

Moment to Moment

A positive approach to managing classroom behavior

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Foreword:

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Contents

Foreword	5
Preface	7
Acknowledgments	8
Introduction	9
Meet the Children	10
A Social-Emotional Curriculum	11
Using this Book	13

Chapter 1: Supporting Students Moment to Moment 15

Looking Beyond the Behavior	15
The Trigger	17
Understanding Social-Emotional Skills	18
Physical Skills	19
Language Skills	20
Social Skills	21
Emotional Skills	22
Cognitive Skills	24
Identifying Skills Deficits	25
Active Skill Development	26
Skill-Based Games	27
Teach/Practice/Survive	28
Moment-to-Moment Support	29
Moment-to-Moment Strategies	30

Chapter 2: Actively Developing Physical Skills 39

Fine Motor Movement	39
Motor Planning	41
Adaptability	43
Body Awareness	45
Attending to Others	47
Verbal Impulse Control	49
Self-Control	52
Matching Movement	53
Alternating Movement	55
Self-Regulation	57
Movement Control	60

Chapter 3: Actively Developing Language Skills 63

Receptive Memory	63
Processing	65
Mindful Listening	67
Nonverbal Communication	69
Intentional Verbal Communication	71
Expressive Communication	73

Perspective-Taking	75
Verbal Expansion	77
Verbal Messaging	79
Storytelling	85

Chapter 4: Actively Developing Social Skills 89

Joint Attention	89
Social Reciprocity	91
Imitation	93
Social Referencing	94
Social Observation	96
Emotional Sharing	98
Social Anticipation	100
Social Receiving	101
Space Awareness	103
Reflective Appraisal	104

Chapter 5: Actively Developing Emotional Skills 107

Expressing Emotion	107
Internalizing Emotions	109
Externalizing Emotions	111
Emotional Regulation	113
Emotional Modulation	114
Tone Modulation	117
Optimistic Thinking	120
Positive Affect	123
Emotional Agency	125
Emotional Liability	128

Chapter 6: Actively Developing Cognitive Skills 132

Attending	132
Switching Modalities	134
Information Sequencing	135
Seeing the Whole Picture	137
Flexibility	139
Symbolic Thinking	140
Recognizing Character	142
Social Cognition	144
Behavior Modulation	146
Social Narration	147

Chapter 7: Dealing with Meltdowns 149

Step 1: Stop Talking	149
Step 2: Stop Your Own Escalation	150
Step 3: Stop the Child's Escalation	150
Preventing Meltdowns	152
Actively Developing De-Escalation	152

Conclusion	155
Professional Resources	156

Introduction

“Children thrive...where adults interact with children in a warm, sensitive, responsive manner, the environment is physically and emotionally safe and language-rich, and there are activities that promote pro-social interaction, creativity, exploration and problem-solving.” (Doherty, 1998)

Teachers’ college has one main focus and communicates three messages. The main focus is the curriculum. Pre-service teachers are taught how to teach language, run guided-reading circles, use manipulatives for math, and set up science experiments. In the background of these detailed curriculum lesson plans are three consistent messages: classroom management is the key to a teacher’s success; teachers will teach in inclusive classrooms and need to teach to the needs of all students; bullying will not be tolerated. The curriculum lessons are taught explicitly and in detail to the teachers. But for the other three messages, all the knowledge is implied.

It cannot be assumed that all teachers know how to help a child whose behavior is challenging without using authoritarian means or singling out the child so that peers judge the child’s behavior. Teachers need to be explicitly taught techniques and strategies to create a non-judgmental classroom social climate when dealing with such children.

