

**What's Next? Series**

**The Child Who is Resistant**

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**Book chapter and webinar on Resistance and Opposition**

11  
The Child Who Is Resistant

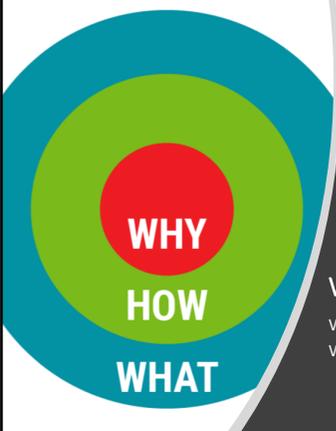
**reclaiming our students**  
Why Children Don't Move, Anxious, Aggressive, and Shut Down. How to Get What You Can Do About It.

**the CounterWill instinct**

... is a pushing back against the will of others  
or a defensive reaction to perceived control and coercion

**INSTINCT**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSKIOvLTAA&t=1s>



**Start with the WHY**  
Simon Sinek - Golden Circle

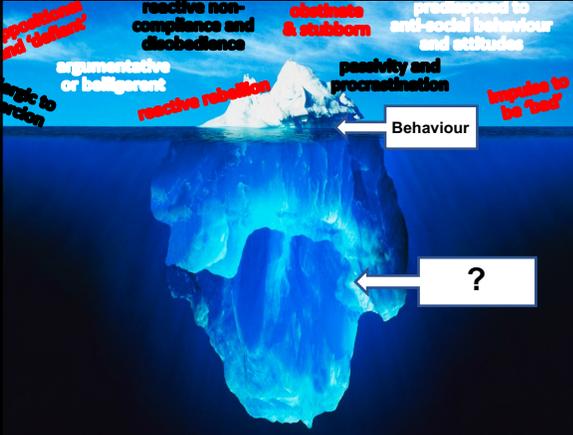
**WHY**  
**HOW**  
**WHAT**

**WHY: the purpose**  
what is your cause?  
what do you see?



**KEY INSIGHT #1**

Children's behavior isn't always what it seems, we need to dig deeper and look at what's happening beneath.



**Behaviour**

**?**

Labels above water: *provocative and defiant*, *argumentative or belligerent*, *reactive non-compliance and disobedience*, *obstinate & stubborn*, *passivity and procrastination*, *prone to be "lost"*, *pre-disposed to anti-social behaviour and attitudes*.

Labels below water: *reactive rebellion*, *arguing to perfection*.

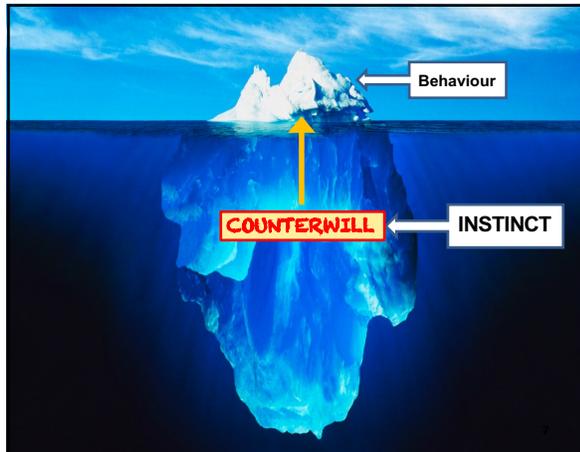
**SHIFTING OUR LENS**  
To gain perspective and insight



What we SEE influences what we do

When we understand what is behind the behaviour we then:

- choose interventions that will make a difference
- avoid interventions that risk making things worse



Opposition and Resistance (Counterwill Instinct)

... is a pushing back against the will of others

or a defensive reaction to perceived control and coercion

The top right image shows a child's hands holding a white sign with the word 'No!' written on it. The bottom right image is a close-up of a young child's face, looking slightly to the side with a serious, somewhat angry expression.

**CounterWill** refers to the instinct to resist or oppose the will of others when the attachment instincts are not engaged.

Other's WILL

- values & goals
- designs & purposes
- intentions & initiative
- preferences & priorities
- judgements & opinions
- expectations & hope
- plans & decisions
- wants & wishes

**COUNTERWILL**

**CounterWill** serves attachment by protecting against 'outside' control and influence

The diagram features a list of 'Other's WILL' items on the left. A large, grey arrow points from this list towards the word 'COUNTERWILL' on the right. Below this, a text box explains that CounterWill serves attachment by protecting against outside control and influence.

