Therapeutic Communication

Build positive relationships and increase student motivation

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Introduction

Verbal communication in the classroom is often dispensed with little planning and only a moderate amount of thought. This is because it's so easy to talk, and most of us assume that students can easily and quickly comprehend verbal language. It's true, that students can easily and effortlessly understand the words that are spoken in class, but comprehension is another matter. Furthermore, our words are our opportunity to build and establish relationships with students, so they should be chosen with care and spoken strategically, especially with students in therapeutic programs.

Words can trigger students and words can comfort students. Words can activate negative memories that are completely unrelated to the present situation and words can activate positive memories related to the present activity. Words can activate a stress reaction and words can reassure. When words activate negative memories and stress reactions, it is often the case that the rest of the message (after the emotional and biological reaction) is not processed the way it is actually spoken. Instead, the additional words are distorted by the emotion of the listener or crowded out by the words from negative memories, words from another time and place. This is one way that misperception can occur, and it's how people develop different memories of what is actually said.

Words can shape identity (positively or negatively). Words can define the type of relationship students can expect to have with us. Words can drive students out of the present, into the past, and words can keep students in the present. Words can manage perception and manage mood. Words can escalate and words can de-escalate. Words

can be ignored and easily forgotten and words can be amplified by reinforcement and relationship. Too many words all at once can cause problems. Too many words spoken too quickly can cause problems. Words spoken from too far away can be a problem.

Your words can show that you're not listening, that you haven't been listening, and your words can show that you are attuned, truly listening. In so many ways, words can cause a breakdown in communication, a gap in comprehension; they can confuse and escalate a situation and they can hurt as much as they can help, especially in therapeutic classrooms.

Talk Less and Show More—Visual Support of the Verbal Message

Many children do not listen closely to the spoken word because they have trouble regulating their attention or because they have a poor habit of listening and they're accustomed to ignoring what is said until it is said over again many times. These children benefit more when verbal communication is supported visually.

Some children become defensive and defiant when they are told what they have to do, and their brains quickly activate memories and behavior patterns that have more to do with prior negative experiences and less to do with what is happening in current time. These children listen less to what is being said and attend more to what is playing in their brains. These children also benefit more when verbal communication is supported visually.

There are some children who believe that their adamant protests and other refusal behavior will change the teacher's words, will change the teacher's expectations to something much less demanding (this has been their experience in other settings). Instead of listening to and following the words of the teacher, they are using competing words of their own and expecting to have the teacher listen to them. These children also benefit more when verbal communication is supported visually.

Some students are told several times throughout a class period to complete their work, to follow directions, to pay attention, to stay in their seat, to stop talking, etc. With these students we already know one thing for certain; verbal redirection is ineffective. It has been ineffective all period, all year, and for many prior years. Nevertheless, verbal redirection continues to be the strategy of choice because it is most readily available. It is also the strategy of choice because this is how it works in the world outside of school. People are provided with verbal direction or redirection and they are expected to respond accordingly. It doesn’t matter how smart you are or how much you’ve learned in school; if you don’t learn how to respond appropriately to verbal direction and redirection you will be seriously disadvantaged in your efforts to be a success outside of school.

This is why we want to support our verbal information with visual communication. Visual lasts longer, and does not require repetition to be remembered. The visual message is there to be considered by the student when the student is more prepared to fully process the information. We should write it down, rather than repeatedly telling

students, show an example of what it should look like, and leave a visual reminder, rather than stay by their side and continue with verbal reminders. Visual supports make teachers more predictable to students when teachers show that they are relying on the visual support to enhance their message (e.g., referring to the "visual" when there is a question, pointing to the "visual" when students need reminders about routines and expectations, making decisions after referring to the "visual").

The ultimate goal is to increase the effectiveness of verbal direction by repeatedly pairing scripted verbal direction with visual supports that increase predictability of outcomes, visual supports that clarify the message and that don't change upon protest or further argument. Eventually we want to train the brain to quickly recognize these situations from the verbal direction alone, so that verbal direction leads to a quicker and more automatic initiation of productive behavior patterns.

