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in **Every**
Child

**Boosting Children's Socio-Emotional Skills
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CHAPTER 1

Three Basic Beliefs about Skills

Late afternoon, nine-year-old Mike and his friend were playing by the river while their parents set up the campsite. After a few moments the parents realized that the boys were gone! Apparently they had decided to go either up or downstream without asking or informing anyone. Their parents felt this was unsafe and were upset by their lack of consideration. After an hour and a half of worry, the boys returned, unaware of the distress they had caused.

In a 3rd grade class, students were supposed to write a comment on each other's planet project poster board. Sam refused to write any comment on the board of his well-known class enemy.

Shelly, 14, ran away for three days, the longest she'd ever done this. Everyone was worried about her safety and where she could possibly be. When she finally came back, everybody was very angry. Her parents took many privileges away and the school decided this was the last straw. She wouldn't be allowed to walk at graduation.

How would you respond to these situations?

Adults' intentions

Immediately after hearing each of these true stories, most adults have some ideas about what they would like to say to the

youth involved. It is assumed that if a young person engages in what is perceived as a problem-behavior, then he or she probably needs to *learn* something. Adults--whether parents, educators, or counselors--further assume that it is our job to teach the young person to think or behave differently than she or he does. We want to do our job, as responsible adults, of "coaching," "raising," "educating," "protecting," or "fostering the growth" of those under our care.

In fact, the more we care, the more we want young people to learn to think and act differently in the face of problems. We become compelled to make visible objectionable behaviors and what should have been done differently. While counselors may attempt to accomplish this goal by discussing the problem in depth, parents and educators tend to give some kind of consequence, such as the removal of a privilege, hoping that a little suffering will enhance learning.

Regardless of our varied roles, the ultimate goal behind most adults' responses is to teach young people to:
- **Think** about the effects of their choice next time
- **Grow** by examining their mistakes
- **Develop skills** to make better choices.

Adults' effects

In many of these problem situations, adults' typical questions, talks, or consequences do not have the intended effects. Counselors' talking and asking questions about a problem may create a context where the young person shuts down, answers with a lot of "I don't know," or becomes defensive. Parents' and educators' consequence giving may lead to a build-up of resentment. Consequences that make sense to

the young person and are given only occasionally, without damaging the adult-youth relationship, can be effective in fostering learning sometimes. Research shows, however, that consequences and punishments, especially the big ones, most often lead to resentment, hatred and a perception that adults are mean (Kohn, 1999).

During timeouts, young people aren't in their rooms thinking about what they could have done better. They are usually brooding resentment and anger.

In effect, our attempts at correcting the problem can end up inadvertently worsening it instead, since our disapproving reaction to the questionable behavior may engender defensiveness, which in turn may lead to an argument potentially damaging the actual relationship.

Advances in neuroscience also clearly demonstrate that the higher cortical functions required for complex learning shut down when an individual is experiencing defensiveness, fear or anger (Siegel, 1999; Bluestein, 2008). This means that we fail over and over again at associating a problem behavior with reflection, understanding, and more appropriate responses. The young person's memory does not associate the behavior with the lesson. Such a deduction would involve the logic-oriented frontal cortex. Instead the more primitive limbic system is engaged and the *adult* becomes labeled as a cause of emotional discomfort.

Is there a more brain-compatible way of accomplishing the intended effect of cultivating socio-emotional skills?

Advances in neuroscience have demonstrated consistently (Damasio, 1994; LeDoux, 1996; Sousa, 2001) that the optimal learning environment is one where three experiences occur simultaneously:

1. A positive emotion
2. Exposure to personally relevant information
3. Interest, excitement, or curiosity

In other words, the brain encodes its most complex and lasting knowledge when people experience a pleasant feeling coupled with a discussion of something that is both meaningful and gratifying. This is described by Daniel Siegel (2009, p.16):

"*The experiences we provide as teachers--or as parents or therapists--focus students' (children's or patients') attention, activate their brain, and create the possibility of harnessing neural plasticity in those specific areas. Coupled with emotional engagement, a sense of novelty and optimal attentional arousal, teaching with reflection can utilize these prime conditions for building new connections in the brain.*"

Is it possible to help young people think better and talk about their mistakes in a way that would elicit such excitement, meaning, and interest? Is it possible to have a conversation about problems where the young person would not become defensive or shut down but rather engaged and interested in what adults have to say? Is it possible to have conversations in which young people are encouraged to cultivate social and

emotional skills, they would be comfortable with and confident using when faced with problems again?

