

Ineffective Communication

Hitting/ Violence

Threatening

Yelling

Swearing

Name Calling

Put-downs

Awfulizing

The Third Degree

The Cold Shoulder/Silent Treatment

Lecturing

Nagging

Blaming

Guilt Trips

Comparisons

Commands

Gunny sacking

Ridicule

Sarcasm

Punishing

Criticizing

Complaining

Whining

Dirty Looks

Effective Communication

Work from established rules

Be respectful of each other's needs

Listen

Be direct but understanding of the other

Offer each other choices

Describe what you see, think and feel

Pay attention

Allow each other a chance to find acceptable solutions.

Find where me common ground is.

Use "I" statements.

Give each other the details

Be willing to negotiate.

Use humor.

Work together to problem solve

Behavior Management Pro Tips, The Best of the Best

Hello,

I'm Gary Russell, Program Director of the Evergreen Shelter Program. My human service career began at the Archdeacon Gilfillan Center, 37 years ago, where I had the privilege to work with the Cottage 2 Supervisor, Dan Stark, and the therapist, Kathy Gardner, who you probably know as Kathy Favor. I like ideas, especially ideas that help people gain insight into their behavior and achieve some peace of mind. I have a decent memory for these ideas and have been collecting, packaging, and teaching these high-impact ideas for about three decades. This will probably be my last conference presentation as part of the Evergreen Team, so, in parting, I would like to pass on some of the best behavior management tips that I have gleaned on my journey. I sincerely thank my mentors, all the influential persons that gave me so many awesome things to think about, from Dan and Kathy to one of my main influences, C. S. Lewis.

First, I would like to take some of the mystery out of High Impact Counseling or Parenting. I'll be using parenting and behavior management interchangeably. The key elements of effective counseling and intervention are well documented. The essentials might surprise you. Success depends more on the attitude and service orientation of the counselor than their theoretical approach. The key elements are: A Warm and Caring Person who develops A Relational Connection to build Hope and A Perception of Progress. Effectively helping others improve the quality of their lives involves sticking to the basics, Counseling 101. You can be an effective change agent, and your influence is not contingent on having a Master's degree. What is absolutely essential, even for the Masters and Doctorate level practitioner is a Degree of Caring.

Here is one of our major influences, Vincent Felili. Vincent directed an obesity clinic at the Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in San Diego. About half of the participants dropped out even though they successfully lost a significant amount of weight. So, Vincent conducted exit interviews with many of the participants that quit. Vincent was trained as a scientist and thought in terms of biology, disease, genetics, thyroid levels, blood panels, and metabolism. During the exit interviews, many of the interviewees disclosed they had been sexually abused as children. Vincent was shocked. Then, he started asking how much they weighed before the abuse. He was more shocked when a lady said she only weighed 40 pounds. She was an incest victim. Vincent's interviews suggested that weight gain might not be a problem, per se, but might be the person's solution or coping mechanism to deal with past adversity and trauma.

So, Kaiser Permanente expanded a survey to study the potential impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs. This massive study with more than 17, 000 participants created a monumental paradigm shift that tipped the old Nature/Nurture debate heavily in favor of Nurture over Nature.

Early psychology was steeped in determinism, and mental health disorders tended to be viewed as pathological. Pathology refers to disease processes. The etiology of these diseases is organic or biological, or genetic. When a disorder is pathological, there is no changing the situation. You either learn to live with it or perhaps medicate the symptoms.

The Kaiser research favored a *characterological* view of mental health disorders. Characterological issues refer to psychological problems that affect a person's healthy development. These are things that

we learned from experience that may lead to disorders. Characterological issues are seen as more malleable and hopeful as they can be unlearned or rationally reinterpreted.

The Kaiser findings clearly showed that many conditions like depression, COPD, liver disease, ischemic heart disease, diabetes, and cancer are characterological, based in experience, not pathologically based in someone's biology or genetics. The negative health symptoms resulted from adverse experiences and subsequent toxic stress. If all of these mental, chemical and physical health problems and dysfunctions are the result of adverse experiences, they were and are potentially preventable. Had the traumatized child grown up in a safer, more loving home, they likely would have turned out just fine.

