



BEHAVIOUR PRINCIPLES: CHOOSING INTERVENTION PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS

I was recently asked to give the keynote address for a Behaviour Summit organized by the Eastern Townships School Board in Quebec. They called together all of their stakeholders: directors, principals, teachers, consultants, aides, lunch monitors, bus drivers, secretaries, trustees, and parents to brainstorm ideas for how to help students to better handle the behavioral requirements of attending school.

I had 45 minutes in which to provide them with a coherent framework. This may seem to be a daunting task, but because of the Neufeld paradigm, I knew that I would be able to present guiding principles that would make it easier for them to choose amongst the myriad of behaviour interventions and programs that abound.

When working with children, Dr. Neufeld reminds us that there are key factors that must be kept in mind: maturation, vulnerability, and attachment. The first factor, maturation, is a process and it is an inherent part of our make up as human beings. If all goes well, we are impelled to venture forth to become viable beings. It starts with “I’ll do it myself” and continues as children are moved to test the waters and develop their own ways of navigating life’s challenges. However, as we now know from the newest brain research, this process takes a long time, well into the mid-twenties or even longer for many of us.

The second factor we must consider is vulnerability. In order for growth to happen, every organism must stay soft. (For a human being this implies having a soft heart and being able to feel vulnerable feelings such as guilt, embarrassment, anger, sadness, etc.). However, softness is a state that opens us up to being hurt. In the best interest of their development, our children must be able to tolerate this state of vulnerability.

How is this possible? The answer is the third factor we must consider, and that is attachment. Our children can only stay soft in the context of safe and secure adult relationships.

Any intervention or program that is implemented in our schools needs to respect these three key factors. So we need to ask, “Does this intervention:

- **respect maturation?** Is it geared to an understanding of the need for human beings to “venture forth” (and make mistakes)? Is it appropriate for the current developmental level of a child (not necessarily his/her chronological age)? Does it respect the natural immaturity of a growing being or does it promise to “grow” children up so they can instantly act like “little” adults?
- **protect the vulnerability** of our children? Or, does it use shame or try to alarm the child in order to manage the child’s behaviour?
- **respect and protect the adult-child relationship** and ensure the strong, caring attachments that are so necessary for a child’s development?”

I then took a critical look at some common interventions.

1. Using “consequences” to change behaviour: Many children who have trouble learning from consequences are delayed in their ability to consider two points of view at a time. In the moment, they act on what seems most urgent and cannot hold on to the possible negative or positive outcome of acting in another way. These children are having maturation issues, and unfortunately, we can’t force them to mature. For these children, consequences only end up frustrating them even more. As a result, these children no longer see us as being “along side them” but rather see us as being against them. Instead, if we determine that a child does not have the necessary maturity to handle a certain situation (e.g. playing with others at recess), we need to take charge and rearrange the environment so that the child can participate without getting into trouble.

2. "Time out" uses the relationship to alarm the child into behaving, especially if we give the message, "You may return to my presence when you decide to behave appropriately." The implication here is that the adult-child relationship depends on the child's ability to behave "appropriately." Of course, some children do need to be removed from a situation for the safety of others. However, instead of sending the child "away," one could rather send the child "to" another caring adult in the school.
3. Reinforcement programs, which urge adults to take notice of a child's "good" behaviour, often make our naturally "good" children very anxious because being "good" is clearly the way to ensure adult attachments. But being good all the time leaves little room for the maturation of the emergent self. And children should never be given the impression that adult attachment is dependent on how well they behave. Our children do need recognition for their efforts. A smile, a nod, and a "thank you" are well appreciated and can be given to all children at any time of the day.

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