> "Look, the routine right now is. . ." (point to the visual of the routine)
> "Look, this is what we're going to be doing. . ." (point to the task schedule on the board)
> "This is what your paper will look like when it is set up properly"
> "Look, first finish your paper, then choose an activity" (point to a "first/then" card)

See, (http://kevinplummerphd.com/visual-systems-to-increase-motivation-and-support-better-decision-making/) for more information about visual support systems.

The Language of Routine

We use explicit routines to help students develop more automatic behavior (less dependent on verbal directions) in many normally occurring ambiguous situations throughout the school day. There are routines for group discussion, for transitioning between activities, for speaking politely, for quiet seatwork, for centers, for walking in the hallway, for taking a break, etc. There are countless routines embedded in the school day, some more formal than others. Scripted repetitive language is used to prompt, support, and redirect routines. It is important that the language of routine sounds scripted, so that as the beginning of the redirection or reminder starts, the student's brain supplies the rest of the script before it is even spoken. In addition, visual displays are put up to remind and to show the order of the routine. We do all of this in an attempt to help the brain create new neural connections, so that the new behavior we're trying to develop becomes established in implicit memory and is available to the child without requiring much thinking or any effort to recall. For more information on routines see, http://kevinplummerphd.com/using-classroom-routines-to-create-a-therapeutic-brain-settling-effect/.

Students can easily become distracted and frequently need to be directed back to the task at hand. When we continually do that verbally, students can easily become distracted again because it's easy to forget what someone just said. When we continually direct verbally, the class becomes very noisy and the repeated verbal directions become another source of distraction. Sometimes students become distracted by their own thoughts and emotions and they have to be brought back to the

present and reoriented to what is supposed to be happening. A routine is a predictable set of circumstances, wired into the brain through repetition and reinforcement, which makes it much easier to get oriented once someone points out where you are in the routine. Furthermore, language about specific elements of a routine is instructive because it tells the student what is expected instead of telling the student what not to do.

"Right now, the routine is (point to a visual of the routine) and this is what we're doing," instead of "Stop fooling around and wasting your time. You're not getting anything done."

Routine also enables the teacher to provide correction of behavior without making it personal, without raising defenses, and without creating misperceptions.

"The routine for asking for help is to use a polite request. That's our routine, so I'm going to have you follow that." Instead of, "I'm asking you to stop being rude. That's not how we ask for help in this class."

Routines allow the teacher to respond to requests affirmatively, rather than in the negative.

"Can I do my math on the computer?"

Say this:
"Let me check the routine (a visual). The routine says that computer math is after you finish with the worksheet, so yes, you can do your math on the computer, once you finish your worksheet."

Instead of saying this:
"No, you can't use the computer. It's not time for the computer. Don't keep asking me about the computer. You should know better by now."

The language of routine can avoid having the direction sound like a personal attack and it can help the student access the memories associated with the established routine, keeping students in the present and preventing misperception. The language of routine should be highly scripted, so you can say the same thing and the same way each time (and a visual helps you remember this). The precision in language and the repetitiveness of the script enables much quicker processing of the information because the brain thinks ahead, and when it recognizes the first part of the script, it fills in the rest before it is even spoken. In this way, the script becomes a self-control device and the student is less dependent on the teacher's words as the control device.

"The routine for asking for help is. . ." (the student's brain fills in the rest before the teacher even completes the rest of the script).

Redirecting through the routine is one way to eliminate over use of the word "no". Over use of the word "no" can trigger defiance in most people. It can also trigger distress

reactions, irrational thinking ("I'll never get to. . ., you never let me. . .") and oppositional behavior. When students make requests that cannot be granted, refer to the routine.

"Right now, the routine is math and we're finishing our math papers. Ask me about playing cards when it's time for credit check."

Yes, you can get a drink, but first finish your math paper, then get your drink."

It isn't easy, but we want to find ways to eliminate the word "no" from our directions and from our responses to student requests.

Improving Comprehension of the Nuances of Routine with Visual Communication

Some students need even more support before they can understand and figure out how to follow established routines, because embedded within some school routines are situations that are not as intuitive to some young students. Most young children eventually come to understand the nuances of routines without needing to be told, but some children struggle with this. Intervention for comprehension of the subtle aspects of routines requires a reduction in verbal communication while increasing visual communication.