**CounterWill** is NOT a learned response, but an **EMOTIONAL REACTION** that plays a critical role in **PRESERVING** the self and becoming a separate person.

The belief that resistance and opposition must be unlearned (a) doesn't recognize or **value the developmental benefits of having one's own mind** and (b) fails to appreciate that we need to **GROW a child out of resistance**, not punish or teach a child to behave otherwise.

from *Rest Play Grow* by Deborah MacNamara

**Counterwill Instincts**

**Why are children moved by their counterwill instincts?**

- There is a **natural** and **intended** purpose to the counterwill instincts. We are all born with this instinct.
- It is quite **healthy** for a child to show counterwill tendencies.
- When children stay **stuck** in counterwill, they may be **having difficulties with**:
  - Experiencing vulnerable feelings
  - Trusting the adult (may not feel cared for or may be feeling exploited)

The top left image shows a man with glasses looking thoughtful, with his hand near his face. The top right image shows a small green seedling with two leaves growing out of a patch of soil.

**KEY INSIGHT #2**

Children's behavior is based on development and emotional maturity. We cannot push and pull to get what's expected.

What is the purpose of counterwill?

- It serves **attachment** by protecting against outside influence and direction.
- It serves **development** by preparing the way for separate functioning.
- It is quite healthy for a child to show counterwill tendencies.

The diagram features a central yellow box with the text "in the service of attachment" at the top and "in the service of emergence" at the bottom. Between these two phrases is the text "Countering the WILL of others...". Above the top phrase are five upward-pointing arrows, and below the bottom phrase are five downward-pointing arrows. The entire diagram is set against a background of a blue and white stepped shape.

Resisting because of a LACK OF CONNECTION

**COUNTERWILL** serves attachment by protecting against outside influence & direction from those NOT within the parent-sanctioned village of Attachment.

"Children were designed to be impossible to manage unless sufficiently attached to those in charge"

It is the default dynamic in a child that serves to PROTECT them.

Hence the importance of good parent-teacher-school relationships.  
And the problem with Substitute teachers

ATTACHMENT & CounterWill

Why does a child oppose an adult to whom he/she is attached?

- When the directive is given the child is attached to someone or something else
- Counterwill has been "held at bay" earlier and re-emerges when in a safe place

CounterWill happens when the pressure or coercion felt is greater than the child's pursuit of attachment.

commands	>	impulse to comply
obligations	>	urge to make it work
expectations	>	desire to please
demands	>	inclination to defer
pressure	>	desire to measure up
forcefulness	>	desire to be good

CounterWill and DEVELOPMENT

COUNTERWILL serves DEVELOPMENT by preparing the way for SEPARATE FUNCTIONING

The first step in finding one's own WILL is to resist and counter the WILL of others.