YES!!!

Skill Boosting Conversations (SBC) offer a method of investigating situations that elicit all three of the brain's optimal learning components. The very process of SBC reactivates neural connections of the areas associated with successful problem solving, in a way that can transform a possibly random and temporary state, into a long-term trait of the young person. Uncovering young people's very own productive thinking automatically provides them with experiences of competency, excitement, and interest.

Allow me to illustrate this process with the stories introduced above. While all of the problems described were of concern to caring adults, they were all, ironically, incredible stories of successes at thinking and problem solving. This thinking and solving occurred in a blurry, improvised way that was not fully articulated by the young people involved. The thinking was very brittle and was likely to be buried and forgotten under the weight of any anger or resentment generated by interactions with adults. Yet this reasoning was a treasure worth digging for, in the name of cultivating thinking skills. Let's look at how we might use Skill Boosting Conversations (SBC) in these situations and then discuss the three principles guiding the process.

1. A problem doesn't mean a lack of skills

Adults often think, that if a child makes a mistake, or has a problem, it implies a deficit in their thinking or their skills. Is

that really true? If you find yourself being impatient at someone, is it because you do not know how to be patient? Problems with young people do not necessarily mean that they are lacking a skill or need our teaching. As the mother of Mike in story #1, I was tempted to lecture the boys about all the possible dangers of drowning in the deeper parts of the river, getting lost, the late time of the day, and not warning any adult of their departure. Instead I took a deep breath and engaged in the following conversation with my son:

MN: Mike, what do you think about you two going away like that?
Mike: It wasn't a good idea…
MN: What makes you think it wasn't a good idea?
Mike: Well, we hadn't told anyone where we were, and we hadn't really planned to go that far, but we really went too far. We were just looking for crawdads. We first went downriver and since it was really deep we decided it would be safer to turn around and go the other way where the water was only knee deep. So we came back and then went the other way a little. But then we tried catching some fish that were swimming away and that took us further.
MN: How did you decide to come back in the end?
Mike: Well, I could tell the light in the sky was changing and my feet were cold and it had been a long time since we were gone. I really wanted to turn around.
MN: Did Lance understand that?
Mike: Yes, but he wanted to come back by a trail in the forest. We had a discussion. I was afraid we would get lost. I, for sure, was coming back the way we came because I knew for sure it would take us to the campsite.
MN: So you thought that you could have gotten lost coming back a different way? What did you think about specifically?

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Mike (thinking and getting increasingly emotional): Well, it was late…we really didn't have much time to try different ways, and if we had gotten lost in the forest we had no water, no food, there were coyotes … and bears …and … mountain lions maybe…and you wouldn't know where to look for us! It would have been really scary. Wow, I'm so glad I insisted on coming back the river way.

MN: Getting lost would have been scary! So you were able to think about the time of day, the dangers with wild animals, the lack of supplies, and the fact we wouldn't be able to find you?

Mike: Yeah! I also thought it would be safer for us to stay together so I convinced him to come my way.

MN: So you also thought of the importance of staying together?

Mike: Yeah…then we can help each other out if something happens.

MN: You thought of a lot of things! But you know we were also worried…Might you want to explore the river differently next time?

Mike: Oh yeah! … I'd really prefer if a grown-up came with us. I was nervous. I don't want to do that again.

After this conversation, Mike most likely did a bit more thinking on his own. If instead I had peppered him with questions about the multiple facets of the problem, or delivered a lecture or punishment, that would likely have hijacked his attention towards either the consequence itself or the anger he would have experienced. The problem solving, which he actually did engage in, would have been stampeded not strengthened.