Improving comprehension of the subtle, yet vital, aspects of the routine can be enhanced by creating brief scripted and illustrated comprehension guides (stories and/or booklets) that reveal what some students miss and what they should try to do differently. (See Comprehension Guides at https://kevinplummerphd.com/). The illustrated guide is read and discussed with the student ahead of time, and referred to during the actual routine or learning activity, making it is easier to provide reminders and redirection in scripted fashion—while pointing—and without disrupting the flow of what is going on.

Beyond reminders and visual cueing, learning some nuanced routines requires a highly fluid reinforcement system so that students can realize immediately what they have done well and what they need to improve. The nuanced aspects of some routines are too difficult to describe in enough detail (in a guidebook) to achieve total clarity and comprehension for the student. Instead, students need numerous concrete examples from their own experience. This is why we have to be prepared to reinforce the nuanced behavior while it is happening, so student attention can be directed to it and a memory of it can be formed right at the time it is happening. We combine the reinforcement system and the visual routine into one feedback tool. For more information about this program feature see Visual Feedback Systems for Comprehension Guides. You can also find examples of this type of device at https://kevinplummerphd.com/visual-self-management-programs/.

Words Reflect the Relationship

When students are convinced that teachers genuinely care about them and believe in them as individuals, students believe in and care more about themselves, they care

more about their class, and strive for greater achievement in school. According to research that examined emotionally supportive teachers, these teachers were observed to be warm, kind, sensitive to emotional needs, and thoughtful in their responses to children. They engaged in positive communication, using respectful language and a calm voice, and they provided gentle guidance.

Many students in therapeutic classrooms come with insecure attachments, poor bonding and limited capacity to trust adults. Many students have been rejected, neglected and mistreated by adults and peers. They have been told, over and again, that they've been a disappointment, a source of trouble, a source of misery and that they are incompetent and incapable. Some of these students feel unwanted and unloved. Many of these students enter the therapeutic classroom with the scars of failed or unfulfilled relationships and their relationship needs interfere with their ability to function.

Think about the type of relationship you want to establish with your students. Use words in a way that can build positive character and meet a personal need. Provide feedback that shows what you think about the student.

> “That was nice of you to let Jane have the first turn. You are a very considerate person.”

Provide recognition that shapes identity.

> “You did a great job on this math paper. I want you to be one of my math helpers.”

Frequently use the word give, as you interact with your students. Students who have unmet emotional needs should frequently hear the word give, especially as we require or demand things from them. We want to give time, give space, give credit, give a chance or opportunity, give attention, give thought, and we want to speak in ways that help students feel that they have been given to.

"This is important, so I'm going to give you some time to think about that."
"I'm impressed, I give you a lot of credit for trying that."
"I know you're not happy about it, so I'm going to give you a chance to try that again."
"I know you want to get it right before you show anyone, so I'm going to give you your privacy as you work on that."
"I know you're having trouble concentrating, so I'm going to give you a great work space that will help you focus."

Show that you notice. A person who notices is a person the student can learn to trust and rely on, a person who will see what is most important, figure out what is really going on, be patient until the situation has been properly observed, and keep an open mind about what it all means. A person who notices learns something from watching closely, and abandons preconceived ideas to incorporate what was just learned. In addition, students impacted by trauma sometimes become highly anxious in the presence of

adults who appear not to notice or who "jump to conclusions" without understanding the situation.

Frequently use the word notice in your comments about the student, then report on something that shows how observant you are and what your ability is to see the best in the student.

"This is what I just noticed about you. . ."

Words for Reinforcement and Effective Positive Feedback

Children have trouble accepting praise that evaluates them (“You are a good reader”) when the specifics have not been stated first (“What makes her think that? I’m not as good as she thinks and she’ll be disappointed in me when she finds that out.”).

What was it that specifically impressed you?

“Whenever I read through your writing, the descriptive words and details you use give me a very clear mind picture.”

Add a character building element.

“You are good at knowing what will make your story interesting to other people.”

Practice being impressed. Students like to exceed your expectations. We focus a great deal on meeting expectations, but there is no satisfaction in that for students. Students like to exceed the teacher’s expectations. Some students have never impressed anyone, except when they’ve acted inappropriately.

“I’m impressed. I was expecting students to find five out of the ten new terms, but you found eight. You must have worked really hard.”

Tell the class (for the effect on the group as well as the individual).

