

CLIMBING THE WALLS: HARNESSING THE POSITIVE IN EMOTIONALLY AND BEHAVIORALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN

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"Climbing!," Ned announced.¹

"Climb on!," I replied, taking up the slack in the system.

Ned grabbed the oblong blue handhold in his hand. First he stepped his right foot off the ground, finding an upside-down green hold shaped like the letter "a", and then his left foot followed onto a hold a little higher. He worked his way up the wall slowly, calling down for directions repeatedly. Twice, he almost gave up. Both times, however, I shouted up to him that if he wanted to come down he could, but that I felt certain he could make it.

Finally, Ned's hand grabbed the bar at the ceiling.

"Hey!," he shouted. "Hey! Jeremy! Doug! Look at me! I made it! Whoohoo!"

The other twelve- and thirteen-year-olds who weren't climbing themselves came over.

"Awesome!," said Jeremy. "Ned made it to the top!"

"Good job!," Stephanie shouted up.

"Okay, Ned," I said, "now just lean back and let me take your weight on the rope."

"I'm scared."

"It's just like we practiced," I reminded him. "Just lean back like you're sitting and walk your legs down the wall."

Tentatively, Ned sat back in his harness, and, still hanging on to the rope with his hands, said he was ready to lower.

"Okay," I said, "you really don't need to hang on to the rope, but if it helps you feel safe, that's fine."

I lowered him to the ground. He untied the rope from his harness with lightning speed and bounded off to share his triumph with the other children.

The nine students (eight of whom were male) in classroom 403 ranged in age from eleven to thirteen. Two weeks shy of college graduation, I felt nervous about my new job working with children suffering from extreme emotional and behavioral problems. Their diagnoses included bipolar disorder, attachment disorders, psychotic tendencies, obsessive/compulsive disorders, and attention-deficit disorders, to name a few. Managing such a mix in a normalized classroom setting challenged my limits on a daily basis. My daily interactions with the children often proved more negative than positive. They yelled and swore at adults frequently, threw

¹ Names have been changed.

objects such as chairs at each other and adults, and at times physically attacked one another or adults. As the child care worker, I dealt with these behavior problems a large proportion of the time, allowing the two teachers to continue with the lessons. I also worked intimately with counselors and other team members on behavior management plans, which often included negative consequences.

After the first few weeks, I found myself searching my mind for a way to establish a connection with these children which could impact them positively. I hoped to find some sort of engaging activity that would enable them to see me beyond my role as a child care worker, while also helping them to develop more confidence in themselves and in the adults who influenced their lives. I wanted to help my students find a window of time in which they could overcome their negative behaviors, a time to escape the swearing, yelling, hyperactivity, and violence that characterized their day-to-day existence at school. With their various diagnoses of emotional and/or behavioral disturbances, I soon realized this would prove hard to accomplish within the daily routine of classroom activities. In class, the students fell into familiar behavior patterns corresponding to the schedule of academic classes (such as the student who managed to end up in time-out every writing class for several months). I continued to spend my days talking nonstop, giving directions, helping kids resolve issues, and intervening physically when necessary.

"I need everyone to focus. I need you to follow directions. Jennifer, you need to stop. Jonathan, put your pencil down. I'm going to count to three. One, two, three. Nice job following directions, Ned. Jonathan, now you need to take a time-out."

After several weeks, I had begun to wonder if I would ever find a way to engage the children positively for a significant duration of time. I wanted to show them that sometimes teachers and child care workers could have something *interesting* for them to learn and to develop a greater sense of positively based trust between the children and the adults in their lives. After all, we constantly told them to trust us, claiming to be "on their sides," despite the fact that the large proportion of our daily interactions involved handing out consequences for negative behaviors. How could we expect them to feel positively towards us, especially when neglectful and abusive adults could be held responsible for many of their behavior problems? Could I as a child care worker find a way to help build their tenuous sense of trust and confidence?

In my search for shared interests with the children, I decided to talk to them about certain aspects of my life outside the classroom. Most significantly, I told them about my passion for rock climbing. I thought it might serve as a connection, as many of them were interested and involved in sports. Early on, I noticed that whenever I talked about climbing during morning meeting, the kids became much more attentive and focused. They raised their hands more instead of shouting out, and

their interest appeared genuine. For these children, who had experienced so much trauma at their young ages, our efforts at planning activities or discussions often generated little interest or quickly ended with behavioral outbursts. Due to the novelty of rock climbing, our discussions captured their imaginations and allowed them to dream about something far removed from the usual classroom topics.

Amazed at their response, I told my supervisor in a weekly meeting about how much the classroom could focus when they possessed a genuine interest in the discussion. Imagine my surprise when he suggested the possibility of taking the children climbing! I had definitely thought of it before, but I had assumed that financial and legal constraints would render a program like this impossible. However, when my supervisor suggested the possibility, I immediately became enthusiastic. I explained that I was certain that the owner of the local climbing gym would be happy to work out a special time for us and a discounted price, as I had organized some field trips the previous year for an after-school program, and he had been very helpful.

From that point on, the program began to take shape. Throughout the fall, I brought in climbing equipment. My enormous jangling backpacks would stimulate the students' curiosity over the course of the day, as they looked forward to my afternoon presentations. I would begin by selecting several students to come up to the front of the classroom and serve as "models." For one presentation, I had the models put on harnesses, and hang climbing gear from their belts. I had them try to guess the purpose of each piece of equipment. Then I tied them into ropes as a climber would tie in, explaining the basics of rope safety. Another time, I had a student dress in expedition gear, complete with several layers of coats, goggles, and a headlamp. The students expressed amazement at the bivy bag, a small bag that serves as a substitute for a tent, into which a person can zip him or herself to protect from the elements. They then took turns climbing into a sleeping bag and trying on different pieces of equipment. The students relaxed and enjoyed themselves during these dress-up sessions, laughing as they learned.

