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1

Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall Respond vs. React

The goal isn't to get rid of all your negative thoughts and feelings; that's impossible.

The goal is to change your response to them.

—Marc and Angel Chernoff

Reflecting On Your Beliefs

Can you think of a specific student who challenged you and made you feel frustration, stress, or anger? Do you have memories of a specific class that made you question your decision to be an educator? Think back to your response to those stressful times or frustrating behaviors. Could you have done anything differently? Honestly, I must answer yes to all of these questions, and I admit there were opportunities where I could have done a lot of things differently. I ask you to recall your interactions with the frustrating behaviors of a student or a class that challenged you. Did you consider changing your own behavior or were you more focused on changing the student's behaviors?

Most of us have a philosophy or belief system about children's behavior. But where do these come from? Each of us brings thousands of life experiences that influence every interaction we have with our students. Those experiences include interactions with our own caregivers and families, marketing campaigns and imagery, media representations of specific groups, social commentary, and the list goes on. Our deeply rooted belief systems dictate how we view behavior, what we expect of children's behavior, and more importantly, how we respond to their behavior. As we progress through adulthood, many of us become more set in our ways—more inclined to believe that our way is the “right” way. This one-sided view can create a divide when we teach children from different cultures, backgrounds, or generations, or whose families' belief

systems simply differ from our own. If we want to be effective in our responses to student behavior, we must be open to the idea that there is more than one right way to do things.

Some readers may be looking for the “right” way or a magic formula that will transform challenging students, but unfortunately in all my years of working with students, I have not found one. Impacting behavioral change in another person is hard work, and every individual has unique needs and circumstances that should be considered. As you read this book, you will be asked to reflect, stretch, grow, and possibly rethink your response to behavior. When I am struggling with change, I try to remind myself of this anonymous quote: “Life is change. Growth is optional. Choose wisely.” In light of this, I hope you, the person dedicated to supporting and coaching your student or child, will commit to do the following:

- Challenge yourself to be more analytical about and less reactive to your student’s or child’s behavior.
- Ask yourself why they are responding with this behavior, what need they are trying to have met, or what is making them feel this way?
- Be open to considering the barriers that may be causing your student to be unsuccessful and be willing to do something different to help mitigate those barriers.
- Recognize that going against the culture of obedience in discipline is not a sign of weakness, but rather evidence of reflective thought, self-control, and planned support.
- Give yourself permission to try something different because it may be effective in helping the student to improve and grow—even if it goes against what has always been done or just because your “mama said so.”

Rethinking Our Response

Jeffrey Benson, author of one of my favorite books, *Hanging In*, writes, “There is never one thing that defines a challenging student, never one cause, never one life event, never one disability.”¹ He goes on to say, “However hard challenging students have been to teach, their lives have been exponentially more difficult to live.”²

Wow. Let that sink in. Like many of you, I have really struggled with certain behaviors and found it difficult to connect with and sometimes even like students when they have displayed difficult behaviors. This embarrasses me to admit, but I think it is important that I do. Writing

down a quote like this on a notecard or a Post-it® note and placing it somewhere you see it often may help you find the empathy necessary to “just keep swimming” with certain students.

It took me a few years as a novice teacher to realize these students’ behavior was rarely about me, but rather a result of how they felt and their lack of coping strategies and resources to manage those feelings. It took about the same amount of time for me to stop taking it personally and reacting to their behavior and start reflecting and responding. Once I became more reflective and more skilled at behavior support vs. behavior management, I developed my next principle for a positive classroom:

**My students’ behavior is not my fault,
but my response to it is my responsibility.**

This is not to proclaim that as teachers and parents we are not sometimes at fault for triggering a behavior, or even more common, for escalating a situation. Teachers who have experienced “losing it” are often later able to admit they didn’t handle the situation well once time passed and emotions settled. I know I am guilty of it in the past as a teacher, and even now, at times, as a parent.

As hard as it may be to do, it is always the job of the adult to de-escalate every situation. How can we expect children whose brains are not fully developed to behave better than we behave? Maybe you can personally relate to some or all of my responses in the next story, or maybe you can’t. Either way, I hope you use it as a scenario to reflect on your own response when emotions are high and to remember someone needs to be the catalyst for calm. When the adult escalates a situation, it rarely ends well for either party.

