THE SKILL-BUILDING LENS

Helping Students with Behavior Challenges

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There's a disconnect between the needs of students with mental health issues and teachers' skills. Twenty-one percent of U.S. teenagers have struggled with a debilitating mental health problem at some point during their school years (Merikangas et al., 2010), yet programs for elementary and special education teachers typically provide *one* course—if that—in mental health and behavior management. Thus, most teachers lack the skills and knowledge to intervene effectively with students facing mental health challenges.

Teachers realize they need such skills. They want to create positive outcomes for students who are struggling. And some fear that a disruptive student might jeopardize the academic performance of their entire class—a fear that has become more prominent in light of contemporary initiatives that yoke teacher pay and school funding to student performance.

When a teacher struggles with a particularly troubled student, he or she often seeks guidance from a team composed of the school psychologist, special educators, administrators, and other colleagues. But this strategy often doesn't live up to its potential.

A New Lens

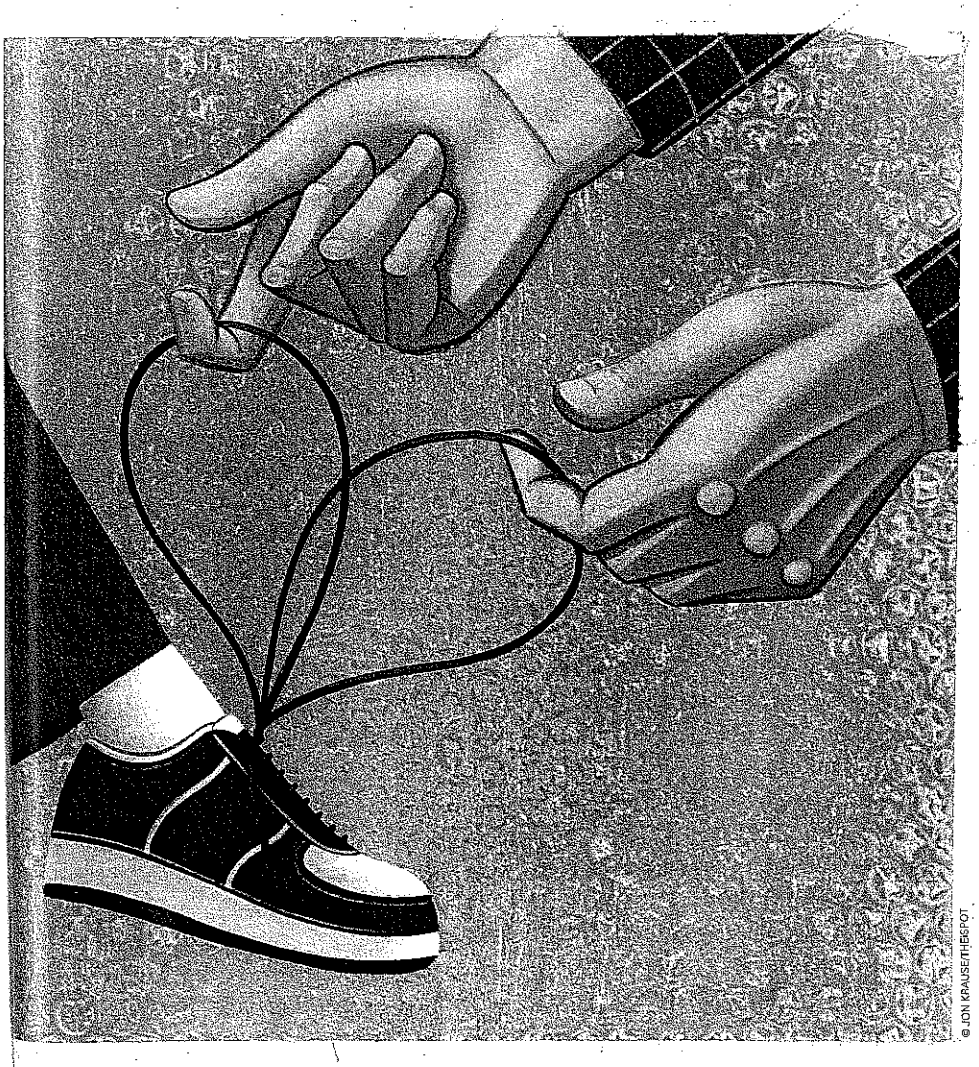
Conversations at these problem-solving meetings are often emotionally charged. With good intentions, participants let discussion drift to outside-of-school topics—a parent's arrest, a family's eviction, or the student's seemingly daunting psychiatric profile. Students' home lives and diagnoses profoundly affect their behavior at school, so such topics shouldn't be off-limits. The problem is that conversations focused on life problems don't fit well within the short time allotted for team meetings, and the solutions to such problems—if there are any—are generally beyond what a teacher can implement. Too often, problem-solving meetings become long and emotionally draining—and don't result in concrete strategies teachers can try.