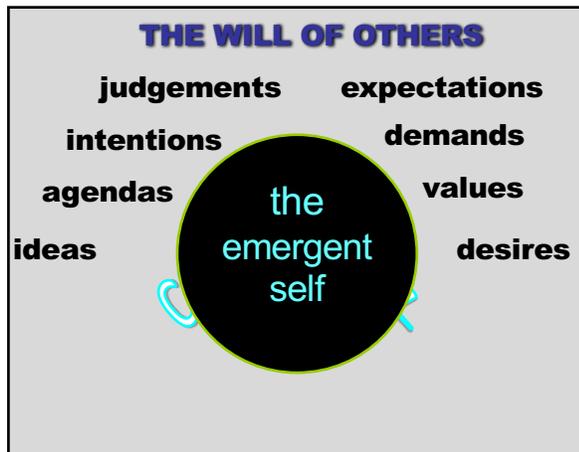
THE WILL OF OTHERS

judgements expectations  
intentions demands  
agendas values  
ideas desires

CounterWILL

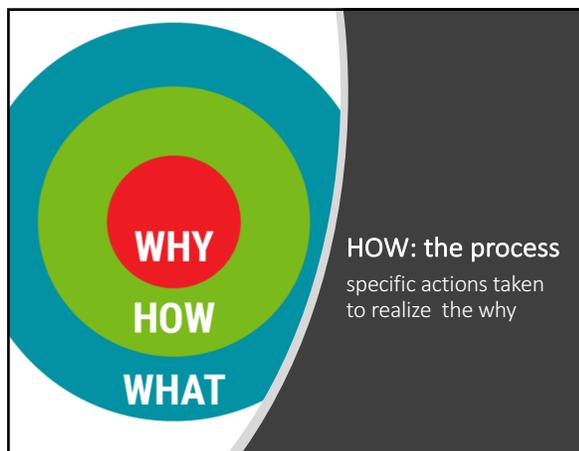
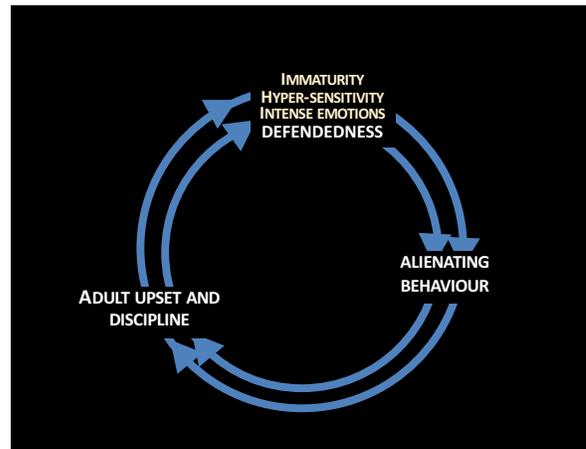
the emergent self

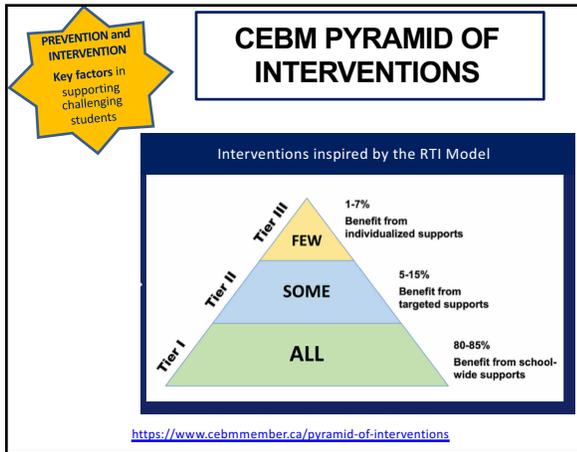
The diagram shows a large triangle with the words "judgements", "expectations", "intentions", "demands", "agendas", "values", "ideas", and "desires" arranged around its perimeter. A large, stylized, 3D-effect word "CounterWILL" is written across the triangle. At the base of the triangle is a black circle containing the text "the emergent self".



*CounterWill* happens when the experience of coercion is greater than the sense of one's own *WILL*

expectations	>	initiative
pressure	>	purpose
demands	>	desires
have to's	>	want to's
directives	>	intentions
input	>	curiosity
incentives / rewards	>	interest





### BEST PRACTICES

Gaining insight to inform practice

**From:** What's wrong with you? This behaviour has to stop.

**To:** She's experiencing too much **coercion**

*How can I help reduce the pressure?*

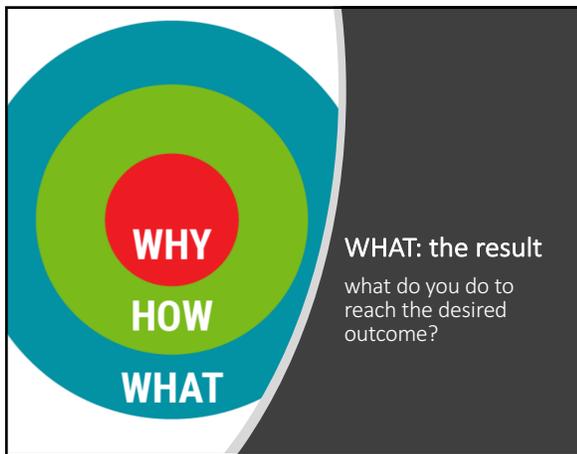
### BEHAVIOUR CHANGES WHEN...

