

Introduction

A first grader wanders alone on the playground during recess. No one acknowledges him. No one asks him to play.

Second-grade girls tease a classmate because she is overweight, and the boys call her names. She responds by eating more food.

A child winces from embarrassment when she's called on to read aloud in class. She stumbles over virtually every word, and, despite the stern, admonishing glare of the teacher, the other children giggle as she struggles to decipher the letters and sounds.

A third grader is considered weird by his classmates because he can't pay attention or sit still. He impulsively blurts out inappropriate comments without raising his hand, wanders aimlessly around the room, and continually disrupts the class. Seemingly oblivious to the continual reproaches he receives from his teacher, he chronically misbehaves and, in so doing, further alienates his classmates.

An uncoordinated child is invariably picked last when sides are chosen during PE. The other children moan when he ends up on their team. Each time he misjudges a fly ball or strikes out, his teammates laugh and groan.

All children experience problems from time to time. These dilemmas go with the territory of being a child and are part of the developmental learning curve. In the long run, the vast majority of the predicaments prove inconsequential, and most children cannot even remember the previous day's dilemma. Having an argument with a friend, being kept in the classroom during recess for misbehavior, or getting a poor grade on a homework assignment are unlikely to leave a permanent imprint on a child's psyche, unless, of course, the scenarios are recurring and scripted.

Of far greater concern are the more intractable problems that are often directly attributable to the student's attitudes and behavior. Children who chronically lie, tease, steal, bully, cheat, spread rumors, or act in socially inappropriate ways are transmitting a clear message that they are unhappy campers. Their actions are certain to generate undesirable repercussions that typically include peer rejection, alienation, and repeated admonitions and punishments from teachers and parents.

Youngsters who are socially rejected, bullied, belittled, teased for looking or acting different, disparaged for having learning problems or other disabilities, or scorned for poor athletic skills are clearly at psychological risk. Their traumatic experiences in the classroom and on the playground are all but certain to profoundly, and perhaps indelibly, warp their perceptions about themselves and their world.

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AVOID CRISES**

Maladjustment and inappropriate behavior that trigger derision and estrangement should not be dismissed as run-of-the-mill conditions that children should be able to simply shrug off. Yellow and red flags are flapping in the wind. These yellow flags quickly become red flags when teasing, bullying, lying, or stealing is added to the mix.

Children wrestling with seemingly intractable problems and those on the receiving end of unkind behavior—even if the reactions of their classmates are attributable to the rejected child's own seemingly intentional maladaptive conduct—require adult assistance in coming to grips with the underlying issues and in resolving the dilemmas. If this help isn't provided, aggrieved children may conclude that the predicaments are insoluble and that the crises are unavoidable. Feelings of frustration and futility can easily overwhelm beleaguered youngsters who lack the requisite analytical thinking skills, problem-solving capabilities, and insight to resolve their problems.

Social estrangement and social deprecation can shake the very foundation of a young child's self-concept. Unless alienated children are furnished with effective problem-solving tools, they are at risk for developing a host of defense and compensatory mechanisms that will magnify and exacerbate the situation. These self-protecting mechanisms may range from oppositional behavior and conduct disorders at one end of the spectrum to depression and self-destructive, or even suicidal, tendencies at the other end.

In theory, our society, and especially our schools, should have learned this immutable lesson about the implications of social estrangement from the events at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Certainly, this tragedy was extreme, but we continue to be confronted with the harmful effects of maladjustment as other troubled students in schools across the nation express their unhappiness, social alienation, and despair through acts of violent behavior. Sobering as this violence is, we must remind ourselves that for every child who expresses anguish through explosive and violent rage, there are thousands of others who suffer in silence. Their self-esteem is demolished, and their frustration and anger implode and trigger despondency, demoralization, and depression. These children may attempt to hide their unhappiness with contrived conduct that is unconsciously designed to either defect or draw attention, but their despair is palpable if one looks beneath surface appearances. Class clowns, bullies, braggarts, instigators, and rumor spreaders are simply compensating for their own feelings of inadequacy.

BEING ATTUNED

Aware teachers, counselors, and school administrators clearly recognize the potential risks that children face when confronted with seemingly intractable life dilemmas. The natural impulse of many of these educators is to intervene proactively. Their concerns typically include the following:

- How can I help my students deal with the problems they're facing?
- How can I help my students develop a better understanding of the issues?
- How can I make my students aware of their role in creating the problem?

- How can I provide appropriate guidance and support?
- How can I intervene without sending the message that I will take ownership of every problem that my students encounter?
- How can I discourage maladaptive behavior and encourage adaptive and socially acceptable behavior?
- How can I be sure that I'm doing everything to help emotionally at-risk children deal with troubling situations?
- How can I sensitize my students to the feelings of their classmates, and how can I help them appreciate the pain they are inflicting by teasing, isolating, disparaging, or bullying other children?

CAN I REALLY DO IT?

Right now, you may be thinking, "I'm not a clinical psychologist, and I haven't been trained to deal with these issues." If you are indeed thinking these thoughts, you're absolutely right. No, you are not a clinical psychologist, and no, you haven't been trained to deal with your students' psychological problems. This having been said, it's equally important to assert your assets and talents. You are a professional educator. You understand how kids tick, and you have a broad range of skills. With an effective instruction model, you're certainly capable of teaching your students how to fix many of the common everyday problems and handle many of the common everyday crises that they face. Teaching children how to resolve the pain-producing dilemmas they face in life is actually not as challenging as you might believe. There's an added payoff: Teaching your students these problem-solving skills can also be exceptionally rewarding.

