

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Crisis as Opportunity

Most adults want to help kids in conflict but just do not know how. Award-winning novelist Tobias Wolff wrote *This Boy's Life*, which recounts his own childhood abuse and rebellion. Wolff cites an occasion when his frustrated mother asked the parish priest, Father Carl, to talk with him. Father Carl invited young Toby for a walk by the river. Toby played along by politely feigning cooperation:

[Father Carl] asked me if I wanted to make my mother unhappy.

I said, "No."

"But you're making her unhappy, aren't you?"

"I guess."

"No guessing to it. You are."

He looked over at me. "So why don't you stop, why don't you stop?"

I didn't answer right away for fear of seeming merely agreeable. I wanted to appear to give his question some serious thought.

"All right," I said. "I'll try."

I was not available to be reached. I was in hiding. I had left a dummy in my place to look sorry and make promises but I was nowhere in the neighborhood and Father Carl knew it.<sup>1</sup>

Even adults with formal professional training have trouble connecting with "difficult clients" (Hanna, 2002). In spite of a

sincere desire to reach young people, they don't know how to get around the defenses that have been so carefully constructed, often over a period of many years. All professionals need effective strategies to disengage from adversarial roles and connect with youth in crisis.

## **OUT OF THE ASHES**

Schools, courts, and mental health programs are often overwhelmed by youth in conflict. In an official policy statement, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2002) declares, "Within the review of crisis behavior lie opportunities to prevent their recurrence . . . to create a 'Phoenix out of the ashes'" (p. 19S).

In the traditional deficit view, a crisis is a calamity. From a strengths perspective, a crisis offers a unique opportunity for reinforcing relationships and coping skills. But this requires strategies for interrupting conflict and using crises as learning situations.

## **Disengaging from Hostility**

If crises are to become teaching opportunities, adults must disentangle themselves from angry, adversarial conflicts with youth. Rather than be drawn into Tit for Tat reactions, adults must treat problem behavior as errors in responding rather than purposeful defiance (Ducharme, Atkinson, & Poulton, 2000).

Defusing conflict begins with a personal choice not to fight with a youth. This does not mean becoming weak or permissive. Instead, as Nick Long (2000) observes, one decides to act like a thermostat rather than a thermometer. A thermometer goes up or down depending on the surrounding climate. If we allow ourselves to become overheated—or turned off—by a youth's behavior, we become like thermometers under control of the youth. But a thermostat is a more sophisticated instrument. It registers temperature like a thermometer, but then makes the necessary adjustment to keep the climate in balance. When a student's emotions kindle, we can calm them down. When a youth is down, we can help bring him or her back up.

Skillfully handling conflict is a “double struggle” of managing one’s own private logic and emotions while trying to calm a youth. Clinical and research studies suggest practical strategies that are foundation skills in defusing angry conflict.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Strategy 1: Never Take Anger Personally***

Conflict cycles operate like mirror images, in which both parties believe they have been provoked and both feel justified in the righteous rage. When we take anger personally, we assume the mind-set of victims, and we step on a slippery slope. To avoid the mentality of “violated” victim requires controlling the private logic by which we interpret conflict. One should think of an alternative explanation for a person’s anger other than that the person is intentionally being offensive. The sooner in a conflict cycle that empathy is used to crowd out blaming thoughts, the easier it is to de-escalate the cycle.

### ***Strategy 2: Monitor Your Own Emotional Arousal***

Be aware of internal cues that anger or fear is reaching a disruptive level. If you notice rancor in your voice, this signals that emotions are in charge and it is time to cool down or back away from the interaction. Sometimes empathy statements can break the cycle of hostility. However, adults may not want to appear weak or be manipulated by angry youth, and so they often persist in fruitless disagreements. This won’t calm either party in this dance of disturbance. Backing away from conflict does not mean that the incident is closed. Rather, the communication is being postponed until calmer minds prevail. Disengagement is not a sign of weakness but one of strength and self-control.

### ***Strategy 3: Monitor and Defuse a Youth’s Agitation***

In a brewing conflict, an alert adult carefully tracks a youth’s emotional arousal to avoid explosive outcomes. Rodney had overheard a phone conversation between his foster mother and a social worker, and he suspected he was about to be kicked out of his foster home. He arrived at school agitated and

paranoid and soon was sent to the office. It became clear that Rodney believed school staff were a party in plotting against him for his abandonment. Rodney said he was so furious that he might break the windows out of the conference room and jump. Instead of confrontation, he needed a strongly supportive statement: "We can understand why you are so mad. You have every right to know what is going to happen to you." Rodney was ready for battle but not for empathy, and his hostility melted into sobs. One can imagine an alternative scenario if adults had moved to physically contain Rodney and escalated this crisis into a full-scale restraint.