The sensations we receive from experience are not raw. Experiences are interpreted. If they are interpreted, they can be reinterpreted. This is hugely hopeful. The damage from ACEs is not only Preventable; it is Treatable.

The Kaiser findings should profoundly affect our faith in one's ability to change and heal and should permeate our attitudes with hopefulness. We should not look at kids in a jaded, static way. A child's negativity is likely a clue to their woundedness. Anyone can see what a child is doing. The trauma-informed advocate will be driven to find out why they are doing it. They will also have a big box of tools to help youth heal from trauma.

So, I firmly believe that if you can say the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, you can hit a home run. You can speak truth into a child's life, and change can happen fast. You can be that change agent and rock somebody's life.

Like any great venture, you have to know where you are going. There is a goal to maturation, adolescent development, and parenting. Once you determine your goal or mission, all of your preparation, methods, actions, interventions, and activities should be crafted to reach that end. Among professionals, promoting maturation to independence and community contribution is referred to as Positive Youth Development.

I used to think the goal of parenting was legitimate independence, but no person is an island. We need to learn how to live relationally and in community. So, I think legitimate interdependence might be a better goal.

Kids start out dependent, if they stay dependent, poor them and poor you, as you will be carrying a lot of weight. Foster legitimate interdependence. There may be a day that you will need them to help carry you. So, here's a big tip compliments of mentor Dan Stark, "Never do something for a kid that they could do for themselves." I had a foster granddaughter who was a doer, a bit extreme at times. Here she is trying to break a birthday party balloon. I would pull up a stool for her and let her help with dishes. A lot of water ended up on the floor and me. But, her work ethic at age three would make some adults look like slackers.

This is how I believe we work. Information and logic create one's belief system. When emotions flavor our beliefs, they create our attitudes or tendency to act. When we choose based on our beliefs we generate behavior or actions. We teach what we allow and need to establish appropriate boundaries for youth. While kids are growing up, we should provide a safe, consistent structure (more on that in a minute).

When Joe Vene ran the Juvenile Center, he talked about an institutional syndrome. Some youth would conform to the Center's rigid structure and behave like model citizens while incarcerated. But, when they left the Center, there was no improvement. We should strive for profound internal change. Our ultimate goal is to impart principles and values so one day the children entrusted to us will no longer need our structure or rules. They will carry the principles with them and do the right thing. You may be thinking, "Maybe in their 30's."

You are your most significant influence. There are two pivotal core beliefs, things we tell ourselves. At the core are our identity and sense of worth or worthlessness. If you can change a person's identity, for better or worse, you can change the entire course of their lives. We need to impact the core. Contend for a child's mind as competing influences do not have their best interests at heart.

Here is the cycle. Talk and teach. Provide the reasons behind the Rules. Teach youth to master their emotions. Use positive and negative consequences to reinforce pro-social behavior. Consequences should help youth set appropriate boundaries and learn that respectful and responsible action will increase their freedom and independence.

There is a sophisticated tool to help you clarify and teach values. Are you ready? It's a circle, hum. Your family or program values go inside the circle. We always start with three values. Your family might have unique values that you want to instill. Then, there are behaviors that are contrary to your values and clearly fall outside of the circle. Kids will surprise you. I find that even rebellious youth living outside the circle will agree that it is a parent's job to promote values inside the circle. The circle sets the standard.

There's an unwritten contract between a parent and a child. "A child has to agree to be parented. If they don't, you may need to rally the village to get help raising the child. The village may include Police or probation officers.

So, a quick review.

- Positive change and growth are possible.
- Caring adults are powerful change agents.
- The goal is to foster legitimate interdependence.
- Profound change comes from within, impacting one's values, identity, and self-worth. If you have good self-esteem, you'll probably be doing all right.

At the Shelter, our approach to parenting is founded on Three Pillars of Parenting. The first pillar is Love. The word gets thrown around. But, this is a Give Love that C. S. Lewis captured in this quote, this "love is not so much an affectionate feeling, but rather a decision to work in another's best interest as far as can be attained." By this definition a lot of youth's peers do not love them. They don't always love themselves or work in their own best interests. This love sometimes prompts you to do things you don't feel like doing, confronting behavior outside the circle, being patient when you're feeling impatient, or hanging in there when you feel like throwing in the towel.