When I look back at my first year of teaching, I see how hard it is to attain the delicate balance of maintaining classroom control without using a negative approach. Since I was well-trained and prepared in the curriculum, my classroom dynamic and priorities became centred on ensuring I covered it extensively and properly. My prep time and teaching revolved around the curriculum; everything else was an interruption to the lesson of the day and the material that needed to be covered. I was so busy teaching the material, how much time did I have to think about the children whose behavior showed they were having trouble? With some, the nuances of their social behavior did not affect the progression of my lessons, so their social struggles did not always catch my attention. But where the behavior of the student interrupted the lesson and affected the learning of other children, my focus on the behavior of the child was based on my need to get on with the lesson. Instead of supporting the needs of the child who struggled with behavior, I would sometimes use quick negative reinforcement to get the child back on task. Repeated negative reinforcement—singling out the child in frustration, correcting the child in front of peers, and telling the child to get back on task when he/she has no idea how to perform the task—might gain us classroom control, but does so by creating an atmosphere of intolerance. If we send a message that what the child is doing is bad, over time other children will start correcting and alienating that child. The teacher can inadvertently start a cycle of behavior that is intolerant of the individual behavior challenges of the children in the class.

It is not a supreme ability to teach math or fabulous life experience that makes a strong teacher. The most influential commodity a teacher brings to the classroom is his or her own positive personal qualities and warm character in the face

of challenging situations. The individual teacher's daily modeling of an openness to the ideas of others, optimistic attitude, acceptance of all students, tolerance of mistakes, patience throughout challenging moments, and inclusion for everyone may be the strongest teaching tool to help shape positive behaviors in children and influence the way they treat each other and learn. A pro-social teacher is one who understands that she or he plays a crucial role in teaching social-emotional curriculum, then supports and guides that curriculum all day long in the classroom.

Meet the Children

Sometimes the best way to identify what needs doing is to look at the behavior in action. Here are four students who will be returned to throughout this book. Try to see the behaviors of your own students in these profiles. It will help you target which strategies can help you manage your own classroom, moment to moment.

Jenny

It starts right from drop off. All the children are gathered on the playground, ready to go inside. But Jenny is off by herself, near the fence, trying to place leaves in a hole in the ground. When the school bell rings, she does not move. Her mother approaches her, calling her name. When she reaches Jenny, she bends down and touches her shoulder. Jenny jumps up in surprise, as if her mom came out of nowhere. The negotiation and battle begin. Jenny is unmovable. Reasoning does not work; counting down has no impact; threats are ignored. Finally, Jenny's mom pulls Jenny up, and Jenny immediately goes into an intense state of resistance, moving toward her mom then away from her, moaning, lying on the ground.

In Junior Kindergarten, the teacher often finds Jenny crouched under a little table in the back of the room, as if there is danger in the class. When leaving the classroom, Jenny will not line up. The gym teacher reports that one time Jenny just left the line-up into the gym and he couldn't find her. In Senior Kindergarten Jenny needs one-on-one teacher cueing and reminders to complete her work at, and sometimes slightly above, grade level. She needs reminders to attend to her work and to focus on the activity. Through Grade 1, Jenny never brings in her school forms. Her backpack is always a mess and she forgets her lunch most days.

Neil

Neil's behavior struggles affect his ability to function in school each day; his parents advocate for their son with a level of authority and righteousness that would leave any teacher feeling demoralized and defensive. The list of classroom strategies and accommodations for Neil would require the work of three teachers.

The Grade 4 teacher, in anticipation of Neil's behavior, takes a harsh and unforgiving line with Neil. Yet Neil's behavior gets worse. Neil walks into the class like he owns the place. His voice dominates the room, his reactions even stronger, sharper, and more aggressive than before. He demands attention and moves through the classroom like a bulldozer. His outbursts, meltdowns, and verbal statements increase in both intensity and harshness. In play with other children, he seems unaware that they have feelings too. He grabs and takes; worse, he does not seem to notice when another child is sad or hurt—their crying upsets him. Other children move away from him, scared or just unsure. He does not seem to speak to other children; instead, he is always calling the teacher to tell what the other children are doing to annoy him or what they should not be doing.

Marsha

Marsha is gifted academically, but is considered socially awkward and different from the other children. At recess, she runs around, appearing to play a game by herself. By Grade 6, group work is becoming harder and harder for Marsha. Her group members like working with her, since she is a great project leader and always knows everything about the subject. But more and more, working with Marsha means doing everything Marsha wants. If at any point someone else has a different idea or opinion, Marsha becomes very upset. Her body tenses up and she forcefully argues with the group for her ideas. If the group decides, with a vote and group consensus, to do a project in another way, Marsha refuses to participate in the rest of the assignment.

