

# Trauma-Based Responses to Challenging Behavior of Traumatized Youth: Changing Verbal Behavior of Staff

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# Challenging Behaviors are Often the Masks that Hide Trauma

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# Stephanie's Story

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# Diagnosis

<b>Medical Model</b>	<b>Behavioral Model</b>
<b>Individual disorder/ disease</b>	<b>Environmental factors</b>
<b>Clinical interview</b>	<b>Observe in multiple natural settings</b>
<b>Family history</b>	<b>Reinforcement history</b>

# Exhibit Challenging Behavior in School

## Behavioral Issues

- Disengagement & Off-Task Behavior
- Noncompliance
- Disruptive Behavior

## Mental Health Disorders

- Internalizing- Anxiety & Depression
- Externalizing- ADHA, ODD & CD



# Student-Teacher Interactions

Often interpret their behavior  
as oppositional, defiant,  
disrespectful, provocative

React with harsh,  
authoritarian interactions

Frequently resort to  
disciplinary practices (ODR)  
disproportionately for SOC  
Suspensions and expulsions

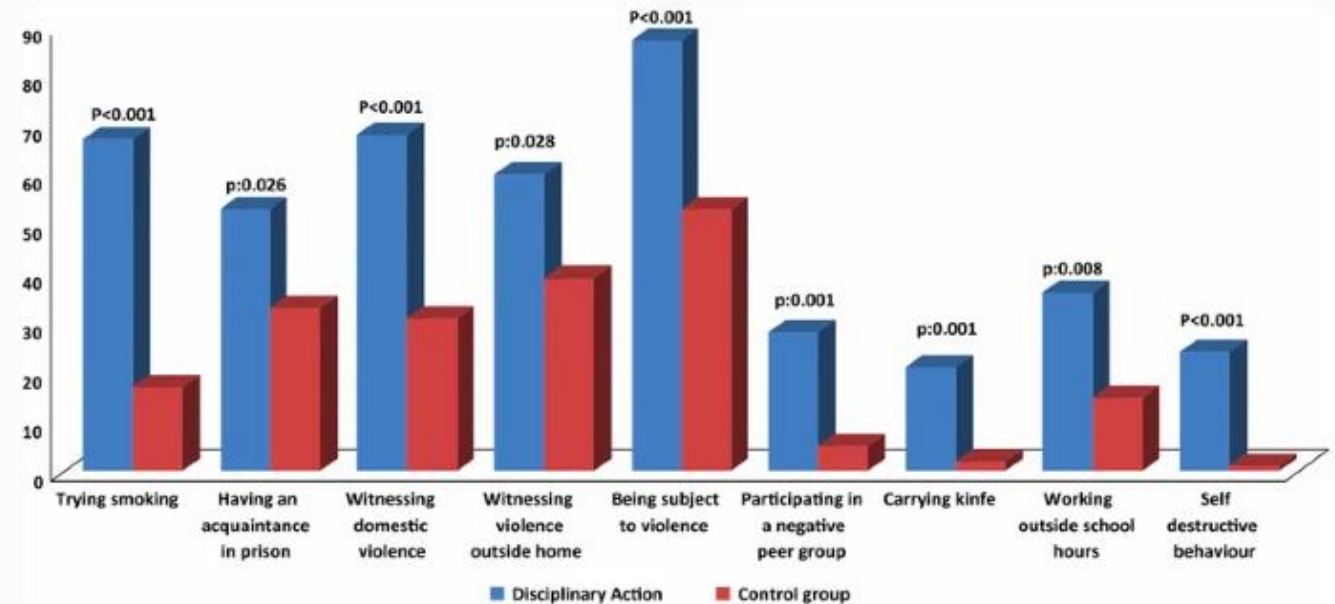
# Disciplinary Practices

- Office disciplinary referrals (ODRs)

- Witnessing violence and being subjected to violence → significantly higher amounts of ODRs

- Esin, Dursun, Acemoğlu, *et al.* (2015)

Fig. 1



Situations that had a significant relationship with office discipline referrals



Why doesn't this work?