“Look up here for a minute. I just found what I was looking for. Look how neat this paper is. Everything is lined up, the writing is neat, and all the steps are numbered. If anyone needs help setting up their paper, you can check with Rachel.”

Tell someone else, let the student overhear you telling another.

(to another teacher who has stopped in) “I’ve got to tell you about this incredibly kind thing one of my students did today...”

Put it in writing.

I noticed your hand up in science today. I could tell you were really paying attention. I appreciate your effort and I think you

will see it pay off on your next quiz. Keep up the good work.

Positive feedback should involve novel, rather than scripted language. Think about something to say about the student that makes it clear you were paying attention and makes it clear that you were impressed.

Try to avoid saying things like, "Great job following the routine." Instead, find one thing worth recognizing in the routine. "I really appreciate how quiet you were following the hallway routine. That shows a lot of consideration for all the students in class who are trying to work. You are very considerate."

When a student experiences a mild negative consequence (e.g., a move down in the Green Zone), provide the language of hope and opportunity

"I'm going to give you a chance to move up by . . .”

When a student makes a request that you can't grant because the student has not met expectations, provide the language of hope and opportunity.

“You are not in the green. Ask me again when you get into the green.”

When you want to reinforce the importance of your feedback system, such as the Green Zone, frequently refer to it as you make your decisions to grant requests.

“Let me check The Green Zone. All right, you’re in the green, go ahead."

Remember, redirect students to the routine with language that is scripted and reinforce students with language that is more novel and personal. If you use scripted language for reinforcement, it won't feel like reinforcement to the student (so it won't, in effect, be reinforcement), and if you use personal language for redirection to the routine it could feel like a personal attack to the student and it might trigger defensive behavior.

Avoid communication that shapes a negative identity. “Bad” students do not do well. We must be careful in our communication that we do not convince students they are “bad.”

Avoid negative absolutes: “You never...” “You’re always...”
Avoid negative superlatives: “You are the worst...the slowest...”
Avoid negative narrative or history**:** “Get it done on time for a change”
Avoid negative character labels**:** “You are...a slow poke, lazy, a slob, sneaky, a liar, thoughtless, careless, a motor mouth, irresponsible, thick headed, a clown, a poor listener, dishonest...”
Avoid negative comparisons: “Your brother got the brains and you got the creativity”...Jane is quick to get things, but you’re a real plugger”

Words for Memory Building and Perception Management

Future behavior is not based on past behavior, as many people believe, it is based on a memory of past behavior and that memory may be based on behavior that never occurred. It may be based on a misperception, or a memory made by taking a piece of the present experience, distorted by misperception, and combining it with a memory of something that happened long ago. To ensure more stable and predictable behavior we have to work on creating more stable memories that are based on more accurate perceptions. This is another way we should be careful with our words. With the right words, we can focus students on the present and support more accurate memories.

It is helpful to frequently use the words, "right now" while describing behavior and while describing the situation you would like students to remember. That helps with perception and it helps bring students into the present situation (and perhaps away from where a memory may have just taken them). Use sensory language to describe what you see, hear and feel, and that will more richly encode the memory.

"Right now, this is what I see (or this is what I hear)". "Right now, this is what I see. You are totally focused on your work, completely quiet, fully concentrating on your writing. I'm going to remember this picture of you as a totally focused, really hard worker. I'm impressed. I'm giving you double credits for that."

When you need the student to access a memory of focused hard work, and the reward associated with that (the teacher's praise, the double credits, the feeling of pride and competence) you can help the student recall that moment because you used words to create a visual memory, a verbal memory, and an emotional memory. For more information on the role of memory in the manifestation of behavior, see: http://kevinplummerphd.com/the-role-of-memory-in-the-manifestation-of-behavior/.

Words can also be used to create a memory by clarifying perception. Perhaps a student is choosing to avoid work and you would like that student to learn something constructive about that poor choice. It will be very important to ensure that the student has the right perception of that moment.

"I came over to give you credit, but I'm looking at your paper and you haven't done any work. I can help you if you want"

"I don't want any help because I don't want to do it."

"I really want to give you credit, but first you have to do some work."

"I don't want to."

"Credits are for hard work, so right now you're choosing to not earn any credit."

