

Therapeutic Behavior Management Pt 1: Overview

A framework for decision making in critical situations by Steve Parese, Ed.D. (rev 2018)

SUMMARY: This brief article is the first in a series of articles on Therapeutic Behavior Management. It provides an overview of the TBM Model, a framework for making professional decisions in difficult situations with troubled children and youth.

Other articles will delve in greater depth into topics briefly explored here, including the use of consequences with deliberate misbehavior, and the predictable stages of crisis with emotional youth.

For more information about training in this topic, visit www.TACT2.com or contact the author at SBParese@aol.com.



Personal and Professional Differences

On any given day, staff who work with troubled children and youth may be called upon to deal with a wide range of behavior problems. Most are mildly distracting or disruptive, such as a refusal to work or teasing peers. Some are destructive or even truly dangerous, such as property damage or fighting. During critical moments, staff may react out of anger or fear, rather than responding thoughtfully and professionally. In such cases, helping adults may actually make problems worse instead of better.

Most professionals would agree that staff must provide a consistent front when dealing with problem behaviors. Yet we come from such different backgrounds, and often disagree on how to handle challenging behavior. Some staff have been raised by parents who encouraged open discussion of rules; others in homes where children were to be seen and not heard. Most were raised by strong, even-handed caretakers, although a small but significant portion of staff serving troubled students were themselves troubled at one time, and now seek to give back in some way.

In addition to these personal differences, staff may have radically different professional perspectives as well. Security staff often have

experience working in youth corrections or law enforcement and so may be conditioned to manage challenging behavior with quick, no-nonsense confrontation. Counselors, social workers and therapists have often been trained to respond to the very same kind of behaviors with non-directive processing. Teachers and para-educators, pressured to show achievement, may emphasize classroom productivity even more than individual learning, and quickly exclude misbehaving students.

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Therapeutic Behavior Management Model

Without a common framework to guide behavior management decisions, staff are all too likely to react to problems based on their separate personal and professional perspectives.

The Therapeutic Behavior Management (TBM) Model provides this guidance, helping staff find common ground and make intelligent, therapeutic decisions in difficult situations.

- Charlotte holds a piece of sharp metal in her hand, weeping and scratching at her skin.
- David and Ellis, opposing gang members with a history of violence between them, begin pushing and shoving one another.

With immediately dangerous behaviors such as these, we have very few choices. Our goal is to quickly control the crisis and assure safety. Our responses may include:

- (1) Reassurance to calm individuals;
- (2) Redirection of unsafe behavior;
- (3) Removal of aggressor, target, or audience;
- (4) Restriction/Restraint, if trained to do so.

Intervening with dangerous misbehavior:

Adam is moving toward another boy, a baseball bat in hand. The security officer catches his eye, raises his hands palms up and in a low, clear tone of voice says: "Adam? Adam, look at me. Put it down, right now, please." While Adam is distracted, a second staff member escorts the other boy out of the area quickly and quietly.

Deliberate or Emotional?

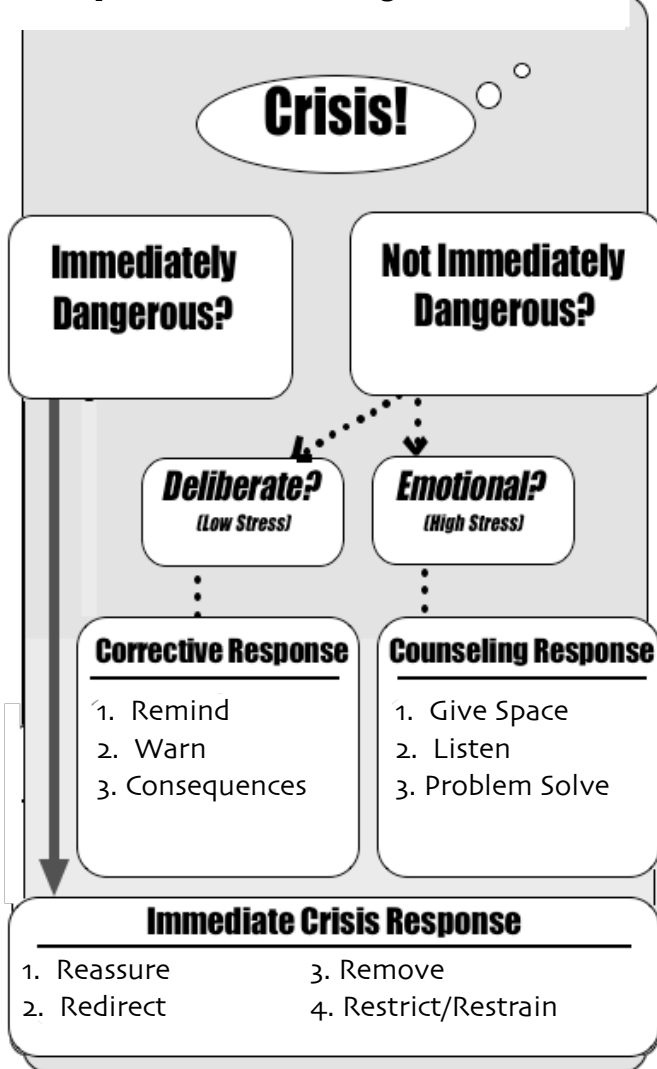
The TBM Model suggests when behaviors that are not immediately dangerous, we have more choices available. Consider anything you know about the youth, the peers, and the precursors to this problem, then ask: "Why is the student acting this way? Is it deliberate or emotional?"

