VERBAL MANAGEMENT OF CONTAGIOUS BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT: Contagious conflict is a problem encountered by all child and youth care workers who work with groups of troubled youth. This article offers a framework for understanding group types that foster contagion and several techniques for diffusing or de-escalating it.

Joe, upset over his last home visit, has a terrible day in school. He acts out physically and aligns himself with other youth who are also having a difficult time. Consequently, at the end of the school day, he is told that he will not be able to partake in the group's off-grounds activity that evening. He reports to the living unit where Sam, a child care worker, notices he is upset. "Let's go talk," Sam says with concern. "No!" Joe screams. "I'm not talking to you or anyone else in this crazy place." Then he pushes Sam and walks quickly to several peers who are eager to support his negative behavior. "None of us are going to listen to you," they declare in unison.

This, or a similar incident, is probably familiar to most child and youth care workers. Situations where one youth's acting-out behavior affects others are certainly commonplace in group care and most workers know that they must intervene to deal with the conflict or their groups may become extremely difficult to manage. However, while the necessity to restore order is obvious, the methods for achieving this end often are not. In this article, an attempt to offer some assistance will be made. The objective is to provide another practical framework for understanding groups and a few additional strategies for intervening in contagious situations. Most of the information presented here is based on trial and error experiences in two residential centers for high and low functioning youth.

We have found that contagion is most likely to occur in group care settings in one of five specific types of groups: calm groups, play groups, tense groups, belligerent groups, and out-of-control groups. We have also found that contagious behavior can often be diffused or de-escalated with a few simple verbal techniques. A description of the group types and techniques follows.

Calm Groups

In calm groups, the group members are usually involved in quiet everyday activities such as one-to-one sessions or table games. A few youths might also be showering or cleaning their rooms. The overall interaction among the group is positive and friendly. Hence, the conflict that occurs is usually minor and it can be easily diffused if the worker uses his/her rapport with the youth or one of five verbal techniques developed by Samuels and Moriarty (1979): problem solving, distraction/diversion, re-expression, presentation of reality, and strong verbal command.

Individual Rapport. Whenever possible, workers should use their individual rapport with a youth first. Rapport is the trust and confidence that develops over time between a worker and a youth. We have found that rapport usually emanates from relationships in which the youth's care is paramount and in which the youth learns that the worker uses logical consequences rather than fear or pain to control negative behavior.

An example of one of the many ways rapport is used is as follows: Tim, upset over losing a game of checkers, stands up and begins to swear loudly. The worker, who has a rapport with Tim, merely looks at him and frowns. Knowing that the worker has tried to be fair, firm and consistent in the past, Tim sits down and softly mumbles, "I'm sorry."

Problems Solving. Problem solving with calm groups consists of taking the youth or youths aside and identifying alternatives to the current disruptive course. For example, a youth who is having trouble getting to dinner on time because he is engrossed in his reading can be presented with the options of either preparing for dinner five minutes earlier or delaying reading until later in the evening.

Distraction/Diversion. Distraction/diversion is used with the moderately angry youth to focus his/her attention on something more enjoyable. For example, Sue uses her visiting privileges to visit Scott and her actions make Bill jealous. The worker, sensitive that Bill is getting angrier by the minute, tosses him a basketball. "Think quick," the worker says as he flips the ball. "How about a game of buckets," the worker continues. "O.K.," Bill replies. Then later, with Bill's anger under control, the worker and Bill discuss their feelings about the incident with Sue and Scott.

Re-expression. Re-expression is used to help a youth recognize his anger and frustration and to encourage a more appropriate means of expression. For example, a youth who is frustrated by a delayed home visit goes to his room and slams his door behind him. The worker, knowing that the youth enjoys writing poetry, reminds the youth about the consequences for door slamming and encourages him to put his feelings on paper. In these cases, alternative forms of expression, such as writing, playing music, drawing, painting, working with clay, and role playing can serve to help calm a youth and at the same time to express himself/herself in a more comfortable way.

