Crisis Management

Module 15

Thomas Monoghan, MS Ed

Old Dominion University

Series Editors

Irene Walker-Bolton
Virginia Department of
Education
Richmond, VA

Robert A. Gable
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA

Stephen W. Tonelson
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA

Pat Woolard
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA

It was a typical Wednesday afternoon in Mrs. Winger's class. As the children were finishing up their writing assignments in preparation for recess, a sudden series of loud noises occurred outside the classroom door, startling the children. Fortunately, earlier in the day, Mrs. Winger conducted a review of the classroom crisis intervention plan with her students, including a mock drill. Following the procedures in the plan, she delegated the paraeducator to coordinate lining up the children in a quick yet orderly fashion so they could be escorted to the designated safe location. Showing poise and calm, the paraeducator did as she was asked with little resistance from the children. With her students safe and accounted for, Mrs. Winger followed the guidelines of the intervention plan to call her contact within the crisis management team as she went about securing the safety of the classroom.

Description of A Crisis Management Plan

Classroom crises are inevitable. Classrooms with students with emotional or behavioral disabilities are especially vulnerable to disruptions. These children often exhibit disruptive behaviors that may cause harm to themselves or others. During these moments of disorder, students can be easily riled, distressed, and even panic. In order to maintain a safe and secure learning environment for all students, it is essential for teachers to develop a systematic and preventative crisis intervention plan (Rock, 2000).

As teachers develop emergency contingency plans, there are several components that must be included. The most important step is to identify what constitutes a crisis and at what times it is appropriate for teachers or crisis management teams to implement emergency procedures. Any threat of violence, property damage, or aggression of any kind is grounds for implementation. Individuals tasked with responding to the crisis situation need also to be identified. Any classroom crisis management plan should conform to existing school procedures, and all participants and responders coordinate their efforts with fellow teachers, staff, administration, and the school-wide crisis management team (Colvin, 2004; Rock, 2000).

The next step in the process requires detailing the responsibilities of crisis responders and how these individuals will be notified of an emergency situation. Using cell phones, pagers, or the intercom system as part of a reliable rapid response network is also recommended. Consider using a code system so as not to incite further distress. Assigning paraeducator and teaching assistants to shepherd the children to a designated safe area will allow the teacher and crisis

management team to work together toward diffusing the problem situation. It is essential that copies of the crisis intervention plan be distributed to all participants, and these individuals are thoroughly trained in all safety regulations and crisis response procedures (Allen & Ashbaker, 2004; Yell, Meadows, Drasgow, & Shriner, 2009).   No matter the extent of parental involvement, it is essential that parental approval be obtained before adopting any crisis intervention plan (Colvin, 2004).

Part of the crisis intervention process is teaching students appropriate behaviors and responses to crisis situations, as well as familiarizing them with the emergency plan. Teachers need to clearly explain the reasoning for the plan, and define all expectations and procedures. Give the students a list of the steps to follow then model appropriate skills and responses. Explain the reasoning for each step, expectation, and skill. Remind the students that the goal is to prevent a crisis before it starts and to prevent the escalation of a crisis when one happens. Discuss scenarios when these expectations, skills, and procedures may be used. The more students make connections between the plan and real-life scenarios, the more prepared they will become. Do so using role-playing that includes constructive feedback, guidance, modeling, and independent practice. Teachers can also use these practice exercises as an opportunity to reinforce social skills training (Koch, 2010).

In any crisis situation, it is important for teachers to remain calm and take appropriate measures to diffuse them safely and discretely. This should include low-profile responses, such as eye contact or non-verbal gestures, if classroom expectations and routine problem-solving methods do not work. Using low-profile means to curtail problematic behavior will draw less attention to the situation and allow class activities to continue with minimal interruption. If non-verbal cues do not work, the student will need to be verbally reminded of the rules, however in a manner that is unobtrusive by speaking in a calm and soft voice. Proximity control may be enough to solve the problem. Moving about the room from student to student as they complete seat-work is a good opportunity for teachers to monitor behavior and to proactively address problematic situations before they escalate (Yell et al., 2009).

If proximity, non-verbal gestures, or private reminders do not curtail misbehavior, teachers should deliver a precision request. It is not the intention for this request to escalate the situation, so the teacher needs to do so with calm confidence and no further comment. If the student responds favorably, reinforcement is recommended. If after five seconds the student does not respond favorably, the teacher should then deliver a pre-planned negative consequence approved by the school administration for such circumstances. These responses may include time-out, response cost, overcorrection, in-school suspension, or office referral (Morgan & Jenson, 1998; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

As soon as the situation is resolved and the consequence has been issued, the teacher and student should engage in a short debriefing session. The purpose of this session is to help the student understand the origin of the inappropriate behavior, to provide feedback and to remind the student to use socially acceptable alternative behaviors in the future, and to prepare the student to be reintegrated into the classroom. The debriefing should not be used as an opportunity to chastise or criticize the student for his or her actions. The teacher should treat the student with calm and respect, explain the exact purpose for the session, ask non-threatening questions to help the student understand the antecedent(s) of his or her actions, inquire of the

student how he or she could have better handled the situation, and obtain a commitment from the student to employ more acceptable behavior in the future (Sugai & Colvin, 1997).