Consider this scenario. In early March, after countless previous meetings with the principal and school psychologist, 3rd grade teacher Mrs. Shin is in the conference room with them again. She's concerned about the approaching standardized tests and how a very troubled student of hers, Jared, is likely to fare. Jared has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and oppositional defiant disorder. He's currently being tested to determine whether he's eligible for an individualized education program (IEP). He has refused to do any writing all year and hasn't produced math work in three months.

Lately, Jared has been displaying aggressive behavior on the playground. Mrs. Shin hasn't been able to discuss the problem with his foster mother because the mother's car broke down and she missed a scheduled conference. This Monday, Jared mentioned he had received a birthday card from his biological mother—and he's looked angry all week. What is Mrs. Shin supposed to do?

Here's where using a skill-building lens helps. It's important for administrators to create an environment in which teachers like Mrs. Shin who ask for help feel

Teachers often feel overwhelmed by a student's mental health challenges. The key to helping is to focus on what teachers can do—build student skills.



empowered and optimistic—even when it feels like every conceivable intervention has been tried. A teacher should leave a problem-solving meeting with a plan—and with the confidence that he or she can carry it out.

Breaking Big Challenges into Smaller Skills

In *The Explosive Child,* Ross Greene (2014) writes that children would behave if they could. We can generally interpret any inappropriate student behavior as the manifestation of an underdeveloped skill—and educators *can* teach these missing social, behavioral, and emotional skills alongside academics, even in busy classrooms. Breaking down an overwhelming challenge into smaller skill areas can make the problem seem manageable, while giving the teacher a road map to address it.

For example, the avoidance Jared is displaying toward work is a behavior common to kids with emotional issues that can become increasingly troublesome in the upper grades. Kids like Jared often experience the flight response when faced with a daunting task. Teachers can address such work avoidance by teaching skills many students lack: how to initiate a task, how to persist when facing difficulties, and how to seek help. Simply shifting the conversation from how many months Jared has been avoiding work to how we might teach him to ask for help can result in a much more productive conversation.

Five Skills No Learner Should Be Without

Let's look at five skill areas that are often underdeveloped in disruptive students and things classroom teachers can do to help kids strengthen them (Minahan, 2014; Minahan & Rappaport, 2012).

1. Self-regulation

Most students who exhibit challenging behaviors need to be explicitly taught

self-regulation skills, such as how to identify their feelings and recognize warning signs that they're about to lose control (like clenched fists or a racing heart). Providing a cue such as saying "self-check" allows the student to notice and reflect on the clues his body is giving him. Over time, this will help him catch himself getting frustrated and use a self-calming strategy before he becomes explosive. A small box of comforting items and self-regulation strategies put together with the student can be kept available. Cognitive distraction activities like word games or hidden-picture books are great for self-calming.

Another innovative strategy is biofeedback, which uses electronic monitoring—usually a sensor on the finger connected to a device that displays signals like heart rate in real time—to teach a student how to control her body's responses. The display helps a student know whether a self-calming strategy worked.

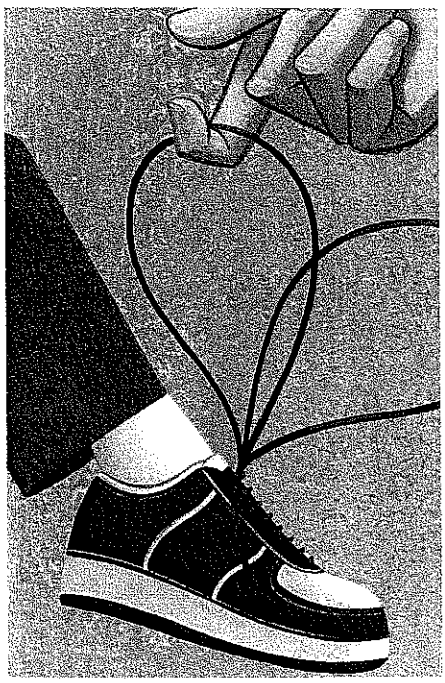
2. Social skills

Perspective taking, the ability to understand others' thoughts and feelings, improves people's ability to navigate social situations. It's often underdeveloped in students with social-emotional disabilities.