**Maturation**  
Behaviour changes as the brain matures

**Emotions**  
Behaviour changes when emotions are felt

**Vulnerability**  
Behaviour changes when vulnerability is protected

**Attachment**  
Behaviour changes when students are attached to adults



Challenge: Resistance & Opposition Making Sense of What is Unfolding and Mapping Interventions to Support a Student			
<p><b>What are the behaviors that you see?</b></p> <p><b>Tier 1: In the Classroom:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Withdraw, turned out</li> <li>Ignoring, not participating</li> <li>Intimidated when being told what to do, refuses to comply with requests</li> <li>Stares, you're not the boss of me!</li> <li>Impatient with peers &amp; adults</li> <li>Intimidates and speaks over others</li> <li>Work refusal</li> <li>Runs against daily routine and expectations</li> <li>Struggles with transitions, changes and novelty</li> <li>Always in low and demand</li> <li>Physical outbursts with objects, towards peers and/or adults</li> <li>Stomps out of the room</li> <li>Can be uncooperative to manage by substitute teacher</li> <li>Does not willingly respond to authority</li> </ul> <p><b>Tier 1: In the School/On the Playground:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Walks the halls in frustrated stance and demeanor - refusing to go where the adult has requested</li> <li>Negative comments readily dispensed to others</li> <li>Includes personal space and conversations</li> <li>Often refuses to go outside for recess and/or lunchtime</li> <li>Refuses to play or play correctly</li> <li>Physical outbursts with objects towards peers and/or adults</li> <li>Ignores rules when playing</li> <li>Games/activities never ends to win at games</li> <li>Impoverish self during games with others</li> <li>Impoverish others' games when not invited to play</li> <li>Blames others for all that is not working with - does not take responsibility for their words and actions</li> </ul>	<p><b>Suggested Interventions:</b></p> <p><b>Tier 1: In the Classroom:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish clear, structured routines - follow these implicitly</li> <li>Plan interventions, announce in advance - give students time to digest information and demands</li> <li>Work at reinforcing a significant attachment with this student</li> <li>Increase opportunities to make 1:1 connections</li> <li>Have additional work supplies readily available - provide with generosity when they are missing items</li> <li>Offer alternate seating options and alternate workstations to provide opportunity for choices</li> <li>Think student for following requests - notice, name and recognize efforts - focus on small steps</li> <li>Make suggestions for alternative ways of completing required tasks</li> <li>Organize a Personal File with the student - include items they enjoy watching, looking at and doing when they need a break</li> <li>Include a First-Name activity: Change items periodically to maintain engagement. Encourage having photos from home.</li> <li>Establish a Private Area and/or Quiet Activity Area within the classroom</li> <li>Submit their help in areas you know they have good skills</li> <li>Consider alternate arrangements when substitute teacher is present.</li> </ul> <p><b>Tier 1: In the School/On the Playground:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Set up and use Physical Movement Stations - Inside and Outside</li> <li>Walks to Foster Classroom - provide a break from the classroom</li> <li>It is essential that this be set-up as an intervention prior to use, that the student and parents are informed of this intervention strategy</li> <li>Provide a student with passes to visit the Tutorship Room, to return to the office, to use the library</li> <li>Map-out games that can be played outside, provide materials and allow students to choose - clearly state safety measures</li> <li>Participation in "Interest Clubs" with adult supervision             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organize the schedule to "blend" &amp; "empower" clusters of students who struggle together</li> <li>If the student struggles with large groups -sheltered recess and/or sheltered lunch in a predetermined location with the objective of struggling with a small group and from transitioning back to the larger group context</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>Understanding "WHY" this might be coming from:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of secure attachments with adults</li> <li>Feeling crowded vs. being asked to do things, being process and racing against the clock</li> <li>Excess time made frustration - numerous things in their life are not working</li> <li>Facing too much separation from caregivers</li> <li>All that is associated with life and school experience - too much is happening or being asked of them</li> <li>Disruptive conditions</li> <li>Learning difficulties</li> <li>Hypermotility/hyperactivity</li> <li>Sensory issues, ASD</li> </ul> <p><b>Practices to AVOID and WHY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When resistance is felt from the student, AVOID pushing into it. Rather, reduce pressure, offer choices, step back and give time for student to respond</li> <li>Time Outs: Increase separation alerts and transition, which can lead to disengagement "I don't care" or provide substitutes, which can lead to disengagement</li> <li>Contingencies - in terms of high emotions -intensive capacity disturbance. Giving consequences directly increases frustration for a child who already struggles managing their emotions</li> <li>Incentive charts, rewards and behavior contracts</li> <li>Child experiences the adult's agents contracts</li> <li>May increase disengagement</li> <li>Use process outcomes and cues</li> <li>Make the relationship contingent on performance</li> </ul> <p>For more details please see <a href="https://www.cebmmember.ca/resistance-and-opposition">https://www.cebmmember.ca/resistance-and-opposition</a></p>	<p><b>Tier 2 &amp; 3: Interventions with Support Staff and/or Professionals:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schedule intervention time based on the needs of the student</li> <li>Check-out of the loop</li> <li>Safe place to express big emotions</li> <li>Emotional expression activities</li> <li>Introduce sensory materials</li> <li>Written, personal letter help students feel connection to the adults.</li> <li>Create a personalized tool kit to support student in their own environment</li> <li>Show information with other members of the school team, including daycare team.</li> </ul> <p><b>Suggestions to help big emotions come on:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pre-warn schedule for:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Special movement breaks during the school day</li> <li>Break from the classroom - intervention with support staff</li> <li>Expanded emotional regulation activities</li> <li>Personalized Project to be a winner for building, creating, fixing things out</li> <li>Additional outdoor time</li> <li>Additional physical education classes</li> <li>Assign a job outside the school with a peer</li> <li>Assign a job outside the school with a "Special" for the student to be involved with members of the school team, including daycare team.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<https://www.cebmmember.ca/resistance-and-opposition>