The other two pillars are Teaching and Positive Discipline. Positive Discipline is the art of using reasonable rules and effective consequences combined with caring relationships to teach children positive values and behaviors. (I liked it when my kids got caught. Those were teachable moments.)

Positive Disciples helps youth heal from trauma. In the words of Judge Shawn Floerke, “Whatever doesn’t kill you gives you really ugly, ugly coping mechanisms.” We take kids where they are, but we care too much about them to leave them that way. Teach them to meet their needs in ways that respect others and cultivate self-respect. Doing the right thing does wonders for one’s self-esteem.

Extreme parent roles will not effectively impact core beliefs or promote legitimate interdependence. On one extreme is the super strict commander-in-chief. My dad embodied the super strict style. You never argued with him. “What don’t you understand, the N or the O?” The strict style focuses on external control where the adult has a strong need for compliance. Rules tend to be more dominant than relationships. However, Josh McDowell warned us, “Rules without relationship lead to rebellion.” The main lesson learned under the commander’s dominance is the Fear of Authority or, perhaps, to Defy Authority. The style does not effectively teach driving principles or promote legitimate interdependence.

Imagine a relatively submissive youth who has grown up under the Commander-in-Chief. Eventually, this young adult goes to college, and, for the first time, nobody is telling them what to do. What does it look like? They cut loose and go wild. “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” They haven’t learned to think for themselves. They heard the what not to do but not the why. The strict parent likely missed the second pillar of parenting- teaching.

On the other extreme is the Rescuer or Permissive Parent. They are more of a “peer-ent” than a parent. They want camaraderie and to rescue their child from the sting of hard life lessons, poor and bad decisions. This parent is a Swooperman or Swooperwoman. The swooper parent will often indulge their child with privilege or permission. The indulged child will have grandiose ambitions with no concept or plan of the amount of work necessary to achieve their dreams. The permissive parent doesn’t really impart values, so their child gleans values from the street, social media, or peers as clueless as themselves. The style abandons the tradition that elders might have something to teach children. Traumatized parents often parent this way, but that’s another topic. The main lesson learned from the Rescuer is that “no one has the right to tell you what to do.”

So, don’t overmanage or undermanage. Manage with a mission to promote legitimate interdependence. We don’t have children to keep them. We have them to set them free. Give kids a ton of responsibility and increasingly more power and control. Put them in the driver’s seat.

Here’s a really bad analogy. It is so bad that it might help you embrace this notion of empowering increased independence. Imagine there is a group of kids that like to play on the top of a cliff. Do you build a fence at the cliff’s edge or park an ambulance at the bottom? I’m suggesting that, as kids mature, you get more into the ambulance business.

Mick Marino described some parents who had been losing sleep and weight from sheer worry. In a meeting, their son sat smug, relaxed, with a defiant grin on his face. Somehow the onus for the problem needs to shift from the burdened parents and clearly land in the kid’s lap.

Here’s a tip I learned from Corwin Kronenberg to do just that. When a kid gets in trouble, you say,

You've Got a Problem!

There are some variations on this useful expression. You might try, "Now, that's a problem. I'm just glad it isn't mine." Put the responsibility back on the child. Get them involved in considering the positive and negative consequences of their behavior. Try to see if they can solve their problem. If they get stuck, you can offer some possible solutions. This was a major discovery for me and did wonders for my parenting. Here was one of my more successful applications.

When my daughter was young, like kindergarten or first grade, she started missing the bus. One morning, I was going out to my old Toyota to head for work. Leah was slowly shuffling and whimpering down the driveway. I walked by her and said, "I wouldn't be crying if I were you. I'd be running because you are going to miss the bus. I looked through the woods to see the bus driving away. So, I used the technique, "You've got a problem. You'll need to go inside, sit on the steps, and devise a plan to get to school. Then, I called work and explained, "I have a problem..."

Leah thought about it for a while and said, "I suppose I could walk."

I replied, "Hum, you're six years old and have six miles to go. You might not make it there by the end of the day, and it doesn't sound too safe." I suggested, "Maybe you could hire me to give you a ride. I wonder how much bus drivers make?" She didn't fully understand currency. So, she agreed to hand over several shiny quarters for a ride to school.

