

## **Creating a Safe, Fair and Respectful Environment**

Structuring the educational environment to create an atmosphere that is safe, fair and respectful of students is the beginning of an effective program for all students, including those identified as having a serious emotional disability. Students must feel safe both physically and psychologically. The educational setting should be attractive, comfortable and well-kept so that the students will feel that the classroom is a place worth being and they are worth the effort. The room should be arranged so that the teacher can monitor all students at the same time. Any type of verbal abuse, put-downs, threatening behaviors or violence must not be allowed. Components that help to develop a safe and positive educational environment include:

- positive teacher-student relationships,
- a nurturing atmosphere,
- clear and consistent expectations for behavior,
- routines and rituals,
- appropriate amounts of structure for specific situations/needs, and
- proactive intervention of problems.

### **Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**

A good relationship between a teacher and student forms the foundation for behavioral, social and academic learning. This relationship occurs as a result of unconditional acceptance of the student by the teacher. Through this acceptance the teacher shows the student that s/he is valued as an individual worthy of respect. By treating the student in this manner the other components in the classroom will be more effective. Failure to establish this relationship will result in a lack of effectiveness in the overall program and possible resentment and hostility on the part of the student.

The term "teacher" refers to both the teacher and the teacher assistant, if there is one. Both serve as role models for the student and failure to treat the student respectfully by either the teacher or assistant will have a detrimental effect on the climate in the classroom.

It is important to remember that many of the acting out behaviors used by students and youth with serious emotional disabilities are often directly related to their need to protect themselves from the adults in their lives. Protection against harm and failure become an integral part of their personality development. They may rely on defensive behaviors and have an inability to reciprocate emotional warmth and empathy making it difficult for them to maintain healthy and trusting relationships with others. It is essential for a teacher of students with behavioral-emotional disabilities to initially seek understanding of the students' emotional pathology before expecting to be accepted and respected as a person or the authority the teacher represents.

Developing a trusting relationship with these students requires steadfast patience and personal integrity. Students who have been subjected to abuse and emotional trauma tend

to have a hypersensitivity to the authenticity of others. They seem capable of easily detecting superficial concern or hypocrisy in adults. It is critical to realize that the teacher's actions rather than words are powerful models for these students. Maturity, self-control, and unconditional acceptance of the students are essential aspects of the character of an effective teacher.

Nicholas Hobbs (1966) describes the character of a good teacher and role-model for students with behavioral and emotional handicaps:

*A decent adult; educated, well-trained; able to give and receive affection, to live relaxed, and to be firm; a person with private resources for the nourishment and refreshment of his own life; not an itinerant worker but a professional through and through; a person with a sense of the significance of time; of the usefulness of today and the promise of tomorrow; a person of hope, quiet confidence, and joy; one who has committed himself to students and to the proposition that students who are emotionally disturbed can be helped by the process of reeducation (pp. 1106-1107).*

Teacher-student relationships take many forms in the classroom. Two dimensions of the teacher relationship are the roles of behavior manager and emotional nurturer. There should be a balance between these two roles in both group and individual settings. In both roles the teacher should be consistent and work to develop a sense of security, fairness and self-esteem in the student.

**Some characteristics of a positive relationship are:**

- teacher uses appropriate and natural voice tone and voice level while talking with the students in all circumstances;
- teacher uses non-threatening body language;
- teacher gives positive and therapeutic messages to students in all conversations;
- teacher respects each student's privacy and is discreet when discussing personal matters;
- teacher is accessible to students before, during and after school hours;
- teacher listens carefully when students initiate conversation and makes contingent responses or asks questions to continue the conversation;
- teacher initiates conversations with students, asking open-ended questions and seeking out their opinions;
- students seek out the teacher for personal contact and conversation;
- teacher rewards open, honest expressions or questions; and
- teacher responds in an understanding way.

**Characteristics of healthy relationships include:** respect, recognition, caring and support, acceptance, growth and learning, empathy, and trust and confidentiality.

**Roadblocks to communication include:** ordering or commanding, warning or threatening, moralizing or preaching, advising or giving solutions, persuading with logic or arguing, judging, criticizing or blaming, praising or agreeing, name-calling or ridiculing, analyzing or diagnosing, reassuring or sympathizing (ex. "Don't worry." "You'll feel better."), probing or questioning, and diverting, sarcasm or withdrawal.

