“Leave Me Alone!”

“Wait! Don’t Go!”

Insights into the Psychological World of Emotionally Troubled Youth

NYAR West Oct 2016    Dr. Steve Parese    Danbury, NC
Part 1:
Why do troubled kids often push us away?

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Troubled youth see themselves and the world from a fundamentally different perspective.
Most of us want our lives to be PREDICTABLE.
Even if they’re just PREDICTABLY BAD.
For some troubled youth, PREDICTABLE FAILURE is better than unpredictable success.
Psychological Dynamics

1. AGGRESSIVE

World is DANGEROUS.
To survive, always strike first.

FEELING: Angry

BEHAVIOR: Fight, threaten, yell, control or intimidate others, damage property.
2. PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE

World is UNFAIR.
To survive, hide your real feelings.

FEELING: Resentful
BEHAVIOR: Sarcastic, mean, undermine authority, gossip, manipulate others
3. AVOIDANT

World is UNFORGIVING.
To survive, escape your problems.

FEELING: Hopeless

BEHAVIOR: Isolate, shut down, get high, sleep, hurt self, refuse help, don’t show.
World is SCARY.
To survive, find a protector.

FEELING: Anxious

BEHAVIOR: Whine, cling to authorities, demand help, do anything for friends.
Four students are being given assessments by the school psychologist. Each reaches a question which s/he cannot answer, and begins to feel stressed.

**Perry:** “Well, I tell you what Doc, I got no clue! Guess you think I’m stupid now, right? What’s it like being Mr. Perfect? I mean, DOCTOR Perfect?”

2. **PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE**
Which pattern do you see?

Four students are being given assessments by the school psychologist. Each reaches a question which s/he cannot answer, and begins to feel stressed.

**DJ:** “Can you give me a hint? I really need to do well on this test. If I don’t, they’re going to hold me back a year, I heard. Maybe just a little hint? Ppleaseeease?”

4. Dependent
Which pattern do you see?

Aggressive  Passive Aggressive  Avoidant  Dependent

Four students are being given assessments by the school psychologist. Each reaches a question which s/he cannot answer, and begins to feel stressed.

**Andy:** “Smart @$$ people like you are always tryin’ me. I’m @$$% sick of it, let me tell you. One of these days I’m gonna slap one of you upside the head, then we’ll see how smart you are.”

1. AGGRESSIVE
Which pattern do you see?

Four students are being given assessments by the school psychologist. Each reaches a question which s/he cannot answer, and begins to feel stressed.

**Adrian:** “Can we take a quick break? I had a lot of soda this morning and just need to use the restroom. Don’t go anywhere... I’ll be right back!”

Adrian walks out the door, and never returns.

3. **Avoidant**
At-risk children and youth see themselves from fundamentally different perspectives. They often adopt “survival mindsets,” cognitive behavioral patterns such as aggression and dependency which allow them to predict how people will react.

In the process however, they often sabotage important relationships, pushing away the people whose help they most need.
Part 2: How are youth able to draw us into so many lose-lose conflicts?
The Conflict Cycle, created by Dr. Nicholas Long, explains how an impulsive emotional misbehavior often occurs when a student’s underlying beliefs are triggered by a minor stressful event.

If staff react with consequences rather than counseling, the problem often escalates to a true crisis.
Two factors interact in the Conflict Cycle

Self-Defeating Beliefs

Stressful Problem
Conflict Cycle

Negative Beliefs
(about self and others)

Stressful Problem

Negative Reactions

Strong Feelings

Impulsive Behavior

Based on a model created by Nicholas Long, Ph.D.
Let’s read about Andy’s conflict with Mr. Johnson
What FEELINGS & BEHAVIORS might follow?

Avoidant Adrian forgot to her math homework. She is frantically looking through her locker as the bell rings.

“C’mon Adrian! Get to class before I write you up! You’re late!”

FEELINGS: Adrian’s probably feeling ____________________________

BEHAVIOR: As a result, she might __________________________

REACTION: If staff simply reacted, they might ______

____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
Avoidant Adrian forgot to do her math homework. She is frantically looking through her locker as the bell rings.

“C’mon Adrian! Get to class before I write you up! You’re late!”
Conflict Cycle: GAME ON!

Adrian’s STRESS INCREASES!

FEELINGS: TERRIFIED

BEHAVIOR: RUNS INTO GIRLS’ ROOM

REACTION: TEACHER GETS SUSPICIOUS. CALLS SECURITY TO CHECK LOCKER FOR DRUGS
‘See? That’s why I hate this school! You forget your homework one time and they call you a DRUG ADDICT!’
Dependent DJ got beaten up outside of school. Bruised and angry, he storms into class 10 minutes late.

“Where have you been DJ? Take your seat and get caught up with the lesson.”

**FEELINGS:** DJ’s probably feeling ________________

**BEHAVIOR:** As a result, he might ________________

**REACTION:** If staff simply reacted, they might _____
Dependent DJ got beaten up outside of school. Bruised and angry, he storms into class 10 minutes late.

“Where have you been DJ?? Take your seat and get caught up with the lesson.”

FEELINGS: HUMILIATED
BEHAVIOR: Whines and demands that we listen
REACTIONS: “IF YOU’RE GOING TO COME IN LATE, AT LEAST HAVE THE COURTESY…”
What FEELINGS & BEHAVIORS might follow?

DJ’s STRESS INCREASES!

FEELINGS: FURIOUS WITH TEACHER
BEHAVIOR: KICKS OVER A CHAIR AND CURSES
REATIONS: “THAT’S IT! YOU NEED TO LEAVE RIGHT NOW!”
Conflict Cycle: GAME OVER...

‘See what happens here? You get beaten up and YOU’RE the one kicked out! What about the guys who beat me up??’
Part 3:
How can we build therapeutic relationships with challenging kids?

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Working with Traumatized Youth

1. Promote emotional safety.

Prevent stress-related problems by promoting a calm, physically and emotionally-safe learning/living environment.
2. Always keep self-control.

Maintain your own self-control even when angry by depersonalizing issues and managing your own emotions.
Working with Traumatized Youth

3. Actively protect youth.

Protect children from retraumatization by stopping bullying and intimidation, whether by peers or other staff.
4. Enforce rules calmly.

Redirect minor misbehaviors and enforce rules without angry power struggles, shaming, or unnecessary punitive consequences.
5. De-escalate crises.

De-escalate emotional crises by helping youth to calm down and talk about emotions.
6. Hands-off when possible.

If absolutely needed, use only minimal physical force and safe, non-threatening holds to control dangerous behaviors. Never use angry threats or physical force to “manhandle” children for noncompliance.
Working with Traumatized Youth

7. Talk out problems.

Thoroughly and calmly process crises with youth after stressful situations, especially after restraints.
8. Ask for help if needed.

Recognize when to use other staff to help with problems beyond your own level of expertise.
KEY POINT #3

Even the most capable professionals can be drawn into no-win power struggles with challenging youth seeking to recreate familiar patterns of failure.

It is essential for staff to resist punitive reactions in moments like these, to instead set reasonable limits and maintain a professional perspective.
See me for more information about an onsite TACT2 Training of Trainers

www.TACT2.com