



THE WHO

Who are we talking about in this book? Naturally, we're talking about students whose difficulties meeting social, emotional, or behavioral expectations are expressed through severe behaviors. The ones who are screaming, swearing, hitting, biting, kicking, running out of the classroom, and worse. The ones who are flying frequently into the assistant principal's office. The ones who are on the receiving end of countless discipline referrals, detentions, suspensions, expulsions, physical and mechanical restraints, forced seclusions, and (yes, in many places, still in the year 2016), paddlings. That these interventions aren't working is made clear by the fact that they are being applied so frequently to the same students.

The ramifications of our lack of success with these students extend beyond the classroom. We find them in our statistics on dropping out, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, and incarceration. These are also very expensive kids; placing a student in a program outside of the mainstream classroom is very costly. So the stakes are high, both in human and financial terms.

By the way, there are other students who are having difficulty meeting academic, social, and behavioral expectations, but whose behaviors are less extreme. They communicate that they're having difficulty by crying, sulking, pouting, withdrawing, becoming anxious, or sleeping through their classes. They may be sad that they have no friends, frustrated that they're having difficulty paying attention or sitting still, or hopeless over ongoing academic struggles. So we're talking about them, too.

Of course, when we don't effectively help behaviorally challenging students, their reasonably well-behaved classmates lose, too, and not merely in the ways that may be most obvious. Yes, there's lost learning. And there's the stress and anxiety of being around a kid who can be scary and seems out of control. But there's also the nagging sense that the adults aren't exactly sure what to do or how to make things better—because it's not getting better. And there's the uncomfortable feeling that the ways in which behaviorally challenging classmates are being treated are unnecessarily ostracizing and inhumane. So we're talking about the reasonably well behaved kids in this book, too.

We're also talking about classroom teachers. I don't come across many classroom teachers who look forward to dealing with their behaviorally challenging students on a daily basis (though there are exceptions). Those students—and their parents—are cited as a major contributing factor by many of the 50 percent of teachers who leave the profession within the first four years. And the emphasis on high-stakes testing has caused many classroom teachers to feel like test-prep robots, which, many tell me, has taken a lot of the humanity out of the work. Legislators and school boards often aren't focused on humanity; they're focused on test scores and new initiatives and budgets and reducing referrals into special education. The de-emphasis on social and emotional learning in many school systems has made it a lot harder to respond humanely in response to kids whose behavior is making everything else a lot more difficult. There's no *time* for humanity!

We're talking about parents, too. Parents of behaviorally challenging kids know a thing or two about feeling ostracized. They know they're blamed for their child's challenging behavior, despite the fact that they have other children who are well behaved. They don't want to be defensive, but feeling blamed doesn't make *that* any easier. They want to trust that their child is being well treated at school, but there are many signs to the contrary. Whatever the school is doing isn't working—their child is still on the receiving end of countless counseling sessions, detentions, suspensions and worse—but the parents feel powerless to do anything about it.

Of course, we're also talking about the parents of the reasonably well behaved kids. They may not know it, but they too have a stake in how things turn out with behaviorally challenging students. Their kids are showing up ready to learn, and the last thing they need is somebody else's kid screwing that up, making their child feel unsafe, and taking inordinate time and energy from the teacher. Not OK. Decisive action is needed, and pronto. Except that the pound of flesh and exclusion sometimes demanded by these parents isn't going to get the job done. When behaviorally challenging students aren't helped effectively, well-behaved kids and their parents suffer too.

If it's action that's called for, then we must also be talking about administrators. Most principals and assistant/vice principals aren't happy to have been placed in the role of building police officer. Yet the classroom teachers who are sending kids to the office also expect action, and are frequently quite clear about what the action should be: a powerful adult-imposed consequence—straight from the school's discipline handbook—that will finally get the message through and signal to the well-behaved students and their parents that the situation is being taken seriously and handled decisively. There's just that nagging awareness that the decisive and serious action *isn't actually working*. The kids who we've been sending to the office a lot are still being sent to the office a lot (if they haven't

already dropped out of school). The line outside the principal's office is never-ending. Something's the matter with this picture.

Finally, we're also talking about school psychologists, counselors, social workers . . . the people who are officially on the hook for "fixing" students with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. After all, it's often said, those students fall outside the expertise and responsibility of the general education classroom teacher. The problem, of course, is that the building's school mental health designee is overwhelmed, too. He or she may be covering several different schools, the kids who need help just keep on coming, and the testing load is intense. Plus, shouldn't the people who have been sending the kid to the office be involved in the process of helping these kids instead of handing the kid off like a hot potato to someone else?

Apparently, we're talking about everybody. And that's good, because when we help behaviorally challenging students more effectively, we're helping everybody else too. And it's going to take everybody to turn things around.

So now, the question: Are the ways in which we're dealing with behaviorally challenging kids at school actually helping? And another: Do the traditional disciplinary strategies even make sense anymore, given what we now know about behaviorally challenging kids? If not, then we're helping no one.

We've lost our way. We need to find a different way.