Research to Support a Crisis Management Plan

The foundation of any crisis management plan and planning process is Knackendoffel's collaborative problem solving approach. This 13-step process allows for the participation of a team of individuals to work toward the common goal of establishing an effective crisis management plan. This process includes:

1. Defining what constitutes a crisis situation.
2. Gather specific information about theoretical crisis scenarios and possible responses of the students.
3. Explain the problem solving process as a group effort toward achieving a realistic and workable crisis management plan that benefits all students and educators.
4. Identify alternative solutions from which to consider the best options to incorporate into the plan.
5. Summarize solutions from the discussion notes into an easy to understand format for review before moving on to the next step of the planning process.
6. Analyze all possible problem consequences then discuss the benefits and detriments of each outcome.
7. Rate each outcome or solution according to plausibility on a rating scale. This step involves rating each solution, not ranking them against each other.
8. Select the best solution based upon the given ratings. More than one may be selected if multiple solutions are highly probable.
9. Determine the satisfaction of the chosen solution(s) and revisit the rating and selection process if a consensus is not achieved.
10. State support for the decision even if it is not the ideal solution. It may be difficult to predict outcomes in advance, so some solutions may be less clear under certain circumstances than under others.
11. Develop an action plan based upon the chosen solutions. This involves delegating responsibilities and detailing the contingencies upon which the plan will be implemented.
12. Develop a monitoring system for the plan and methods by which it will be modified, amended, and improved. This requires close communication among all participants and regular meetings to discuss its effectiveness.
13. Schedule the next meeting to avoid later meeting conflicts and to cultivate a sense of accountability for those involved in the planning process (Knackendoffel, 2005).

When to Consider a Crisis Management Plan

The first step toward establishing a crisis intervention plan is to ensure the school itself has the resources and mechanisms in place to support such a plan. Most school-wide safety programs can be placed into four categories: (a) psychological programs involving conflict resolution, social skills, and mediation training; (b) behavior management programs offering teacher consultation and training; (c) school-wide programs to optimize school organization and enhance

school safety; and (d) youth development programs involving structured community activities for youths as a means to explore abilities, interests, and skills. Other means of promoting safe and secure schools include built-in security systems such as surveillance cameras and monitoring devices, crisis management protocols and personnel, and school buildings designed to minimize potential threats and hazards. Zero-tolerance policies also aim to build discipline and control within the school environment. The intent is to create a more secure climate by removal of all detriments (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010).

Perceptions of school safety play a large role in establishing a secure learning environment. There are significant differences between students and teachers regarding a climate of safety within schools; with students' typically rating school safety nearly 40% lower on average than do teachers. This disparity may contribute to differing emphasis on proper methods to secure a safe school environment. Likewise, students who are more active, attached, and connected at school are less likely to deviate from social norms, break rules, or fail to meet expectations. When students perceive all school personnel are working together to maintain a safe and secure learning environment, students' perceptions of school safety improve and they exhibit less deviant tendencies. This finding alone should encourage more student participation toward the safety and security of school and classroom (Booren, Handy, & Power, 2011).

Guidelines for Implementing a Crisis Management Plan

The key to prompt, safe, and successful crisis intervention is creating an effective crisis management plan and team. The term "crisis" typically refers to any event that disrupts normal daily operation and that may pose a danger to the health of students and school personnel. These events include (but are not limited to) assaults and other overtly aggressive behaviors, shootings and suicides, natural or man-made disasters upon school grounds, accidents, and sudden medical emergencies. The team itself should consist of representatives from all school personnel and support staff, community service volunteers and professionals, and parents. The responsibilities of the team include: a) developing, maintaining, and implementing the crisis intervention plan; b) coordinating resources and activities with district and local community emergency services and agencies; c) the dissemination of the plan, and training of the school staff in safety measures and plan procedures; and d) meeting on a regular basis to review and revise the intervention plan (Gullatt & Long, 1996).

