

SUSAN LAMKE, DENISE PRATT, AND STAN GRAEVE, M.A.

# SAFE & Healthy

## Secondary Schools

BOYS TOWN<sup>SM</sup>  
Press

*Strategies to Build Relationships, Teach Respect, and  
Deliver Meaningful Behavioral Support to Students*

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Deliver Meaningful Behavioral Support to Students*

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Boys Town, Nebraska

# Safe and Healthy Secondary Schools

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# Understanding Today's Student

Today's high school students are more sophisticated than any generation before them. They know more and see more because of the digital age in which they live. They have communication tools that give them instant and constant access to virtually everything and nearly everyone. Yet despite their "worldly" sophistication, they remain as vulnerable as ever. They have bouts of apathy, anger, and angst, and many of them manage to sap the energy out of the most enthusiastic educators and shatter whatever sense of cohesion and connectedness schools seek to create.

Each year it seems America's schools are confronting the same behavioral issues – bullying, cheating, teasing, whining, sleeping in class, shoving, fighting, touching, talking out of turn, showing up late, failing to do assignments – but with modern twists. While the root problems are the same, they manifest themselves in ways that reflect the latest cultural and technological trends.

The schoolyard bully, for example, no longer has to wait to see his victims in person before he pounces. The bully simply goes online and humiliates his targets on MySpace, YouTube or Facebook. He can text, e-mail, and Twitter to his tormenting heart's content. Of course, the hostility that cyber-bullies engender can never be contained in cyberspace. The sadness, rage, and fear eventually crash into classrooms when bullies, victims, and bystanders come face to face.

The class gossip represents another example of technology reshaping student behavior. Writing and passing notes during class is old school. Today, she simply hides her BlackBerry from view and texts her musings to somebody somewhere. Even more problematic is when teens combine flirting or sexual taunting with texting. The fallout from "sexting" episodes can leave

teachers and administrators struggling to cope with the painful fallout. In New York, for example, a teen photographed his private parts and sent the picture via cell phone to a female classmate. She forwarded the image to a few friends, who forwarded it on to a few more. School officials estimated that as many as three hundred students saw the nude photo. The young man was humiliated and the entire school was disrupted and distracted for weeks. In Ohio, a similar high school incident turned tragic. A jilted boyfriend sent nude photos of an ex-girlfriend to others at their school. The images created a hostile environment for the girl, who was incessantly taunted and harassed. The situation became so debilitating for her that she took her own life. The victim's devastated mother equated the school's social environment to torture.

Stories such as these are stark reminders that students come to school influenced by the best and worst of the social, cultural, and environmental conditions they live in. Perhaps that is why school life leaves many teachers with mixed feelings. They are proud to be in a profession that educates and inspires the nation's youth. But they loathe the vulgar language, and they dread the irrational behaviors and attitudes of students (and some parents). The rudeness and disrespect that pervade too many schools is having a chilling effect on some educators. According to a 2004 survey on school discipline policies conducted by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research organization, one in three teachers either thought about leaving their profession or knew someone who had because of student behavior issues and discipline problems. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future found that about half of urban teachers quit within their first five years on the job. The most commonly cited reason: poor student behavior.

## Reasons and Risk Factors for Student Aggression

What makes some students act out in aggressive and unpredictable ways that hurt others or themselves? A wide array of personal and societal factors can converge to produce hostile behavior patterns in students, including the cultural environment that exists inside their schools, families, and communities.

**School Life.** Risk factors too often exist inside the very places where young people should thrive: Outdated classroom materials that fail to engage students' interests; tolerance levels that are too high; staff who are, or seem to be, detached and indifferent; disciplinary decisions that are unfair and arbitrary; and a social climate that is uncaring, uncooperative, and unwelcoming.

When students perceive discipline as unjust and punitive, and sense a lack of respect and caring from teachers and staff, they can become discon-

nected from school. The more detached their feelings, the more at risk they are for engaging in problem behaviors that range from acting out in the classroom to drinking, smoking, and sexual activity (Libbey, 2004; McNeely & Falci, 2004; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004).

Students who feel alienated at school experience more episodes of emotional distress, violence, fighting, bullying, and absenteeism than students who enjoy caring relationships and feel a sense of belonging in their school environment (Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993; Blum, 2005). Unfortunately, according to Klem and Connell (2004), anywhere from forty to sixty percent of high school students may be “chronically disengaged” from their school. This lack of attachment puts these students at risk for behavior problems and undermines the emotional and physical well-being of everyone in their learning community.