But, the problem wasn't solved yet. When she returned from school, I had her go back to the stairs to sit and devise a plan not to be late for school. She is a sufficiently bright girl and eventually said, "I have an idea. I'll get dressed the night before, and when morning comes, I can pop up and go.

Ok. We have a plan. It's not morally or physically dangerous, just bad fashion. Now, we need to inform her mother. We let her get dressed the night before. What do kindergarten or first graders wear? Stretchy outfits. She wasn't the stinky kid, and the wrinkles didn't change much. She got dressed the night before, and when morning came, she popped up and made the bus. She was never late again and eventually learned to dress herself in the morning.

Here are some essential tips on creating a solid structure to promote safe and sane action. First, here is our guide to reasonable rules and effective consequences. Notice, because rules reflect a family's values, they apply in some fashion to every family member. Assume courtesy is important, and you want your children to let you know where they are going and what they will be doing. It wouldn't be appropriate for dad to get off work at 5:00 PM and not show up until 10:00 PM without an explanation.

I would like to highlight a beautiful tip that is the quintessential example of positive discipline, the use of Restorative Consequences.

A fifth grade went on a field trip to a State park, and the tour was led by Park Naturalists. During the trip, one problematic boy knocked a nest out of a tree with eggs. The teachers and Park staff became aware of the misdeed. Everyone was embarrassed, disgusted, and ticked at the student. He was sent to sit on the bus to await his fate.

A wise teacher went to talk with him. “You really blew it. Do you want a punishment, or would you like to try and fix it?”

The boy said, “How could I fix it? The nest is broken, and the eggs are smashed.”

The teacher repeated, “Would you like a punishment, or would you like to fix it?”

He said he would like to fix it if possible.

The teacher arranged to meet the boy at the school on Saturday morning. He had the keys to the woodshop. With the teacher’s guidance, the boy started constructing simple birdhouses. When they had a half-dozen, they went back to the park and started lashing them to trees. Not only was he able to make a decent effort to rectify the situation, but he was able to restore himself to good standing, having made amends.

Here is another tool we often use to help youth regain trust and freedom. It’s the Trust Formula. When a youth gets into trouble, the Trust Formula is the path to getting out of trouble. It shines light at the end of the tunnel.

We have research and reasons to be optimistic, and reasonable rule and consequences.

Now let’s jump into crisis intervention tips. Do front-end work. Experienced counselors address tension and conflict at the first sign of smoke. Newbies tend to go around putting out fires. When you see tension, pull people aside and sort it out. If you are working with instigators, street savvy youth, or kids with poor boundaries or ADHD, you have to be present and manage by walking around. Be proactive and participatory.

Here’s a side tip on working with ADHD youth. Distraction and redirection work wonders. Squirrel! A youngster had a meltdown in his EBD classroom that ended up in a restraint and his removal from class. Dan Stark and I were called with the dubious job of retrieving him as he was suspended for the day. I was ready for intensity. The student had been separated but still looked very upset. When Dan saw him, he said, “Hey, is that a new shirt?”

The kid looked bewildered. “Ah, yeah.”

Dan said, “That’s a sharp shirt. Where’d you get it?”

“My uncle gave it to me.”

Dan asked, “What’s your uncle’s name?” and kept running with it. Within seconds, the kid forgot what he was all upset about, and we walked calmly back to the cottage while Dan got the whole uncle history.

Dan would also set up mini challenges to burn energy and keep things moving in a positive direction. “Mike, if I set a stopwatch, do you think you could run around the cottage in under 11 seconds? Use proactive distraction and redirection with an extra dose of patience. Don’t just let it spin. Take action.

Follow your gut. If you hear or see anything that doesn't seem right, don't let it slide. Address it. Communication is like a mirror. You hold it up, and youth get insight into how they are coming across. Ask their peers what they think about what they are hearing and seeing. Peer feedback holds a lot of weight.

The key characteristic of a really good counselor is assertiveness. They take the initiative with the truth. But they do it in a caring, crafty way that increases the likelihood that their feedback will be well received. When confronting someone, always make statements. Don't ask questions like, "Did you just poke Bill?" or "Did I just see you flip off, Ms. Anderson?" Questions force a person into defending themselves. Questions are accusatory. Of course, the person will be more defensive." And, never ask a liar if they lied. With many issues, denial runs deep, like substance abuse disorders, sexual compulsivity, or sexual offense. We are no longer asking. You've got some issues. Now, let's get busy working on them.

