

Thriving

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Relationships matter: Supporting adults and kids to thrive!

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I met Jim, a 7th grade special education teacher, in a graduate class I taught during the fall. The class provides practical strategies to help teachers *respond* rather than *react* to children who experience chronic, unpredictable, and unresolved stress. The class uses dialogue, practice exercises, and case studies to enhance learning. As the class progressed, one of Jim's 7th grade students—Caleb—regularly served as our case study to develop practical strategies that could be used in the classroom. Caleb's pain-based behaviors included physical and verbal aggression, destruction of property, and leaving school when stressful situations became too overwhelming. Jim had worked hard to support Caleb both academically and socially and believed he had made some dents in Caleb's protective shield.

A couple of months into the school year, Caleb's behaviors escalated. His already fragile peer relations deteriorated further, his ability to self-regulate diminished, and he escalated striking out at adults and peers. One day after class, Jim told me he had run out of ideas. Earlier in the day Caleb had pushed Jim when he tried to prevent him from fighting another student. Jim had heard that Caleb's dad had returned from prison and thought that Caleb's behaviors could have something to do with this. Jim asked if I would visit his class, meet Caleb, and observe Jim's interactions with his students. Jim hoped that we together could come up with ideas to support Caleb after the visit.

Jim obtained permission from the principal for my visit. When I arrived, Jim introduced me to his students as his friend. He told them that I was his teacher and that I supported him in becoming a better teacher. When the class began working on a group project, we both noticed that Caleb sat by himself and doodled in a notebook. Jim took me over to Caleb and said, "Caleb, I would like you to meet my friend, Mr. Erik Laursen. He is my teacher and helps me. He says that is important for a teacher to have a relationship with his students. What do you think about that? Can you tell him what you are working on." I stuck my hand out and said, "I'm glad to meet you." Caleb said 'hi' but did not shake my hand. In a sad and subdued voice, he said "I don't feel like doing anything." Jim responded in a warm and caring tone of voice and encouraged him to join the activity. Jim then said, "Yes, I can tell something is bothering you. Let me know if I can there is anything I can do - if you want to talk about it, I will listen." Caleb did not take him up on the invitation. When the class ended, Caleb seemed anxious and lost.

During lunch, Jim was called to the cafeteria to support Caleb and I joined him. We found Caleb standing on a table making suggestive moves with his pelvis causing quite the scene – to the amusement of some and the disgust of others in the about 200 student-audience.

When Caleb saw us, he jumped down from the table and tried to escape but then opted to hide behind some trashcans. I went to the area, where he sat on the floor hunched over. He looked flustered and maybe scared. I asked if it was OK that I sat down on the floor. He did not respond verbally, but I noticed we had eye contact. I clearly was the beneficiary of transfer trust (Freado, 2016), which a somewhat trusted adult introduces another adult as a friend to a student. At times, a beneficiary of trust has the opportunity to connect with a young person, because the young person has a "clean slate" with the adult.

When the other students left the cafeteria, Caleb appeared to calm down. Jim sat down on the floor next to me and I observed that Caleb maintained eye contact with me. It appeared that Jim and I provided *felt safety* (Purvis, Cross, & Sunshine, 2007) for Caleb.

Erik: "I can tell something is going on with you. I don't know what it is. I'd like to know. I'll listen, if you wanna share? Maybe we can figure something out."

Caleb: "Of course you don't know. You can't read my thoughts."

Jim responded with a little smile: "You are right about that. That's why we would like if you tell us what's bothering you."

Caleb did not respond to our invitation and began to move about in the cafeteria pretending to hit and kick things in his path, but without destroying anything. Jim and I moved from the floor and sat at one of tables a few feet away. Caleb moved closer and closer to us. He appeared emotionally and physically exhausted and eventually, he sat down next to Jim. With warmth and compassion, Jim said: "Wow, it's been a rough day. Let me get you some water and then let's go back to class." Caleb looked less agitated and asked, "Can I come?" His voice appeared to have returned to normal. He also looked less agitated. "Sure," Jim said.