#### ***Strategy 4: Allow Sufficient Time for Cooling Down***

In a natural course, intense emotion spikes and then decays. Time is our ally. Attempts to argue or reason with an agitated person will prolong and escalate anger. If the helper notices tension in his or her own voice or nonverbal behavior, or if the presence of the adult is stirring rage in the youth, it may be better to temporarily acquiesce or withdraw. If the helper can communicate true warmth instead of hostility, then "joining" with the person who is angry usually will defuse tension. In general, the best strategy is to offer support with a tone of strength and compassion to communicate that violence is neither a necessary nor an acceptable way of resolving conflict.

#### ***Strategy 5: Debrief Following Crisis Incidents***

Just because the storm appears to have passed does not mean that hostility is defused. Angry people who stew in the private logic of feeling violated or disrespected can work themselves up with plans to get even and retaliate (Sapolsky, Stocking, & Zillman, 1977). By helping an angry youth rethink a crisis event, guilt or rancor can be lessened and the youth is given an opportunity to learn effective coping. Standards on physical confinement and restraint now require debriefing after critical events (JCAHCO, 2001; AACAP, 2002). Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) is specifically designed for this purpose and will be discussed in detail in the following section.

### ***Strategy 6: Model a Forgiving Spirit***

There is no greater act of generosity than giving by forgiving. People who make amends communicate benevolence instead of malevolence. But some adults are slow to forgive a youth who has crossed them, and even less likely to apologize for any part they may have had in a conflict. If an adult realizes that a conflict situation could have been handled in a more tactful manner, a prompt, genuine apology often de-escalates anger. Adults who are too proud to apologize are often obsessed with proving their toughness. In a battle of wills, both parties see backing down as a sign of weakness. The adult has a unique opportunity to demonstrate that truly strong people can walk away from a fight with dignity, a skill all youth need to learn.

Talking about anger is not the only way of defusing it. Some youth respond well to diversionary activities, humor, and re-immersion in positive relationships. Because anger is a highly unpleasant emotion, there is a natural motivation to restore harmony. For both youth and adult, ruminating about hostility is highly counterproductive. The age-old advice is forever current: Never let the sun set on your anger.

### **Learning from Crisis Events**

A crisis is an event that causes emotional conflict and threatens a person's ability to cope effectively. In a severe crisis, the person has feelings of distress, confusion, and loss of control. Handled poorly, crisis situations can metastasize into trauma. Traditional crisis intervention programs focus on physical safety and de-escalation and should be basic training for all who work with potentially volatile children.<sup>3</sup> But beyond defusing a crisis, the challenge is to break self-defeating patterns of behavior. This requires advanced training.

Nicholas Long and colleagues have developed a comprehensive curriculum for training adults to communicate with youth in conflict and use crisis as a teaching and treatment tool (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001). Life Space Crisis Intervention uses naturally occurring problems to teach youth more effective coping skills. Crises become opportunities to help youth

learn alternatives to aggressive, disrespectful, or self-destructive behavior. LSCI is useful to educators, counselors, and other professionals who deal with youth in mental health, juvenile justice, and faith-based and community agencies. These people need practical, proven strategies that work in the real world, on the front lines of the child's "life space." This is not therapy on a couch but therapy on the run.<sup>4</sup>

Fritz Redl found descriptive terms such as *oppositional* and *conduct problem* to be of little value in developing behavioral interventions. Instead, he built an entire system of therapy around diagnosing significant events in the child's life. A life event is best understood by knowing how it was experienced and interpreted, rather than viewing behavior through the distorted "optics" of a particular discipline (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 26). Sticking to events avoids the trap of confusing clinical jargon. People without psychological training can describe events in detail. Children, including those with cognitive disabilities, can communicate most effectively by relating stories (Baker & Gersten, 2000).

Redl, like his mentor, August Aichhorn (1935), would engage youth in detailed discussion of an event to decode the meaning of the behavior:

How does it start? Where does it end? Try to translate into an actual anecdotal incident—an "event system." There is no other way to get at the clinical facts. . . . Stick to the here and now, the actual process, the demarcated event and then you will begin to understand. (Redl, 1994, p. 53)

A person who shares emotionally charged life events opens a window to his or her world. Exchanging stories also is a prime means of social bonding. Unfortunately, many interviewers either interrupt respondents when they break into stories or disregard the importance of this narrative (Bruner, 1990). By exploring events of importance to a child, we get a sample of how that youngster thinks, perceives, and feels. People do not reinvent themselves with each new challenge. Thus timelines of events reveal a youth's typical coping style, whether constructive or self-defeating.