This article introduces a unique team approach to planning and positive behavior support. The young person becomes a key participant in solving problems and setting goals for growth.

The CLEAR™ Problem-Solving Model: Discovering Strengths and Solutions

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The CLEAR Team Problem Solving model shifts the focus from deficits to strengths and solutions. The goal is to identify how a child's private logic and interpersonal conflicts serve to maintain maladaptive behavior. Specific interventions are designed to meet the universal growth needs for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). This process values and supports each individual involved and engenders a spirit of hope and optimism.

Using a structured team meeting, a trained facilitator frames discussion around the CLEAR sequence of problem solving. This evidence-based model is grounded in resilience science, neuroscience, and positive behavior support (Brendtro & duToit, 2005; Brendtro, Mitchell, & McCall, 2009; Koehler, 2006). Viewed through the lens of potential, parents and

staff join with the youth to create a CLEAR plan for the future.

Connecting Hurting Kids to Supportive Adults

An agitated teacher stops the behavior specialist in a hallway to share, on behalf of almost the entire staff, frustration with Taylor, a tenth grade boy. Taylor has been alternating between angry rants in class and running away and crying. With frequency of outbursts increasing, an alarming picture was painted of a boy who some feared might even be psychotic. Most teachers believed that this disruptive child belonged in a center-based program for severely emotionally impaired youth, not in the mainstream. They were weary and just wanted to teach students who were "ready to learn."

The skinny boy with a tousled mop of thick, curly red hair spoke in rapid spurts. Taylor blinked a lot as his eyes darted around the room. Fidgety hands and feet indicated a pent-up energy. His words describe the reality he perceived: "I'm ignored;" "I sit alone;" "No one likes me;" "Teachers try to tick me off and get me in trouble;" "I'm sent to the office;" "Teachers won't help me;" "I hate this school;" "I can't trust anyone;" "No one cares." His feelings of anger, sadness, frustration, loneliness, boredom, and despair portray a very unhappy youth.

Keeping students like Taylor connected to school is difficult, particularly when adults feel frustrated and impotent. For more than a decade, the federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), has required schools to provide positive behavior supports for students whose behavior impedes learning. Many states have implemented policies that require that the educational community must provide a system of positive behavior support to enable students to manage their own behavior and show academic achievement. Yet students continue to struggle when interventions simply manage the environment.

Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) are widely used to deal with disruptive behavior in schools. PBS is the "application of positive behavioral interventions and systems to achieve socially important behavior change" (Sugai et al., 1999, p. 6). PBS provides a package of prescriptive tasks and procedures to create well-managed environments where office discipline referrals are low and positive feedback is high.

Within the Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District (Char-Em ISD) in northern Michigan, nine elementary and middle schools have been trained under a statewide project entitled the Michigan Integrated Behavior and Learning Initiative which incorporates the PBS model (Michigan Department of Education, 2006). But there is a commonly expressed concern of frustration when it comes to "frequent flyers"—those students whose behavior frequently interferes with their learning and the learning of others. Staff who experience confusion and stress disengage from positive approaches and react to the youth's problems in negative ways:

- *"Acknowledging or rewarding when behavior is appropriate doesn't seem to matter to them,"* states one teacher.

- *"Those students just need to have the consequences upped,"* says another frustrated staff member, *"but how does that fit in with our positive philosophy?"*

- *"Rewards only seem to work for a little while with that student,"* observes an exasperated principal.

For strategies to be effective, these must be perceived by both students and adults as meeting their needs. But adults who do not understand the challenges or stress through a youth's eyes can easily miss the mark on what truly drives the behavior and what supports are needed. When adults view these youth through pessimistic lenses, interventions lack the spirit and conviction that true change requires.

CLEAR™ Problem-Solving

In their book *Response Abilities Pathways* [RAP], Brendtro and du Toit (2005) summarize the research on understanding the purpose of behavior with the aptly named acronym CLEAR. This is a timeline by which the brain processes behavioral events:

CHALLENGES produce stress triggering

LOGIC which combines with

EMOTIONS which drive

ACTIONS that lead to

RESULTS or consequences

In RAP interventions, the CLEAR problem-solving process is used with *individual students*. The CLEAR model also can be used as a problem-solving format in *teams*. This involves structured meetings facilitated by a leader trained in the Circle of Courage and CLEAR methodologies.

The old psychological adage that behavior serves a purpose is true. When caught in conflicts, adults may tend to think that purpose of a student's problem behavior is to be obnoxious and disruptive. Frustrated adults, blinded by their own stressors and negative perceptions, often resort to coercive and punitive methods. An optimistic view creates caring action. This mindset is critical to help students make true behavioral change. Such is the spirit of CLEAR team meetings.

Taylor needed a CLEAR Problem Solving meeting. His list of office discipline referrals included: fighting with peers; shouting and arguing with teachers; flipping teachers off; refusing to follow directions to sit, work, stop making noises, or go to class or the office when told; walking out of class; and hiding. Before considering placement in a setting separate from non-disabled

peers, a referral process is used to review whether a student's response to multiple behavioral interventions has proven ineffective. Through the CLEAR process, everyone at the table saw the situation from Taylor's point of view. Adult thoughts turned naturally from fear, confusion, and blame to understanding and empathy. Feelings of frustration dissolved into compassion, and actions turned from rejecting this troubled student to working as a team to help him.