There are two effective ways to package these statements. First, simply describe what you see. "You just poked Bill." Or, "You just dropped the F-bomb." Be like an umpire and call it like you see it. "Your face is red, and your fists are clenched. Or, you have a Micky Mouse bookcase in your hand, and you look like you're about to get an assault charge with it." You're not asking, just describing, and there isn't a lot up for debate.

The second technique is to describe your emotional response to what you see. Again, kids cannot argue with how you feel. Imagine you're loading a van for an activity. A 14 and 15-year-old guy and girl plunk down in the back seat, and you're not feeling comfortable with their boundaries, relationship, or the backseat. A new youth counselor won't want to create any conflict and will be worried about making unfounded accusations. They will watch the rearview mirror and anxiously hope for the best. An experienced counselor will have no problem following their gut and erring on the side of safety. The second technique would be perfect for this situation. "I'm sorry. Call me a prude, but I'm not comfortable with the seating arrangement in the back. Would one of you move forward a seat, please? Then, you wait while they grumble, and someone moves. Now, you don't have to worry about it or find out later that you should have followed your gut.

There is another gem that will be included with this curriculum on our website. It's our Guide to Effective Communication. We have found that if we can just change the way family members talk to each other, huge improvements can be achieved. Parents and kids will have ineffective tendencies. If they find themselves on the left, they agree to take a break and use righthand assertive communication before reengaging. It's an excellent chart for the refrigerator to help set a standard for effective communication.

Ok, let's Prepare for Intensity. Take some deep Breaths. You want a little tension on the inside, but you want to look relaxed and casual on the outside. You are your own biggest influence. Talk to yourself. "I'm the adult. I'm going to stay chill, calm in the storm. I'm the rational anchor." Drama junkies would love to get you on board their crises. A kid will look you over and wonder, "If I were you, what would I be insecure about?" Those are the buttons they will try to push. They will say something as hurtful as possible. "Don't take the Bait!" With me it's, "You old, fat, bald, mother..." It's like, "come on, give me something new."

Watch *Girls Interrupted* with Whoopi Goldberg and Winona Ryder. Winona is in treatment and is trying to insult Whoopi, who plays one of the treatment staff. Winona really lays it on, and the whole

time Whoopi looks at her peacefully and silently. When Winona finally runs out of ammunition, Whoopi calmly comments, “You’re just throwing it all away,” it being Winona’s potential. It’s a masterful example of Professional Detachment, not taking things personally, not taking the bait.

When kids say hurtful things to provoke you, your best response is, “I’m sorry you feel that way.” The phrase shifts the focus. It’s not that you deserve their wrath and insults, but the youth is being nasty and showing their lack of self-control and respect.

Get analytical. Anger tends to be a secondary emotion masking a primary emotion that youth feel too vulnerable to express. Look beyond behavior, “what they are doing,” to figure out “why” they are doing it. I find the most common primary emotion is hurt. Kids get their feelings hurt and are not secure enough to genuinely admit they are hurt. It’s easier to get pissed. Other big themes are frustration, wishing you could be doing something but are stuck doing something you don’t want to be doing. That is a reality for most of the kids with whom we work. Some youth may be testing limits to see how far they can take it.

Again, use the mirror. If you can help an angry youth get in touch with what they are really feeling, you are counseling. You are giving them insight. Help them package and express their hurt, frustration, and loss of control. You can teach them to be assertive and powerful.

Here’s a tip I learned from an FBI hostage negotiator. In a conflict, you can take an inventory of your own emotions to determine what is motivating the youngster in front of you. If you are feeling incredibly irritated or annoyed, it’s all about attention. Many kids would rather have negative attention than no attention, particularly if they are ADHD. So, ignoring them won’t work. You’ll need to attend to them strategically.

If you are getting pissed and starting to dislike the kid, it’s all about power and control. But, like attention, successfully handling the challenge is counterintuitive. Don’t get into a power struggle or feel the need to show the kid you are the boss. Besides, you are not the boss. Bruce Springsteen is the Boss. Empower the youth. Give them choices. Make them feel in charge.

