

THE PARAPROFESSIONAL CONNECTION®

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KEEP CALM

We live in a world full of pressures. There are the day-to-day pressures of the work/home balance and the kinds of pressure that brings on stress and anxiety. “Keep calm and carry on” was a very popular phrase several years ago. There were memes, posters, coffee mugs, stickers and t-shirts covered with that logo or a version of it everywhere. Another less common phrase is “never in the history of calming down has anyone ever calmed down by being told to calm down”. Have you ever told a student to “just calm down”? Has anyone ever told you to “calm down” when you were upset? Did it work?

Think about both of these statements about being calm. Do they make sense to you? Are there times when keeping calm is easier or harder? The ability to stay calm is a valuable skill and our ability to do that changes depending on many factors. As a paraprofessional, you need to remain calm and professional in a variety of circumstances and settings. One of the best things you can do to stay calm is to be prepared. It also helps to try to avoid the “what ifs”, control what you can control, focus on the next small step and find a support network. This month, we will focus on some additional tools that will help you and students solve problems, remain calm or calm down when things could be stressful.

“The ability to remain calm and focused in stressful situations is central to making positive decisions.” – Goldie Hawn

Other Staff Development Materials Available:

- Beginning Teacher Growth Tool
- Color Me Successful Training Package
- My Para, My Partner
- Substitute Paraeducator Folder/Inserts
- Substitute Teacher Folder/Inserts
- 3-Hour Workshop Facilitator Guides

We welcome your feedback, questions, and comments:

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I HAVE AN IDEA!

Another important soft skill that will help you at work is your ability to problem solve and innovate. Problems are a fact of life. When a problem develops it is common for people to complain about the problem or “admire” the problem by talking about it without plans for change. Leadership appreciates staff who recognize a problem and come with ideas or solutions to solve the problem. Good problem-solvers are able to analyze situations, accept input from others and create a plan to address the issue. It helps if you are innovative and creative. This means you are open-minded to different ideas and can provide new solutions and perspectives.

“You can’t solve a problem on the same level it was created. You have to rise above it to the next level.” - Albert Einstein

There are two common types of problems that occur in education. One type is kid-focused with students and developing supports to best meet their needs. The second type is adult-focused with staff and the disagreements that occur. There are similarities in how we can solve these problems. With both types of problems, the focus should be on the best interest of the students.

Step 1: Define the problem. You need to clearly define and agree on what the problem is. If everyone views the problem in a different way or if some people feel there is not a problem, then this may be the reason for the disagreement in the first place. However, you have to come to an understanding about what needs to be solved. It is important at this step to keep the adult issues separate from the kid needs. This may mean we have two different problems to solve.

Step 2: Brainstorm solutions. Throw out lots of ideas. This is where the creative, innovative ideas are important. At this point, everything is a possibility. We are not discussing the pros and cons of the ideas yet. There are many ways to do this. If the team is comfortable together and all members feel safe contributing, then it could be a conversation. If there are tensions, then the ideas may need to be more anonymous and people can write them down and someone can read or document them. It is important to stay on topic and not bring up other issues. Be open to hearing the ideas of others. Instead of saying, “we already tried that” or “that won’t work”, be positive about the parts of the idea that are creative or different. It is possible that a combination of several suggestions might be the best solution.

Step 3: Choose a solution and do it. This means getting to an agreement which probably means some compromise. Once we agree on the solution, then everyone needs to implement it to the best of their ability. No sabotaging allowed. After trying the new idea for a week or two, you may need to go back to step one again to better define the problem and adjust the solution based on where you are now.

Ultimately, if you feel like you are part of the solution, then you can’t be a part of the problem. If people feel valued and listened to, then they will be engaged and involved in positive solutions. Focus on being a problem solver, not a problem creator in your team.