Later, when the credit sheet is tallied and it comes up short of the goal, and the student is upset and feels a sense of unfairness and wants to blame someone for not giving him a chance, the teacher can say,

"I remember what happened. I gave you a chance to earn credit for doing your work and you picked not doing your work. I'm surprised you picked that, because now you don't have enough credits to pick the activity of your choice."

"Don't worry, you'll have another chance to pick working hard so you can earn credit." (the language of hope and opportunity).

Those words are carefully scripted to clarify perception in a situation where it would be very easy for the student to distort and forget what really happened. Those words clarify perception, create a useable memory, and leave the student with all the responsibility for the choices, along with the responsibility for the unfavorable outcome and a clear understanding of what it would take from the student to achieve a different outcome the next time. Instead of threatening consequences, or loading up on consequences to make a point large enough to impact the student in the moment (and escalating a situation beyond a reasonable point), we should strive to be more precise in our language so that we are creating the right memory and so we can repeat the same scripting in subsequent trials.

Words Can Trigger Defensive Behavior and Undermine Motivation

Don't do this Behavior Direction Questions:

"Are you supposed to be doing that right now?"
"Is that the way you're supposed to line up?"
"Do you think I'm happy with you right now?"

Try to do this Speak in the Affirmative:

"Right now, the routine is. . ."
"Right now I'm giving credit for. . ."
"I'm going to give you a chance to move up by. . ."

Don't do this Belittling:

"It's amazing how little you care about your work. I know kids in kindergarten who can do neater work than this."

Try to do this Show Surprise:

"Rachel, I looked quickly at the paper you just handed in and I was surprised. It didn't look like some of the other neat and careful work I've gotten from you. I'm going to have you take this and turn it into a real Rachel paper."

Don't do this Blaming and Accusing:

"You made a mess at the computer area. Are you this sloppy at home?"

Try to do this Describe the Problem:

"Ben, I'm looking at the computer area and I see your book on the table, a pencil on the floor and many scraps of paper around the chair."

"Let's have you follow the reset for neatness routine."

Don't do this Sarcasm:

"Today should be declared a holiday, you finally managed to turn in a paper on time. I guess today is my lucky day."

Try to do this Legitimate Recognition of Effort:

"Jane, I want you to know I noticed your paper was in on time. I appreciate the effort that must have taken. I know it's not easy. Think about what you did differently this time and keep it up."

Don't do this Name Calling:

"You get the prize. You are the 'number one interrupter.' Do You know how rude and disrespectful it is to keep interrupting while I'm with another student?"

Try to do this Give Information:

"When you see me helping a student you probably think it's a good time to get help from me, but actually it's the worst time because I can only help when I'm not interrupted. When you have your turn, you will notice how much better it works when we're not interrupted."

Don't do this Embarrassing:

"You forgot your homework again? All right class, it looks like Jane is going to keep us waiting another day for our perfect homework completion goal."

Try to do this Write it in a Note:

"I know you must feel bad about forgetting your homework again. Give it some thought and let me know when you come up with a few solutions to your problem. Then we'll get together and work out a better plan."

Don't do this Threatening:

"You better get back to work on that paper or you'll have to give up your free time while everyone else is having fun."

Try to do this State it as a Choice:

"I see you wandering around the room while your math paper is not done. You can finish your work at your desk or work up next to my desk, if you need a change of scenery." Or, "I want to remind you that your choice is to finish your work now or during the free time period right before lunch."

Don't do this Comparing:

"If the rest of the class can finish on time, why can't you?"

Try to do this Enlist the Student's Help:

"I know there must be a reason why you're not finishing your work on time. I wonder if you can help me figure it out. Think about it, let me know what you come up with, then maybe I can help. We'll make a plan during recess today."

Don't do this Ordering:

"Gabriel, open your book to page twenty-five, pick up your pencil, and start working on the first ten problems, now!"

Try to do this State Feelings Instead of Showing Feelings:

"Gabriel, I'm sure you can appreciate how frustrating it gets when you have to repeat the same instructions over again because people aren't listening the first time. It gives me the feeling that you don't care about what I am saying." Remember to use "I" statements rather than blaming statements. "I feel _____ when you _____ because _____."

Or, "Right now I'm giving credit to students who have an open book and who are already starting to write."