**Family Life.** The sense that some students have of being excluded or isolated at school is compounded if they also lack caring relationships at home. Gang and street violence, domestic abuse inside the home, addictions, economic hardships, hunger, coercive and neglectful parenting, and other sociological and environmental stressors are the harsh realities for many. Young people exposed to these risk factors often develop disruptive and antisocial behavior patterns (Walker, 1998).

**Cultural Life.** According to Hughes and Hasbrouck (1996), a hyper-sexualized culture and violent media, increasing public incivility, social fragmentation, and concepts of right and wrong that are often portrayed as relative rather than clear-cut are also contributing factors to students' aggressive behaviors.

The actions and attitudes that students learn at home, on the street, and from an increasingly crass culture are never left outside on the schoolhouse steps. They creep into classrooms, cafeterias, and common areas. While some of these learned behaviors may be appropriate, others are aggressive, self-centered, and disrespectful. Regrettably, many teens – regardless of their social or economic status – have not acquired the social skills necessary to effectively and appropriately interact with peers and adults in school settings. When educators fail to provide any type of behavioral support or intervention, students' personal and academic success is threatened. For example, Olweus (1991) found that chronic school bullies who weren't properly disciplined for their bullying behaviors had a far greater risk of becoming incarcerated adults. A recent Yale University study suggests bullies and their victims are more likely to commit suicide, too. Other researchers have found a relationship between social skills deficits and future delinquency

(Kim & Leventhal, 2008; Bullis, Walker, & Stieber, 1998; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004).

All of these risk factors are fostering a perspective among some young people that violence is a viable option to solve problems, the rights of others don't have to be respected, social responsibility means nothing, and basic social skills and manners are irrelevant (Walker, 1998).

These negative influences oftentimes are exacerbated by young people's own biology.

## **The Developing Brain**

In the past decade, neuroscientists (those who study brain development) have gleaned fascinating new insights into the workings of the human mind. For decades, the assumption was that most of the brain's development and growth occurred during the first decade of life. After childhood, the brain was believed to be fully or nearly "wired."

That assumption was turned on its head thanks to technological innovations, including magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and diffusion-tensor imaging (DTI). The MRI gave researchers the ability to study living, growing brains. With DTI, an enhanced MRI technique, they were able to see the brain's white matter, the fibers below the surface of the brain that connect its different regions. The images revealed that the brain continues a cycle of growth and reorganization throughout adolescence – much like a remodeling. They learned, for example, that gray matter thickens during childhood but thins during adolescence. This "pruning" process essentially alters the very structure of the adolescent brain by eliminating overabundant and unnecessary nerve cell connections. Many scientists believe the teen years are crucial in cognitive development, and the more opportunities adolescents have to exercise their brains by learning how to think critically and restrain their impulses, the stronger their neural foundation will be throughout their lives (Steinberg, 2005; Steinberg, 2008; Powell, 2006).

## **The Prefrontal Cortex**

The prefrontal cortex, the frontal lobes located behind the forehead, is often referred to as the brain's CEO. It's the part of the brain that's responsible for, among other things, rational thought, emotional control, inhibition, common sense, emotional self-regulation, delayed gratification, attention and focus, as well as making choices between right and wrong, and planning for the future. It's what makes us act like grown-ups. However, research sug-

gests this part of the brain is not fully developed in teens, and it may not be completely wired until they hit their early twenties (Giedd et al., 1999; Weinberger, Elvevag, & Giedd, 2005; Strauch, 2003; Casey et al, 2005).

As adults, we use the prefrontal cortex to think logically and put the brakes on our impulses.

But as you may have noticed in your classrooms, teens often can't do that. Child psychologist and director of the Boys Town Outpatient Behavioral Pediatric and Family Services Clinic, Dr. Patrick Friman says teens tend to use the rational part of their brains intermittently. For one day or for one week, they follow instructions, accept feedback, and maintain control over their emotions. But the next day or the next week, they go back to "feeling" their way through situations. They behave recklessly and impulsively, for no rational reason. Take, for example, the sixteen-year-old straight-A student who is not considered a "behavior problem." One afternoon he decides to flush a cherry bomb down the second floor toilet, fracturing a pipe and releasing a wave of water. Why did he do that? It doesn't seem like something he would do. It doesn't make any sense. If you were to ask him why, his most honest answer would probably be, "Because I felt like it." If you were to ask him what he was thinking, his most honest answer would likely be, "I wasn't." For adults, these answers are not very satisfying. Surely there has to be some other motivation or at least a better excuse? Don't count on it. Often, teens can't explain "why." When the prefrontal cortex is not involved in the thinking process, there is no rational way to explain certain behaviors. And research suggests many adolescents rely on their emotional brain more than their rational one.