Again, if you’re irritated and annoyed, the kid needs attention in increments that you can manage, given everything else you need to do. If you’re getting angry, you need to figure out how to empower the kid who is likely struggling with powerlessness and feeling out of control.

Avoid Polarity. If you’re in a power struggle, you blew it. What is polarity? Relational polarity happens when people take opposing sides. It’s usually framed in terms of an authority versus the subordinate. The adult is pitted against the child, me versus you; staff against the kids; master versus peon, us versus them, me against you. The battle lines have been drawn, and the fight is ready to begin. It’s implied at times a parent says, “I’m the adult.” Or, “As long as you live in my house, you will do as I say.” Or, “When you start paying the bills…”

Why is polarity a bad thing? Well, for starters, if you push, they will push back. The “push-push, becomes a “lose-lose” situation. Power struggles do not promote safety, and adults should be fostering safe households.

The other major reason polarity and the subsequent power struggles are to be avoided is that they do not teach responsibility. The “I’m in charge” approach emphasizes external control at the expense of

cultivating the child's ability to control themselves. It also favors authority over a relationship. The approach doesn't help children internalize values or the principles behind the rules. By the time a child reaches eighteen, we hope they have internalized values and can think for themselves. They will need a lot of practice at this along the way.

I suspect the strong need for control reflects some unmet need(s) for the caregiver. As caregivers, if our ego needs go up, the safety goes down. Some children are submissive when dominated, at least until they leave home. Again, the primary lesson children learn in these situations is to either "fear of authority or defy authority." Typically, children have little respect for persons in their lives that were too controlling.

How does one avoid polarity?

Ultimatums vs. Choices- Ultimatums are the quintessential expression of external control. "Do it or else." They necessarily pit the adult authority figure against the child. Kids have ego. If you push, they will push back. Adults, with ill intent, have used this knowledge to provoke responses that escalate conflicts.

The analogy of the truant student...

Choices internalize the conflict, placing it in the child's head, so the parent/caregiver can avoid bumping heads. Here are some tips on offering choices:

- Lead with the preferred choice, the path of least resistance.
- Avoid bluffing. Be confident you can follow through with either option.
- Step aside for a few minutes to let the child "save face" and allow the cognitive dissonance a chance to spur some action.

Learning to package everything as a choice is an art. If you're stuck, consult a coworker or another parent for ideas. There is another benefit to offering choices. I believe humans are capable of independent action. They are transcendent. When you offer choices, you empower a child and affirm their personhood. Choices are dignified.

Contingency Consequences- Contingency consequences basically follow the "work first, play later" formula. They are a great way to put responsibility back on a child. Instead of going "head to head" with the child, you outwait them. Contingency consequences also have a positive feel as you get to say "yes" instead of "no." Here are some examples:

Child: "Can I watch TV?"

Parent: "Sure, as soon as your chore has been checked."

Child: "I want to go over to Mike's and play."

Parent: "Sure, as soon as your homework is done."

Make sure time is truly "on your side." If kids fail to do a "time-sensitive" chore, trade their chore for one of yours when you have time. It works like this: "If you don't have the dishes done by 11:30, I'll do them for you. Then, you'll do one of my chores for me. I have to warn you. My chores are harder than dishes, and they will start Saturday morning. I was thinking of cleaning the garage."

When ADHD kids come back from public school, which was stressful, they look forward to their 30 minutes of game time. If they come into the staff office and ask for the controller and the staff says, “You’re not gaming. You haven’t done your chore yet.” The result can be a disaster. But, if staff use contingency consequences, the disaster can be avoided.

“Can I have a controller?”

“Sure, but we have to do your five minute chore first. Come on, I’ll help you.” Yes, when.

State your expectations in a positive way- Tell kids what you want them to do rather than what you don’t want them to do. This is positive imaging. If they can conceive it, they can achieve it.

This is super important:

- Go over your expectations for a task or an activity.

- Break it down to a few essential rules.

- Go over the consequences if they should fail to follow the basic rules.

- Get their agreement on the rules AND the consequences.

If they blow it, it’s their fault not yours. This makes the follow-through much easier. It also teaches children they can earn privileges by exhibiting positive behavior.

The Wayne’s Roller World analogy...