That starts with taking a look at what we've been thinking about behaviorally challenging kids. The lenses through which we're viewing these kids will have a major influence on the stance we take toward them and the strategies we employ in our efforts to help. What we're thinking and seeing and doing should be a reflection of the mountain of research on behaviorally challenging kids that has accumulated over the past forty to fifty years.

Here's what we've *been* thinking: behaviorally challenging kids are attention seeking, manipulative, unmotivated, coercive, and limit testing. And the parents of those kids are passive, permissive, inconsistent, noncontingent disciplinarians.

Challenging kids are challenging because they're lacking the skills to not be challenging.

The problem, of course, is that those beliefs are not a reflection of what the research tells us about behaviorally challenging kids. What we now know can be summarized in one sentence: *challenging kids are challenging because they're lacking the skills to not be challenging*. In other words, challenging behavior is reflective of a *developmental delay*. We'll be thinking more about that notion in subsequent chapters. But, for now, it's important to note that the emphasis is on lagging *skills*, not lagging *motivation*. That's an important distinction because, generally speaking, strategies aimed at improving motivation do not improve lagging skills. And the discipline programs in most schools are still oriented toward improving motivation.

Two ingredients are required for a student to behave adaptively: *motivation* and *skills*. For a very long time, school discipline programs have been focused on the *motivation* part, when the research tells us that we should instead have been focused on the *skills* part—just as we would with any other developmental delay.

As you may already know, the Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS) model described in this book operates on a very important key theme:

KIDS DO WELL IF THEY CAN

This is the belief that if the kid *could* do well, he *would* do well, and that if he's not doing well, he must be lacking the skills to do well. One of the most important things a potential helper can do for a behaviorally challenging student is to finally, at long last, figure out what skills the child is lacking. Those lagging skills are making it difficult for the student to meet certain academic and behavioral expectations.

The other important thing a potential helper can do for a behaviorally challenging student is to identify the *expectations* the student is having difficulty meeting. In the CPS model, those unmet expectations are referred to as *unsolved problems*.

Here's another key theme, and it's related to the first:

DOING WELL IS PREFERABLE

This is the belief that human beings—behaviorally challenging kids included—have a strong preference for doing well (as opposed to doing poorly). This belief is at odds with the commonly held belief that a student's challenging behavior is *working* for him.

How would challenging behavior be working? According to conventional notions about the *function* of behavior, challenging behavior helps a student *get* something (for example, attention) and helps him *escape* and *avoid* tasks that are tedious, challenging, uncomfortable, or scary. If that's what we're thinking and seeing, the interventions that make perfect sense are those aimed at proving to the student that his challenging behavior isn't going to work, and trying to elicit and encourage replacement behaviors that adults believe will work better. The first goal is typically accomplished through use of punishment, the second through use of reward.

But *all* of us get, escape, and avoid. So the question isn't whether the student is getting, escaping, and avoiding, but rather *why the student is going about getting, escaping, and avoiding in such a maladaptive manner*. And now you have the answer, thanks to the mountain of research: *because he's lacking the skills to get, escape, and avoid in a more adaptive fashion*. If we don't yet know what skills a student is lacking, and we don't yet know what expectations a

student is having difficulty meeting, then we don't yet know how to help the student.

What skills does the research tell us behaviorally challenging kids are lacking? For the time being, we're going to sacrifice precision for simplicity: *flexibility/adaptability*, *frustration tolerance*, and *problem solving*. Challenging episodes typically occur when these skills are being demanded. Along these lines, here's another crucial true fact: *Challenging kids aren't always challenging; they're only sometimes challenging*. When are they challenging? *When the demands and expectations being placed on them outstrip the skills they have to respond adaptively*. Just like the rest of us.

Adult-imposed consequences don't teach kids the skills they lack or solve the problems that set the stage for their challenging behavior.

When we treat behaviorally challenging kids as if they have a developmental delay and apply the same compassion and pretty much the same approach we would use with any other learning disability, they do a lot better. When we continue treating them as if they're unmotivated, manipulative, attention seeking, and limit testing and continue relying heavily on adult-imposed consequences, they often don't do better. Again, that's because adult-imposed consequences don't teach kids the skills they lack or solve the problems that set the stage for their challenging behavior.

Let's think briefly about the word *helper*, because that's the most important role caregivers can play in the life of a behaviorally challenging student. Of course, educators are in one of the helping professions; so are parents, mental health professionals, coaches, medical doctors, and so forth. There are two criteria for being an effective helper:

1. ***Helpers help.*** In other words, helpers abide by the Hippocratic Oath, which goes something like this: *don't make it worse*.

2. *Helpers have thick skin.* In other words, helpers don't take things personally. While helpers are entitled to their feelings, helpers bend over backward to ensure that those feelings do not interfere with helping.

In many schools, the interventions that are still being applied to behaviorally challenging kids are making things worse. And in many schools, helpers' subjective reactions and inaccurate beliefs about the difficulties of these students is interfering with helping.

If the lenses and interventions that are being applied to behaviorally challenging students in a particular building aren't helping, then we will continue to lose those students. And, as you've already read, when those students lose, we all lose. Changing course—finding a different way—requires that the helpers recognize that. And then start the hard work of doing things differently.

So now let's get back to where we started at the beginning of this chapter. Who are we talking about in this book?

Everyone.