



CHAPTER ONE

Changing With The Times

*Oh, the things you can find if you
don't stay behind! —DR. SEUSS*

Our son, Micah, was six years old when he entered kindergarten. We had strategically waited an extra year to give him time to mature socially and emotionally before enrolling him. At his former day care, they told us as long as Micah's new teacher kept him busy, he would be fine. Yes, Micah was a "busy bee." My wife and I suspected that his *proclivity for activity* would no doubt be an issue of concern in the classroom. Since my wife taught at the same school, she warned the kindergarten teacher about his behavior. (Did I mention this was

her first year teaching at the school?) She was young, smart, energetic, and had a dynamic presence, so we thought: *If anyone can keep up with Micah in kindergarten, it will be her.*

During the first week of school, Micah brought home a behavior folder that provided us with daily feedback. Initially, Micah received “plus” marks, indicating he had good days. We were optimistic, but our optimism was short-lived. By the end of the first week, “minuses,” indicating behavior concerns, started to pop up. Of course, my wife and I sat Micah down and tried to encourage positive behavior, but the efforts yielded little success. Although he had some good days, the minuses he received clearly outweighed the pluses. Micah also began conveniently leaving his folder on the bus at the end of each day. He would explain, “Daddy, I don’t know where my folder is. It must be in the classroom, but I had a good day!” His teacher heard a variation of this same theme: “My folder? It must be in my mom’s car.”

Although my wife and I continued to work with Micah on making good choices, his problems in the classroom persisted. On the third week of school, after several “minus” days, my wife called to let me know Micah had snuck back into his classroom at the end of the day and emptied the contents of his teacher’s prize box of stickers and pencils into his backpack. Yes. Our child was now a thief.

That evening, when we spoke with Micah, he asked, “Why am I always the one in trouble?” He

told us some kids wouldn't play with him anymore at school because he was the "bad kid." After some probing, we discovered he was giving out the stolen pencils and stickers from the prize box to kids in his class—so they would play with him. It seemed our son was working the system to buy back his friends.

As a parent, I didn't know what to say. I was exceedingly frustrated with his behavior, but I also knew (to a certain extent), he was *trying* to do the right thing and was just unable to live up to the established expectations. We knew Micah had behavior issues. We knew he had the right teacher. We knew she really liked Micah and was doing everything she could to help him succeed. But, somehow, things were definitely going awry.

At this point, we were very worried about Micah's self-esteem, which was dropping. We were also worried about his relationships with peers, which were clearly damaged. We took him to the doctor, as we felt confident we knew the source of the problem. Micah was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and started taking medication that fall. We were very fortunate his behavior improved dramatically. Don't get me wrong, he still had social skill deficits and other behavioral concerns that needed to be addressed, but now they were at a much more manageable degree. Although I was pleased there was an improvement in his behavior, I remember thinking, *What if the medication didn't work? Would Micah still be getting minuses every day?*

In three short weeks, my son went from loving school and having friends, to feeling singled out, isolated, and always in trouble. I could not see how this was possible. As an educator, I also intuitively understood that Micah couldn't be the only child facing this challenge. I was left wondering, *How many other children and parents are having this same experience?*

So, What's the Problem?

Over the past twenty years, I have heard many variations of Micah's situation from countless parents and teachers. I've listened to story after story of students struggling with behavioral and emotional concerns, and their teachers finding little success with interventions. Unfortunately, the theme of behavior problems in the school system is all too common. I hear the same sentiment repeatedly from teachers across the country:

"If I could just teach, I'd be fine. But my school day feels like a continuous game of 'whack-a-mole' with small amounts of teaching squeezed in. I spend all my time dealing with behavior issues and it drives me nuts!"

It seems more and more teachers are living in survival mode, trying their best to deal with classroom behaviors, while also meeting the academic needs of their students. The problem is only exacerbated by the nation's continual hyper-focus on testing and

increased rigor in the school system. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for having high academic standards, but there needs to be a balance. We need to make certain our practices are developmentally appropriate, and it is critical we take into consideration other aspects of children's well-being besides just their cognition—specifically, their social and emotional needs.

When I ask parents about the goals they have for their children, the responses are usually the same: “I want my child to like school, be happy and well-adjusted, be a life-long learner, and make friends.” Over the course of several decades, I have yet to hear a parent tell me: “I want my child to have high test scores.” I find it ironic that having exemplary test scores is the primary goal found on most Campus Improvement Plans. Yes, for most schools, the primary focus seems to be on meeting the academic benchmarks we set, often at the expense of everything else. The obvious problem with this line of thinking is that if we don't support the social and emotional needs of our students, the cognitive goals achieved will mean very little when they are older. Children who can't behave grow into adults who can't behave.

