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Life Space Crisis Intervention: New Tools for Staff and Troubled Youth During Troubled Times

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Traditional educational treatment paradigms frame problems as pathology or deviance and rely heavily on coercion, punishment, and exclusion. These reactive strategies are challenged and contrasted with Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI), which capitalizes on problems as opportunities for learning and growth. LSCI provides staff with specific competencies for successfully managing crisis with students showing common patterns of self-defeating behaviors.

The pattern is familiar. A young person has increased conflicts with family, school, or in the community. Adults in his or her life space are unaware of the nature of the youth's inner turmoil and become frustrated by chronic, escalating, troublesome behavior. Punishment or exclusion only drives these youth further from the social bond, and makes them resistant to traditional counseling strategies. Increasingly cut off from supportive mentors and prosocial peers, the young person gravitates to other alienated youths who share a hatred of adult authority and institutions. These youths may retreat in lonely isolation or explode in violent acts, evoking further rejection and punishment. Many professionals and agencies may see them, but they are known by none. The children and youth being sent to psychotherapists arrive with multiple problems of developmental neglect, abuse, and rejection. They often live in a hostile environment comprised of fragmented and overbearing families, alienated schools, and the destructive social forces of guns, gangs, drugs, promiscuity, and poverty. The many needs of troubled children and youth cannot be squeezed into a behavioral, psychodynamic, cognitive, or social learning modality, except for narrow types of help.

If mental health services for troubled children and youth are to survive, programs must reevaluate the illness model of treatment and develop a comprehensive strength-based model. Young people must be seen as resourceful participants in their own healing, not passive patients who need fixing.

At-risk and troubled students are also bringing all the social ills of our society into the classrooms,

causing teachers to feel overwhelmed and helpless. When schools separate these youth into alternative programs, the programs often become little more than curriculums of control. The legal principle of zero reject (i.e., all students are entitled to an appropriate education) is being overridden by the political policy of zero tolerance (i.e., hold kids fully accountable, but allow staff to give up on difficult youth).

Instead of providing special services, some schools are criminalizing misbehavior by transforming unfortunate schoolyard conflicts into violations of the criminal code. This type of system makes one believe that there are educators who think that the criminal justice system can raise kids better and educate them better than schools. Since problematic behavior is often related to emotional disturbance, schools that want to dump their troubled kids need to keep these students from being identified as disabled. In some states, school-based services for seriously emotionally disturbed students are truncated by consultants who show school boards clever tricks for keeping special education off limits to conduct problem, oppositional, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder children. Strikingly, children with these disabilities constitute a majority of youth who end up incarcerated in the juvenile system (Garfinkel, 1998). Thus, many seriously emotionally disturbed children are being deprived of appropriate special services with the rationalization that these youths don't have a "real" disability, but are just choosing to act in a socially maladjusted manner. Traditional strategies for discipline fail dramatically with a significant portion of highly troubled students who do not benefit from either punishment or exclusion. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders are the most likely to be suspended and expelled, and ultimately, to become dropouts or push-outs from school.

As the mental health and educational systems wash their hands of troubled children, the justice system becomes the placement of last resort. Experts in juvenile justice are calling for reforms based on positive youth development and restorative justice, which builds

competence in offenders. However, many politicians prefer to serve out just desserts as they continue to shift resources away from prevention and treatment, and toward warehousing responses. There is not a shred of scientific evidence that these punitive measures make any sense. As Wylie (1998) concluded,

It seems horribly appropriate that, having denied children the kind of care and protection that all human animals must have, we decide to punish them, in essence, for our failure to raise them in the first place... and all the fancy rationalizations for adult sentencing of children foreshorten not only their future, but ours. What do we think these 11- and 14- and 16-year-old jailed felons will do when they are released? Become insurance brokers? Has there ever been a plan so exquisitely calculated to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children— and their children’s children? (p. 37)

LSCI is designed to be an alternative to reactive strategies. Traditional approaches to troubled youths are inherently pessimistic and reactive, and keyed to the deviance and dysfunctions of youth. Youth who provoke hostile encounters with others often import to school dysfunctional attitudes developed in the family or on the street. While judicious use of wise punishment does not convey rejection or disrespect for youth, a punitive climate does, and it is destructive to group morale and discipline. Certainly, school rules and community laws require sanctions for seriously antisocial behavior. However, one cannot assume that the punishment alone will teach them a lesson. If punishment is indicated, then the crisis surrounding the punishment may itself provide an excellent opportunity for learning and growth.

Many troubled youths distrust all adults and engage in patterns of coercive interactions and conflict cycles. Instead of using adults for guidance, they oppose or manipulate persons in authority. They also become very skillful in avoiding or resisting counselors who use traditional deficit and disease models of mental illness. In contrast, LSCI employs a strength-based approach of problem solving. Instead of an adult approach of searching for deficits or disease, causing increased resistance from the youth, LSCI-trained adults use the crisis to search for strengths and solution, increasing cooperation from the youth. The focus of LSCI is on understanding the reasons for counterproductive conflict cycles. This entails enlisting youth in a careful analysis of crises that negatively impact the youth. An analogy is a coach guiding players in reviewing videos of a losing game to identify what

went wrong.