## **Limbic System and the Amygdala**

The limbic system is the feeling part of the brain responsible for emotionally driven behaviors. It includes an almond shape mass known as the amygdala. The amygdala influences behaviors related to emotion and motivation. It initiates physiological responses to fear and stressful events; the "fight or flight" response. In her book *The Primal Teen*, Barbara Strauch credits the amygdala for unleashing "those gut, meet-me-outside impulses" (p. 136).

For adolescents, the emotional brain often overrides the rational brain. The amygdala, for example, is thought to be highly sensitive and influential in how young people process anger. Unfortunately, adolescents tend to misinterpret anger, or perceive anger where there is none. Have you ever asked a student, in your most calm and neutral tone of voice, to please be quiet only to hear something like this shouted back at you: "Why are you always screaming

at me!?” For adolescents who seem to be more dependent on the amygdala than the prefrontal cortex, interpreting situations or the actions of others as hostile or angry, even though they clearly are not, is much too common.

In one study, researchers found that teens and adults differed significantly in how they perceived people’s emotions. Using pictures of individuals with fearful expressions, the researchers showed the images to teens whose brains were being scanned with an MRI machine. The MRI scan revealed that the teens’ had more brain activity in the amygdala region than in their prefrontal cortex while they were analyzing the images. For adults, the opposite was true. In addition, the teens frequently misinterpreted the expressions. The younger the teen, the more inaccurate the perception was. They saw sadness, anger, or confusion rather than fear. In another similar study using “fearful faces,” adolescents again perceived emotions that were at odds with the pictures they saw, suggesting that they are more likely to misjudge basic social cues because they have a greater reliance on their emotional brain (Baird et al, 1999; Killgore & Yurgelun-Todd, 2005).

Misjudging social cues, hearing hostility when it’s not being voiced, seeing anger where it’s not being expressed, failing to plan ahead, being disorganized, making impulsive decisions, failing to pay attention, and seeking instant gratification are just some of the less-than-surprising behaviors that can result from a brain that is still a work in progress. As Strauch (2003) says, the teen brain is “in flux, maddening, and muddled. And that’s how it’s supposed to be” (p. 8).

## Emotional Intelligence

For adolescents who are predisposed to aggressive and impulsive behaviors, their inability to monitor emotions and plan ahead before acting can also be attributed to a lack of emotional intelligence. These young people have an especially difficult time using reason and restraint when they find themselves in stressful situations, and they give little thought to the consequences of their actions. They also struggle with empathy, failing to see a situation from another person’s point of view (Henley & Long, 1999).

According to Henley and Long, those who lack emotional intelligence tend to share these characteristics in common:

- They have little or no guilt about their behavior and therefore are not motivated to change it. They tend to use some fallacious reasoning, such as assuming the role of the victim instead of the victimizer, rationalizing their behavior, or minimizing the conflict.

- They lack normal feelings of compassion toward others.
- They are self-centered, narcissistic, and rigidly proud.
- They believe personal aggression creates power and status.

To help adolescents develop emotional intelligence, you must focus on providing instruction in compassion and self-control. One way to teach compassion, Henley and Long suggest, is to structure your classroom to run on cooperation rather than compliance and to emphasize the belief that students have the power within themselves to make needed changes.

Some teaching methods that encourage compassion and cooperation are: cooperative learning, brainstorming (which teaches students to listen and build on others' ideas), peer tutoring (lets students help others), role-playing (helps students see problems from different perspectives), and using literature written for young people (lets students begin to think through problems as they learn from role models in literature). In addition, creating a classroom atmosphere that encourages students to be self-directed and to take responsibility for their own actions can be done by teaching students relevant social skills, such as accepting decisions of authority and accepting criticism or a consequence, and reinforcing behavior through effective and appropriate consequences (a more complete list of social skills is provided in Chapter 4). In an article written for *The Science Teacher*, authors Hall and Brier (2007) suggested several different tactics teachers can use in the classroom to address emotional issues, including demonstrating emotional neutrality, varying instruction methods, holding mini-conferences with individual students at regular intervals, and emphasizing the positive. Many of these concepts are explained in subsequent chapters.