Don't do this Reprimand:

"Who said you could use my scissors? How many times have I told you not to take things off my desk without permission?"

Try to do this Assume the Best of Intentions:

You probably didn't want to bother me when you took the scissors off my desk, but never mind that. You can always interrupt me to ask my permission before you borrow something off my desk."

Words Can Show You Are Attuned

Attuned people read the emotional states of others and they adjust their interactions accordingly. When students sense that teachers are attuned to them they are more emotionally settled, feel more secure, and develop greater feelings of trust. It quiets the limbic system, lowers alarm, and enables the student to be more focused on the present, better able to process and respond appropriately to what is going on around him/her. When a teacher is not attuned to a student, and that student has a history of trauma or poor attachment experiences, the student can easily become emotionally overwhelmed when that lack of attunement becomes evident.

When there is little attunement the emotionally-challenged student's brain elevates alarm level and processes the relationship as potentially threatening or challenging. Perhaps the teacher will overwhelm the student or demand too much and fail to notice the distress. The presence of such a person activates a subconscious process (emotional memories activated, stress response activated, alarm level raised) leading to feelings of insecurity, lack of trust, and potential threat. The student response, then, usually doesn't match what the teacher expected, communication temporarily breaks down, and both parties feel the more pronounced lack of attunement. When this pattern

continues in this manner, students will sometimes protest the mere approach of the teacher or they might insist on working with someone else, but can't give a specific reason why they feel that way. Practice adjusting the pacing, physical proximity, tone of voice, and length of sentence. Observe the results and make adjustments.

Watch the student closely and match the pace of communication to the comprehension level of the student. Slow down and clarify if necessary. Use shorter sentences with more space between the sentences.

Match the pace of the communication to the stress level of the student. Slow down, leave space to process, and rephrase.

Don't pile one misunderstanding on top of another. Take a break, allow time to settle things, then start again from a point of calm.

Avoid agitating the student who is focused on work by asking questions that require a major shift in concentration. Instead, make comments and provide commentary if the student is focusing and may have trouble shifting attention. Ask fewer questions or ask questions that have a "fill in the blank" or "multiple choice" answer. If the student is unresponsive to comments or commentary, come back later, instead of asking more questions.

Report on yourself during discussions with the student. "Right now, I'm really listening to what you're telling me and I'm giving it a lot of thought because I know how important it is to you." Report on how much you're listening, how much thought you're giving it, how much you're helping or not helping.

"I'm giving you a chance to do that one without my help because I know you want to see what you can do on your own."

"See how I helped you with that? In this class, we help each other because we care about each other."

Be Careful with Words of "Hope" That Raise Guilt, Stress, and Anxiety

Sometimes adults want children to be more concerned than they appear to be. Maybe we think they should be studying more, or they should be more appreciative, or more conscientious or better prepared. Guilt and anxiety can certainly motivate behavior, but both feelings can also be damaging when used excessively. We may initially get the behavior we want, but we may also be creating complications for children as they internalize these feelings and find it difficult to escape them, even in situations that are only remotely similar.

To achieve a specific and situational effect, we are loading children up with guilt and anxiety in a way that follows some children into a multitude of unrelated situations. Some children can easily shed the burden, but many cannot and they carry it with them.

Furthermore, when guilt and anxiety are used to manipulate children, it can lead some of these children to continue that destructive pattern when they become parents.

In many cases, our offering of "hope" is a disguise for the stress and anxiety we are trying to create.

"I hope you're fully prepared for your test, because right now you could be studying."

"You're up late. I hope you don't have trouble getting up in the morning."
"I won't have trouble getting up."
"Well, I hope not, because you have math first period and you can't afford to miss math."
"I'm good."
"Well, I hope so, because you need a better math grade if you expect to get into the college of your choice."

The above example is really a statement of doubt, not a statement of hope. It's an infusion of stress and anxiety, rather than encouragement, and it's designed to make the child feel stressed rather than confident. Instead, state the feelings directly, without any added baggage, and make the feelings about the child instead of about yourself.

"I feel like you're making it hard on yourself by staying up late and I don't want it to be a struggle for you to get up in the morning."

"I'm worried about you, that you'll be disappointed with your grade on the math test, because you don't seem to be studying much, but maybe you already know the material well enough. What do you think?"