Presentation of Reality. Confronting a youth with the reality of consequences for continued acting-out behavior can curb the behavior before a consequence is needed and the rest of the group is unsettled. For example, a youth throws a cookie at another youth and the worker informs the thrower that if he doesn't pick up the cookie, and if his behavior continues, the youth will have to leave the room and miss the activity for the evening.

Strong Verbal Command. A strong verbal command is a short, quick, usually loud command given by a worker to get immediate attention. With a calm group, it is used infrequently, and as a last resort. For example, several children may be watching TV quietly when, suddenly, one child gets up to leave the area and accidently falls over another child. Then the imposed-upon child strikes out and a fight ensues. The worker's loud, "Break it up!" or "Stop that!" may cause both children to stop or pause long enough for other interventions.

Play Groups

In play groups, group members are normally engaged together in an enjoyable activity such as basketball, volleyball, dodgeball or table games. The difference between calm and play groups is that in the play group some good-natured teasing and horseplay may be going on in addition to, or as part of, the activity. In other words, the interactions are potentially more disruptive. The conflicts which can arise include out-of-hand horseplay, individual or group inability to cope with losing, or accidental, but unwanted, physical contact.

The first step is for the worker to constantly be aware that teasing and horseplay can get out of hand, and to be as sensitive as possible to the group's and individual mem-

ber's ability to tolerate it. Then, as with the calm group, when these interactions begin to border on becoming problematic or indeed do deteriorate to a conflictual situation, individual rapport, problem solving, distraction/diversion, re-expression, presentation of reality, and strong verbal commands can be used to curb further deterioration. For example, eye contact (individual rapport) may be sufficient to stop an overly aggressive football player. Changing activities or a discussion about cheating (problem solving) may be suitable for an incident of card cheating. A compliment for a previous play (distraction/diversion) may help a frustrated basketball player. Switching from baseball to kickball (re-expression) may work for frustrated youths with inadequate hand/eye coordination. A reminder that the activity may have to cease (presentation of reality) may work with a group of roughhousers. And finally, a firm "slow down" (strong verbal command) may work for an anxious group on the way to a dodgeball game.

Tense Groups

A tense group is characterized by a series of simmering minor problems among group members. In general, they are semi-resistant to fulfilling unit responsibilities and/or cooperating in group activities. Limit testing (complaints and derogatory remarks) and formation of negative sub-groups (two or more members of the main group who band together for a counterproductive purpose) may be occurring. In these situations, experienced workers can usually sense or feel the tension as it begins to develop.

Following is an example of a fairly common tense group situation. Steve, a member of a potentially negative sub-group, enters the living unit requesting to see his worker. The worker, however, is busy trying to calm another youth. Steve, refusing to speak with another worker, agrees to wait, but he is obviously in a defensive mood.

The worker is detained by the other youth

until dinner begins at 5:20. At supper, Steve sits with Ronnie, Bill and Greg, members of this sub-group. Steve and Bill, who is also having a difficult day, begin to complain about the worker. Soon Ronnie and Greg add to the unpleasant interchange. By the time everyone returns to the living unit, Steve's anger towards the worker has completely clouded over the original problem. When the worker seeks Steve out, he refuses to talk and instead decides to continue to complain and incite his peers.

Meanwhile, Greg begins to involve additional group members by spreading the word about the worker's unfairness to Steve. Soon the entire group is tense and problem bound, all because the worker did not have time to deal with Steve's original problem.

Understandably, workers can't always do everything at once. However, steps can be taken to stop situations such as this from reaching the point where tension is needlessly spread throughout the group. The natural solution, of course, is prevention. That is, workers can be aware of how each youth deals with delayed gratification and use strategies to help. For example, the worker might have taken a moment to at least acknowledge that he was aware of Steve's desire to speak with him and that he would try to meet with him as soon as possible. When prevention fails, the following techniques may be helpful.

Individual Rapport. Once a tense group has developed, individual rapport can be used with as many members as possible. Rubbing one youth's head, commenting on another's special hobby, and just listening to another are only a few examples of what might be done. The objective, once again, is to use individual rapport as soon and as often as possible.

