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Too Many Schools are Teaching Students to Control their Emotions... the Wrong Way! Because They Don't Understand the Science, They Won't Succeed in the Practice

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<https://www.projectachieve.info/too-many-schools-are-teaching-students-to-control-their-emotions-the-wrong-way-because-they-dont-understand-the-science-they-wont-succeed-in-the-practice/>

*[To listen to a synopsis and analysis of this Blog on the “**Improving Education Today: The Deep Dive**” podcast on Spotify. . . hosted by popular AI Educators, Angela Jones and Davey Johnson: [CLICK HERE](#) for Angela and Davey’s Enlightening Discussion]*

Dear Colleagues,

Introduction

A few weeks ago, I finished a free three-part webinar series for a company that provides special education data management services to districts around the country. The number of attendees was overwhelming!

To attract the largest audience, I naturally focused on the most-requested needs of both general and special educators nationwide.

And so, sequentially, I discussed:

- Teaching Students Emotional Self-Control and Self-Regulation through Social Skills;
- The Seven High-Hit Reasons for Students’ Challenging Behavior; and
- Helping Teachers Change Difficult Students: Behavioral Interventions for Disobedient, Disruptive, Defiant, and Disturbed Students

The first topic, addressed in today’s Blog, is overshadowed by a cascade of unfortunate realities in our schools today... that:

- Most school leaders don’t fully understand the science-to-practice of “Social-Emotional Learning” (SEL). . . its history and flaws, its “smoke and mirrors,” its real outcomes and how to measure them, and. . .

that most of what they are “doing” is not “SEL,” and will not effectively change most students’ social, emotional, and interactive behavior.

[\[CLICK HERE TO READ MORE IN A PREVIOUS BLOG:](#)

January 28, 2023: Why “Do” SEL If It Doesn’t Improve Student Behavior in the Classroom and Across the School?]

- Most school staff are teaching students emotional “self-control” or “self-regulation” in ways that so ignore the neurobehavioral and psychological research-to-practice that they will not succeed (and are wasting precious time and resources).

- Most teachers are frustrated because their students’ emotional needs (especially after the pandemic) are so significant that they are negatively impacting their engagement, interactions, learning, and academic progress in the classroom. . . and their current SEL “solutions” are not working.

This Blog provides the science-to-practice blueprint that all educators need for success in this area.

Students’ Emotional Awareness, Control, Communication, and Coping

There are too many “experts,” “non-profit” organizations, and vendors practicing in the social-emotional learning (SEL) arena who are leading districts and schools down dead-end streets.

They talk in vague, global, and constructivist terms like “emotional self-regulation”. . . they provide implementation “frameworks” that (sometimes) work momentarily in some schools, but not—long-term—in virtually all schools. . . and they advocate (or, at least, allow) schools to choose unproven “off-their-menu” strategies (like mindfulness and meditation) that have no hope for sustained student success.

It’s time to get real!

Districts and schools need to teach students the emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills that lead to demonstrable and sustained emotional, attributional (think: positive attitudes, expectations, beliefs, and self-statements), and behavioral self-management.

Said a different way: For their “SEL investment,” schools need to attain observable, explicitly defined, and validly measured student self-control outcomes that are anchored by established, science-to-practice emotional, attributional, and behavioral strategies and interactions.

This involves teaching all students—in developmentally sound, age-dependent ways—the emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills that they need.

Emotional Awareness involves:

- Students’ identification, knowledge, understanding, and discrimination of the many different emotions that they may experience in their lives;
- Their awareness of the emotional triggers that exist in the settings that they go to or must attend;
- Their awareness of their physiological cues and responses to different emotional situations; and
- Their awareness of how others look and act when they are in different emotional situations or states.

Emotional Control and Communication occurs:

- When students are able to maintain the physiological control of their bodies when under conditions of emotionality, so that
- They are able to think clearly and rationally—demonstrating effective social problem-solving skills, so that
- They can demonstrate appropriate social interactions and behavioral self-management skills.