By the time the conversation was completed, Mike had thought about all the items of concern to adults and much more! I was left impressed and appreciative of his thinking. He was left feeling more determined not to do this again, proud of his problem-solving abilities, and most importantly, on the same team with his parents about his safety.

2. Important efforts and skills are often hidden: Examine the problem-solving process not just the outcome

There is so much we don't know about what happens in a young person's mind. Most of the time parents, counselors, and educators' inferences about children's thinking are biased by our own view of the world as adults, and consequently our solutions to problems do not match the intricacies of the young person's life. Asking gentle questions from a place of kind curiosity and interest will reveal fascinating information and complex thinking that is completely unpredictable (White, 2007). Respectful questions may even reveal that, what looked like a problem to the observing adult, was actually a successful attempt at avoiding a bigger issue.

In story #2, the third-grade student had been participating in a SBC classroom project and had gained some experience in noticing and articulating his successes.

Sam (coming to me): MN, I think I maybe had a success today but I'm not sure.
MN (interested): Really, tell me about it.
Sam: I'm so angry Eva wrote a mean comment about my planet project.
MN: What did she write?

Sam (resentful): She wrote "Whaaaat??" like she thought it was a crappy project.
MN: So you took that as a criticism?
Sam: Yeah, she hates me, everyone knows we're enemies.
MN: So what did you do?
Sam: I asked her why she wrote that, but she just shrugged and walked away.
MN: She shrugged and walked away? Was that upsetting?
Sam: Yeah, I thought of saying something mean but I didn't.
MN (curious): You didn't say anything mean?
Sam: No, and then I thought of writing something really, really mean on her project...but I didn't want to do that…
MN: You didn't want to do that? What kept you from doing that?
Sam (thinking): I don't know….Euh…I guess I didn't want to do that, because then I'd be just like her. I thought it would be more mature to not do that.
MN: So you thought it would be more mature. What did you do to avoid writing a mean comment?
Sam: I tried to stay away from her project and do all the other ones, slowly, hoping I would not have time to comment on hers. And it worked, I didn't have time for hers'!
MN: You stayed away and it worked! Was that hard to stay away from her project?
Sam: Oh yeah…
MN: Was there anything that you were thinking that helped you stay away from her project?
Sam: I'm not sure…
MN: What may have been going around in your mind while you stayed away from her project?
Sam (thinking): I thought everyone would think that I'm the one who's mean and then I might get in trouble. I didn't want that.

MN: You thought of what would happen after, like the consequences sort of?
Sam (slowly): Yeah, I thought I would be the strongest if I didn't write anything mean and not writing at all seemed like the lowest mean I could do.
MN: So if you actually had to write something it would have been hard to resist the temptation to write a mean comment while not writing at all was the safest way to stay at the lowest mean possible?
Sam (smiling): Yeah!
MN: How do you call that part of you that helped you think of the lowest mean strategy and the consequences?
Sam (proud): The mature part of me! I think I like to be mature!

No observing adult could have guessed this behavior represented a success rather than a problem! Sadly, in many schools, a refusal like Sam's would have lead to conflicts with the teacher. Fortunately for this student, the teacher was flexible, which made it safe for him to experiment with creative problem solving. Under the appearance of a problem, Sam's refusal to evaluate his peer was in reality an extraordinary success. Only gentle questions and an openness to hearing young people's experiences could make that visible and a trampoline for growth such as acknowledging that one can be, and likes to be, mature.

3. Broadening our scope from a problem to a skill focus: Meaningful learning can occur in the absence of problem talk

Problem behaviors can be so big and serious that they often blind adults to everything else. This was the case with Shelly's

situation. Certainly the habit of running away when there was a conflict at home was serious and needed to be addressed. Tackling it head on however was not a wise idea. It is often preferable to start with a skill boosting conversation and then later, if needed, gently attempt to make strides about the problem. In this story, as in many others, the visible behavior is only the tip of the iceberg. The most important part of the solution is hidden and can only be revealed through respectful conversation.