These suggestions reflect what child psychologist Peter Jensen encourages adults to do for the teens in their lives – become their prefrontal cortex. Dr. Patrick Friman uses the analogy of an airplane's oxygen mask to communicate that very same concept. When an airplane depressurizes, oxygen masks deploy. Safety protocol says that adults should put on their masks first, before assisting children. The same principle applies to the rash and reckless adolescent. Their oxygen masks (the prefrontal cortex) won't always deploy. In fact, they will often be AWOL. Therefore, it's imperative that parents and educators be willing to give young people access to their oxygen masks to help them overcome and learn from their impulsive indiscretions.

What does all this mean for your learning community? One implication is that you may have to come to terms with the fact that your point of view or argument, which you might believe to be the most logical and decisive, may not always be so understandable or clear-cut to your students. They are going to see the world differently. Rather than get angry, accuse them of being dif-

difficult, and demand they embrace a particular attitude, engage them. Support them. Teach them the skills that will empower them to think critically. Help them to analyze and problem solve on their own, rather than dictating to them what they should think.

Another implication for the classroom is that your words and behaviors may be getting misinterpreted. Adolescents, especially young teens, are not always skilled in reading the emotions of others or assessing their intentions. How they perceive an event, for better or worse, shapes their behavioral responses. Their misperceptions can lead to misunderstandings, which can lead to behavioral mistakes.

## Safe and Healthy Schools

You may be wondering how, exactly, one can overcome the seemingly immutable laws of nature and biology. If you are surrounded by students whose brains are in a state of mayhem and occasionally misfiring, what exactly can you do to prevent their confusing, confounding, and crazy behaviors?

The reality is no one can prevent some of the craziness that teens engage in, no matter how hard one tries. There will be moments that make you shake your head and maybe even lose faith, especially when you're standing in front of a teen who is completely out of control and operating totally from the limbic system of his or her brain. You will be sorely tempted to react hostilely or aggressively to the teen's emotional and inappropriate behavior. If you do, your mind may reward you with a fleeting moment of emotional satisfaction, but the unfortunate and unintended consequences may linger far longer – modeling and reinforcing the very behaviors that you're trying to prevent, undermining the teacher-student relationship, and contributing to a social climate that is more confrontational than collaborative.

In those moments when you feel worn out and wonder if some students will ever get their acts together, there is one thing you should remember: The insanity is only temporary. Eventually, all those faces staring back at you will, one day, be a lot like you – mentally mature and emotionally secure.

But right now, their brains are functioning in a different way and at a different level. As a result, you have to be willing to modify some of your expectations and readjust your own perceptions. The fifteen-year-old boy who is tall and muscular and the sixteen-year-old girl who wears adult fashions and makeup, may physically look like twentysomethings, but mentally and emotionally, they are still adolescents. They are still learning how to make abstract, logical arguments. They are still trying to grasp the concept of empathy and seeing others' perspectives.

They are still developing their abilities to use logic and reasoning. They are still forming their mental and emotional selves.

## **Positive Behavioral Support and Protective Factors**

Despite the potentially negative influences of psychology, personal circumstances, and popular culture, they are by no means insurmountable or irreversible. The Search Institute, for example, identified forty Developmental Assets that nurture adolescents and help them mature into caring, responsible adults. The more young people are exposed to or experience these assets, the healthier their development and the better their outcomes. Many relate to school, and for some young people, school may be their only source of positive social support. You can play a pivotal role in making sure that your learning community provides students with as many of these assets as possible. Here are a few that the Institute considers essential for youth between the ages of twelve and eighteen:

### **External Assets**

- Family support
- Positive family communication
- Caring school climate
- Parental involvement in schooling
- Safety at home, in school, and in the neighborhood
- School boundaries (clear rules and consequences at school)
- Adult role models
- Positive peer influence
- High expectations

### **Internal Assets**

- School engagement
- Bonding to school
- Equality and social justice
- Responsibility
- Restraint
- Planning and decision making
- Interpersonal competence

- Peaceful conflict resolution
- Positive view of personal future

Your ability to create a safe and effective learning environment can help mitigate whatever negative influences confront students in their lives.

## How to Use This Book

When you look at the students and families that comprise your learning community, what assets are lacking? What needs are not being met? How can you promote positive behavioral support and become a more effective teacher to all of your students, especially those whose behaviors scream they don't want anyone's help, but you know they really do? These are the types of questions that need to be reflected on when you're dealing with disruptive and aggressive students. You will set yourself up for disappointment, rather than set your students up for success, if you have preconceived notions or expectations about the behavioral skills students "should have" when they step inside your school.