The teacher begins to notice other behaviors from Marsha. Marsha seems to come into class more agitated than before. She walks around a lot before sitting down, bumping into things and other students. She gets out of her seat during desk work to get a tissue or refill her water bottle, and sometimes leaves the class without explanation. She tells her teacher that she feels the other children are not being nice to her and do not like her. Marsha seems to approach students more than she did before, but does it by coming right into their space and interrupting the conversation. Marsha asks the other children to play her game, often when they are already in the middle of an activity. When the children politely tell Marsha that they do not want to switch games, she continues to insist that they play her game.

Lee

Everyone loves Lee, a lively Grade 1 student, imaginative, full of life, and wonderfully energetic. Adults and teachers are always impressed with his funny sayings and his dramatic flair. Yet in class, Lee needs constant reminders to sit still, to walk slowly, not to dump papers off the desk. Lee can't be in the house centre for more than two minutes without another child complaining about him and the intensity with which he plays. He will take toys from another child without asking. If another child wants a turn with a toy, Lee's whole body shakes; he holds the toys close as if they were the last toys in the room. He will scream at the other child, sometimes pushing or hitting. At carpet time, Lee either stares down at a spot on the carpet or lies down on the carpet and pushes his body against another child. Despite the fact that Lee's vocabulary is superior and he even seems to know some French and Spanish (perhaps from TV), he never seems to talk while playing with other children. He grabs toys, pushes his way into play and around the room, and grunts most of his communication to his peers. Lee has never once been heard telling a story or explaining something. He seldom asks questions and will not volunteer to answer questions. When asked a question, he appears nervous and unsure. His main response to verbal questions is "I don't know." Yet his teacher has heard Lee talking nonstop to his parents.

A Social-Emotional Curriculum

So how does one teacher stop Lee from moving around the room all day and Neil from dominating the room? How does one teacher get Marsha to listen to what her group wants and Jenny to come to school ready to learn? How can you gain

classroom control and teach to the high needs of these four students, much less the rest of the class? The reality of the school system is that a teacher will have all four of these kids in each class, along with 18 to 20 others who bring their own unique needs, strengths, and challenges.

There are many books that provide excellent strategies to build a collaborative and inclusive classroom. But some of them miss the hard stuff. They are missing the big problem. In truth, there is no quick fix for Neil. No matter how positive, supportive, and accepting a teacher is of Neil, he is going to mess up time and time again throughout the year. He is going to wreck a well-planned lesson and he might bang into another child, most likely on purpose. There will be many times when Marsha will refuse to slow down with her ideas and she is going to get upset in class, she is going to be rigid in her thinking and she is going to walk away from children who do not listen to her. Jenny will forget her backpack; she will come to school without the item that each child needs to complete an art project. And Lee is going to walk up to a group of kids and grab their toys.

Compare this with other aspects of learning—for example, when a child struggles to read no one gets upset with the child. We do not blame the parents. We protect the child in class; we do not ask that child to read out loud; we do not have her read books that are at grade level; and on creative writing assignments, we might pair her up with a student who could scribe. We would not tolerate another child laughing at her or calling her stupid. There is a schoolwide plan in place to help the slow reader. The teachers know how to assess the child and can begin a reading intervention program. They send reading activities home to the parents and might advise getting a tutor. It does not mean that the child will learn how to read quickly, but no one would expect her to be able to.

We do not have this kind of plan for the social-emotional curriculum. Teachers don't receive mental-health training. If they take special education courses, they learn about diagnoses and labels; however, the terms are very general and at most explain what the child can't do. Dyslexia tells us that a child can't read; that is the first step in teaching that child how to read.

When a child repeatedly does not comply with social norms of behavior, we may label that child with Asperger's/Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD), or a Nonverbal Learning Disability (NLD). The disorder is given as the reason for a child's inability to comply. School boards give teachers a brief definition of the labels. They indicate that the teacher must treat and assess this student differently, that the teacher must accept that the student's behavior will be different. This is our expectation of an inclusive classroom with a teacher teaching to different needs. What is not explained is how to teach a particular child differently, why the behavior is different, which behaviors to make allowances for and which are within the student's control, and what to do to help that student. What is missing is the training, insight, and information that would allow a teacher to build that student's skills, instead of giving the student a pass for often-inappropriate behavior.