In studying the use of LSCI in schools, five main findings were discovered:

1. School crises do not happen by appointment.

School crises happen at the least convenient time for the staff. These crises most commonly happen during the first 40 minutes of a school day; during transitional periods when students are changing classes; and when staff do not see the initial precipitating event, but have to intervene and stop some dangerous behaviors.

2. During a crisis, teachers rely on their personal authority.

When school staff found themselves in a confrontational situation with students, they frequently relied on the powers of their authority to encourage a student to change his or her behavior and conform to school rules. Unfortunately, these students had little respect for authority and were not easily intimidated. The use of authority and teacher threats as a management technique escalated the conflict. These students needed to understand and take responsibility for their behaviors rather than simply be coerced into superficial behavioral compliance.

3. School crises are triggered by a minor incident. Typically, school crises began with minor inappropriate student behavior such as not staying on task, walking around the classroom, teasing peers, and arguing over the fairness of modification point systems. In most situations, the staff did not start or initiate the conflict, but they often responded in a style that fueled the conflict and kept it going.

4. Staff become caught in the conflict cycle. The conflict cycle is a basic paradigm that explains why normal, healthy, reasonable staff can behave in ways that are significantly different from their personalities. If staff are not trained in understanding the dynamics of the conflict cycle, they will end up mirroring the student’s behavior and escalating the student’s conflict. The dynamics of the conflict cycle demonstrate how a student in a stressful situation can create identical feelings in staff. Adults who act on their own feelings and do what feels natural inadvertently mirror student behavior and make the crisis worse. During these incidents, staff are programmed to respond like thermostats, and reflect the emotional fever of the student. For example, an aggressive student shouts at a teacher and says “I’m not going to do it!” The teacher becomes counter aggressive and impulsively yells back “Yes you will!” Or, for example, a depressed student may tearfully say to her teacher, “Please leave me alone! There is nothing you can do to change anything.

Nothing in my life has meaning or is interesting.” The teacher initially feels sorry for the student and tries to comfort her. But if this sequence continues, the teacher feels frustrated and, ultimately, helpless. The teacher feels the counter depressive feelings and leaves the child alone to fend for him- or herself.

5. Crises arise from three major causes. These are identified as normal developmental issues, such as becoming independent, winning group approval, developing ethical values, and dealing with peer influences; situational forces at school, such as misinterpreting personal comments and being teased or bullied, frustrated by assignments, falsely accused of an act or confused by staff directions; and unresolved psychological issues, which occur with at-risk and troubled students. These represent the most severe and complicated forms of conflict. These students cannot separate emotional problems they have experienced at home or in the community from the current problems they have in school. Psychologically, a crisis may signal unresolved issues of abandonment, rejection, or abuse.

In this paradigm, a crisis is perceived as a glass half-filled instead of half-empty. This approach allows for the use of the student’s resources and potential strengths instead of dwelling on deficits, dysfunctions, and disorders. A crisis represents a unique time to help a student come to grips with an important life problem, which is often denied by the youth. When successfully managed, a crisis can illuminate his or her self-defeating behavior and provide strength-based social skills.

LSCI is an advanced, sophisticated, and effective strategy that uses a student crisis as an opportunity to promote insight and change. It uses the curriculum of direct life experiences in the student’s natural habitat with staff members whom the student has come to trust. This is a respectful encounter casting the staff member in a role as a student’s life skills coach rather than a prosecutor. LSCI does not supplant other behavioral, educational, or therapeutic strategies that have been shown to be effective. Rather, it begins where other behavior management systems end. It provides advanced interventions designed for specific students who show common patterns of self-defeating behavior.

LSCI is comprised of six stages and six reclaiming interventions. The six stages are broken down into two main stages. The first main stage, called the Diagnostic Stage, includes the drain off, the timeline, and the central issue. During this stage, staff drain off the student’s emotions, validate student’s perceptions of the crisis, and determine which pattern of self-defeating behavior is occurring. The second stage, termed the Reclaiming Stage, includes insight, new skills, and

transfer of training. During this second main stage, the student gains insight into his or her personal problem and gains accountability; staff empower the student to learn new skills to overcome the self-defeating pattern of behavior; and the learning is transferred and generalized into the student’s life space. There are six reclaiming interventions that have been identified, including social skill training that span self-defeating behaviors, such as lack of guilt or emotion, distortions of perceptions due to anxiety, behavior due to being overcome with guilt (self-injurious), and manipulation of others for gain.

While LSCI is competency-based, it is more than a set of techniques. At its core is a new mindset about problems as opportunities, and about troubled youth as possessing strength and resilience, which can be tapped for their own healing. Such programs cultivate a positive peer culture among students and staff, and mutual respect between adults and youth.

References

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Note: The majority of information in this article can be credited to the works of Nicholas Long and Frank Fescer and can be found in the book titled: *Life Space Crisis Intervention*.