Dan says...

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Educators don't disagree, but they seem to be at a loss for how best to deal with behavior problems in the classroom:

I tried everything. I spent all my time signing folders, giving out stickers, and moving clips, but I still had tons of behavior problems. Nothing seemed to work.

—L. Vincent

Nothing worked...and therein lies the problem—continual interventions with minimal success.

The Times—They Are A-Changin’

Unfortunately, when it comes to working with the current behavior problems we are facing in schools, our interventions don’t seem to be working as well as they once did. In part, this is due to changes that have taken place in our society over the last few decades. And these changes have had a huge impact on children’s behaviors. The best way to understand the impact is to examine the changes themselves.

Behavioral Expectations

To this day, I still remember a vacation I took with my family when I was a teen. Truth be told, it wasn’t so much the vacation I recall, but rather the flight to and from our destination. When I learned we were going to Jamaica, I filled my luggage with all the necessities: tank tops, bathing suits, and flip-flops. It was only after I packed that my mother asked me if I had my jacket and tie laid out for the flight. Huh? Yes,

I had to wear a suit on the plane. Everybody did so, as that was the standard. We also had to dress up for church and nice dinners. Wearing nice attire was the expected behavior in many settings.

Needless to say, those standards have changed dramatically. We are less formal and less defined with regard to our behavior expectations. And it's not just the way we dress; as a society, we have adopted a more casual approach to everything. Our word choice is more casual. Our attitude is more casual. And as is very apparent, student behaviors in the classroom are more casual.

Role Models

When we are young, we learn about behaviors by watching and interacting with others. The individuals around us have a huge impact on our behavior, as they serve as role models. My primary role models were my parents. In addition to mom and dad, I looked up to other individuals on television to teach me about life. Pop culture icons like Gomer Pyle, Beaver Cleaver, Bobby Brady, and Batman shaped my behavior. By watching them on TV, I learned unspoken rules about societal expectations, how to interact with others, and, yes, how to behave. Their behaviors influenced my idea of “normal.”

We don't have to look far to realize current role models have redefined behavioral norms. Today's pop culture icons behave very differently than did their predecessors from past decades. Pick three

popular television shows and watch them. If you make a list of some of the behaviors modeled, the point will be evident. Exposure to language, sarcasm, and violence—popular adult themes in mass media—has risen, and accordingly, these changes have had a dramatic influence on the behavior of children.

Interaction with Others

When I was younger, I spent the majority of my time after school outside with friends. We hung out on the playground, rode our bikes, played basketball, ran around the neighborhood, or played Kick the Can and Red Light Green Light. These games and activities taught me very important life lessons:

- ☛ I don't always get what I want.
- ☛ People sometimes say mean things.
- ☛ Life isn't always fair.
- ☛ Sometimes I win. Sometimes I lose.

By playing with others, I also learned how to disagree, work through conflict, compromise, play nicely, and share. These were critical life skills and I learned them through daily interactions with my peers.

In today's society, kids have a great deal of screen time, and when they are in front of

screens, they are not practicing face-to-face communication. Technology is a great tool, but it can never

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replace human interaction, which naturally provides opportunities to learn social skills. This deficit is often evidenced through children's behaviors.

Messages

The unspoken messages I learned from adults when I was young were quite clear:

- ☛ Leave things nicer than you found them.
- ☛ Mind your manners.
- ☛ Say "please" and "thank you."
- ☛ Respect your elders.

There was no confusion about *how* I was expected to act, as adults sent consistent messages regarding our beliefs and behaviors. The values I learned had the same themes of respect and compliance. I was taught The Golden Rule: treat others the way you want to be treated. I was also taught to do what I was told. Whether these were good messages or not, they were at least consistent. My friends and I knew how to behave since the adults seemed to have a unified voice in their expectations.

Consistent messages were also easier to come by, due to our dependence on each other. The neighbors knew my family (and they watched out for me), so I couldn't do anything without word getting back to my mother and father. Families relied on each other to collectively raise kids. The more everyone communicated, the easier it was to send consistent messages about behavioral expectations.

However, we have moved from a society of dependence to independence, with more working families and individuals raising children in isolation than ever before. Neighbors don't know each other as well and we have more single parents raising children. These changes have had an impact on the messages we send to our kids, with one parent teaching "think before you speak" and another teaching "just do it." Yes, these mixed messages have negatively influenced kids' behaviors.