In my years of working with children, some with diagnoses and some without, I made two observations. First, I noticed that the behavior of the child with the diagnosis was not consistent. A child with a speech and language delay who struggled with social communication was able to ask for a toy, tell a story, and engage in a back-and-forth conversation with a friend in a calm environment. Yet at school, this child hardly ever spoke: stuttered when he talked and used, at best, one-word utterances when he wanted something. This kind of inconsistency is

A recent Ontario survey indicated that most teachers (92%) reported that they had children in their class dealing with mental-health challenges, yet 93.3% indicated that they feel unprepared to help students with mental-health problems. (Andrews, 2013)

It seems to make sense that, if a child performs a skill one day, that child should be expected to perform it the next day; if the child does not consistently perform the skill, we assume that he or she is choosing not to. We do not assume that if the child is relaxed and in a calm state, he or she can perform the skill, but if dysregulated (overwhelmed or stressed), he or she cannot.

the reason why some parents are unable to accept that their child needs help; the child's behavior might actually differ at home and at school. It is also the reason why we perceive that a child chooses to behave a certain way.

The second thing I noticed was that diagnoses are not consistent with behavior. Over the years, I found that my individualized programs for each child did not fall into categories of diagnosis. I did not run the same social program for all the children I worked with who had ADHD. Some of the children who did not have a diagnosis had the exact same program as a child with ASD, despite the fact that another child with ASD needed a separate program. If I was not using the diagnosis to drive my programming, what was I using? Each child I worked with had a skill-based intervention program. The skills were based on observation sessions I had with the child, instead of on a diagnosis.

What do these two observations lead us to? The fact is that difficult behavior does not usually occur because the child is "behavioral" or attention-seeking. It is not caused by a lack of motivation, poor parenting, or a lack of discipline. Teachers need to understand the behavior of a child in the context of what that behavior reveals about the child's social-emotional skill development. Once a teacher understands what these skill deficits are, some of these skills can actually be taught and built. Some children need extra help and patience in the classroom while they build these skills, including perspective-taking, social reciprocity, attention, flexibility, and behavior modulation. These skills are abstract in nature and situationally based, so they are hard to define and classify, and are not seen in behaviors exhibited all the time and in all environments. Not having these skills affects a child's social world as much as dyslexia affects a child's reading. And, like reading, these are skills that need to be better understood and then worked on over time, through teaching and practice.

Through information and knowledge, this book seeks to empower teachers to know what learning skills lie behind clusters of behaviors and how these issues influence social-emotional development. If a teacher is more aware of common patterns of behavior, he or she will know what to be paying attention to and, perhaps most importantly, how to support the social-emotional learning of particular students. Teachers equipped with a strong understanding of these skills deficits will be able to more effectively guide children in the moment.

Using this Book

This book will provide in-the-moment strategies for teachers to calm a child in crisis, guide a child to perform a skill the child already knows, and support a child in practicing this skill. This process is called Moment-to-Moment support.

Once teachers have a better understanding of the social-emotional skill deficits a child might face, they need to be equipped with a process for supporting the student. All teachers can positively support students, guide them, and help them. But in order to effectively influence the learning success of a child with a skill-deficit, the teacher needs to have an awareness of the external and internal causes of the behavior, to understand what different behaviors are telling them about a child's social-emotional skill-deficit profile, to recognize what these skill deficits look like and how the skills can, in fact, be taught. All of this will put the teacher in a position to be able to know how to support this child in the moment.

Teachers and the school itself needs a well-developed plan that includes four important steps:

- **Looking Beyond the Behavior** to understand what specific behaviors and their triggers reveal about the social-emotional skill deficits of a child.

- **Understanding Social-Emotional Skills** by type, assessing what skill deficits underlie specific behaviors, and planning how these skills can be taught.
- **Active Skill Development** by introducing the skills in classroom activities.
- **Moment-to-Moment Support** of individual students practicing the social-emotional skills.

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