# Excluding a student has devastating consequences for that student

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Psychologically, the messages to the student include “you don’t belong, we don’t care about you, we don’t believe you can learn or behave, the class is better off without you”

Emotionally, this can create feelings of anger, resentment, and revenge

Behaviorally, it may be giving the student exactly what was wanted- escape

Academically, the student is missing much-needed instruction and classwork

When traumatized youth exhibit challenging behaviors

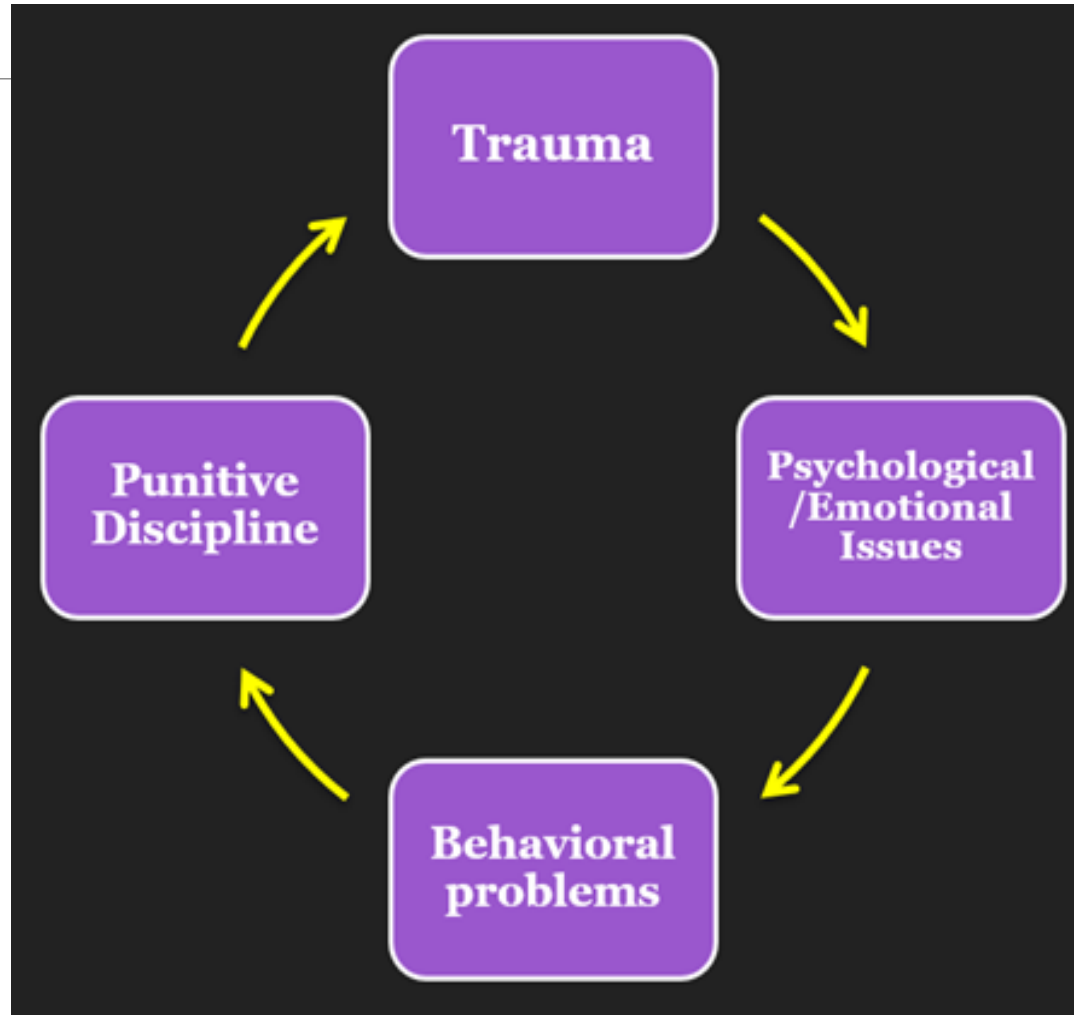
- Harsh, authoritarian staff responses
  - Retraumatize youth
  - Escalate their behaviors
  - Cause them emotional harm



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# Traditional Discipline & Cycle of Trauma

(McInerney & McKlindon, 2014)



# “School-to-Prison Pipeline”

Students who are frequently suspended from school experience:

- Increased rates of absenteeism and discipline problems
- Greater alienation from their school
- More likely to engage in criminal behavior and end up in the criminal justice system

# The Conflict Cycle (Long, Fecser, & Brendtro, 1998)

**1. Activation-** a negative incident activates a troubled student's irrational beliefs

"Nothing good happens to me!" "Adults are unfair!"