### **Tips and Strategies for Resolving Conflicts While Maintaining Relationships**

1. It is important to **clarify the problem** or conflict and understand the underlying issues.
2. If people present a number of conflicts, ask them to **establish priorities**.
3. **Beware of suppressed emotions**, especially anger and hurt.
4. **Allow people an opportunity to ventilate**.
5. When the **issue of trust** enters the interaction, address it immediately.
6. **Don't take it personally**.
7. Conflicts often arise when people have **underlying wants and needs** that are not being satisfied.
8. It is very important to **discuss each other's perceptions around the conflict**.
9. People will often try to disguise their **doubts and fears** while in the midst of a conflict.
10. **Asking for feedback** when in a conflict can help to create a picture of the unhealthy dynamics embedded in interactions.
11. When people engage in conflict, they typically create potential solutions in their own minds.
12. During the problem-solving process, it is very important for people to **separate inventing solutions from deciding on the final solution**.

### **A Nurturing Atmosphere**

In a classroom, the teacher provides an atmosphere of nurturing in group and individual settings during times when emotional support for the group/individual is needed. The goal of nurturing is to develop a trusting and accepting relationship between teacher and student. The nurturing teacher strives to be accessible, empathetic, and supportive. The student must be "valued" as an individual for nurturing to be authentic.

Praise, both verbal and physical, is one of the most natural expressions of approval, warmth, and acceptance. The teacher's positive tone and supportive attitude delivers nurturing messages to the student. It is important to look for frequent opportunities to be genuinely positive.

Some examples of verbal praise are:

- "Mike, I like the way you came into the classroom."
- "Everyone is working on science so quietly."

- "I like the way everyone is raising a hand."
- "You made 95 on the math test! That's great!"

Some examples of physical praise are:

- pats on the back,
- winking, smiling,
- holding hands (elementary), and
- "high fives."

The teacher needs to take time to show a personal interest in a caring fashion. By listening, sharing, and reflecting, the teacher is able to relate with a student at a more personal level. Although some limit-setting is always in place, there is more tolerance as the teacher allows for student expression and refrains from judging and criticizing. This approach opens opportunities for a student to express feelings without being threatened by the imposition of moral judgments. When a student is able to express perceptions and feelings, then the teacher is able to assist him/her with labeling feelings and behavior, and identifying underlying problem issues.

Some examples of labeling and identifying statements are:

- "It's okay to feel mad when you lose something important."
- "I can see that you are very disappointed with the way he treated you."
- "It is normal for students to be nervous before a big test."
- "We all want some attention now and then."
- "You say that you're going to Carowinds this weekend. It is really nice to have a vacation like that."

A student needs to have time during the day to relax, feel accepted, laugh and enjoy him/herself. During periods of stress, nurturing provides opportunities for the student to feel secure. A teacher needs to do this in both group and individual settings. A teacher nurtures his/her students in a variety of ways.

Some examples are:

- celebrating birthdays,
- providing hugs and warm fuzzies,
- praising students,
- walking and talking with individual students,
- empathizing with student feelings,
- sharing jokes,
- allowing ventilation of feelings in a safe environment,
- helping students set goals and aspirations, and
- smiling and laughing with students.

In classroom settings, the teacher may need to provide opportunities for the group to vent concerns, anger, frustrations and anxieties. Through group discussions, the teacher can encourage the group to express feelings and find support from each other as well. In outings such as a ropes course, the teacher has a prime opportunity to nurture budding feelings of self-confidence and tolerance of others. In group settings, modeling appropriate expressions of frustration as well as problem-solving is crucial to the development of social skills in the student.

With individual students, the teacher as nurturer provides opportunities for the development of self-control, insight, and a sense of self-worth. Behavior management techniques teach the student that s/he is responsible for his/her behavior. Emotional nurturing helps the student develop a sense of self-worth and provides tools to use during difficult situations (e.g., communication skills, problem-solving, etc.).

Providing emotional nurturing is a complex issue. The teacher must consider a student's needs and readiness for nurturing as well as his/her own comfort level in playing the role of nurturer. Teachers may find some student behavior personally offensive or physically threatening and be unable to nurture in the presence of such behavior. Students may also be offended by nurturing. For instance, physical touch can be a sensitive issue for both teacher and student. Problems with touching can occur if a student is embarrassed by touching, misreads the touch, or is inclined to be stimulated by touching.

Another concern when nurturing in the BED classroom is that it may make the teacher's job as behavior manager more difficult. One effect on the classroom is that when affect is dealt with, an escalation of other students' behavior can occur. For example, when one student shares a scary experience it can cause other students to become frightened and act out their fears. This requires the teacher to switch from the role as nurturer to behavior manager and this changing of roles can be difficult to accomplish at times. A second effect is that a student may choose to identify with and respond to the teacher as a nurturer and refuse to respect the role of behavior manager. Finally, the teacher's objectivity may be compromised by having developed a close relationship with the student based on past interactions in which the teacher played the role of nurturer. This lack of objectivity "opens the door" for a student to manipulate the teacher.