An effective crisis management plan is a comprehensive set of policies, procedures, and concise instructions devised to protect all students and school personnel during any emergency scenario. Any effective and efficient crisis intervention plan requires five essential components:

1. The plan is drafted by representatives from all areas of the school staff, reviewed by emergency services professionals, and approved by the school administration and the parents of the students.
2. The plan is either included as a part of, or conforms with, school-wide quality assurance and risk management programs.
3. The plan includes as part of its objectives (a) mechanisms to identify potential crises and neutralize them before they mature, and (b) procedures to safely and quickly resolve crises when they do arise.

4. The plan includes mechanisms to contain and control the scope and intensity of the crisis while underway.
5. The plan takes into consideration the "human factor," including the widely varying array of emotions, reactions, and abilities exhibited by individuals in a crisis situation.

To maintain order and consistent instruction, teachers must know how to intervene when crises arise. Many problematic situations can be resolved by the students themselves. A raised hand or thinking before acting may defuse most potentially volatile scenarios. However, there are circumstances that students may not be prepared for or able to cope under such conditions. Problems beyond a student's control—such as trouble at home—may manifest itself as trouble at school. Feelings of fear and anxiety can overwhelm a child who is unfamiliar with or ill-equipped to handle these strong emotions. Likewise, instructors without an adequate crisis management plan may feel stuck in a no-win situation of escalating emotions. Fortunately, there are research-based practices available to assist with these issues. For example, the ACCEPTS Toolkit provides a structured framework for teachers who encounter such situations (Koch, 2010).

ACCEPTS is an acronym formed from the first letter of each program skill: Activities, Contributing, Comparison, Emotions, Pushing away, Thoughts, and Sensations. ACCEPTS is a multi-session program involving one-to-one, teacher-to-student skills training built upon a firm foundation of distress tolerance. The first step requires identifying at-risk students. Candidate students more often than not have failed to respond favorably to cognitive modification or behavior change strategies. The ACCEPTS strategy promotes neutral behaviors that encourage students to pursue more productive approaches. Once a student begins the program, the student and teacher work together toward devising a skill set. The seven ACCEPTS skill strategies increase tolerance to stressful situations until emotions subside and more productive behavior is possible. These seven skill strategies include:

- Activities that the student can engage in to take the student's mind off of the problem situation without resorting to troublesome responses. Activities serve a double-purpose not only as a diversion, but also as a source of self-esteem which acts as an inhibitor of negative thoughts.
- Contributing to classroom or school-wide activities and functions. By doing so, students switch focus from themselves to the group, team, or fellow peers united toward a common goal.
- Contrasting the student's situation to others with similar or worse concerns. This perspective helps students understand they are not alone in their suffering. This may also include comparing how well the student is currently doing as opposed to when circumstances were worse. Doing so shows students that progress is being made.
- Experiencing opposite emotions allows the student to take a break from negative feelings by feeling something different. Allow the student to engage in a pleasing task that elicits a different emotion from the current one. This may include listening to a favorite song, drawing, or reading an engaging story.
- Pushing away troubling thoughts or feelings shows students that feelings of sadness and thoughts of distress are temporary. Visualization helps students practice pushing away by

using props to symbolize the "pushing away" of negative thoughts or feelings. Another method is visualizing placing negatives in a box, locking it, and stowing it away for later.

- Other thoughts include having students get involved in tasks or other diversions that distract from negative thoughts and emotions. Give the students a meaningful task, like counting supplies or tidying shelves, that occupies them and builds self-worth. Some students may also enjoy taking a walk and describing what they see.
- Other sensations can be employed as a means to overcome negative thoughts and feelings. Have the student choose an activity or distraction that involves the senses of taste, smell, hearing, sight, or touch. Some students may choose squeezing a stress ball, the smell of flowers, feeling the heat from a radiator, or examining the rainbow from a prism (Koch, 2010).

Cautions Regarding the Use of a Crisis Management Plan

When incidents of high stress, distress, and confusion may arise, teachers and other school personnel must take into consideration the "human factor." All individuals, especially younger children who may not be emotionally or mentally developed enough to grasp the magnitude of crises situations, may not be cognizant of school emergency procedures and may react in any number of ways to crisis developments. It is essential for all teachers and school personnel to understand and account for potential breakdowns in communication and behaviors. A crisis management plan that is ignored and is not distributed or practiced will ultimately fail to achieve its objectives. Drills and review are essential to the process and any intervention plan must include these components in order to meet expectations (Rock, 2000; Smiar, 1992).

It is also important to consider the power of resistance in a student-teacher relationship. Teachers sometimes unwittingly contribute to a crisis situation through conflict with the student. Teachers must be aware that students may not be confrontational due to personal motivations, but their reactions may stem from conflict between the student's behavior and the teacher's dictates. Teachers need to be able to rely upon multiple measures to resolve conflicts. Any incompatibility must be addressed by providing an alternative behavior that serves the same function as the target behavior while simultaneously teaching the student a new skill (Koch, 2010).

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