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Growing Edge Training online journal



What do you see?

Vikki Hennard

"The question is not what you look at that matters, but what you see.

– Henry David Thoreau

What do *you* see when you see misbehavior? In grade school, I watched a boy, Gary, get paddled, as other children watched and laughed. His defiant smile led to a paddling one might define today as nothing short of child abuse. I remember that scene as if it was yesterday. I was six years old. Gary was seven. I watched, along with that playground full of grade school children, but I saw something different. Why didn't everyone else see it like I did? Because if they had, they would have had the same heartache I experienced, the same pain. Tears would have slid down their faces, as they did mine, rather than the laughter and ridicule that further punished this small boy.

What they didn't see was the innocent child behind the false bravado. They didn't know Gary like I knew him. Gary was my step-brother. Abandoned by his alcoholic mother and raised by my own resentful mother, they didn't know that rather than the love and belonging he desperately needed, he got rejection and hate from the adults in his life. They didn't know that his older step-brothers found comedy in putting dog food under his hamburger bun, and that he was still forced to eat it by the woman who despised him. They didn't know that the trauma he endured made it difficult for him to concentrate in or out of school. But, as a six-year-old child, I wanted desperately for them to know, and to see.

As with many individuals who work to reclaim children and youth, my experiences led me to follow a career where I could advocate for those who could not advocate for themselves. Beginning my career in the early 90s, professionals in the field of behaviorist psychology had shifted the mindset in education away from simply punishing behavior, to one where it was important to determine *why* individuals misbehave. Thus was born the era of the functional behavior assessment (FBA), which still has a stronghold in education today.

This approach advocates that behavior is communication, a maladaptive response to circumstances, and serves the purpose of either obtaining something, or avoiding it (Sugai et. al, 1999). Instead of simply punishing, professionals could observe individuals in an environment, analyze incidents of misbehavior, and draw conclusions about why youth misbehave. From these assessments, plans

to prevent misbehavior can be developed, and preventative changes to the environment, as well as social skill instruction, can be added to the protocol. Yet punishment remains, redefined as consequences, that include external rewards for good behavior, and inflicts pain in less visible ways as when paddling was the order of the day, yet is perhaps much worse, as it is often relational and emotional, and seeps into the mind in ways that can cause a lifetime of pain.

I followed this behavior-centered view for half my career, systematically collecting data to identify the circumstances that lead to, or trigger (called antecedents), a behavioral response, and determining the positive or negative consequence that result so that I might distill the why down to getting something, or avoiding something. In other words, what *I* looked at and what *I* saw became the data that mattered. Yet this approach relies on the data collector's and analyzer's own perspective of the data, colored by one's own view of the world, of behavior, and of the child. And to get to *why*, it relies on the belief that youth view the world the same way as the adults who are analyzing them.

As the research and fields of practice delve deeper into the effects of trauma and systemic inequity, the necessity of turning our attention to the innocent child within has become paramount. A child-centered approach, unlike a behavior-centered approach, focuses on the child over behavior and surfaces how the child sees herself, each person involved in her life sees her, shows her strengths and needs, and helps each person see her in the light of innocence. Without this clear view, we cannot hope to help a child strengthen his well-being, or help those who take care of him get a well-behaved child.

A *child-centered* approach... focuses on the child over behavior.

As time passed in my own life, and experiences multiplied, I regained my child-centered view of education. Drawing on the work of pioneers in positive youth development, positive psychology, and other children-centered models (Bitter, 2009; Brendtro et al., 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), my colleague and I worked to bring out a more positive view of the youth in our care. In reflecting on the challenges we faced, one common truth became evident—it wasn't enough for

the two of us to see the innocent child, we had to help as many people as possible see him, too. Thus, the CLEAR™ process for examining the function of behavior, was born (Seger & Koehler, 2011).

In the CLEAR™ Process, an assessment goes deeper than a series of interview questions, is more comprehensive than using quantitative data collected and interpreted through another's view, and uses a meeting—structured around positive vocabulary—to help individuals in all areas of the youth's life understand the challenges the youth experiences, the logic, or perspective the youth has, and the emotions that filter through it all.