**2. Trigger-** negative beliefs trigger intense negative feelings

3. Drive- intense feelings drive inappropriate behavior

**4. Incite-** inappropriate behaviors incite adults

Student yells, threatens, makes sarcastic remarks

**5. Mirror-** adults mirror negative feelings and behaviors

Adult yells back, threatens, makes sarcastic remarks

**6. Reactions-** adults' reactions escalate the conflict

**7. Self-Fulfilling Prophecy-** student has no motivation to alter irrational beliefs about adults or change inappropriate behavior



# De-Escalation Strategies (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016)

Don't take behavior personally (student is triggered by events in other environments or in the past)

Don't lecture, criticize, use sarcasm, threaten, belittle, blame

Stay calm, listen, be with the student

Give the student an out/ allow the student space/escape

State your expectation calmly and clearly

Reframe the situation



# How to Interrupt the Dance of Anger (Polirstok, 2015)

1. Drop voice tone
2. Give student space
3. Lower hands to side
4. Repeat expectation
5. Allow student to save face
  - Reinforce good choice
  - Announce not making a good choice and will follow up with the student later



# Use Unexpected Responses

- Youth with challenging behavior are experts at dealing with traditional, authoritative responses. (They can beat you at that game!)
- “If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always gotten.”







# Unexpected Responses

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➤ **Paradoxical**

➤ “You’re right! I am such a pain!  
Please read page 24.”

➤ **Reframing**

➤ “You are my hero! Thank you for  
taking that bug out of my room!”

➤ **Empathetic**

➤ “What did she say to you that  
made you so upset? It’s not like  
you to curse!”



# Unexpected Responses

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- **Distraction**
  - “Whose keys are these?”
- **Ignoring Verbal Garbage**
  - Sexual Comments
  - Mumbling, Complaining
  - Insults



# Unexpected Responses

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➤ **Neutralizing**

➤ “You can write any words you want as long as you spell them correctly.”

➤ **Appealing to their “better self”**

➤ “I need your help because you are a leader.”



## Why do unexpected responses work so well?

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- **Traumatized youth often seek to create expected negative emotional reactions such as: anger, fear, and shock.**
- **This was often the only way they could create emotional responses in the adults in their environment.**
- **Unexpected responses that are neutral or positive can provide these youth with unmet emotional needs.**

Why do unexpected responses  
work so well?

You catch youth off guard when  
you use...

- empathy
- questions
- boredom
- matter-of-factness
- agreeing
- reframing
- paradoxical responses



## REMEMBER...

- Negative emotional reactions are often powerful reinforcers for traumatized youth's challenging behaviors
- So be careful...**WHAT YOU REINFORCE YOU WILL GET MORE OF!!**



If Staff/Teachers  
Don't Adopt  
More Trauma-  
Informed  
Strategies

We should ask the same question  
we would ask if youth or students  
do not change their behavior...



Is it a skill deficit or a  
motivational problem?

# Behavior Analysts Know How to Teach Deficit Skills: Behavior Skills Training

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Instruction

Modeling

Role-Play

Feedback

Practice

Reinforcement



# How do we Deal with a Lack of Motivation to Change?

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Functional Assessment-  
Analyze Antecedents-  
Establishing Operations

# States of Deprivation

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Having cooperative, interested, respectful, hard-working students



Seeing students learn



Being valued and appreciated



Enjoying teaching



Making a difference in lives of youth



Finding a way to reach difficult youth

# Aversive Stimuli

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I love the kiddos! I have the content and the lesson plans ready! I love to teach! But what makes teaching difficult are the behavior problems!

When youth are disrespectful and defiant, it just gets under my skin!

I have a hard time controlling my temper when I am being verbally attacked!

When youth are violent, I find that fear and anxiety take over and I feel the need to really clamp down hard on youth!

Nothing upsets me more than to see a vulnerable student being picked on by another student!

If they're not doing the work and learning it reflects badly on me!