Of course, when children manifest significant social maladjustment and inappropriate conduct, this behavior may indicate significant underlying psychological issues that require immediate intervention by a competent mental health professional. Troubled students should be referred as soon as possible to the school psychologist or school counselor. (*Please note:* In the Appendices you'll find an inventory of red-flag behaviors that are generally symptomatic of psychological problems and a second inventory of red-flag behaviors that are generally symptomatic of psychological overlay. The appropriate school personnel should be alerted when you observe children exhibiting these behaviors.)

This book is not intended to transform you into a clinical psychologist. Rather, it's designed to provide you with a practical and easy-to-use blueprint for helping your students acquire more effective analytical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. The program also shows you how to help students in Grades 1–4 acquire greater compassion, values, ethics, empathy, and emotional resiliency.

The strategies in this book are based on a core principle, namely, that educators, counselors, and school administrators have a compelling responsibility to furnish students with a range of functional life skills. This obligation is a societal constant that transcends time and culture. Whether the objectives in a developing country are to teach children how to use a sewing machine, repair an engine, or avoid landmines, or the objectives in a developed country are to teach children how to do research for a term paper, use a computer, or deal with

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teasing, the instructional pedagogy is essentially the same. You teach the relevant steps and procedures systematically. You show children how to break tasks and challenges down into manageable pieces (the “divide and conquer” principle). You model. You structure opportunities for practice. You provide feedback. You affirm progress. You provide help, support, and encouragement.

Sound familiar? Of course it does. You apply these very same instructional principles every day! As a teacher, you already know how to instruct, guide, and mentor children. But perhaps you didn’t realize that you could use the same basic, commonsense procedures when teaching students how to handle problems and avoid crises. The premise is simple: Children should be taught how to identify and resolve problems *before* they become monumental, debilitating, and seemingly insoluble dilemmas.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

Each unit in *Helping Students Fix Problems and Avoid Crises* focuses on a specific topic that could trigger pain in a child’s life. The format is simple and consistent. The key issues are succinctly examined in the educator-directed section at the beginning of the unit. The unit then segues to a short child-directed, read-aloud story that presents the issues in terms that students aged six through nine years can easily grasp and assimilate. The evocative and engaging stories require approximately five to ten minutes to read aloud. Teachers may elect to have students read the anecdotes, or they may prefer to read the stories to the class. The questions that follow each story are designed to elicit reactions, stimulate critical and strategic thinking, enhance sensitivity and compassion, improve problem-solving capabilities, and develop verbal communication skills. Optional pencil-and-paper activities and reproducible exercises are provided to reinforce understanding and assimilation of the issues and ensure mastery of the skills being taught. The overriding goal of each unit is to convince students that with guidance and sufficient practice, they can successfully handle many of the seemingly insoluble problems that they’re facing.

Children do not need to be struggling with the particular problem addressed in a unit to derive benefit from the analytical process. For example, youngsters who have no difficulty making friends can certainly profit from a better understanding of how their unpopular classmates feel, and children who learn effortlessly can also profit from a better appreciation and understanding of the frustration and embarrassment that children with learning problems often experience. These insights are requisites to their acquiring enhanced empathy.

The modeled interactive teaching methods incorporate *cognitive behavioral change procedures*. These procedures emphasize

- **Relevancy**—the skills being taught directly relate to real-world issues.
- **Insight**—heightened awareness of the underlying factors helps children better handle problems and crises.
- **Instruction**—easy-to-use and easy-to-understand procedures enhance mastery.
- **Reinforcement**—repeated opportunities to practice ensure assimilation.

- **Behavioral Change**—deliberately orchestrated successes encourage the use of newly learned skills.
- **Application**—recurrent use of newly learned skills embeds productive habits.

By design, the material in this program can be seamlessly woven into any academic curriculum or counseling program. You may, for example, decide to devote one or two twenty-five minute blocks of time each week to reading and discussing a selected story.

You are about to add a critically important dimension to your interaction with your students. You are about to become a powerful *life skills mentor*. You'll discover that the process of showing children how to resolve problems and handle crises is not only doable, it's also enjoyable and immensely satisfying. Of course, as a professional educator, counselor, or administrator, you're already serving as a mentor in a wide range of venues. This program will furnish additional tools and expand your reach and influence into areas that might otherwise be overlooked or deliberately avoided.

Imagine the sense of relief children experience when they discover that the problems that are causing them anguish can actually be fixed. Then imagine being the person who guides children to this potentially life-altering discovery. Isn't this one of the most prized payoffs for the professional educator?

The modern educator cannot content himself or herself with exclusively teaching academic skills and course content. Children in the world of the twenty-first century are facing too many problems, challenges, temptations, and crises to be left to their own devices. Many are foundering because they are ill prepared to handle these trials, and they desperately need our guidance so that they can develop strategies for understanding and sorting out the issues and handling the dilemmas that might otherwise overwhelm them. You have the opportunity to serve as one of their primary guides and to help lead them safely through the minefield.

Let's get started.

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