RESPONSE TO CRISIS

I D E A S T O G R O W B Y

Despite our best efforts to be proactive and prevent students from becoming dysregulated, situations can escalate. A student in crisis is often unable to regulate their behavior independently and may need support to get out of the flight, fight or freeze response mode. While the behavior may have seemed to come out of nowhere, there were likely triggering events or signs of anxiety or agitation that you may have missed. It is easy to miss the early signs of escalation when you are in a busy environment and your attention may have been on another student or event. It is important to have a response plan for when crisis occurs to help maintain safety of the student in crisis, peers and staff and to deescalate the situation. It is not the time to provide consequences or teach new strategies. The purpose of a crisis response is to calm the student and prevent harm. Here are some helpful strategies to utilize during crisis:

- Act calm, even if you're not. You may feel stressed. Your heart might be beating faster and your blood pressure may rise, but try not to show it. Model calm in your actions and your verbal responses. This becomes easier with experience.
- Follow district protocols and procedures.
- If the student has a Behavior Support or Intervention Plan, follow it.
- Call for support, if needed. It is wise to make other staff aware of a potential concern, especially if there are not other staff in close proximity to provide support.
- Give the student wait time and space with supervision. A good phrase to use is "I am going to give you space, but I am here if you need me." Let the student reach out to you when they are ready.
- Limit the number of staff interacting. You may need several staff present, but only one person should be talking or interacting with the student. Multiple directions or people talking can be intimidating and confusing which can further escalate the event.
- Give choices. Use minimal words. Short, simple directions are best. Avoid conversations that may lead to a power struggle.
- Actively listen to the student concern if they are talking. If they are not talking, pay attention to their actions especially as changes happen like people arriving or leaving.
- Validate feelings. "I understand that you are upset because..."
- Document. There may behavior data or incident reports that are required by your school, district or state. Complete those in a timely manner. The longer you wait, the more difficult it will be to accurately report what occurred.
- After the crisis ends, take care of yourself. You may have an adrenaline rush during a crisis and the effects of that can last around an hour depending on several factors. Monitor how you are feeling mentally and physically immediately after the crisis and about an hour later. You may feel differently.
- Reflect with colleagues regarding the response of the team and ideas for the future.

Hopefully, crisis is a rare occurrence in the classrooms that you support. Whether it happens rarely or frequently, it is important to have a plan. Pay attention and participate in any crisis response or behavior trainings that you are provided as the more skills you have, the more comfortable you will be when a crisis occurs.

REMIND AND ROUTINE

The Revised R's related to behavior so far have included relationship, respect, realization of success, reaction, redirection, record, reason, relevance, rights, rules, restructuring and replacement behaviors. Next, we focus on reminders and routines to support student success.

Last month, we concentrated on replacement behaviors. This means developing a new habit that also meets the need that the student has. When you are trying to develop new habits, we know that it takes time and we fall back on our old habits because they are easier and more comfortable for us. One way to help us remember the new habit or replacement behavior is using reminders. This same approach increases the chances of changing the behavior for a student by reminding the student of the new strategy at the right time. For example, if the student often forgets materials, remind them before they leave the current location. It could be with a checklist, by pointing to the item they need or quietly saying one word to remind them. If a student gets in trouble for pushing peers in line, then it might be a reminder of how to line up before the transition happens. This could be with a social story or picture cues. It might be a note or visual on the student's desk, a task on their visual schedule, a gestural cue that directs them to a new resource that you are trying to teach. It could be a word or phrase that you have agreed on with the student to help them remember what the new behavior is.

It is important that you are positive when teaching this new response, the student should not feel embarrassed, nagged, bribed or threatened. One way to avoid these negative feelings is to create new routines. Routines support being consistent with new habits. If it starts to come naturally as part of a routine, then it will take less effort. Find ways to create routines for the student like checking their visual schedule before transitions or reading a social story before recess to support their new coping strategies around positive behaviors. Routines can help a student cooperate because they are a set of familiar events that occur on a regular basis in the environment or during this time of day. Routines decrease time and effort by providing a structure and a sense of familiarity. Routines help a student be more independent and feel successful. The routine is creating the expectation instead of the adult telling them what to do. Visual reminders, practice and positive attention help students learn the routines.

Reminders help us stick to the new routine and once the routine is established and consistent, then it becomes a habit. Keep teaching the students new habits using positive replacement behaviors for what was challenging behavior in the past.

Guiding Discussion Question

- What reminders and routines can you use to support positive behaviors?