For example:

- Robert is texting during class, distracting himself and others from the lesson.
- Stephanie and her friends are mercilessly teasing a new girl during lunch, mocking her unfortunate stuttering.
- Tanya, the girl with the stutter, drops her tray on the cafeteria floor and stomps off with tears in her eyes.
- Vincent's girlfriend broke up with him this morning by text, and he's got his head down, refusing to work.

Our goal in non-dangerous situations like those above is not simply to control the behavior. We want to manage these problems in a way that calms the individual and returns the group to a productive learning environment.

Therapeutic Behavior Management (TBM) Model



Immediately Dangerous or Not?

The TBM Model suggests that the very first thing staff must do when facing a challenging situation is to assess the danger level. Consider the students involved, the setting, the number and strengths of staff available, etc, and ask: "Is this immediately dangerous, or not?"

For example:

- Adam brandishes a baseball bat, moving with clear intent to harm another boy.
- Brandi enters the school in rage, yelling profane threats at staff, then pushing one who tries to calm her down.

The tools we choose will depend on our assessment of the psychological source of the behavior. Is it deliberate or emotional?

Deliberate behaviors are intentional actions which meet the student's needs at the expense of others. They usually receive peer reinforcement, and do not have underlying emotional issues involved. The youth is rational and the stress level is fairly low, so body language is often calm. Robert and Stephanie (above) appear to be acting out in a deliberate manner.

Emotional behaviors are connected to some underlying emotional problem which occurred earlier, or is anticipated in the near future. Emotional students might be frustrated with one person, but take it out on another. They are often irrational, highly agitated, and extremely stressed, so body language is often intense. Tanya and Vincent (above) appear to be acting out in an emotional manner.

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Emotional behaviors are connected to some underlying emotional problem.

Behavior Management or Counseling?

The TBM Model suggests that *deliberate problems call for behavior management*. Our goal is to interrupt the misbehavior and get a youth back on track with minimal disruption.

Initially, we might (1) Provide a simple reminder or redirection. Failing that, we might (2) Offer a fair warning of reasonable consequences, then (3) Give a firm confrontation applying those consequences.

If that doesn't work, we may ask for help from other staff involved, or simply ask the student to leave, hoping that a change of venue results in a change of heart as well.

Sample intervention with deliberate misbehavior:

Robert is texting during class, distracting himself and others from the lesson. His teacher leans over and says: "Robert, you know the rule. Put it back in your pocket and leave it there, or you'll have to put it in the box until your parents can come in. Don't make me be the bad guy today."



However, *emotional problems call for counseling* instead. Our goal is to de-escalate the issue and ultimately help the youth learn skills to avoid similar issues in the future.

If a youth is extremely agitated, we might (1) Give her time and space to calm down. As she de-escalates, we should (2) Listen carefully to allow him/her to vent, then (3) Help her find solutions to the problem.

Sample intervention with emotional behavior:

Tanya, a new girl with a stutter, huddles in the corner with tears in her eyes after being teased mercilessly by Stephanie. A staff member quietly says: "Tanya, I can see how upset you are right now. Would you like to take a minute to yourself in the guidance office? I'll come by in a moment and maybe together we can work this out."

Of course, if a behavior escalates to being immediately dangerous while we are managing it, safety becomes paramount. As stated earlier, the TBM model suggests an immediate crisis response, which includes:

- (1) Reassurance (3) Removal
- (2) Redirection (4) Restriction/Restraint.

Closing

Troubled children and youth are served in many different settings by staff with many different perspectives, and they misbehave for many different reasons. Being firm, fair, and consistent is vital to our success in creating safe and productive living/learning environments, but we must also be flexible in considering the source of problems.

The TBM Model offers a framework to guide decisions in critical situations. Staff must first assess danger level. If the behavior presents an imminent threat of harm to self or others, the model suggests that we try redirection, removal, restriction, or even restraint.

If there is not an imminent threat of harm however, the TBM Model suggest that we assess the psychological source of the problem. Deliberate behaviors, which are often intentional, rational, and needs-fulfilling, usually respond well to behavior management strategies. However, emotional issues, often sparked by outside problems and fueled by high stress, require more subtle counseling strategies instead.

Choosing the best tools for the job is an essential part of any craft, including that of our handiwork with troubled youth.



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