### TIER 1 – UNIVERSAL Practices in the Classroom

- Classroom interventions to benefit the whole group, evidence-based practices
- Daily practices lead by the Teacher with the help of other adults in the room
- In-class universal practices, focused on PREVENTION:
  - ✓ Minimizing exposure to additional pressure/coercion by relying on structures and routines to convey directives and to avoid surprises
  - ✓ Engaging student's attachment and receptivity before moving on to a task
  - ✓ Offering an array of support measures to answer to a variety of student needs and challenges

### Examples of Counterwill at Tier 1

At Tier 1, students may exhibit some covert signs of counterwill instinct by:

In the classroom:

- Taking their time/ slowing down after having been told to take out their material or to begin a new task
- Procrastinating in completing a task

During transitions/ in the schoolyard:

- Passively ignoring the adult directives to stand in line
- Hanging out longer in the schoolyard after having been told it's time to return to class

### REDUCE COERCION

- use **structures** and **routines** to orchestrate behavior
- the routine guides the behavior
- teach routines in a fun way
- make routines engaging:  
*"quiet as a mouse", "super-hero role"*



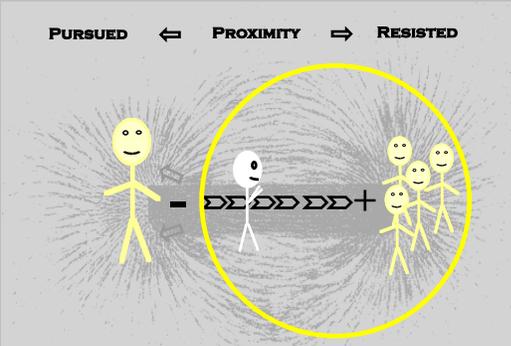
### ENGAGE THE ATTACHMENT INSTINCTS

1. Ensure to **collect** students at the beginning of each day and at least a few times throughout the day (following a transition), where there is no apparent reason to engage them other than to affirm the relationship
2. Make certain to **engage** students prior to giving a directive or starting a task
3. Use the engaging power of **play** if necessary to jump-start the relationship dance (especially if there is reticence to attach)

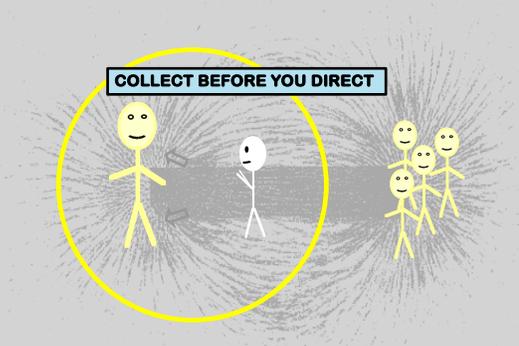


### When returning from lunch or recess

PURSUED ← PROXIMITY ⇒ RESISTED



### COLLECT BEFORE YOU DIRECT





What practices do you use to **ENGAGE** the student's **attachment** and **RECEPTIVITY**?