Student Story: The Matthew Debacle

After teaching for four years in Louisiana in two very small districts, I moved to Atlanta to a much larger district. I got a job teaching in a large urban middle school as the special ed co-teacher for a sixth-grade team. I loved being a part of a very dedicated, professional team of teachers, and I moved with my students from subject to subject truly co-teaching and supporting all students in each class. It was a dream after several years of being relegated to a rundown trailer at the back of the campus with very little support. Most of the students on my

caseload had multiple diagnoses and were eligible for special education through Emotional/Behavior Disorders. Now, while I understand that it is necessary to identify eligibility for an IEP, I like to view students through an assets lens vs. a deficit lens, but knowing the full background of my student's profile is pertinent to this story.

Matthew (not his actual name) was a sixth-grade student who had been adopted by his parents when they were in their forties. He was their only child, and he was adopted from another country at three years old. When I picked up his folder for the first time, I was overwhelmed by the sheer mass of it. It easily had one hundred pieces of paper which was daunting since he was one of twenty-three students whom I needed to know intimately. Doctors, therapists, interventionists, psychiatrists, pediatricians, lawyers—you name it, he'd seen them all. His parents were at their wits' end by the time I'd met them and felt they had done all they could do. I remember his mother saying the exact words, "We just got unlucky." Ouch. That statement gave me a sense of the messaging he may be getting from home.

He was the first student I had ever taught who had the letters ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) on his IEP. He was also diagnosed with bipolar disorder, dysgraphia, and a specific learning disability in reading. He was also the most adorable little boy you have ever seen. He was quirky, wicked smart, a math genius, and very committed to procedures and routines. Matthew was small in stature but big in demand for attention.

I worked hard from day one to connect with him. I pulled out all the stops, used every tool I had, and it felt like nothing was effective. He was not interested in bonding, he wasn't receptive to positive feedback, and he surely wasn't into my cute incentive charts that had worked for students in the past. Within weeks, I became frustrated and felt like a failure. In all my years combined, I have not heard the word *no* more than in the nine months I taught Matthew. He still owns the record! He did the opposite of what I asked, yelled at me and others when he felt he wasn't getting his way, and seemed to almost feel joy when making others angry or upset. At that time, I had never heard of ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) which we'll discuss more in chapter 3, but knowing what I know now, he had a score of 6 out of 10. He faced many obstacles every single day, and I was not responding to his needs. Instead, I was reacting to his behavior.

I am not sure why this incident upset me as badly as it did, but I will never forget it. I was passing out a math worksheet for the students to complete. When I placed the paper on Matthew's desk, he aggressively

knocked it off his desk and onto the floor. For some reason, it really agitated me. He had told me in many verbal and nonverbal ways when he didn't want to do something for weeks, and I had handled it fairly well. Until that day. I backtracked to stand in front of him, and I said what so many adults might say in response to his rude behavior. I ask you to consider your own response as you cringe at mine.

"Pick up that paper." You can guess how he responded. You've probably been there before.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you will pick it up." I said in what my kids refer to as the "mom's about to lose it voice."

"I. Am. Not. Picking. It. Up." he yelled with gritted teeth to match mine.

This is that moment that so many educators can relate to—when the class becomes very silent, and every single eyeball is laser-focused on you, waiting to see what you are going to do about it. Pressure? Stress? Prayer? Visions of after-school libations? Maybe all of the above.

What I did next was a terrible decision that I am relieved to say I have never made again. I grabbed the sides of his desk, leaned over with my face very close to his, and barked, "You *will* pick up that paper."

I knew better than to try to force him to do anything, but my emotions truly got the best of me in that moment. I basically dared him with my positioning and tone to do what happened next.

"NO, YOU WILL PICK IT UP!" he screamed in my face as he poked me hard in the cheek.

If there was video of how I behaved next, you might decide not to read the rest of this book. I stomped, I yelled, I mumbled to myself, I ran around the front of the room looking for an office referral to fill out, all while saying, "You did *not* just hit me!" over and over. I scribbled as much as I could on the form, and demanded he get up and follow me to the office. You want to guess how that went down? Not well at all. During the twenty-minute battle to get to the assistant principal's office, several teachers stepped into the hall to see what was going on. I looked like I had gotten into a fight with a hairbrush and some mascara, and they looked worried.

We stormed into Mrs. Borishade's office—okay, I stormed into her office. Matthew shuffled very, very slowly with a smile and a look of victory on

his face. Mrs. Borishade was a supportive, positive, administrator whom I respected. She knew if I brought a student to the office, it was serious. But as she looked both of us over and then silently read the referral (up the sides and across the back) she looked confused. She said quietly, "It says here that Matthew knocked his paper on the floor."

"YES. HE. DID." I said breathing heavily with my chin up and jaw tight.