Emotional Coping:

- Goes beyond emotional control to the point where a student is able to consciously process a personal or interpersonal situation in order to master, minimize, or tolerate the stress and conflict. Coping includes accepting someone else's emotional support.
- Emotional coping occurs when students debrief and reconcile a just-concluded emotional situation and/or learn to minimize the emotional impact of a persistent or traumatic situation.
- Ultimately, emotional coping skills help students to (continue to) live their lives in emotionally positive and healthy ways—even in the face of continuing, similar, or new traumatic situations (or those that trigger emotional memories).

These skill areas combine as students demonstrate, for example, the following strategies or situational responses to emotional situations:

- Avoiding Trouble/Conflict Situations
- Dealing with Peer Pressure
- Being Honest/Acknowledging your Mistakes
- Apologizing/Excusing Yourself
- Dealing with Losing or Not Attaining Desired Goals
- Showing Understanding of Another's Feelings/Empathy
- Dealing with Another Person's Anger or Emotionality
- Walking Away from a Fight/Conflict

From a science-to-practice perspective, then:

- Emotional Awareness develops through instruction, personal and social understanding, learning and coaching, application and feedback, and evaluation, mastery, and maturation.
- Emotional Control and Communication occurs when there is physiological control, emotional self-control, attributional/attitudinal control, and behavioral control and execution relative to understanding and verbalizing one's emotions.
- Emotional Coping develops through students' emotional awareness, and the use of emotional and attributional control skills that are integrated into coping strategies. Hundreds of social, emotional, and behavioral coping strategies have been identified in both research and practice.

These strategies help students reconcile past emotional situations, live in emotionally positive ways even as these situations continue, and to accept and use the support of others.

Clearly, this does not occur through even a series of presentations, discussions, pep rallies, or incentive programs.

It occurs—as with reading, math, and science—through scaffolded preschool through high school curricula and instruction. . . teaching the expected skills through a social skills process that embeds the science-to-practice of emotional self-control and management.

The Science of Emotional Self-Control

Most emotion-based behavior is classically conditioned (think Pavlov and how he rang a bell to get his dogs to salivate). That is, a student's emotional triggers create a neuro-physiological response that results in almost instantaneous behavior.

The initial sensory information (a) is received by the mid-brain's thalamus, which (b) is directly transmitted to the emotional center of the brain—the amygdala, which (c) activates the nearby hippocampus of past memories and experiences, which (d) produces a “fight, flight, or freeze” response.

Some of the emotional trigger's sensory information is also transmitted to the cortex or “thinking” part of the brain. Here, the information is more deliberately processed and analyzed, whereby the student makes a “good or bad choice” based on past or present incentives or consequences, and/or planned goals or outcomes.

Critically, the amygdala receives and processes emotional information milliseconds before the cortex and, in the face of high-emotion triggers or situations, it neuro-physiologically activates the HPA (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) axis. This biochemically (a) pre-empts the potential for more rationale thinking in the cortex, and (b) fast-tracks the conditioned fight, flight, or freeze response to occur.

Students' emotional self-control, then, is dependent on them being trained in and mastering the elements within the “Emotional Control Paradigm.”

This involves:

- An awareness of their (the students') individual “emotional triggers” and “physiological cues”. . .
- So they can (a) consciously prevent or avoid significant emotional situations, while (b) instantaneously producing a classically-conditioned relaxation, thought-stopping, or physiological de-escalation response—especially for the situations that are unavoidable or unexpected. . .
- Allowing them to (attributionally) think clearly, positively, and proactively regarding their choices, goals, or desired outcomes. . .
- So they make good choices, demonstrate appropriate behavior or interactions, and productively cope with the situation now and in the future.

At this point (Action Step Alert!), districts and schools need to determine if the instruction, strategies, and/or interventions they are currently using to teach emotional self-control to their students (at the Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 levels) are well-matched to the science above.

