

# Middle Ground

The Magazine of Middle Level Education

February 2013 • Volume 16 • Number 3 • Pages 9-10

## When Discipline Issues Are Emotional Issues

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Do any of your students repeatedly misbehave despite the fact that you give consequences time after time?

Are any of your students prone to avoiding their work?

Sometimes we need to approach these kinds of problems as emotional issues rather than discipline issues.

It's impossible to talk about behavior and learning without talking about emotion. In fact, all learning is double-coded with emotion codes and cognitive codes, according to Stanley Greenspan and Beryl Benderly in *The Growth of the Mind and the Endangered Origins of Intelligence*.

Think back to a teacher you had in school whom you didn't like. Chances are, your dislike for the teacher spilled over into a dislike for the subject the teacher taught.

Because you didn't like the subject, you probably didn't work to your potential in that class. Because emotion is linked to learning, it's important to understand it. Emotion is based on safety and belonging. When a student is upset, it is likely because of an issue that is related to safety or belonging or both.

### Early Emotional Memories

Prior to the age of 9 or 10, we tend to store our emotional experiences in the amygdala section of the brain. The amygdala has a fascinating memory pattern: It has a long-term memory for the *feeling* but a short-term memory for the *incident*. So we may know *how* we feel about something, like a person or place, but we may not know *why* we feel that way. Our brain stored the emotion connected to that person or place, but not the incident that prompted the emotion. We remembered how certain people made us feel and tended toward similar patterns of behavior around those people because those patterns were comfortable to us.

Furthermore, research by Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby suggests that bonding and attachment—two elements of our emotions—affect our interactions with others and our beliefs about ourselves. As described in their 1991 *American Psychologist* article, "An Ethological Approach to Personality Development," they put a young child and parent in a room and then asked the parent to leave. If the child was content to explore the room without the adult present, the child was considered to have a secure attachment and a secure emotional foundation. If the child stared anxiously at the door, cried for the parent, or wouldn't explore the room, the child was deemed anxious or avoidant—without a secure emotional foundation.

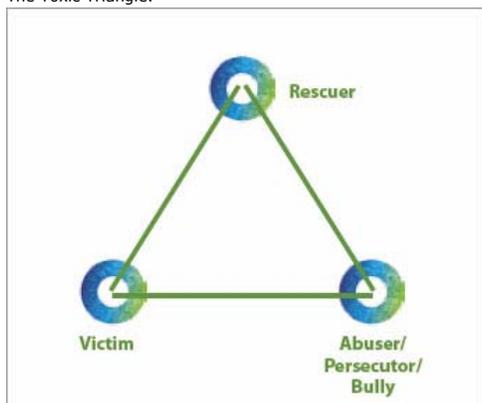
These styles (secure, anxious, and avoidant) continue to follow many of us throughout school and into adulthood. For example, an emotional attachment affects our willingness to work hard, attitude about making mistakes, willingness to stand up to a bully, or even willingness to participate in class discussions. Because emotional attachment is different from child to child, it is imperative that schools be safe, inclusive places emotionally.

### The Toxic Triangle

Safety and belonging in the middle grades school can become jeopardized by what is sometimes termed the *toxic triangle* (Figure 1). In middle grades schools, students are beginning the process of adult socialization. They learn their emotional patterns of interaction from the environments both outside and inside the school.

**Figure 1**

The Toxic Triangle.



Adapted from "Fairy Tales and Script Drama Analysis" by Steven B. Karp-man. (<http://karpmandramatriangle.com/pdf/DramaTriangle.pdf>)

The triangle illustrates the lack of boundaries young adolescents may encounter as they try to find their "place" in schools. This lack of boundaries—a threat to safety and belonging—stems from the fact that the students are

learning where they "fit," and that the place where they "fit" depends on the situation.

In middle grades relationships, nobody takes ownership for a specific role at all times. Rather, most students who venture into the triangle assume all three roles eventually. In one setting the student is a bully, in another setting he's a rescuer, and in a third setting he's a victim. "He said-She said" is a form of toxic triangle. This toxic triangle is a barrier to students finding a sense of safety and belonging in school. And without that, they don't learn.

How do we keep the students—and ourselves—out of the triangle? Consider this scenario:

When I was a principal, a father came to me with concerns about his daughter, Kate. He said Kate was being "sexually harassed" by Brandon, a classmate. He wanted me to assure him that Brandon would "never get within speaking distance of Kate again."

I explained to the father that this was, indeed, a very serious issue. However, according to the law, Kate first was required to tell Brandon that she didn't like what he was saying and doing in her presence. I asked him what Kate did when Brandon acted that way.

The father told me he didn't know, so I called Kate to my office and asked her, "When Brandon says those things to you, what do you do?"

Kate said, "I just smile at him."

Her father was furious.

I explained to Kate that she needed to tell Brandon she didn't like the way he talked or acted around her. When she responded that she couldn't do that, her father said,

"Yes, you can, and you will."

I sent Kate back to the classroom and then said to the father, "Your daughter is beautiful. All her life she will have unwanted attention. Don't you think it would be better if we gave her the skills now, so that when she's older and you aren't with her, she can defend herself?"

What the father wanted me to do was to get into the toxic triangle. He had come in to rescue his daughter by bullying me. If I had let him do that, I would have felt like I had to rescue Kate—and then I would have bullied Brandon. Brandon would have felt like a victim and likely would have gone home and told his mother. She probably would have felt the need to rescue Brandon and would have come up to school and bullied me. Then I would have felt like a victim. And on and on and on.

Once a person gets into the triangle, the cycle isn't easily broken, and the problem isn't easily solved.

### Breaking the Triangle Pattern

The triangle operates when resources are unequal, when students don't feel safe, when they don't have a sense of belonging. Indeed, it's a daily pattern in most middle schools.

The first step in stopping the triangle is making staff, students, and parents aware of it. Most of them will recognize the pattern immediately. Provide them with some questions they can ask the others involved in the situation as a way to stay out of the toxic triangle.

*Why* questions should usually be avoided because often they're used to assign blame and they tend to elicit a defensive response. Rather, questions that start with *how*, *when*, *where*, *what*, and *to what extent* generally spark more helpful answers.

Here's an example of using questions to avoid the triangle.

When my son was in second grade, he came home from school and announced that he was bored. When I asked him, "Whose problem is that?" he told me it was the teacher's problem. My son was presenting himself as a victim in the hopes that I would go to school and rescue him.

I asked him, "Is the teacher bored?" He said, "No, I am." So I said, "Then, it isn't the teacher's problem. It sounds like it's your problem. And if it's your problem, how can you solve it?" My son agreed that it was his own problem and that he needed to solve it.

Had I gone to the school and "bullied" the teacher in order to "rescue" my son who was a "victim," chances are that a pattern similar to the scenario sketched out in relation to Kate and her father would have ensued. The cycle would continue.

By addressing the emotional issues at the heart of most problems, discipline can be more effective, students will learn more, and school will be a safer place for all learners.

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