"And he refused to pick it up?" she questioned. "Is that correct?"

"That is correct."

Silence.

"Ms. Ranson, you can go back to your students and let me handle this. I got this," she said and smiled.

That was not the reaction I was expecting or hoping for. I am embarrassed to admit that I wanted her, and everyone else in that office, to raise up and be as mad as I was! He POKED ME IN THE FACE for gracious sake! Why wasn't she upset? Why wasn't she questioning him? Why wasn't she calling the National Guard? Yes, this sounds ridiculous, but I had reached my breaking point, and I wanted others to get on the roller coaster with me.

Now, I am able to recognize the skill and mastery in her response. I had lost my temper and my self-control, and she was giving me the time and space to regain it. Matthew needed a calm adult to step in and de-escalate the situation, and thankfully she was able to do it when I could not.

De-Escalation – Who and When

Time, experience, and extensive training have taught me that my reaction to Matthew that day escalated the situation to a level that was unnecessary and, honestly, dangerous. I knew what his skill deficits were. I knew he was not one to be commanded, controlled, or backed into a corner, but I proceeded with an aggressive, authoritarian approach (discussed in Ch. 3) anyway. I let my emotions, instead of my goals, drive my decisions.

When you find yourself in a power struggle with a student, ask yourself these two very important questions:

1. Will my next step de-escalate this situation?
2. Will my next step maintain a safe, calm learning environment for all?

The second question is important because we should consider the time wasted and lost for the other students in our class when something like this happens. From start to finish, the incident robbed them of approximately thirty-five minutes of instruction. And why? Because a piece of paper was on the floor. Many adults don't see it in such a simple way. We see the defiance, the disrespect, and the yelling at an adult as major offenses that warrant a heavy-handed reaction and punitive consequences. I have had some educators debate me when I've shared this story because they strongly disagreed when I called my own behavior a mistake. This is where a shift in mindset can make all the difference.

What we DO is more important than how we FEEL.

Our response to behavior should be based on goals, not feelings. Again, it is *always* the responsibility of the adult to de-escalate the situation. I want you to consider what my options were when he first knocked the paper to the floor. Because I responded to him immediately with anger and a command statement, I left myself without options. That opened the door for him to take control of the situation, and he stepped up to the challenge. My goal was for Matthew to complete the math assignment. With that in mind, review the following responses and decide which ones would have better de-escalated the situation. I could have...

- Left the paper on the floor and ignored it. Was the paper really keeping me from being able to teach?
- Asked another student to please pick up the paper, and then thanked that student for being helpful.
- Told Matthew his paper was on my desk, and he was free to grab it when he felt ready.
- Picked up the paper myself and said casually, "Please give me a signal when I can drop it off to you."
- Asked an empathetic question, "Hey, is everything okay? Math is usually your thing!"
- Offered for Matthew to hand out the papers for me. This could have met his need for attention and control (actual prevention vs. reaction).

Some readers may look at the list of options and share the belief of one educator I met in Virginia who said, “I have to tell you, I would *not* have picked up that piece of paper if my life *depended on it*. I would have died on that floor with that paper!” We laughed for a solid three minutes. I knew she wasn’t the only adult in the room who felt that way, but she was the one willing to admit it!

It was good to laugh about it and address what so many of us have been programmed to believe:

- The adult must make it clear: “I’m in charge—obey, or else.”
- Children should not ask questions, but rather accept directives silently.
- The teacher has the right to full control and can exert power when needed.
- Students should calm themselves down and show more self-control.
- By the age of _____, kids should “know better.”

How have these beliefs and approaches worked with students like Matthew? How can a child be expected to make better choices than the adult in front of him is making? When you assess your personal style of discipline in Chapter 3, you will be pushed to reconsider these programmed beliefs. Why shouldn’t children wonder or ask why? Why can’t we share control and allow them to have a voice? A former administrator and mentor, Dr. Terry Alderman, taught me that “we can mean business without being mean.” Kindness, respect, and choices will always help create a win-win situation in even the most hopeless of moments.

Knowing what I know now about the impact of trauma, reactive attachment disorder, and other factors that were clearly present in Matthew’s life, I understand his need for a sense of control, his hesitancy to trust and bond with adults, and the feelings he was so desperately trying to manage. The day after the incident, I apologized to him and to the class for my reaction, and we had a group discussion about how to manage anger in healthier ways. I failed Matthew that day, but we recovered. Reflection, relationship repair, and hope are always options.

Specific Strategies/Reflection

Remember: Respond vs. React

- A response is planned and driven by goals.
- A reaction is unplanned and driven by emotion.