Setting up an alternative small-group lunch or recess helps these kids tune in better to others, reduces social anxiety, and facilitates positive social interaction. Social successes improve a student's self-esteem and often lead to fewer negative interactions throughout the day.

3. Executive functioning

Executive-functioning skills are key to setting goals and solving problems. They help students start tasks, organize materials, plan projects, manage time efficiently, and stay on task. Students with poor executive functioning often have difficulty handling frustration and completing work.



To boost executive functioning, use checklists and how-to lists, break long assignments into smaller chunks, and help students organize through calendars, time organizers, and mnemonics. Communicating expectations visually—such as a giving a student a laminated photo ("Here's how your desk should look when you're ready to go to lunch"), rather than saying "Get ready for lunch!"—helps an organizationally challenged child remember what needs to be done.

4. Positive thinking

Students who struggle with positive thinking engage in all-or-nothing thinking ("I hate math") or have frequent catastrophic thoughts ("If I fail this test, I'll never get a good job!"). This can lead to shutting down before even trying an assignment—or outright refusing to participate in a certain subject. To promote more positive, realistic thinking,

- Take photographs of a student's successful moments during the school day (and send them home).
- Provide a daily check-in and check-out sheet. In the morning, the student jots down what he or she thinks will be difficult that day; at day's end, he or she reflects on what happened with that task, perhaps talking with a teacher. If the task *was* difficult, did he persist? What helped her cope?
- Try a similar strategy with challenging assignments. Before the student tries the assignment, ask "How hard will this be, from 1 to 5?" and after the assignment, ask, "How hard was it?" Reflecting over time on the differences between the recorded numbers helps learners realize that assignments often aren't as difficult as they fear they'll be and reduces their initial negative thinking.

5. Flexible thinking

Flexible thinking enables students to manage unpredictable events and disrupted routines. Improving flexible thinking helps a learner adapt to new situations and improvise to meet different types of challenges.

A great way to heighten this skill is to catch kids being flexible and reinforce them for it. Set up a Flexibility Jar and add a pom-pom to it every time the student demonstrates flexibility. Displays of flexibility might include calmly allowing a peer to use the computer first or saying "Oh well!" when there's an unexpected change like the class not being able to watch a planned movie. For young children, define flexibility as any time the child stops, stays calm, and makes a new plan.

Three More to Grow On

We should also empower teachers to strengthen weak skills connected to work avoidance—initiation, persistence, and seeking help.

Initiation

Some students won't even attempt to start an activity once they perceive it might be too difficult for them. Procrastination increases their stress and reduces the time they have to complete

the assignment. The teacher often has a 30- to 60-second window to jump in and help an overly anxious student start working with confidence before negative thinking leads to a shutdown.

If several students have this issue, provide a nonthreatening warm-up activity like a word search until you have time to help each student start the assignment. Or preview the assignment before the whole class tackles it. For example, do the first two problems on a math worksheet with vulnerable students in the morning: When you hand back that worksheet later during math class, these students have an entry point and won't be so scared of the task.

Persistence

When some students make a mistake or struggle, they stop working to avoid feeling inadequate. Teach persistence by pointing out that the brain actually grows when a person pushes himself out of his comfort zone to learn hard things (Dweck, 2008). Have part of the student's grade reflect not just the product, but also a self-reflection on how well he or she persevered ("Did I attempt more problems today than yesterday?").

Seeking Help

Overwhelmed students can be too embarrassed to ask for help—or not know how. It's invaluable to teach students how to ask for *specific* help ("I don't know how to start this assignment. Please help me think of what to write about.") Often, a student will feel more comfortable when you set up a subtle system for asking for help, such as agreeing on an object the student will put on her desk to indicate she needs assistance.

Toward Empowered Problem-Solving Meetings

A problem-solving team that approached a situation like Mrs. Shin's with the view that behavior is both a way of communicating and a symptom of underdeveloped skills would have a better shot at helping. Team members might reframe a concern like "Jared hasn't done *any* math work in months" into a conversation around questions like, "Are we teaching Jared the skill of initiation? How does he typically react to challenging work? How are we teaching him to persist?" Such questions would lead into brainstorming ways to build up weak skills.