Don’t Gunnysack- This tends to be more of an adult problem. I see it when romances run amok. A partner will approach a conflict carrying a whole history of past hurts. They don’t clear the slate, forgive and start fresh. Each engagement is an opportunity to review all of the past instances where the person has hurt them. Adults should not come primed, expecting things to run amok based on prior bad interactions. If you assume things will go poorly, they probably will. Start fresh. “OK, yesterday sucked, but today is a new day. Let’s try to have some fun together.” Not hanging on to the past is particularly relevant when working with ADHD children. If you can get over it, they already got over it ten minutes ago.

This chart shows the course of an emotional crisis. Some hurt, challenge, frustration, unmet need or maybe even an injustice can trigger an escalation. If the child has been stuffing these emotions for a while and are not too skilled in managing them, they can flame into a full-blown tantrum. Tantrums may have worked in the past. At the Evergreen Shelter, we try to avoid the “crisis” stage like the plague. The teardrop shape depicts your window of opportunity to turn things around before the youth is traveling by the emotional seat of their pants. Your job is to be the rational anchor so you can pull them back down to reality.

I learned this next tip from Jim Sporleder, former Principal of Lincoln High School in Wala Wala, Washington. Jim had this target prominently displayed on his office wall. If a youth arrives in the red zone, you explain that you want to talk with them but will give them time to chill and move toward the green zone before the serious discussion begins. There is no point in talking in the red zone, as words are just fuel for the fire. Meaningful discussion is reserved for the green zone.

Once a child crosses that dotted line, things get primitive. Your Canine 101 skills need to kick in gear. Quit talking. Anything you say can and will be used against you. The escalated youth is keying into your body language and posture. So-

Keep your distance- If the normal distance is about 3 feet, you need 6 or 7 feet between you and an escalated child.

Present profile (the professor routine)- Try not to look imposing or threatening. The least defensive posture you can assume is the professor stance- hand on the elbow and your other hand on your chin. You look contemplative, not aggressive. You're casual, taking your time and thinking things over.

Use less eye contact- Don't give them the evil eye.

Lower your voice- The youth will be escalating, maybe even screaming. You don't want to get on board. Remember, you are modeling self-control and communicating "mellowness." Make them come down to your level, not vice versa.

Be Mindful of Your Environment- Try to subdue lighting. It's hard to have a mutiny when you can't see your fellow mutineers. Quell background noise. As the air becomes charged with tension, a proactive parent or counselor will want to turn down the lights, the radio, the TV, and generally mellow things out. Some environments are very noisy. When kids interact in these environments, they almost yell to hear each other. It doesn't take much to cross this threshold and start screaming.

You must be very mindful of any potential audience. When a child tantrums in the checkout line at Wal-Mart, they are hoping the audience will humiliate their mom or dad into complying with their request to avoid embarrassment. If you leave all your items in the cart and carry the same child into the bathroom, the whole dynamic changes. Melodramatic youth will stage for their peers. Again, any spectators fuel the flames.

Removing the audience may be the job of your coworker or partner if you have one. Sometimes you have to think outside the box. Try to lure the youngster you need to confront away from the audience before you confront them. If the child is unwilling to join you, you might have better luck removing the audience and leaving the child behind. At the Shelter, we shut down the house, locking most doors to limit the contagion if we worry that a child might escalate. This can be done as a precaution. It does not necessarily mean anyone is in trouble. We typically stay in this mode until the conflict has been resolved.

If kids dip below the safety line and grab something that could be used as a weapon. Describe what you see and let them know that if they continue, they will be talking to an officer. If necessary, call 911. Sometimes the presence of an officer will quickly de-escalate a situation. If it doesn't, you want them close anyway.

So, you isolated the incident and are keeping your distance. Finally, the only real way to de-escalate a youth in the crisis mode is to let them vent, even if they are talking smack about your coworker (you can deal with that later). Use the Active Listening skills you learned in your social work Methods class. If the youth is talking, they probably won't be swinging. Listen with the intention of helping them solve their crisis or meet their need.

OK, here are three parting tips...

First, if things get intense, at least it will be interesting. Debrief with a colleague.

Don't worry if you blow it. The situation will certainly repeat itself, perhaps with different names and faces, and you will have a chance to redeem yourself.
Finally, "Act casual at all times."