Upon returning to the classroom, we again invited Caleb to share what was going on, but he was not ready to share his inner thoughts and feelings but agreed to stay in Jim's classroom for the remainder of the day.

Community support

One of the founding partners of positive psychology, Chris Peterson is best remembered for three words he used in every presentation he made: *other people matter*. He added that we are those other people (Peterson, 2008). All people need positive and supportive relationships with others to be happy and to thrive. Jim and I knew that Caleb needed supportive adults around him—and we knew that we needed a community to support us to think of ways to reach him.

A couple of days after the visit, Jim and I shared with the students in my class what had happened during my visit. We asked if the class members would help us develop a plan to support Caleb. My students agreed that it would take a community effort to find ways to focus on *what's strong, not what's wrong* with Caleb. We began to explore how Jim and other adults could help Caleb to feel safe in community with others—beginning with one supportive adult relationship.

The class asked Jim and two other teachers from his school, who were also in my class, what they had done to support Caleb. They had used bumping, a preemptive and intentional strategy to connect positively with a youth. It involves planned and intentional efforts to talk with and engage a young person who is wary of adults (Laursen, 2015). In most cases, however, Caleb had avoided their attempts. The community felt that extraordinary attempts had to be made to reach Caleb or he might be of risk for placement in a more restrictive environment. The group decided to use the two-by-ten strategy (McKibben, 2014, Smith & Lambert, 2008, Wlodkowski, 1983) to build the foundation for a supportive relationship with Caleb. The strategy is simple: a supportive adult spends two minutes per day for ten days in row talking with a student about anything he or she wants to talk about while steering clear of academics and behaviors. Focusing on what the young person wants to talk about provides him with *felt safety* and paves the way for a supportive and sustainable relationship. It supports the basic human need of belonging.

Throughout our solution-finding activity, we acknowledged Jim already had an emergent relationship with Caleb. The group asked if Jim would try the two-by-ten strategy to develop a supportive relationship with Caleb. From past attempts to reach Caleb, Jim and the other teachers at his school acknowledged that it would be hard to have even a two-minute conversation with Caleb. Therefore, the class developed a list of possible talking points for Jim to use in his conversation with Caleb: music, sports, (one of the other teachers had noted Caleb wore a Steelers' shirt), movies, hobbies, etc.

Strengths-based practice

The class also discussed the importance of using a strengths-based approach when Jim invited Caleb to participate in the two-minute conversations. Strengths-based practice is shaped by a stance of power-with rather than power over. The stance involves five elements; care, intentionality, trust, respect, and optimism to create a safe and inviting ecology for the young person and the adult.

All people need positive and supportive relationships with others to be happy and to thrive.

Care and support is the core of strengths-based practice and includes warmth, empathy, and positive regard. This caring stance is combined with high expectations that acknowledge the strengths and capacities of young people. The synergy of care and high expectations honors the humanity of young people and paves the way for the co-creation of solutions and change (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). Care stands in contrast to cure, a typical practice in a deficit approach,

Intentionality means that a person offers something that is purposefully intended to benefit another person – an interaction that is meant to enable the person to grow. To be intentional, an adult must first tune in to their own thoughts and emotions to become fully present to relate to and understand the young person. Intentional adults use natural events to reach out and engage everything they know about a young person, their history, character strengths, executive functions, culture, and faith. It includes listening, acknowledging, supporting,

a pat on the back, or simply *being* with the young person. Intentionality activates the social synapse, connecting the young person and the adult at a deep brain level.

Strengths-based practice assumes that all people have strengths, are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly. **Respect** for young people is shown through caring and intentionality and opens a space of equality and shared power seeding the development of mutual respect.

Hope is the belief that the future will be better than the present, along with the belief that a person has the power to make it so (Lopez, 2014). A strengths-based stance is complete when the adult brings optimism and hope about the potential in each young person. It is critical to be optimistic and hopeful about the process and the possible change for the better.