## **Clear and Consistent Expectations for Behavior**

Structured behavioral programs require that a teacher relate with a student in specific, well defined ways. There are some essential skills that the teacher must call upon: clarity in his/her communication, consistency in his/her interactions with a student, and a proactive attitude toward treatment and behavior change.

### **Clear Communication**

There are many reasons students have difficulty understanding communication initiated by others. They may be experiencing current emotional stress. They may have received many ambiguous messages in the past and require extra clarification to understand the

import of certain words. They may have receptive language or attention difficulties which affect their ability to understand and/or retain information or follow directions. The teacher should understand the students' language capabilities and take this into account when giving directions and communicating. In order to be effective, it is crucial to be clear in communication with students.

Some ways to help students understand directions are to:

- Use short, concise sentences;
- Show the students what you want them to do;
- Have the students practice the directions;
- Break long directions down into smaller parts and only give one or two parts at a time, allowing the student to complete the first part of the direction before proceeding;
- Make sure the student understands the meaning of all the words used;
- Be specific and concrete;
- Repeat directions;
- Post common and frequent directions and expectations in writing where students can see them;
- Call the student's name before giving the direction;
- Make sure eye contact is made when communicating;
- Wait until distractions are reduced before giving information;
- Have the student explain or repeat the directions;
- Speak clearly with appropriate volume, and use a calm, firm voice tone;
- Make sure the students understand how to clarify directions they do not understand; and
- Write down instructions or have the student write them down.

Common rules and guidelines should be overtly taught so that students understand exactly what is expected of them. If a rule is established, the teacher must teach the rule to the student. This involves clear explanation, modeling of the rule and then having the student practice until he or she can follow the rule correctly. When a minor rule violation occurs, the teacher should treat it as a learning error. Ask the student to provide the rule. Then ask the student to show the teacher that he or she can follow the rule. If the student continues to violate the rule, the student may need additional support or prompts about how to follow it. If the student argues about the rule, the teacher must strive to minimize "garbage" or "noise" introduced into the conversation. When communicating with a student, it is helpful to be concise and firm. Being concise in words communicates clarity of thought and being firm in tone communicates clarity of intention.

### **Consistency**

It is important to be consistent in interactions with students. Consistency provides the students with a feeling of security and safety. Every adult who interacts with the student should understand the guidelines and consistently address behaviors. It is important for the students to know what to expect in various situations and also what to expect in the

teacher-student relationship. Consistency may be the most essential skill that guides behavior management. When a consequence is stated, there must be consistency in the follow-through. When a behavioral contract is negotiated, there must be consistency in adhering to the "letter" of the agreement. When rules are formulated, there must be consistency in application across many situations. Rules and consequences must be realistic ('doable'). The teacher is unable to be consistent if rules or consequences are unrealistic.

Some ways to demonstrate consistency are to:

- Establish a few basic rules (no more than 4 or 5) that only change infrequently and with good reason (example: Follow directions, respect others and complete assignments on time.);
- If using a point or level system, make sure it is one that can reasonably be used and implemented consistently;
- Keep rules, expectations and consequences realistic;
- Teach all rules and expectations;
- Uphold rules and handle rule violations without bias; and
- Keep behavioral contracts simple and follow through on any consequence or reward that was promised.

### **Setting Expectations**

One method of clearly and consistently communicating what is appropriate behavior is to develop a set of "expectations" for regular activities. These expectations serve as a reminder to the students of what their behavior should be in any given situation.

Expectations should be taught to the group and then restated whenever there is movement or change. The teacher should start each academic instructional period or transitional activity by stating the expectations. It is also helpful to restate expectations to the group during the activity to reestablish control if necessary. By stating expectations, power struggles may be avoided.

Examples of expectation statements include:

- "It's time for math; make sure your pencil is sharpened and your book and paper are on your desk."
- "Class, remember the expectations for this group activity are to keep your voices down and remain in your seats during small group discussions."
- "We're getting ready to go to lunch; remember to stay in line and keep your hands to yourself."
- "It's time for you to go to physical science. You should have your book, pencil, paper and behavior sheet."

It is helpful to establish specific expectations for unstructured times of the day, such as

hall transitions, lunch or recess. These can be taught to the students and prompted by either the teacher or a student before the activity. Some suggestions for specific expectations follow.

