

Calm in Crisis

Adapted from: P. Kluth (2010). "You're Going to Love This Kid!": Teaching Students with Autism in the Inclusive Classroom (Rev ed.). Baltimore: Brookes.

This article is from the website of Dr. Paula Kluth. It, along with many others on inclusive schooling, differentiated instruction, and literacy can be found at www.PaulaKluth.com. Visit now to read her Tip of the Day, read dozens of free articles, and learn more about supporting diverse learners in K-12 classrooms.

I walked into a fifth-grade classroom and saw a student with autism sprawled out on the floor. The classroom paraprofessional was standing over the boy, warning him, "Get up now or you won't get computer time." The boy began crying and then biting his hand. The paraprofessional's voice became louder and more stern, "Get up now. Time to make a choice. You can choose to stand up or you can choose to lose your privileges." This was a hard scene to watch; the situation was difficult to begin with but was made more challenging by the actions of the adult. Her words, tone, and posture drew more attention than was necessary to the child; did nothing to calm the young man; and undoubtedly, made the situation more problematic, not less.

Contrast this with another scene. Recently I was visiting a friend at the preschool where she teaches. As I walked in the front door I immediately heard the piercing wail of a young child. I couldn't yet see the child, but any teacher or parent hearing this wailing would recognize it as "the real thing". In other words, these screams did not belong to a child who was merely tired or cranky. These sounds belonged to a distressed, scared, frightened, angry, or otherwise wounded child. I listened for the teacher's voice. Was the child being punished? Was someone scolding him? Was he even with a teacher? I began to walk faster.

As I rounded the corner, I saw a boy screaming and kicking on the floor. A teacher stood next to him, talking to him softly. I immediately understood why I didn't hear her voice amidst the screams; she was talking to him but she was whispering. I stood watching them from a distance, touched by this gifted teacher's poise and grace. The boy's sobs subsided as she gave him a short hug, stroked his back, and continued whispering to him. She had a compassionate look on her face and her body communicated acceptance.

After about three or four minutes the child was calm and the two stood and walked back into a classroom. For the rest of the day I thought about how calmly and gently she had treated his crisis.

Consider the last time you lost your temper. Did you yell? Scream? Cry? Did you say things you would later regret? How did you feel when you were engaged in these behaviours?

Embarrassed? Furious? Lonely? When most of us are in this type of crisis we need gentle support to calm down. We may need to take a short walk, curl up with a favourite book, find a place to be alone, or call someone who will listen as we share our struggles. In other words, we need support, understanding, and time to gather our thoughts. Students with disabilities certainly deserve the same attention and care that we might give ourselves.

This also means that an individual experiencing stress will most likely not be helped by approaches that are aggressive or lack sensitivity such as:

- Loud voices; Negative statements or threats (e.g., “You had your chance”, “You made your choice, now you need to leave class”);
- Taking away preferred or comforting materials or activities;
- Physical redirection;
- Angry tone or body language; and
- Punishments (e.g., “You just lost a sticker on your behaviour chart”).

One of the most important skills a teacher can have is the ability to be calm and comforting in a crisis or “meltdown” situation. A comforting teacher may hug or hold a student or she may simply share encouraging words. Being comforting might also include touching the student’s hand, arm, or back in a reassuring way, asking them how they want to be helped, singing a favorite song, repeating a calming phrase, or simply keeping one’s own body relaxed.

Some teachers insist that it is best to be firm so that students “don’t get away with” behaving in a way that is seen as negative or disruptive. This punitive approach almost always serves to distance the teacher from the student and certainly fails to strengthen their relationship. It is ironic but true that the more a teacher may try to control a situation, the more out of control that situation may become.

In contrast, adopting a cooperative and compassionate orientation can help avert crisis or at least help to deescalate a difficult moment. While a student experiencing challenging behaviours might need to know how the behaviour is being interpreted or might benefit from information or teaching related to the behaviour, it is seldom (if ever) appropriate or useful to intervene in these ways while the behaviour is taking place.

When a student is kicking, biting, banging her head, or screaming, she is most likely miserable, confused, or scared. The most effective and the most human response at this point is to offer support; to act in a comforting manner, and to help the person relax and feel safe. Teaching can come later. In crisis, educators must listen, support, and simply be there.

COPYRIGHT