### USE PLAY AND PLAYFULNESS



- Singing** and **actions** – to take the mind off of the “have to”
- Playing** usually evokes smiles – increasing attachment
- Play with “no”** – a “no” dance – saying “no” or “I don’t want to” as loud as you can – as silly as you can

### TIER 2 – TARGETED Practices in the Classroom and School

- Interventions for challenging students who struggle in the classroom (situational, for a short period of time)
- Practices lead by the Teacher with the help of Support Staff and other adults in the room.
- In-class and out-of-class targeted interventions based on student needs, remedial/supporting measures
- Student continues to benefit from T1 interventions in addition to supplemental T2 measures

### Examples of Counterwill at Tier 2

At Tier 2, some students in the group may exhibit more overt signs of the counterwill instinct by:

In the classroom:

- Refusing to do work
- Openly not participating in group work

During transitions/ in the schoolyard:

- Resisting to transition to Specialists
- Opposing others’ rules during recess games



### “HAVE-TO” INVENTORY

How many “Have-tos” are involved into the **classroom/school** experience?

What “Have-tos” are added involved a **learning** situation?

What other “Have-tos” are present, or have been present, in this **student’s life**?

### Handling *CounterWill*

**Understand what makes a student feel VULNERABLE, evoking counterwill**

- New learning
- Not knowing what is expected
- Looking inadequate, especially in front of peers
- Confirming inadequacy
- Facing loss of attachment



### REDUCE COERCION

- **Address student privately** (if possible) to avoid escalating the power struggle – this also protects the child’s dignity and preserves the adult’s position vis-à-vis the other students
- **back off** until you get a better attachment hold
- **LEAD** the child out of the impasse (power struggle)
- draw attention **AWAY** from the coercive elements of the situation



### REDUCE COERCION

- refrain from using a **commanding or prescriptive** manner
- make agendas **less explicit**
- refrain from focusing on the **SHOULDs**, the **MUSTs** & the **HAVE TOs**
- use as **little** force and leverage as possible




### ENGAGE THE ATTACHMENT INSTINCTS

- Talk about **how hard it is** to always “have to do” things
- **Normalize** that there are times when we all want to refuse to do what we “must”
- Allow the child **time and space** to handle their Counterwill instinct



### COME ALONGSIDE

### Use Play and Playfulness

- Being playful helps to diffuse tense situations.
- Being playful helps to get our directives across without pressure and coercion.
- Through fantasy, stories and make-believe, play can provide cues and guidance towards expected behaviours.




### ENHANCE EMERGENCE

- provide for some sense of **choice**
- put the focus on the child’s **will**
- make room for the child’s **initiative** and **involvement**
- solicit **good intentions** where possible
- place **in charge** where appropriate and possible




What practices do you use to **MAKE ROOM** for the student’s **own WILL** (their initiative and involvement)?

**TIER 3 – INDIVIDUALIZED Practices**  
with the help of Support Staff and/or Professionals

- Interventions for highly challenging students who are unable to function well within the classroom and/or the school
- Collaboration between the school team, with the support of the board consultants/professionals
- In-class and out-of-class individualized interventions based on close observations and reflection - Referral for further investigation on the root of the problem
- Adaptation-Accommodations – Student specific needs, remediation (pull-out 1 on 1)
- Student continues to benefit from T1 interventions in addition to supplemental T2 and T3 measures

**Examples of Counterwill at Tier 3**

At Tier 3, few students in the group exhibit frequent and disturbing behaviours resulting from the counterwill instinct. At this level, the student may exhibit a range of different behaviours, which originate from a multitude of sources.

**In the classroom:**

- Railing against the daily routine and adult expectations
- Interrupting and speaking over others
- Doesn't willingly respond to adult authority. Says things like: "you're not the boss of me!"

