Surface Management Techniques

From Redl, F., and Wineman, D. (1952). *Controls from Within: Techniques for the Treatment of the Aggressive Child*. New York: Free Press.

Redl and Wineman describe several "techniques for antiseptic manipulation of surface behavior" in their classic work. These are generally arranged in order from least to most obvious or intrusive.

Planned Ignoring. The idea here is that behavior is time-limited, and will peter out by itself without intervention. The teacher or child care worker must decide when it is important to intervene and when it is not. Sometimes a child may try to evoke a certain response from an adult, for example, and it is usually better for the adult to ignore such a ploy.

Signal Interference. There are a number of ways that an adult can signal the unacceptability of behavior to a child. Nonverbal techniques include a gesture, shaking of the head, and other means of communicating disapproval. Verbal techniques include a word or two, clearing the throat, even whistling. Signal interference places the burden of responsibility for stopping or changing his behavior on the child, and will not work if things have gotten way out of hand.

Proximity & Touch Control. Children and youth who lack inner controls may benefit from the mere presence of an adult. Redl & Wineman note that proximity lends "ego support" to children who may need it. Non-threatening physical contact may prove helpful for some when presence alone is insufficient. Teachers and child care workers should not refrain from making such contact when it is necessary.

Involvement in the Interest Relationship. Redl & Wineman observe that troubled children and youth lose interest in activities more rapidly than those without emotional and behavioral problems. Adult involvement may be needed to stimulate flagging interest. Redl & Wineman also note that "availability of sufficient and sufficiently rested adults [is an] absolute condition for . . . work of this type" (p.168). For adults to remain continuously engaged with children is tiring!

Hypodermic Affection. In addition to involvement in the interest relationship, many troubled children and some youth require adult affection if they are to maintain good self-control. This is despite the fact that they may reject adult attempts to show it ! The ambivalent attitude is likely an unconscious expression of early needs that have gone unmet, with denial of those needs the resulting defense.

Tension Decontamination through Humor. "Kidding the youngster out of it (p. 172)" may eliminate or reduce the severity of inappropriate behavior, cutting through tension and moving relationships back on an even keel. Humor may be a very effective tool for the adult. In rare instances use of humor may cause an escalation of conflict, however, and so should be avoided. That may occur if the child misinterprets or personalizes the adult's attempt at humor, or if the adult uses sarcasm or humor which demeans the child. There is no place for such adult behavior in work with troubled children and youth.

Hurdle Help. "Some youngsters," Redl & Wineman state, "Throw their most vicious or dangerous temper tantrums, not out of the clear blue sky, but when they run into a block on the way to an attempted goal" (p. 176). Help provided by an adult when a child is getting frustrated or agitated may help her to get over a hurdle and so prevent an inappropriate response. In classrooms and elsewhere, adults working with ED/BD children must monitor their levels of frustration and intervene before problems erupt.

Interpretation as Interference. Children and youth with emotional and behavioral problems often have a distorted view of reality, and are usually out of touch with their own motivations. When the adult uses *Interpretation as Interference* he helps the child to gain a better perspective on outer or inner reality.

The responsible adult has a better grasp on reality than the ED/BD child, and so is in a good place to help the child understand just how things work. For example, the adult might help a student understand that the principal really doesn't "have it in for him," but that the administrator is simply doing his job! Or, the adult might help a child understand how he or she uses defensive maneuvers to avoid taking responsibility. A candid conversation may do much to help a child. Of course, such a conversation could only be effective if a relationship of trust had been developed.

Regrouping. This is a time-honored technique for avoiding conflict. It may involve (1) removing an individual from a group, (2) changing the composition of one or more groups, or (3) dispersing one or more groups. The adult who wants to use *Regrouping* as a surface management technique should first analyze group dynamics carefully. "Change for change's sake" may only exacerbate matters, leading to more trouble!

Restructuring. This technique involves changing an activity when it is clear that the activity is not working or has "gone wrong." The change may be a small one (eliminating a rule that causes frustration, for example) or major (abandoning an activity altogether). Adults must be careful to avoid (1) continuing a failing activity because it has been "well planned" or "is required," and (2) restructuring activities too frequently to inhibit *all* conflict.