"I hope you do well on this test, because I know you'll feel great if you can bring up your grade. Let me know how it goes."

Reflective Listening

Some problematic behaviors are the result of student misunderstanding, misperception and poor processing of information. When this is the case, we have trouble changing that behavior (and getting students to accept responsibility for the behavior) until we clear up the confusion and close the comprehension gap. The comprehension gap consists of the gap in the student's understanding added to the gap in the teacher's understanding of the student's confusion.

Too often, behavior programming targets just the behavior, but a more effective approach would be to first close the comprehension gap. The behavior problem is sometimes completely resolved by closing the comprehension gap. Closing the comprehension gap can be achieved through reflective listening routine. For more information on comprehension breakdown and repair, see Social Comprehension Breakdown and related materials.

With reflective listening the other person feels “heard” and misconceptions are cleared up quickly. The telling back process creates a shared understanding between the teller and the listener and it prompts the teller to explain further until all the pertinent facts and feelings have been expressed. This is a crucial first step in effective problem solving and mediation.

listen with patience
nod your head
do not interrupt
do not over interpret or jump to conclusions
tell back what you’ve heard (“Let me see if I’ve got this right.”).

With reflective listening we have two goals, 1) achieve a better understand the student's perception/understanding and 2) convince the student that we have this understanding.

Words Can Deescalate Struggles

Remember, our communication (verbal and nonverbal) goes a long way toward controlling the situation. First, eliminate all threats. There are many drawbacks to using threats:

they destroy the teacher-student relationship
they build anxiety
they undermine trust
they create resentment
they create a coercive atmosphere
they make the teacher look desperate and out of control
they undermine the student’s confidence in the teacher
they increase insecurity

Avoid ultimatums (you will, or else)

Avoid commands (use the “first/then” phrase, or direct in the form of a choice, or remind about the routine)

Describe objectively what is happening. Listen with patience, nod your head, do not interrupt, do not over interpret or jump to conclusions, tell back what you’ve heard (“Let me see if I’ve got this right. I want to help so I am trying to understand.”)

Use a calm, level voice

Acknowledge feelings and validate, convince the student you understand ("I can see you're upset. I understand how you could be feeling that way right now. You thought you were all done with your math, so of course you feel upset.").

Draw distinction between feelings and behavior ("It's okay to be angry about the math, it's not okay to yell and swear.").

Offer choices

Allow time and space to think about it, walk away briefly while the student is thinking (but don't give a very long period before returning if the student continues to deteriorate).

Explain the choices and the likely outcomes without judgment (no advice)

Reduce the amount of verbal language

Increase visual communication (refer to posted routines, expected behaviors).

Expand time, do not compress it or add the pressure of time limits ("Take all the time you need, no hurry. Give yourself some time to decide if you need to, don't decide right away. It's okay to sit and watch for a while, until you feel ready.").

Reinforce the student's other appropriate behavior

Keep it as private as possible

If it's early in the escalation, change of scenery can help

Avoid physical contact with an agitated student

For more information on therapeutic language during the de-escalation process see the scripts associated with time out/think time as well as safe room settling scripts at kevinplummerphd.com.

Words to Provide Effective Criticism and Corrective Feedback

First point out what is right, then what needs to be different. First describe what is already done, then what needs to be done.

"You've got some really fascinating information about butterflies. See if you can group the ideas by different topics, then write a paragraph for each topic, rather than one long paragraph full of many different ideas."

Deliver criticism and corrective feedback privately. When stopping by the student's desk and offering correction, do not stand there and wait for a proper acknowledgement. Point out the routine, point out an example, then move on and give the student an independent and private chance to make a decision. Also, when issuing directives, allow some wait time before repeating the directive or before moving on to a more serious consequence. Be prepared, soon after the student has made a better choice, to reinforce the student. If you wait too long the student may abandon the behavior and go back to what you originally wanted to see changed.

Do not give positive feedback on compliance (e.g., "Thank you for being quiet, as I had asked."). Instead, reinforce a related behavior (e.g., "You're doing a great job focusing on your work.").

Resist the temptation to use an abundance of words to make a point about behavior that you want the student to change. Too many words, spoken too fast, without enough space in between to process all the language can trigger a stress response that can further impede language processing and increase defiant behavior.