# ★ Collaborative Consultation Practices

● ★ Sarah Hayes, NCABA 2021

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During initial observation, highlighted all the positive behavioral teaching strategies using teacher friendly language.

Positive reinforcement- “You were so friendly and rewarding to the student!”

- Modeling- “You did a great job of showing him how to do the behavior!”
- Prompt fading- “It really seemed to work when you helped him and then backed off and let him try it on his own!”
- Planned ignoring- “You decided what you wanted to ignore, and you really followed through!”



- ★ Motivational Interviewing
- ★ (Miller & Rollnick 2012)
- ★ Sarah Hayes, NCABA 2022

## OARS

Open questioning

Affirming

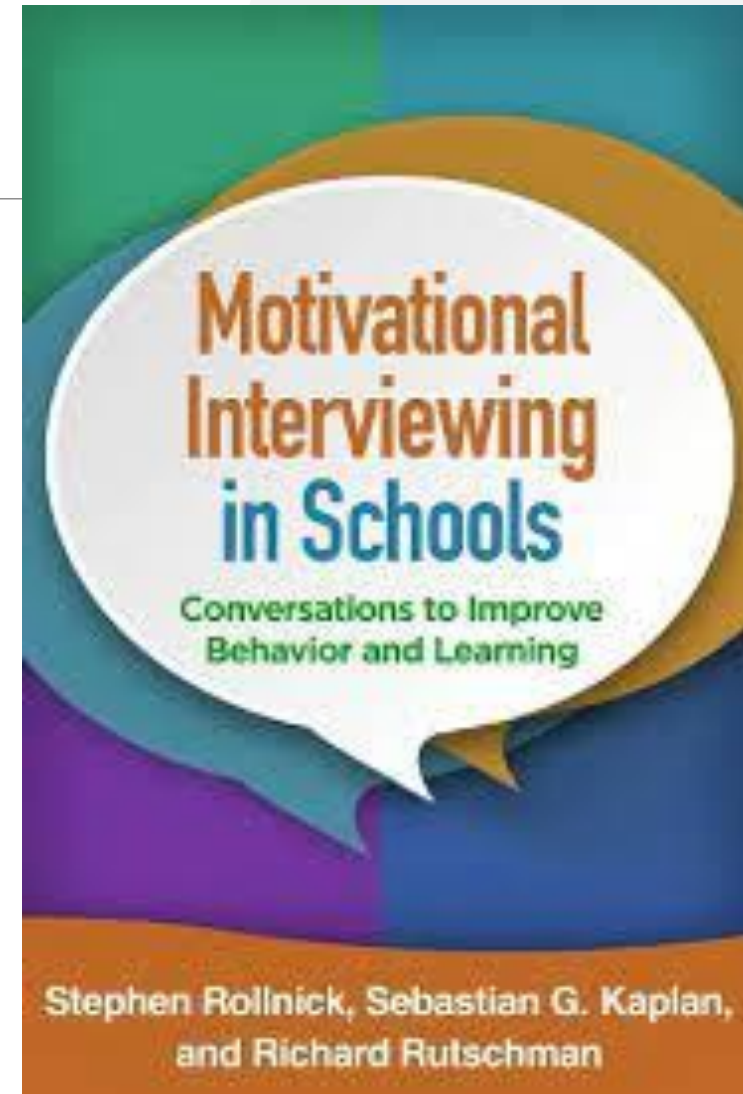
Reflecting

☐ Summarizing

Value Alignment

Evoke Change Talk

Guide EBP intervention



# Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Applications for Educational Psychologists within Schools

Gillard, Flaxman, & Hooper, 2018

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- ❑ Acceptance
- ❑ Defusion
- ❑ Contact with the Present Moment
- ❑ Self-as-Context
- ❑ Values
- ❑ Committed Action

# De-Escalating Responses to Challenging Behavior

## Role-Plays

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Student says "This work is stupid and I don't know why you make us do it!"

Student says "I hate this school and can't wait until I am out of here!"

Student says "You don't care about us! You're just here for the money!"

Student says "I hate you!"

Student refuses to do the work you have asked them to do.

Student hasn't done their homework.

Student walks out of the classroom.

Student makes fun of another student.

**Thank  
You**

# Questions?

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