1. *Hall Transition*
  - a. Stand in line quietly.
  - b. Face forward.
  - c. Keep hands and feet to yourself.
  - d. Follow the line leader.
  - e. Stay in line.
  - f. Use appropriate language and voice tone.
  
2. *Recess/P.E.*
  - a. Stay in the assigned area.
  - b. Follow teacher directions.
  - c. Follow game rules.
  - d. Use appropriate language and voice tone.
  
3. *Lunch*
  - a. Wait your turn in line.
  - b. Use good manners.
  - c. Sit in assigned area.
  - d. Put your trash in the trash can.
  - e. Use appropriate language and voice tone.

Students with serious emotional disabilities have difficulty with transitions and changes in expectations. The teacher should be aware of all the transitions during the day and plan for these transitions. Prompting the expectations before an activity can be used as a ritual to help focus students individually or as a group. It reinforces the student's awareness of appropriate behaviors. It gives the student a concrete list that s/he may use to remind him/herself of what is expected by others in different situations.

Expectations can be set based on the needs and maturity level of the students. If expectations are used, they should be used consistently. Just because the students know the expectations does not mean that they no longer need to be stated. They can and should be stated to focus and to reassure.

## **Routines and Rituals**

Establishing routine and rituals helps students with serious emotional disabilities feel more secure and allows them to predict what will happen during the day. Once the routine or ritual is established it gives them opportunities to behave in appropriate ways with decreased stress. Routines need to be taught in the same way that rules and procedures are taught.

**Examples of possible routines:**



- Classes, breaks and recess begin and end at scheduled times;
- Students take turns washing their hands before lunch in a predictable method;
- A system is developed for how students line up, how they get permission to go to the restroom, how they sharpen their pencils, etc.;
- Quiet time is scheduled before lunch everyday;
- The teacher reads aloud at a certain time everyday;
- A class meeting is held every morning to discuss the day's schedule and initiate positive interactions; and
- A class meeting is held every afternoon to discuss how the day went, solve problems and end on a positive note.

### **Examples of possible rituals:**

- On a student's birthday they get a special activity such as eating lunch with the principal;
- At the end of a meeting everyone makes a positive statement to someone;
- At the beginning of the week each student shares a story from the weekend;
- After recess the elementary class sings two songs before starting class work; and

### **Routine Class Meetings**

An important routine/ritual for students can be a class meeting in the morning and/or afternoon. It is an opportunity to share information about the schedule and day's activities and a chance to have the students start and end the day with positive statements about themselves and others. It can include time for the students to communicate needs or problems and state or evaluate both personal and group goals. It can even include some academic components.

The meeting should include every member of the class if possible. In some situations, such as a resource class, it may be difficult to have all the students in the classroom at one time. Small groups, based on the teacher's schedule and the needs of the students, may provide an opportunity for regularly scheduled class meetings.

The purpose of the class meeting can be individualized to meet the needs of the classroom situation and the current students. The meeting should have an agenda with a regularly scheduled order to the components so that the students will know what to expect from each meeting. Also, they can learn the routine and have opportunities to lead the meetings. It is helpful to have the order of the meeting posted.

Some possible components to a class meeting include:

1. Stating expectations (see the section entitled 'setting expectations');

2. Positive statements (statements about themselves, or others, or an activity that went well during the day);
3. Schedule review (teacher / students discuss the day's events before they happen; any changes in the schedule, expectations for new activities, what will happen when, etc.);
4. Helpful hints (teacher / students may make suggestions for the purpose of improving a situation, system or individual's behavior; practice or role play ahead of the meeting may help students handle giving feedback appropriately);
5. Stating and/or evaluating goals (having the students state their individual goals and/or a group goal in the morning helps them to focus on what they need to do to accomplish the goal, and at the end of the day evaluating how well they accomplished their goals helps them to see progress);
6. Problem-solving (discuss group issues or problems and come to a decision about how to proceed);
7. Short academic or fun activities (letter of the day, words that begin with..., trivia questions, academic questions from the day's lessons, riddles or jokes, poetry reading, etc.); or
8. "Groupness" activities (saying a group chant, determining a group reward for a group goal, planning group activities or educational outings).

The meeting can teach many social and applied academic skills necessary to successful living experiences, such as:

1. Making choices;
2. Setting attainable goals;
3. Time budgeting and time discipline;
4. Sharing ideas, give and take, reaching a consensus, coming to closure, etc.; and
5. Rights and responsibilities of group membership.