Meetings about student behavior are more constructive when certain systems, such as looking at data on the student in question, are in place. It's especially effective for the student's teacher to come with ABC data (O'Neill et al., 1997): information about antecedents (what happened just before a problematic incident); behavior (what the student did); and consequences (how peers and adults responded). For many students like Jared, common hot spots or conditions throughout the school day trigger episodes of anxiety-fueled, oppositional behavior (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012). These hot spots include unstructured times (like recess or lunch); transitions (such as shifting between classes or activities); any writing task; situations that require social skills; or unexpected changes—for example, indoor recess because of weather (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012).

With ABC data in hand, educators can look for tendencies, differentiating between one-time events and larger patterns, and formulate hypotheses about what the student is trying to communicate and which skills need to be bolstered. For example, if a student has a meltdown every time there's a math quiz, a team might hypothesize that he's motivated by escape. He may need further support because of an underlying math disability.

A series of guiding questions, like the following, helps team members spend a problem-solving meeting brainstorming productively.

1. In three sentences, what is the behavior or concern?
2. Which underdeveloped skills do you think underlie the behavior? (It's helpful to review the student's IEP and recent test results.)
3. Which helpful interventions are currently in place to address these underdeveloped skills?
4. Which interventions have been tried consistently and *weren't* helpful?
5. What are the antecedents of the behavior? When and where is it most likely—or least likely—to occur (O'Neill et al., 1997)?
6. Which interventions are in place to mitigate these antecedents?
7. What is the typical response or consequence for the student when this behavior happens? Do these responses maintain the behavior (for instance, by letting a student consistently get out of work by yelling) or help solve the problem?
8. What should our next steps be? (List the agreed-on recommendations and what each team member's role will be and set a time to meet again and report on results.)

Fostering a skill-building lens creates a community of practice that

It's important for administrators to **create an environment in which teachers who ask for help feel empowered.**

enables teachers to coach one another through analyzing behavior problems, empowers them to be less dependent on administrators and external consultants, and gives them confidence to keep trying with a challenging student.

How It Worked for Jared

Let's look at how adopting a skill-building lens helped the team help Mrs. Shin work with Jared. The principal asked her to report Jared's behavior in three sentences. She did so and indicated work-avoidant behavior, especially in writing and math, and playground aggression as her top concerns.

The school psychologist, drawing from her recent testing and interactions with Jared, described his underdeveloped skills: positive thinking, initiation, and persistence. She explained that when Jared looks at a blank piece of writing paper or math work, he automatically thinks he can't do the task. Recess is difficult because of Jared's weak social skills—he often misperceives social interactions and gets upset—and self-regulation—he goes quickly from zero to 60 and becomes aggressive.

After reviewing some ABC data Mrs. Shin brought, team members realized that typical antecedents for Jared's work avoidance included any academic demand with an open-ended writing component and math work. His aggressive incidents usually happened when he faced an unstructured time with a social demand. They agreed that Jared's work avoidance resulted largely from his lack of initiation skills, which were fueled by his negative thinking.

Because there were no successful interventions in place, the group brainstormed some. Mrs. Shin agreed to preview all writing and math assignments, helping Jared start his work individually the day before she handed an assignment to the class. Looking at a paper on Tuesday that he'd already started on Monday helped him bypass negative thinking. He began to approach work during class with more confidence. Mrs. Shin added points to his math grade whenever she saw any sign of persistence.

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The group agreed to provide Jared with an alternative recess—a time when a small group played non-competitive games facilitated by an adult. The principal assigned an experienced paraprofessional to facilitate this alternative recess; the physical education teacher provided equipment for the games. The school psychologist helped Jared learn to take deep breaths and draw in the sand when he caught himself becoming frustrated on the playground. She followed up with Jared's foster mom and outside counselor so they could help him process interactions with his biological mother and his negative thinking around work.

Jared's improvement in starting tasks and sticking to them helped him become more successful during writing and math and stop maneuvering to avoid work. Aggressive incidents decreased, and he found social success with peers. With his foster mother's permission, Mrs. Shin took photos of Jared working on his assignments—and of his completed work—which she sent home. Jared began to talk and think about himself as a competent student.

When educators structure problem-solving meetings using this skill-building lens, teachers feel more empowered and revitalized. This attitude transfers to students. Everyone wins. EL

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