Hold that Thought...

I'm not trying to imply that change is bad. The progress we have made over the last half-century is staggering. Advances in technology, equal rights, acceptance of differences, and health care have all had a positive effect on our society. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge how these changes have impacted student's attention levels, social interactions, and emotional health. This does not mean we excuse inappropriate behavior. Nor does it mean we should go back to the "good ol' days" before technology. However, if we don't understand where the behavior comes from, we can't effectively find the best solutions.

Three Strikes—You're Out

Our inclination is to discipline kids the way we were once disciplined, and as both a teacher and dad, that is exactly what I did. I adopted many of the same methods of punishment my own parents and teachers used, which I later learned were not always the best approaches.

When I first started teaching, I worked in a residential treatment facility for children and teens with severe behavior concerns. My first thought was to use an assertive discipline, “take control” kind of approach. As you might imagine, this did not work out, given the population with which I worked. Every day, I ended up in power struggles with my students. It seemed the more I asserted my authority, the more behaviors escalated: **Strike One!**

I also worked for a brief period in the “adjustment” room. The name alone should have given me pause. This was a place students could be sent, in lieu of the office, when behaviors reached an unmanageable point in the classroom. Although the idea of this time-out approach was to help students adjust their attitude and reflect on their choices, the room operated more as a detention or holding cell. Students stayed in cubbies either sleeping or doing schoolwork until they were ready to go back to class. Of course, in a room staffed with counselors trained to work with this population, the outcome might have been different. This, however, was not the case. When students

were out of control or not compliant, they were often restrained. The room was explained to me as a therapeutic place, but the practices seemed to align more with a philosophy of behavior control rather than reflection and self-regulation. Looking back on my lack of skills, and the somewhat tragic results of my work in that room, I cringe. **Strike Two!**

When I left that job and relocated to Texas, I interviewed for a teaching position in a small public school district. The school had an opening in their Academic Compliance Training (ACT) program for youth with behavior problems. As I understood it, whenever students misbehaved, they would be taken to my room, where I would give them an ACT packet of schoolwork to complete as punishment. If students misbehaved while in the room, I was to add another page to their already lengthy packet. This was to be the case for every infraction. The job requirements were that I not speak with the students, but just continue to pass out pages if they misbehaved. Students were to stay with me until all the pages in their packet were completed and therefore “compliance” was achieved. “Do you have any questions?” I was asked after the interview. I was completely speechless and disturbed . . . on so many levels.

I walked out of that interview scratching my head. All I could think about was horse training. From what I could gather, the job was to “break” the students in an effort to train them. This was a philosophy I simply

could not adopt. Though I'm sure the strategy was well-intended, I knew I could not in good conscience carry out that job. **Strike Three!**

Surely, compliance can't be the answer, I thought. And that was the very moment in my career when I became professionally committed to finding a better way. Little did I realize the stakes would get much higher for me years later once I became a dad.

There Is a Better Way

My brother-in-law once told me, "Your firstborn is a gift from God to show you all the love in the world. Your second born is a gift from God to show you there is still evil to be overcome." Although he said this in jest, I do believe my second child was a gift from God to teach me how to be a better dad. You see, although I didn't get much experience in dealing with oppositional behaviors with my oldest child, Micah more than pulled his weight in helping me understand the ineffectiveness of my behavior strategies. Traditional methods that seemed to work with my oldest had little effect on Micah. I could send him to his room or put him in time-out for extended periods, but neither intervention seemed to change his behavior. Every time Micah went to time-out, I felt the pain of the intervention not working. Slowly, I began to understand behavior in a different way—in my work as educator, in my experience as a dad, and most importantly, through

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the eyes of my own struggling son. I had to learn the hard way that I could not change my child's behavior or the behavior of the students I taught without first changing my own.

Fast-forward twenty years, and I'm writing this book, which is based on a very

specific and pressing need. We must find a better way to support children's behaviors in the school setting. After years of practice, I have learned there truly is a better way. However, I must throw out a warning before you turn another page: While this book contains ideas for creating positive behavior change in the classroom, the biggest change I hope to make is one of mindset... your mindset. My own "aha" moment came in realizing that strategies alone could not solve my problems. As a dad and teacher, I had to adjust my own perspective. Though it presented huge obstacles for me, over the years I've grown exponentially in my understanding and practices toward dealing with challenging behaviors. If you are ready to question your belief system and current practices, I encourage you to read on, as I believe this information can radically impact the way you approach behaviors in your classroom.