Based on my consultation work across the country and internationally, my guess is that most schools have invested virtually all of their efforts in “thinking-based” (cortex-related) approaches, rather than the “conditioned-based” (amygdala-related) interventions needed to change students' more prevalent fight, flight, or freeze emotional responses.

A Deeper Dive into Triggers, Cues, and Conditioned De-Escalation

As long as we're here, let's explore the essential components within the "Emotional Control Paradigm" described above.

Teaching Students to Identify and Understand Different Emotions

At the preschool through Grade 2 levels, students need to learn about different emotions, what they look and sound like, and what others' are feeling when they express them. Examples of common emotions at these grade levels include: Happy, Afraid, Guilty, Excited, Sorry, Jealous, Sad, Proud, Tired, Angry, Bored, Loved, Embarrassed, Irritated, Frustrated, Surprised, Hopeful, and Shy.

At the Grade 3 to 5 levels, this instruction moves to more complex emotions, while also teaching students how different internal thoughts are associated with different emotional states. Here, students can be introduced to the ways that their attitudes, expectations, beliefs, self-statements, and attributions can influence their emotions and behavior. They also should be taught how to recognize and interpret non-verbal peer and adult signals and exchanges—and, especially, how to discriminate among and accurately interpret different voice intonations.

At the Grade 6 and above levels, everything is elevated to a higher level of skill, complexity, and automaticity. At the same time, these students are taught how to anticipate and prepare for different emotional situations, to respond to and minimize the impact of adverse conditions, and to demonstrate empathy for others' adversity and misfortune. Finally, these students must learn how to evaluate not just verbal and physical cues, but social, cultural, and environmental cues such that they can predict and respond to others' emotions.

Across all of these levels, students need to learn and begin to master the interpersonal, social problem-solving, and conflict prevention and resolution skills that they need through a systematic social skills process.

Part of this instruction teaches students to demonstrate their social skills "under conditions of emotionality." Hence, students learn and practice emotional self-control even with the "basic" social skills of Listening, Following Directions, Asking for Help, and Ignoring Distractions (etc.).

See Our Previous Blog:

January 28, 2023: Why "Do" SEL If It Doesn't Improve Student Behavior in the Classroom and Across the School?

[\[CLICK HERE TO READ THIS BLOG\]](#)

Emotional Triggers, Physiological Cues, and Beliefs or Self-Statements

In addition to teaching students about different emotions and emotional states, developmentally-sensitive instruction is needed to help them to be aware of and identify their emotional triggers, physiological cues, and related beliefs or self-statements.

Emotional Triggers are typically external events (although a belief or self-statement could qualify here) that activate students' memories and/or emotions and, ultimately, impact their behavior. Examples include (a) verbal sounds, words, statements, or intonations; (b) nonverbal looks, gestures, pictures, or

movements; (c) smells or other sensory stimuli; or (d) stories, discussions, movie clips, or other interactive experiences.

Triggers can be positive, comforting, or satisfying, or they can be negative, aversive, or troubling. When negative triggers evoke students' intense or prolonged emotional reactions, teachers should consult with their school mental health colleagues who may collaborate with parents or guardians to access more intensive or therapeutic services, supports, or interventions.

Some common negative school-based student triggers include:

- Not Getting a Teacher's Attention or Being Reprimanded
- Not Getting Their Own Way or Being Told What to Do
- Being Frustrated with Schoolwork or Grading
- Being Assigned to Undesired Cooperative or Project Groups
- Having to Discontinue an Activity or Transition When Not Ready
- Feeling That a Teacher or Peer is Being Unfair
- Being Teased, Taunted, or Bullied
- Being Rejected or Left Out

Developmentally, while they experience and react to them, preschool to Grade 2 students have limited (pre-)awareness of or insight into their emotional triggers. As such, these students' triggers are largely identified through teachers' day-to-day observations. Grade 3 to 5 students have more self-awareness and understanding of their emotional triggers over time. And Grade 6 and above students are able to integrate this awareness and insight—still with adult guidance—into increasingly more complex social situations and dilemmas.