Every Monday morning when we shared what we had done over the weekend, I described my climbing adventures to the students. When I went away on week-long vacations, they listened eagerly to my stories about the people I had met and the scenery. I brought in pictures for them to look at, not only of myself, but also of some teenagers who are world-class climbers to show them that even young people could excel at this sport. I also talked to them about disabled climbers who had overcome their disabilities to excel at the sport, hoping to communicate that people can triumph despite problems they may have, be they physical or mental. My students' enthusiasm only increased, as they asked me tons of questions about climbing, most frequently, "When are we going to get to go climbing?"

"Soon, I hope," I would say, praying that the funding would get approved and that these kids would finally experience the thrill of climbing themselves.

As January rolled around, the prospect of us actually starting a climbing program became more and more real. The gym owner and I worked out a fee and a time when the kids could have the whole climbing gym to themselves. The school approved the program, which was to take place during elective period one time a week allowing each child an opportunity to visit the gym several times over the course of the semester. We gathered permission slips and sent them to parents and guardians.

Most importantly, I realized that many of the students with whom we worked had safety and trust issues. We would have to ensure that they felt comfortable with climbing equipment before ever visiting the rock gym. The new environment would be stimulating and scary enough without the added fear factor of not trusting or understanding the equipment.

Because another child care worker and I ran the gym program for these children, we decided to use one or two days a week to teach the children some climbing skills and encourage their trust in the equipment and in adults holding the ropes. We began by bringing in harnesses and ropes. First, we taught the children how to properly put on a harness reminding them to always "double back" the belt over the buckle. We assured them that an adult would check their harness every single time before they left the ground to climb. With ropes, we taught the children how to tie a figure-eight follow-through knot, the most basic and essential climbing knot. Not all the children were able to learn the knot, but we were able to demonstrate how it could only get tighter and never untie itself, assuaging their fears about safety. Several children who did learn the knot practiced over and over again, during the following weeks, proudly showing us their knowledge at every opportunity.

We now needed to convince the children to trust their belayer. (The belayer is the person [always an adult] who holds the other end of the rope that is attached to the climber.) This took a little more ingenuity in setting up, as the school did not have a climbing wall. Finally, we settled on using the older indoor basketball court, a sunken court with an iron fence surrounding the sunken part. From the fence, I tied off two lengths of rope into which the children could secure themselves (with adult help) with two carabiners, then sit back and experience how hanging in a harness feels. This way, the children retained control by being able to stand up whenever they wanted to but learned that their harness and the rope could support their body weight comfortably.

Now we were ready for the leap of faith. I wanted all of the children to experience hanging in their harness while being held by a belayer before they actually went to the gym so that their first experience in this trust exercise did not occur when they reached the top of the twenty-five

foot gym walls. We suspended a rope from one of the iron poles supporting the basketball hoop in the old gym. I tied each child in to the rope, or allowed those who had learned to tie the knots to tie themselves in, checking to ensure their knots were tied properly. Then, each child took several turns at standing up on a small chair, saying, "take," to alert their belayer to take in the slack as they were stepping off, and then stepping off of the chair to hang in their harness about two feet above the ground. Again, each child retained control by choosing when to step off the chair and being able to say, "down," when they wished their belayer to lower them from their hanging position.

Luckily, all of the children made it through this exercise without much difficulty. I proclaimed them ready to climb at the actual gym. With excitement and anticipation, they looked forward to their climbing program.

I had some worries that the gym environment would prove overstimulating to some of the children, with fears that they would not be able to follow directions and behave well enough to maintain the program. However, their focus and wish to climb, combined with our explicit instructions about the expected behaviors, rendered this worry moot. With the help of the gym staff, we outfitted nine or ten eleven- to thirteen-year-old boys and girls with shoes and harnesses that fit, reviewed the rules, and let the climbing begin.

Each adult manned a rope tying children in, encouraging them with helpful pointers, and talking them through their fears. The children could come down whenever they wanted, but most of them tried hard and did not come down out of fear. Lines began to form as the children waited turns on each rope.

We told the students that if they made it to the white line, that was success, knowing that they all could (it was only eight feet up the wall). The joy and pride of each individual accomplishment proved infectious. Children who did not consider each other friends congratulated each other, yelled encouragement at each other, and tried to help one another with information about how to succeed in climbing. They seemed genuinely happy with each other's efforts.

As the program went on over the weeks, the children monitored their progress, noting their improvements in how high they could get on the walls, on the difficulty of the routes they tried, and in their mental feelings towards climbing.

At the end of the year, my supervisor asked the children for a list of good and bad things about the year. Unanimously, he told me, the children had thought the climbing experience had been a positive and worthwhile one.

For me, it had definitely been both worthwhile and inspiring. The power that climbing exerted on these children to focus and be supportive

of one another was nothing less than phenomenal. Climbing allowed them to forget themselves and their negative behaviors for a time. It built self-esteem and encouraged positive feelings towards others, both children and adults. Not only that, but the program brought an increased recognition on my part of the vast potential within each of these children. From these observations, I concluded that one of the strongest tools we have to reach behaviorally and emotionally disturbed children involves exposing them to a diversity of unique experiences, which engage their senses on many levels. Perhaps we need more programs that move beyond behavior management and efforts to teach these kids basic academic subjects. The use of more unconventional approaches to teaching such children life skills can only serve to better their chances of becoming functional members of society. I know that the children with whom I worked responded to their rock climbing experience with an intensity and focus rare for them. I only hope they and others like them continue to discover new activities that both captivate their imaginations positively and build up their self-esteem and relationships as they wade through the rest of their formative years.