Direct Appeal. When using *Direct Appeal* the adult reminds the child of the possible consequences for given behavior. The consequences may be social (e.g., loss of clout in the peer group, rejection by others) or objective (e.g., being injured). The appeal may also be placed with the context of the adult-child relationship, but that may work only if the relationship has been developed previously. Redl & Wineman point out that adults tend to over-use *Direct Appeal* in the form of lecturing, sermonizing, giving warnings, etc., and that this technique is best employed sparingly.

Limitation of Space & Tools. Redl & Wineman speak of "seductive objects" that children and youth may misuse and even destroy. In school these include items such as compasses, scientific equipment, computers, etc. Careful deployment of such objects may prevent their improper use. When a child already has access to an object and is misusing it the adult may have to take it away. It is important, Redl & Wineman note, that such removal not be presented as punitive, but rather as an act fueled by realistic concerns.

Antiseptic Bouncing. This is the equivalent of "time out" and should be conducted non-punitively and only when "the removal of a child from a scene of conflict is the only way to cope with the behavioral implications involved" (p. 199). Justifications for *Antiseptic Bouncing* include (1) physical danger, (2) overexcitement that threatens to get well out of control, (3) behavior that is having a negative impact upon the group (the word *contagion* is used to describe this phenomenon), (4) the need to help a child "save face" by getting him out of a sticky situation, and (5) a need for adults to assert authority by setting of limits.

Redl & Wineman would probably say that *Antiseptic Bouncing* is an over-used technique in schools and childcare facilities today, for they warn of adverse consequences for the child and group and state that discussion of feelings is imperative if the technique is employed. Unlike some behavioral psychologists who see deprivation of social outlets through time out as punitive, Redl & Wineman emphasize the *meaning* of *Antiseptic Bouncing* for the child, and for individualizing the approach as a result.

Physical Restraint. This technique should be used only by those who are trained in its use, for Physical Restraint poses a danger to the child under most conditions. It is rarely used in public school settings, but is commonly employed in residential facilities and some day schools.

Physical Restraint should be used only when the child poses an immediate danger to himself, to others, or to objects. It must be done in a non-punitive manner. Used improperly, *Physical Restraint* may damage rapport between adult and child. It must be followed by a Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) or similar technique.

Permission and Authoritative Verbot ("No!"). These techniques are mirror opposites. Sometimes permitting behavior is the most efficient way of stopping it, for the child no longer gets the kick that provocation often gives! It may also lessen the anxiety that the child feels engaging in the behavior. *Authoritative Verbot* entails telling a child that a given behavior is not permitted. Just saying "no" may help a child save face, can relieve him of guilt or anxiety, and highlights status differences between youth and adults. Still, Redl & Wineman regard *Authoritative Verbot* as a "stop-gap measure" with limited utility.

Promises & Rewards. Redl & Wineman recognize the power of *Promises and Rewards* for changing behavior, but emphasize that they are dangerous. Rewards reinforce the "business deal view of life" that many troubled youngsters have, and once given may come to be "expected" (p.228). Their use is questionable because they may be granted inequitably, and so may foster conflict. Moreover, the child must be able to connect a reward to some behavior and truly be deserving of it. For those reasons promises and rewards should not be used for the purpose of intervention.

Redl & Wineman do support the use of rewards as "gratification grants with no strings attached" rather than as a way of influencing behavior. Their perspective is based upon the premise that troubled children (have missed out on and) need nurturance, and differentiates their treatment model from that of most behaviorists.

Punishments & Threats. These methods require the child to (1) view himself as "responsible" for having received the punishment; (2) refrain from getting angry at the person or persons who inflicted the punishment; and (3) use the aggressive impulses created by the punishment in a productive manner with respect to behavior change. Redl & Wineman state that few troubled children and youth meet those requirements, and argue against the use of *Punishments and Threats* for that reason.

Punishment and threats may also feed the self-punitive tendencies that many disturbed and disturbing children present, and lead many to blame adults for their problems rather than to face up to them. They note that many troubled children and youth *invite* punishment which when given, serves to reinforce their jaundiced view of the world as a hostile place.

To Many Troubled & Troubling Children, it's a "Dog Eat Dog" World !