Youth must believe adults are on their side. An alliance is created when adults seek to understand by listening to the child's stories for underlying meaning. This connection builds the trust that paves a path for change. Getting adults who support the student, especially in the eyes of the youth, at the meeting table is critical. At least one parent or guardian and a school administrator are essential team members, along with as many supportive teachers and other staff as practical. What makes a successful CLEAR team meeting? It is the result of the process itself and the skills of the meeting facilitator.

> *The CLEAR process to be used at the support meetings was explained to Taylor. The principal, special education teacher, school counselor, and his mom would all be there. The probation officer and mental health counselor were invited. Since Taylor had named the technology person as the one adult in the school he felt liked him, we would do our best to make sure Mr. V. attended.*

The most important person in the CLEAR team process is the student. Young persons are the experts on themselves and only through listening to their voices will adults understand their inner world. Prior to the formal meeting, the facilitator gathers available school and case records such as attendance and office discipline referrals, grades and progress reports, and health and psychological records. To prepare the youth for the meeting, it is important to connect with the student and explore how they think and feel about their situation and the strategies they use to cope. This private discussion can follow the same CLEAR format to be used in the team meeting. The facilitator also explains to the student the meeting's purpose and format so this can be seen as a positive opportunity for respectful communication.

Once Taylor believed an adult wanted to help, he shared his desire to have friends, supportive teachers, and all A's in school. Although he decided he was not comfortable coming to the meeting "until the end," Taylor gave his permission for everything he'd said in the preliminary meeting to be shared at his group meeting. He felt a flicker of hope.

As the team discusses the student's challenges, logic, feelings, actions, and results, notes are taken on the whiteboard in columns to visually separate the information. It takes practice for the facilitator to listen intently to discussion while organizing thoughts on the board.

CLEAR Team Problem-Solving meetings begin by identifying the student's strengths, interests, and areas of success. Parents and caregivers are immediately relieved of the fear and blame that accompanies a litany of everything that is wrong with their child. Optimism grows.

> *Taylor's many strengths included: being smart, creative, helpful, kind, caring; having a great vocabulary and being a talented poet; liking computers; and wanting to succeed in school. Taylor's challenges included: seeing others' perspectives; reading social verbal and nonverbal cues; having flexibility in thinking; regulating emotions; problem-solving; recognizing social boundaries; connecting with peers; and controlling impulsive behaviors triggered by loud, stern voices of adults, too many people, too much noise, and unstructured situations.*

The facilitator needs skills for reframing negative ideas and comments and leading the conversation in a positive direction. If an adult begins lecturing the student, it must be handled immediately with poise and grace to protect everyone's dignity. Drawing attention back to the whiteboard keeps the discussion from becoming adversarial. Displaying visual information that tells the story of the student's challenging behavior is a calming, cognitive task. Facilitators use their skills to put a CLEAR picture on the board of the student's challenges, logic, feelings, actions, and results. This takes 20-30 minutes. Most of the meeting, usually 60-90 minutes, is used to define goals for success and plans for getting there.

> *While preparing for his meeting, Taylor recognized that his ways of coping with stress were causing him more problems. Defying authority*

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and walking out of class were not helping him in the long run. He did not like feeling angry, sad, hopeless, and overwhelmed. He had the insight to realize, "If I don't get in trouble, teachers might help me, kids might like me, and I would feel happier."

Through the CLEAR Team Problem-Solving process, adults learn what the student needs. A short period of brainstorming presents a wealth of ideas from which to choose. When these ideas are generated by the people who will implement them, follow-through is more likely. Often students themselves bring up the best ideas. Taylor suggested using a break card allowing him to go to the office to write in his journal when upset. He asked for alternatives to the cafeteria for lunch and breakfast, and offered to help in the elementary school cafeteria instead.

Support plans are designed to address student needs for belonging, social-emotional-academic mastery, independence, and generosity. Plans to monitor progress define specific data collection methods for behavioral supports. Action plans define *who* will do *what* by *when*, making sure all implementation details are attended to and no one person is responsible for everything. Scheduled follow-up meetings insure fidelity and opportunity for modification.

Healing the Pain

All of Taylor's concerns that we knew about were addressed in his support plan. For two weeks, all data indicated improvement. Then one day, Taylor disclosed to a person who had now become a trusted adult that he was being abused by his father on weekend visits. Although distressed with what was happening to Taylor, the school staff was grateful for their changed paradigm and positive connections that allowed Taylor to finally speak up and end the abuse.

Feedback from agency professionals was extremely positive about the meeting process that started the student on this path to healing. Additional supports for student and family were put in place quickly and seamlessly. When students with the most disruptive or disturbing behaviors challenge systems, teachers and schools need to be supported as they continue to search for the unmet need beneath the behavior.

A growing consensus is emerging that envisions the schools of this century as the "hub" for the collaboration of social services, health education, and other community-based sources of education for children and families (Carlson, Paavola, & Talley,

1995; DeMers, 1995). In this capacity, schools have the unique opportunity to impact communities by modeling strength-based practices. By taking the approach that everyone involved in a youth's life can work together to support the child, these strategies are more likely to be successful in preventing more difficult behavior among them (Catalano, Loeber, & McKinney, 1999). In times when pessimistic views of the future of children are discouraging, schools working with families and the community can create visions of hope and belief in the potential of all children.

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