Physiological Cues are the places in students' (everyone's) bodies that activate when they are under (usually negative or aversive) conditions of emotionality. Critically, different students have different physiological cues, and most students are unaware of them until asked by an adult.

Thus, teachers need to help students identify their physiological cues as a critical part of their "Physiological Awareness."

Examples of Physiological Cues include the following:

- Temples Throbbing or Forehead Pounding
- Heart Racing or Breathing Quickening
- Palms Sweating or Neck/Face Flushing
- Eyes Tearing or Throat Tightening
- Shoulders Aching or Hands Clenching
- Stomach Hurting or Head "Spinning"
- Feeling Unsteady, Unbalanced, or Dizzy

Emotion-Based Beliefs or Self-Statements are attitudes, expectations, beliefs, self-statements, or attributions that influence students' motivation, emotions, and/or behavior.

Typically, positive and healthy beliefs or self-statements facilitate students' (a) emotional wellness, stability, and control; (b) feelings of confidence, readiness, conviction, or self-reliance; and (c) potential to demonstrate prosocial behaviors and interactions.

Conversely, negative, counterproductive, or debilitating beliefs or self-statements can (a) trigger students' physiological cues; along with (b) feelings of—for example—anger, hurt, frustration, embarrassment. This can result in (c) a continuum of social, emotional, or behavioral responses ranging from aggression and “acting out,” to anxiety and “checking out.”

Examples of Positive Beliefs or Self-Statements include:

- I am capable and strong.
- I believe in and trust myself.
- I can achieve my goals.
- I am proud of myself for trying.
- I can handle any problem I face.
- I respond to criticism in a constructive way.
- I am my own best friend and cheerleader.
- I love and forgive myself for past mistakes.

Examples of Negative Beliefs or Self-Statements include:

- I'm not worth it. There's no use.
- I have no control over my happiness or success.
- I am not enough.
- I must do everything perfectly.
- Things will never be any different.
- I am no good unless others' accept and value me.
- I am so disappointed in myself.
- I wish I could just disappear.

Conditioning Students for Emotional De-Escalation

We teach students emotional de-escalation by classically conditioning the awareness of their negative triggers and physiological cues to our Stop & Think Social Skills Program's language and process.

The Stop & Think Social Skills Program was identified by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) as an evidence-based program in 2000, and it is listed on the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

The Stop & Think Social Skills Program is grounded in cognitive-behavioral science, it is one of the most popular social skills programs in the country, and it is used extensively at the Tier 1 (prevention), Tier 2 (strategic intervention and special education), and Tier 3 (intensive need and clinical/therapeutic) levels.

See the free Stop & Think Social Skills Program White Paper on its science to practice at:
[[CLICK HERE](#)]

When teaching students to maintain self-control when physiologically triggered by significant emotional situations, we condition them to internally use the Core (or Universal) Stop & Think steps as follows:

- “I need to Stop and Think!. . . Make a Good Choice. . . and Take my Deep Breaths”

When classically conditioned to their emotional triggers and physiological cues, students counteract the fight, flight, or freeze response within the amygdala by instantaneously “Stopping and Thinking” and de-escalating by taking a series of Deep Breaths.

They then say to themselves:

- “I know I can ‘Make a Good Choice’ by using these ‘Choices or Steps’ [they internally specify their action steps here]. . .”

Here, they make a positive self-statement or attribution, and then plan their prosocial response—which typically is taught during the social skills instruction part of the process.

They then say:

- “Now I’m going to ‘Just Do It’”. . . .

Here, they behaviorally put their choices or steps into action. . . so that they, hopefully, can conclude:

- “Great! Now I can tell myself that I did a Good Job!”

An ultimate goal here is to teach students how (a) to maintain immediate and ongoing emotional control during challenging situations by using the first Stop & Think step, so they can (b) think clearly and planfully in the second What are my Choices or Steps step, so they can (c) execute their conflict resolution or prosocial interactions in the third step, resulting (d) in a positive self-reinforcement in the fourth step.