The teacher can use the meeting as a forum for helping students deal with frustrating situations. The teacher can remind a student that s/he will get an opportunity to address a situation or event in an appropriate manner at a meeting later in the day, hopefully decreasing the immediate tension. Usually there is time between when the problem occurs and the meeting, allowing the student to calm down and practice what s/he will say. The teacher can provide assistance in planning how to give the helpful suggestion or hint, teaching the student to communicate his or her needs, frustrations, or wants in a positive way. An example would be if a student was angry at other students because they repeatedly did not return his drawing pencils when he loaned them or borrowed them without asking. He may be angry in a particular moment, but knowing that he can address the problem during the meeting allows him time to calm down and plan what he needs to say to the group to express his frustration. He can then suggest his solution or ask for possible solutions from the group in an appropriate manner.

The meeting can and should be a very positive experience for the students, allowing opportunity for expression in a structured, safe setting. It is a chance for students to be supportive of each other and to recognize each other's progress as well as their own. It provides time for students to take leadership roles and develop self-confidence.

The class meeting can be used as a method for problem-solving at other than regularly scheduled times without a specific agenda. However, even these "problem-solving" meetings should have a plan or order and expectations should be set before starting.

### **Appropriate Amounts of Structure for Specific Situations/Need**

Students with behavioral-emotional disabilities usually require more structure than other students to feel secure and behave appropriately. The amount of structure a student or a group needs should be looked at individually. Also the task or situation should have some influence over the amount of structure imposed by the teacher. The school day should be scheduled so that the majority of the day is given to lessons and activities. Any free time that is built into the schedule should be structured and planned for. Students may function well at a high level of structure, but as they become ready they need safe learning opportunities to practice dealing with less-structured activities. Imposing too much structure into a situation may cause resentment or restrict the growth of the student.

Factors to consider when determining the appropriate amount of structure include:

1. Age and maturity level,
2. Recent past behaviors,
3. Student motivation level,
4. Ability to perform a given task, and
5. Preparation to handle the social difficulty or stimulation of a situation.

Factors that affect the level of structure include:

1. Level of adult supervision,
2. Restrictiveness of movement,
3. Number of choices the student can make,
4. Objects available in the environment for use by the student, and
5. Specificity of rules.

### **Proactive Intervention of Problems in the Environment**

There are many actions a teacher can take to resolve problems while they are small or before they start. The structure of the educational environment can decrease frustrations, anxiety and inappropriate behaviors. Developing a plan to deal with group and individual behaviors before they happen, based on the group/individual needs, increases the consistency and effectiveness of dealing with problems. Having the students develop goals to work toward, based on their needs and motivations, helps the student proactively work on his/her behaviors. It is important to address behaviors as early as possible and work proactively at preventing crisis situations.

## **Scheduling Difficult Activities**

When scheduling for the day, it is helpful to consider the difficulty of each activity for the students as a group and individually. Which activity is most difficult will vary from student to student. Examples of difficult activities are: learning a new math skill, a writing activity, P.E., speaking before class, science, etc. It is important to plan when a student will be working on an activity that is difficult for him/her and prepare for the situation. A student must not be overloaded with more stress than s/he can handle at one time.

Suggestions for ways to schedule difficult activities:

- Schedule before rewarding activities to help with motivation;
- Schedule at times when the student is fresh (perhaps in the morning or after a break);
- Interchange with activities at which the student will feel more success;
- Pay attention to the length of the activity and the length of the students' attention span;
- Schedule quiet activities after a physical activity or after an intermediate task to help with the transition; or
- When working individually do not schedule the whole group to have difficult activities at the same time so that extra support can be provided to the students experiencing stress.
- Schedule individual instruction time to introduce difficult concepts or activities prior to the regular time.

## **Student Goals**

One way to work on a problem before it happens is to help the student identify an appropriate and realistic personal goal. It should be worded so that the student is able to state the goal and will understand fully what s/he is working toward. The goal should be reviewed and evaluated daily. Suggestions for how to improve on the goal can be discussed at any time. The student can focus on one issue and experience success as s/he keeps track of the progress being made on the goal. This gives the student and the teacher a concrete and specific way of communicating about a problem.

- The goal should be evaluated in a concrete way (examples: rating progress on the goal between 1-10 or 1-3);
- The student and teacher both should have some input on how the goal is rated for the day;
- The goal rating should be recorded or graphed in a way that the student can understand and be located in a place where s/he can check his/her progress; and
- The goal could have some recognition or reward associated with making progress.