1. Model De-escalation with Language – Planned Responses

“What do you need right now? Can you tell me?” vs. “I’m not putting up with this.”

“Can you try that again in a way we’ve agreed upon?” vs. “I’ve told you so many times.”

“I will listen to you when your voice is at a level 2.” vs. “Don’t talk to me like that!”

“You are welcome to join the group when you feel calm.” vs. “You need to calm down!”

Add your own planned responses here:

2. Identify a signal or code word with the student/child:

Identify a pre-determined code word/phrase/signal that allows the student to communicate that they have reached an emotional level where they typically struggle to manage their emotions. The code word sets into motion what the student can do and what the adult will do to help him/her calm down.

Student: Calls out code word (bluebird, ninja, cloudy day, etc.)

Adult: Responds “bluebird” and places a kitchen timer or sand timer on student desk or table

Student: Moves to “Peace Corner” or other quiet space with a timer for three minutes or is allowed to do another predetermined calming activity

When time is up, the adult communicates to the student that they handled the situation well and made a good decision. If a tracking system is in place, the adult or student marks success for the interaction. The goal

of the code word is to help the student recognize the changes they go through prior to shutting down or acting out. There are typically warning signs in our bodies, and we want to teach them to make proactive decisions that can help self-regulate and avoid negative outcomes.

3. The “Get Me Out of Trouble” Plan

The “Get Me Out of Trouble Plan” from Jeffrey Benson’s *Hanging In: Strategies for Teaching the Students Who Challenge Us Most*³ has four parts:

1. These things make me upset or mad
2. Ways I can avoid the things that upset me
3. Things I can do to keep calm when things are starting to upset me
4. My escape plan

This is a very simple plan that can be written out with a student to plan for those difficult times when emotions tend to take over. We want to coach kids to recognize their triggers (#1) and not only know what to do when it happens (#3), but also how to avoid in the first place. Each part of the plan helps build the student’s confidence in her own abilities to manage stressful situations rather than always waiting for an adult to do it for them. If working with younger students/children, it is recommended that each part of the plan has pictures in addition to words.

“Get Me Out of Trouble” Plan

NAME: Toni

These things can really make me upset:

- ✓ Staff standing too close to me
- ✓ Not giving me time to stop doing one thing before I have to do another
- ✓ Feeling stupid

Ways I can avoid the things that upset me:

- ✓ Don’t go to class if I am already ticked off
- ✓ Do my homework in study hall

Ways I can keep calm when things are starting to upset me:

- ✓ Ask to be left alone (“I want to be alone now.”)
- ✓ Listen to music

My escape plan – where I go in school to be safe when all else fails:

- Outside Miss Sandy’s office

Source: *Hanging In: Strategies for Teaching the Students Who Challenge Us Most* by Jeffrey Benson

4. Reflect

Think of a time when you got into a power struggle with a student. Identify what you may have done to escalate this situation and list what you could have done differently. Write down three to five options for responding the next time.

5. Choose a Quote

Write a meaningful quote from the chapter on several notecards and put them in places you will see while teaching or parenting a child who challenges you. Simple reminders can often bring us from anger to reflection.

Quote: _____

6. Plan

Write at least three "I will" statements that you are committed to practicing moving forward.

Examples:

- a. I will ask myself, "Why is this behavior happening?" before I respond.
- b. I will remind _____ of strategies I have taught them that will help in a situation like this.
- c. I will apologize to _____ when I break a promise and lose my temper.



**QUESTIONS
to
CONSIDER** ???

1. Where do your beliefs about how children should behave originate?

2. Do you believe children with severe behavioral issues can change and improve their behavior? Why or why not?

3. Reflect on a specific student/child behavior that causes quick agitation for you? Why does it bother you? Can you think of an approach to this behavior that will allow you to respond differently?

4. How would you have responded to the situation with Matthew?

5. Do you feel you typically respond to or react to misbehavior? What evidence supports your answer?



- Your students' behavior is not your fault. Your response to it is your responsibility.
- Take the time to reflect about your interactions with students/children.
- Regularly ask yourself, "Could I have done anything differently?"
- It's okay not to respond immediately. If it's bothering only you, you don't have to address it right away.
- It's always the adult's job to de-escalate.
- Give yourself permission to do something different, regardless of judgment, if you think it will work.
- Choices = Power. It creates options for all involved and allows both parties to feel some control. (If anyone handles a "crisis" better after reflecting on The Matthew Debacle, it makes admitting it to you slightly less painful.)