All of this occurs even as the students are still in or experiencing the emotionally challenging situation.

Implicit in this goal is the neurobehavioral conditioning that helps students to “Think (Step 2) before they Act (Step 3)”—countering what often occurs when students emotionally lose control and “Act (Step 3) before they Think (Step 2).”

The needed instruction, then, follows a “Teach-Practice-Feedback-Master-Transfer-Apply-and-Condition” process that is scaffolded over time and, for some students, may involve modified and small group instruction (at Tier 2) or individualized and therapeutic intervention (at Tier 3).

Even at Tier 1, though, teaching emotional self-control is akin to teaching reading. . . it is continual, progressive, scientifically-based, and outcome-driven.

A Brief Self-Control Example

Because of their developmental status, younger students (through Grade 3) typically use Stop & Think scripts that involve Step skills, while older students (Grade 4 and above) can learn and use higher-ordered thinking scripts that employ Choice skills.

For example, when teaching Grade 1 students how to control their emotions and “Deal with Teasing,” the Step 2 action script is organized in steps because, developmentally, first graders need to follow a concrete, step-to-step sequence to successfully and behaviorally resolve the situation.

Here, the Script might be:

- “I need to Stop and Think!. . . Make a Good Choice. . . and Take my Deep Breaths—Counting to Five”

- “I know I can ‘Make a Good Choice’ by using these Steps:

1. Ignore the person who is teasing me.
2. Ask the person to stop in a nice way.
3. Walk away.
4. Find an adult for help.

- “Now I’m going to ‘Just Do It’”. . . .

- “Great! Now I can tell myself that I did a Good Job!”

When teaching Grade 5 “Dealing with Teasing,” Step 2 is organized as a Choice skill because students at this level have the cognitive-developmental ability to evaluate a specific teasing situation—eventually selecting the best choice from a number of possible “Good Choice” options.

Thus, the Fifth Grade Script here might be:

- “I need to Stop and Think!. . . Make a Good Choice. . . and Take my Deep Breaths—Counting to Five”

- “I know I can ‘Make a Good Choice’ by using these Steps:

1. Think about my good choices. I can:
 - a. Ignore the person who is teasing me, OR
 - b. Ask the person to stop in a nice way, OR
 - c. Walk away, OR
 - d. Find an adult for help.
2. I need to: Choose and Act Out my best choice for this situation.

- “Now I’m going to ‘Just Do It’”. . . .

- “Great! Now I can tell myself that I did a Good Job!”

Summary

This Blog began by noting that most school leaders don't fully understand the science-to-practice of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)—explaining why many of their SEL activities are not resulting in the social, emotional, and behavioral student actions, interactions, and reactions they desire.

Similarly, most schools are teaching students emotional self-control or self-regulation in ways that so ignore the neurobehavioral and psychological research-to-practice that they will not succeed here either.

Thus, this Blog described the science-to-practice blueprint needed to teach all students emotional self-control. We described:

- The four interdependent components (Emotional Awareness, Control, Communication, and Coping Skills);
- The neuro-physiological and psychological science of self-control—differentiating conditioned versus planned emotional responses;
- The components of the Emotional Control Paradigm (identifying and understanding different emotions, recognizing and responding to emotional triggers and physiological cues, maintaining positive attributional thinking, and demonstrating prosocial or conflict resolution behaviors); and
- How to condition self-control through the Stop & Think Social Skills Program's evidence-based process.

Implicit in this process is the goal of neurobehaviorally conditioning students to “Think before they Act”—countering what often occurs neuro-physiologically when they emotionally lose control and “Act before they Think.”

We hope that all of these resources will help you to evaluate what you are doing in your district, school, educational setting, or practice. . . at the Tier 1, Tier 2, and/or Tier 3 levels. . . relative to teaching all students emotional self-control.

Best,

Howie