**During transitions/ in the schoolyard:**

- Imposing themselves onto others and invading their personal space
- Disrupting other's games when not invited to join

Children stuck in counterwill are challenging



- much less receptive to being lead in general
- highly resistant to direction and guidance
- often are less endearing, tending to alienate the adults responsible for them
- appear independent and much less needy and so not as likely to evoke care-taking responses in the adults responsible for them
- very difficult to bring to state of REST and SATIATION
- consequences and sanctions are highly PROVOCATIVE

**Daily multiple student "Check-Ins" with a significant adult**



**Instead of a time-out, use TIME AWAY**

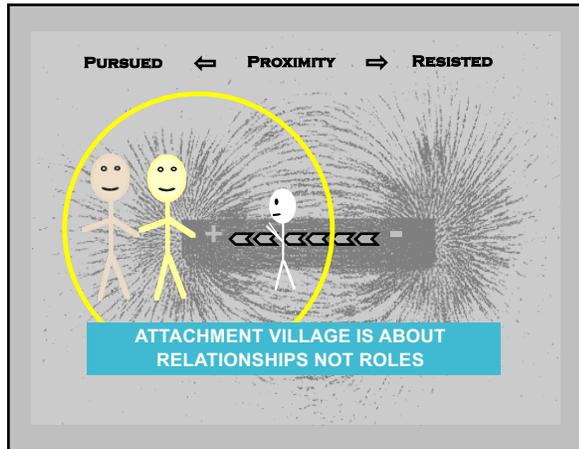
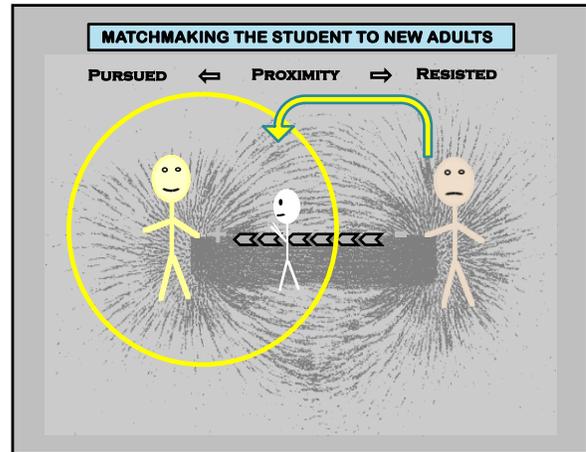
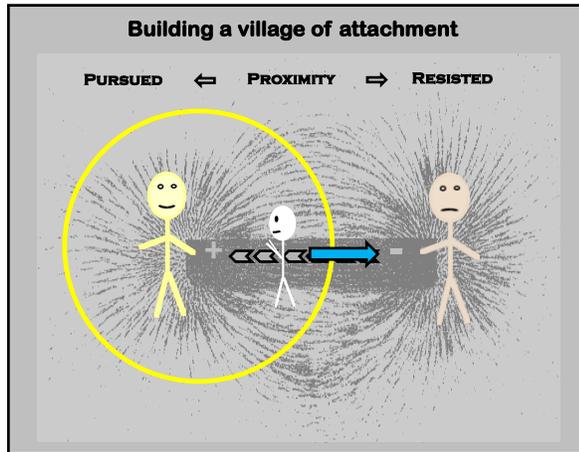
- If necessary, use TIME AWAY (rely on your school team for support and respite).
- Send the student to someone or to a pre-determined location.
- Use a dignified way to have the student leave. E.g. Send the student on an 'errand'
- Let the student know explicitly that the relationship is still intact (i.e. Bridging).
- It is always up to the adult to restore and maintain the relationship with a student.



**Nurturing Support Centre Tier 3 Intervention**

*Personalized & adapted schedule*

*Individualized support*



**Don't let counterwill  
Break the CONNECTION**

- don't take counterwill personally
- anticipate and expect counterwill
- reflect the resistance as natural & normal
- don't use separation as a consequence
- don't make behaviour the bottom line
- repair damage done by counterwill fallout