We had such a meeting for Evan after taking time to listen to the way he processed the events that brought us together. Evan, at eleven years old, had been pegged too dangerous for school because he yelled in panic as staff members wrestled him to the ground, "I'm going to blow up this hateful place!" Beginning with the traditional collection of data points, we began a dialogue with all of the individuals who knew Evan—his parents, his teachers, the school social worker, his therapist, and his principal. We also sought to know him through the eyes of the custodian whom he helped on occasion, and the secretary with whom he often sat. I was the facilitator of a conversation with the primary goal of developing a shared understanding of Evan, an innocent child, who needed our support and guidance. We considered Evan's strengths, like the fact that he did often stick up for kids who got in trouble, or who were being picked on in his view (by either peers or staff). We noted his academic strengths in math, and his participation and astute understanding when the topic in class was on social justice issues.

We got a clear view, knowing that the words we use matter. Avoiding professional jargon like *antecedents* and *function*, we instead focused on our natural brain problem-solving process, and talked about the Challenges (stress) he experienced, his Logic (the way he viewed himself, the world, and others), the Emotions he felt, the Actions he used to cope, and what happened as a Result to him, and for him (Brendtro & du Toit, 2005). Words matter. And these words that framed the conversation presented in a visual chart on the whiteboard, presented a picture of Evan few had been able to see.

Each person at the table shared a story that we could consider through this **CLEAR** lens. A timeline of this significant event brought to light the fear that drove his words, and the previous impact they had on helping him escape an environment that felt all too unsafe; the trauma triggered by the angry physical intervention that took place; the distorted thinking about adults use of rules; the worry about the disappointment his mom would feel realizing that he once again failed to manage his emotions; and the self-loathing that went with it. And with each story, the pattern of thought and ways he coped emerged, shedding new light on the quantitative data that had been collected, data that was overwhelmingly focused on the behavior escalation, but absent of the implementation and impact of previously proposed interventions, and absent of data representing his use of positive coping skills.

Often, parents come to meetings like this overwhelmed by all the professional jargon, and defensive due to focus on the poor behavior choices. And in the name of efficiency, we don't allow stories to be told. But that is counterintuitive to human nature. We all want to share our story, our perspective. And for a parent, sometimes the stories are all they have. With the right facilitation, we can learn so much from stories without getting lost in the tale. It is our role to help make sense of those stories, to hear their voices, to help parents see how important their stories are to understanding how to support their child, and in some cases, to help parents see their child in a clearer, positive light.

Sitting at the table with all the professionals, Evan's mom began to tear up. No one had ever seen her son through eyes of hope. She wondered if she had at times lost hope as well, so accustomed to listening to professionals talk about his negative behavior, as if it would all be so enlightening to her. While in her past experiences she held to a stance that she didn't experience the same difficulties as the school did—her way of defending him in a room full of critics—she opened up at this meeting about some of her own struggles with him. "I promised to give him a new bike if he would go two weeks without getting a call from school, and do what I asked of him at home. [Turning to him] Did you think I didn't believe in you?" That day we surfaced a thinking error that interfered with everyone's attempts to acknowledge positive

behavior—how difficult it was for him to be “perfect” and the ultimate self-sabotage, brought on by heightened anxiety, that occurred as a result. And now we had a chance to work on his thinking errors in a way that would open up success with the strategies school staff previously thought were ineffective. For Evan, and all those who interacted in the school environment with him, his journey to well-being had begun.

We all make our own sense of the world and our experiences, and it drives all of our behavior. If we look at the children and youth we work with as similar in that capacity to think and form perceptions of the world, we wouldn’t hesitate to seek to understand their perspectives. As the emerging focus on being “trauma-informed” attempts to bring attention to the perceptions of those who believe that the world is a dangerous place, we need a way to do more than evoke empathy. We need to know the world from their view, and we need to desire well-being for them. We need to get a CLEAR™ view that presumes the innocence of youth, so that we can begin the work of helping youth to re-imagine the world through a more hopeful, optimistic lens. If Gary had been seen this way, his story might have been different. Let’s not give up on any more Garys.

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