Shelly: Everyone is so mean, I shouldn't have come back.
MN: What made you decide to come back?
Shelly: I didn't want to live like a runaway anymore.
MN: You didn't want to live like that anymore? How would you like to live?
Shelly: I'd like to have a real job, make money and have more freedom… not just run all the time.
MN: So you'd like to have a job, make money and have freedom. Do you have a specific dream?
Shelly: Yeah…I'd like to be a cook.
MN: To be a cook?
Shelly: Yeah, I've always liked to cook and I'm good at it too!
MN: Where did you learn to cook?
Shelly: My grandma used to cook with me before she died.
MN: What would your grandma say, if she could, about your dream of being a cook?
Shelly (smiling): She'd be real' pleased!
MN: Would she be pleased if you stopped running away too?
Shelly: Yeah, she'd want me to get my act together.
MN: Did thinking of your grandma also help you come back?
Shelly: Not really but now I think it would.
MN: What difference would it make?

Shelly: It would help me hang in there through the tough times 'cause she was tough.
MN: So your grandma was tough. Did you have to be tough too to come back?
Shelly: Yeah, I knew everyone would be mad and I really hesitated. I could have gone somewhere really cool with some friends but in the end I decided not to…
MN: Was there anything other than your dream of being a cook and having a real job and freedom that helped you come back?
Shelly: Yeah, I thought of my little brother and how hard it would be on him if I didn't come back for good.
MN: So thinking of your little brother…do you care about him?
Shelly: Yeah...I do…and things are pretty hard for him too…
MN: Are there things you can teach him about being tough, having dreams and making life better for himself? (nods) How does one go about being tough?

The conversation goes on about her little brother, grandma, parents, her dream for herself and the other reasons she came back[1]. The point of this example however is that the reasons she returned were much more important to emphasize than giving her consequences even though the problem was serious. While the adults involved were well intended, wanted her to learn and never run away anymore, their actions had just the opposite effect of making her doubt the decision of coming back. Our SB conversation strengthened, and further enriched, her desire to stop running away, left her with a positive feeling of

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[1] Being a clinical psychologist, I also have the responsibility of inquiring about the safety of my clients. This was done in this situation and the family was invited for family therapy sessions. Those aspects of the work however are not relevant to this particular book.

competency, connection to her family and a sense that …coming back was not such a bad decision after all!

Questions and answers

Question. Isn't focusing on successes and being appreciative of children's efforts, similar to praise and reinforcement?

Answer. I can see how they might seem similar, but there are major differences that will become more and more apparent as you read the book. In a nutshell, when you're praising:

- The adult takes most of the airtime emotionally and verbally
- The child is listening passively
- The content of the conversation is something that pleases the adult

In SBC, it is exactly the opposite:

- The adult refrains from being overly expressive and only asks gentle questions
- The young person is active: the brain is much more involved when one is thinking and answering questions
- The content of the conversation is something the youth is pleased with and interested in sharing
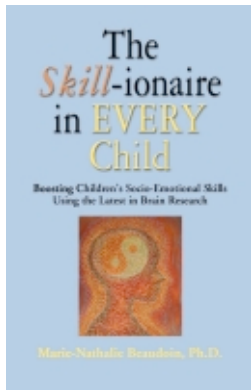
Question. Do Skill Boosting Conversations really make a significant difference?

Answer. Yes! SBC have many desirable effects, which we will begin to examine in the next chapter. A variety of SBC are also

possible depending on the goal. It can take some time to figure out what questions to ask, and as you probably noticed in the above dialogues, I chose questions that were particularly relevant to their stories. In story #1, I extracted the child's ability to think of risks and solve problems. In story #2, I emphasized the child's success at thinking about consequences and the kind of person he wanted to be; and in story #3, I reconnected the teenager to a preferred identity which included her future dreams for herself and a sense of connection to family members.

The variety of possible SBC will be explained in more depth in chapters 3 and 4. For now, the complex ramifications of SBC will be discussed, so that you can become fully informed of what you are getting into.

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