Small Group Discussion. Small group discussion with the negative sub-group can also curb escalation of the tense group. Once the sub-group is identified, the worker may attempt to discuss the problem with the group

in a quiet, removed area. Again, as in problem solving, the worker helps the group find alternative outlets. For example, several youths who are concerned over one youth's stolen jacket might be presented with the option of settling down so that the worker can investigate and perhaps conduct a discussion with all the group members. The objective is to calm the sub-group enough to allow for more productive alternatives to be explored and implemented.

Belligerent Groups

In a belligerent group, non-compliance is commonplace. In this context, the belligerent group, in contrast to the tense group, is potentially more volatile and behavior is more blatant. In other words, the group members are, in general, refusing to cooperate (i.e., refusing to do their jobs, clean their rooms, shower, or attend activities).

Large group discussion is the main strategy for de-escalating the belligerent group. Strategies described previously are usually inadequate, because the contagion has reached the point where outer order must be restored before the worker can proceed with inner controls.

The first goal is to get the group in a contained area, and not necessarily be concerned with minor disturbances such as swearing. Presentation of related consequences (presentation of reality) may take place as the group leader calmly attempts to assemble the group. For example, the group may be reminded that the dance planned for that evening will have to be cancelled if everyone can't work harder at cooperating.

Getting the group together is not an easy task, but it is more manageable if extra help is available, and if the workers insist that other issues will not be dealt with until everyone is standing or sitting, in reasonable order, in the designated area. Once the group is together in a relatively contained, out-of-the-way area, the worker(s) must be extremely sensitive to the tolerance levels of various group members and be able to anticipate further outbursts. This is not an easy task, but workers do get better with experience. When the group is reasonably settled, the worker(s) can proceed with a discussion of the problem as he or she sees it and encourage the group to work together toward mediating the situation. If the group can't participate in discussion, then the worker must at least set some parameters for further interactions. The objective is to restore outer order and try to get members to begin to cooperate rather than resist the worker's authority. This process is, of course, enhanced if the children are reminded of the benefits that can be achieved through cooperation.

The group should be dispersed as soon as possible. Lengthy discussions are not appropriate for belligerent groups; quick reminders and limit setting are.

Out-Of-Control Groups

The last and potentially most disruptive group type is the out-of-control group. When a group is out-of-control, as most workers know, youths will blatantly ignore staff direction and completely disregard most rules. Some youths may be attacking staff, others may be barricaded in their rooms, and still others may be attempting to run away. Usually additional staff or outside assistance is needed to restore the therapeutic environment.

In well-planned programs, out-of-control groups are the exception. Workers are sensitive to the conditions that lead to this kind of deterioration and they do everything possible, including using the techniques outlined above, to alter the conditions quickly and efficiently. Nonetheless, even in the most preventative environments, groups of troubled youths can get very unruly. In our experience, two conditions appear to be present most often with out-of-control groups: a new staff member has been given too much responsibility too soon and/or negative group

leaders have taken charge of the group. The best ways to prevent out-of-control groups, therefore, are to exercise extreme caution in deciding when a new worker is ready to assume total responsibility for the group, and to know who the negative leaders are and how they are likely to gain control of the group.

The major task, once a group is out-of-control, is to re-establish adult authority. The most effective way to do this appears to be to first gather as much adult help and support as possible and then to remove the negative leader or sub-group from the larger main group. This may require physical removal, although it is recommended that physical intervention is always the last option.

After the negative leader(s) has been removed, extra staff should remain to reassure the other youths that the environment is secure. When several staff are on hand, it may be wise to have the staff member who has the best rapport or who is the calmest and most objective stay to supervise the negative leaders. Then, once order is restored, the above strategies outlined earlier can be employed with the understanding that the group may recoup slowly. It is not unusual for an out-of-control group to turn into a belligerent group before returning to its normal status.

SUMMARY

This paper was written with the knowledge that there are many more alternatives for dealing with group conflict and curbing group contagion. These are just a few of the techniques and strategies that the author and his colleagues have found to be effective in the working environment.

REFERENCES

Samuels, M.S., & Moriarty, P.H. (1979) "One Step Ahead" in *Cycron-The Concept of Crises Control.* New York: M.T.I. Teleprograms, Inc.