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The following week, Jim shared in class that Caleb had accepted his invitation to meet each day for two minutes to talk. The first conversation had been difficult, because Caleb was guarded and not very open to talk. Jim said it had been hard to “take off his teacher hat” and just listen. He shared it was hard for him to deal with silence; he was tempted to talk but acknowledged that it prevented Caleb from talking. After a few meetings, the conversations began to flow a little easier. One of Caleb’s favorite topics was the day Jim told him, he could ask Jim any question that he wanted. Jim was surprised by the things Caleb asked, e.g., what kind of car he drives and what his favorite food is. Caleb enjoyed talking about his favorite band *Skinny Puppy*, a band Jim had never heard about. Jim had listened to some of their songs to be prepared if Caleb would bring up the band again. Caleb also shared his joy for board games, “... but I have not played any board games since my father came back.” Jim noted the window into Caleb’s private world and asked:

Jim: What do you mean by “your dad came back?”

Caleb: “Nothing.”

Jim: “It sounded like your father have been away for a while and now has returned? Let me know if you want to talk about it sometime in the future.”

Caleb: “OK”

One day – right before lunch, as Jim and Caleb talked, Caleb asked if they could get their lunches and continue to talk. Since then, Jim and Caleb have had lunch together almost every day and Caleb began to feel safe with Jim. When he dropped windows into what was going on at home, Jim has asked follow-up questions. In the beginning his answers were short, but later he shared more. He told Jim about his dad returning from prison and the arguments his parents have.

Jim has planning time after lunch and one day Caleb asked if he could stay with him instead of going to meet with his counselor. After talking with the counselor, Jim agreed. They now had one and a half hour together - and Jim gave up his planning time for a time to strengthen the relationship with Caleb. Jim continued to support Caleb through games, talking, and reading and writing in Caleb’s journal. After several weeks Caleb asked Jim: “Can we be friends?” “Of course, we can,” Jim said. “If we are friends, you will also have to hear about my bad days and if I am stressed out.” With a big smile Caleb said, “That’s OK. You put up with me all the time.”

Occasionally, Caleb went to study-hall to be with another student, Ezra, who had expressed an interest for a friendship. Jim invited Ezra to join them in a game of Splendor and played a few games with them. He then let them play by themselves when they got into an argument about one of the rules and Caleb wanted to stop the game because “I do not want to ruin our relationship.” Jim responded that it is OK for friends to disagree, and he coached them to work out their disagreement.

On several occasions Jim has invited Ezra, the English teacher, and the math teacher to join them for lunch to expand the group of people Caleb is comfortable being with. As the school year is ending, Caleb regularly experiences what a calm, happy school day feels like. Jim and the other teachers have started to work with Caleb to strengthen his self-regulation. They have also asked Caleb to complete the VIA Youth Survey (n.d.) identifying his character strengths. Each

week, Caleb has an assignment that involves one of his character strengths. This helps him focus on *what's strong, not what's wrong*.

Intentional Responsive Adult Practices

Creating supportive relationships, solidifying executive functions (i.e., self-regulation), and developing character strengths are three intentional capacity building practice described in *Intentional Responsive Adult Practices: Supporting Kids to Not Only Overcome Adversity but to Thrive* (Laursen, 2018) - or simply iRAP. The book provides practical strategies for adults who work with young people in families, schools, treatment, and communities. It is grounded in positive psychology, strengths-based practices, and solution-finding strategies.

Young people who have experienced chronic, unpredictable, and unresolved stress rarely respond to traditional approaches. examines the influence of adverse childhood experiences and adverse community environments on psychosocial growth and brain development in young people; and provides participants with practical strategies to not only help young people overcome stress but to thrive.

iRAP provides youth practitioners with knowledge and practical strategies - called intentional responsive adult practices - to support young people grow and develop throughout childhood, adolescence, and into young adulthood. Regardless of the context in which young people grow up, they need safety, caring, the opportunity to learn, the ability to manage stress, and a strong sense of purpose. Their journey toward living a fulfilled life in community with others provides growth experiences that allow for a healthy integration of internal strengths and resources drawn from their social ecology.

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