**When faced with a challenge of the 'wills'**

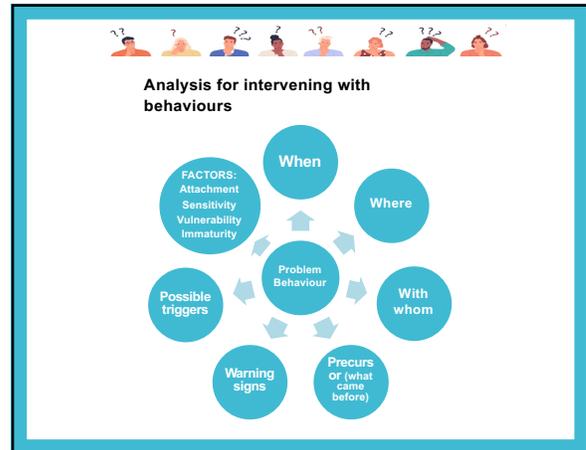
- Be careful about finding yourself into a **power struggle**.
- Don't let yourself be **alienated** by their behaviour and don't take the behavior personally. **Detach your anger from your discipline.**
- Separate the response from the incident and choose a **more suitable time** (\*except in case of emergency or security)
- **Change the circumstances** affecting the child rather than trying to control their behavior.
- **Bridge and repair** any fallout from counterwill confrontations.

**Guidelines to consider**

- 1** Give the impression that you can and will take care of the child by projecting calmness and confidence (If necessary, fake it until you can make it!)
- 2** Rely on structures, routines and rituals to help (\*this limits reliance on child direction/control)
- 3** Be careful about revealing your own sense of helplessness "I don't know what to do with you anymore!"
- 4** Be careful about revealing your own needs, felt inadequacies or fears

### YOUR WORDS MATTER

Instead of that, try saying this	
No you won't	Yes, I understand this is important to you, how about (...)
Not right now	Yes, that's a great idea, let me see when (...)
You should / must / have to	Let's / We can / How about
Be quiet	I see you are eager to share / this is really important to you.
Stop it / Calm down	I see you need to let it out. How about (...)
Don't be so defiant	It sounds like you need to follow your instincts and listen to what your body is telling you.
That's enough	How about we take a pause.
You better do as I say, right now	I've decided this is not a good time to address this issue now
If you don't listen to me, I will (...)	I see this is tricky for you, we are going to solve this later. How about we go for a walk / a drink of water.
Leave my classroom	How about we go to a quieter place to figure this out.



#### Our ROLE as the adult

teacher  
Educator  
Parent  
COACH  
Technician  
Principal  
counsellor

**Adjusting our VIEW** Taking things **LESS PERSONALLY**

Recognizing that instinct is involved

Aiming to "do no harm"

---

**Adjusting our STANCE** Normalizing by conveying that some pushback is part of the process

Placing child in charge when possible

Being patient

---

**Making ROOM for** For child to display own "will"

To be indulged in the play mode

**Catherine Korah and Martine Demers**  
Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management

[www.cebm.ca](http://www.cebm.ca)

**THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT (CEBM)**

As a support to the 10 English School Boards of Quebec, the CEBM aims to help boards and their staff to find effective and developmentally friendly interventions for working with students who experience significant behavioural challenges in the school setting.

**Also visit the CEBM Resource Center**  
<https://www.cebmmember.ca/resistance-and-opposition>

### Editorials on Counterwill

**Why Kids Resist and What We Can Do About It**  
by Deborah MacNamara  
May 9, 2016 - 6 min

<https://macnamara.ca/portfolio/why-kids-resist-and-what-we-can-do-about-it/>

**The Surprising Secret Behind Kid's Resistance and Opposition**  
by Deborah MacNamara  
May 1, 2017

<https://macnamara.ca/portfolio/the-surprising-secret-behind-kids-resistance-and-opposition/>

**Playing Matchmaker: Cultivating Relationships with Teachers and Adults Who Care for Our Kids**  
by Deborah MacNamara  
Feb 1, 2017

<https://macnamara.ca/portfolio/playing-matchmaker-cultivating-relationships-with-teachers-and-adults-who-care-for-our-kids/>

**The Five Things Master Teachers Know and Do**  
by Deborah MacNamara  
Dec 17, 2016

<https://macnamara.ca/portfolio/the-five-things-master-teachers-know/>

### Upcoming Events

<https://www.cebm.ca/news-events>

Wed, Dec 07 | Online Professional Develop.

**Demystifying The Adolescent Journey**

Join us ONLINE: Wednesday, December 7th, 2022 - 4:00-5:00 pm. Presenter: Catherine Korah. Event is FREE. The session will be recorded and available on the CEBM website.

To Register

Thu, Jan 19 | Online Professional Development

**What's Next? series: The Child Who Is Anxious**

Join us ONLINE: Thursday, January 19th, 2023 - 4:00-5:00 pm. Presenter: Catherine Korah. Event is FREE. The session will be recorded and available on the CEBM website.

To Register