Your students are full of promise, passion, and possibility, and their behaviors reflect their youthful enthusiasm. You have a unique opportunity and obligation to guide their development in positive, healthy directions. *Safe and Healthy Secondary Schools* can help you assess your students, identify the issues they struggle with, and determine what new approach or skill can empower them to reach a higher level of success. You can use this book to expand your teacher's toolbox so you can better meet the emotional and behavioral needs of today's adolescents.

For many of your students, emotional safety may be as great a concern or need than feeling physically safe. In these pages, you will find strategies for addressing both. The ideas and concepts presented here are rooted in the Boys Town Education Model. The Model has transformed schools across the country with its behavior-management practices, relationship-building techniques, and social skills components. Each of those principles can help you recognize and address the needs of the "whole student."

The first section of the book (Chapters 1 through 6) explains how you can build up protective factors within your learning community by adopting universal prevention or intervention strategies. Universal, or primary, interventions are global in nature because they are applied to all students on a daily or weekly basis and can include anything from classroom rules and school procedures to social skills instruction and relationship-building techniques. By incorporating primary prevention efforts into your school, you can foster an inclusive and welcoming social climate that reduces and marginalizes inap-

appropriate behaviors, such as bullying, verbal threats, and acting out, so they don't escalate into violent acts. Strategies for building personal connections with students and their families, teaching essential social skills, including problem solving and goal setting, and providing behavioral support are just a few of the proactive measures that are defined and explained.

The second section of the book (Chapters 7 through 10), examines how to address problem behaviors in classrooms and common areas using secondary intervention strategies. Secondary interventions target those students whose behavioral problems are not being adequately addressed by your school's primary prevention efforts. This level of support is more individualized and involves everything from teaching self-management skills to de-escalating conflicts. In many ways, the techniques presented in this section show you how to be the "prefrontal cortex" for students when they are angry, emotional, and not easy to get along with. A variety of step-by-step techniques are explained that can help you de-escalate emotionally tense situations and redirect students. Corrective teaching strategies are introduced that will show you how to turn behavioral mistakes into teaching opportunities that provide long-term benefits to students.

The book's final section (Chapters 11 and 12), provides additional insights into aggression and the characteristics of a safe school. A small minority of students will suffer from mental health issues or display chronic and severe behavioral problems that will require personalized and intensive behavior intervention plans. You can use the information in this section to better identify this student population and learn how you can help these young people get the attention they need from their families and other appropriate services in the community. In addition, there is a summary of what safety experts suggest schools should do to make and keep their environments safe places to learn.

Our hope is that you will be able to put into practice many of these strategies to supplement and strengthen your current efforts. Each strategy, in its own way, is designed to humanize the school experience so students feel more connected to their teachers and peers. When you can help students have more positive relationships in school, feel better about their learning environment, and accept responsibility for their behaviors, you give them the best opportunity to develop their individual talents and realize their full potential.

# Overcoming Students' Disrespect, Apathy, and Aggression

Secondary schools are teeming with teens whose attitudes and actions can sometimes be unpredictable, uncalled-for, and unproductive – bullying, cheating, teasing, whining, sleeping in class, shoving, fighting, touching, talking out of turn, showing up late, and failing to do assignments.

These familiar problems too frequently disrupt classroom instruction, jeopardize student success, and undermine school cohesion. But it doesn't have to be that way.

In these pages, learn how teachers, administrators, and support staff can build a collaborative and cooperative learning environment where high school students receive the positive behavioral support they need to succeed. Included are strategies on how to provide adequate supervision, forge relationships with alienated and disconnected students (and their families), and empower students to deal with anger and frustration rationally rather than recklessly. Insights into how the teenage brain influences behavior, for better or worse, are also provided.

*Safe and Healthy Secondary Schools* uses true-to-life stories to highlight how educators can expand their sphere of influence beyond individual classrooms to all areas of a school. Specific teaching techniques that stop and correct inappropriate behaviors on the spot are explained, as well as methods for building better relationships between educators and students. It's a comprehensive approach to creating a learning environment where students and staff feel physically and emotionally safe.

*The authors have many years of experience teaching in schools as well as training and consulting on classroom management with teachers and administrators in school districts from across the country.*



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