

"She Had It Coming!" A Reality Rub Reclaiming Intervention

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The Reality Rub is one of six Life Space Crisis Interventions. The goal is to help students reorganize and clarify distorted perceptions of an emotionally intense event. As seen in this article, teaching positive behavior begins by helping young people correct their blurred and biased views of reality.

Students seldom assume responsibility for changing their own behavior (as opposed to relying on outside authority and control for behavior change) until they are psychologically empowered to make choices about their behavioral alternatives and are ready to accept the consequences of these choices. But how do they acquire this empowerment to regulate their own behavior? Self-regulation emerges from *understanding* people and events in their environment, *motivation* to change unpleasant conditions, and *trust* in adults. These three essential dimensions of self-regulation are reflected in Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI).

Some students have been described as having "social blindness" or "tunnel vision," seeing only the part of an event that is personally threatening. They forget the sequence of events, distort reality, separate feelings from behavior, and insistently remember only the last hostile action (remark, punch, hit, words) of a peer. The common characteristic among students for whom the Reality Rub Reclaiming Intervention is appropriate is inability to connect cause and effect in the series of interpersonal exchanges culminating in an incident.

Originally called a "Reality Rub-In" (Redl, 1966), this type of LSCI has its foundation in the characteristic way a student thinks and reacts to an incident. Redl describes the rationale for this therapeutic goal:

The trouble with some of our youngsters, among other things, is that they are socially nearsighted. They can't read the meaning of an event in which they get involved, unless we use huge script for them and

underline it all in glaring colors besides. Others are caught in such a well-woven system of near delusional misinterpretation of life that even glaring contradictions in actual fact are glided over by their eyes unless their view is arrested and focused on them from time to time. More fascinating even, are the youngsters whose preconscious perception of the full reality is all right but who have such well-oiled ego skills in alibiing to their own consciences that the picture of a situation that can be discussed with them is already hopelessly repainted by the time we get there. It is perhaps not necessary to add how important it is, strategically speaking, that such children have some of this "reality rub-in" interviewing done right then and there, and preferably by persons who themselves were on the scene or at least known to be thoroughly familiar with it. (p. 44)

The Five Patterns

Long, Wood, and Fecser (2001) identify five patterns indicating a Reality Rub Reclaiming Intervention:

1. **Blocked perceptions of reality.** Sometimes feelings, such as anger, fear, and depression become so intense and overwhelming during a crisis that students temporarily block out the ability to process sensory messages. They literally do not see, hear, or remember what is happening around them. They are so angry; they "see red." They are so frightened, they are "scared out of their wits." They are so depressed, they cannot think, and so anxious, they cannot remember what they

heard. Until the intensity of their feelings is drained off, they will continue to behave in irrational and repressive ways.

2. **Misperceptions of reality.** This is the most common form of a Reality Rub Crisis. Students come to us with a history, which is not available to us until we take the time to hear the student's story. This history colors every situation as it is filtered through eyes, ears, and memory. In many ways, students who misperceive what is happening have a temporary delusional belief. They are convinced that what they saw, heard, and remembered is exactly what actually happened during the crisis. These students cannot be talked out of their convictions and are more likely to believe their own account of the crisis than any objective evidence.
3. **Restricted perceptions of reality.** This pattern occurs when students respond to a crisis by focusing their awareness on one part of the sequence of the crisis. Redl and Wineman (1951) called this process "social myopia." These students only talk about a particular act, as if it represented the entire crisis.
4. **Private reconstruction of reality.** The three previously described types of distortion of reality all involve intense feelings that altered the students' perceptions. Logic based on faulty perception leads to wrong conclusions. In this case, however, students do not deny, misperceive, or restrict sensory experiences. They are able to describe the interpersonal behaviors with accuracy, but still come to the wrong conclusions.
5. **Manipulation of reality.** Student behavior in this pattern tests the rules and limits of the staff and setting. These students look for loopholes in the classroom management system and use them to justify their behavior (pp. 150-151).

The Adult's Task

With the Reality Rub Reclaiming Intervention, the goal is to correct a student's bluffed and distorted perceptions of the incident. To accomplish this goal, the task is to help the student clarify reality by discussing the student's perceptions of the incident and sorting out distortions about what occurred. In the process, you help a student reconstruct the details of the incident, consider the resulting consequences, and organize the new insight into a behavioral plan for future use.

A thorough time line is essential for a successful Reality Rub Reclaiming Intervention. The adult helps the student reconstruct the incident and the feelings involved. Together, they trace through the sequence of events, identifying who, where, when, and what happened. It can be useful to use a diagram of the Conflict Cycle in recon-

structing events during the time line, as it may bring order to the student's often chaotic recollection of the incident. In doing this, students are helped to organize perceptions and learn that behavior evokes behavior from others. They learn the likely consequences of similar actions, and see the possibility of altering future events by changing their actions.

An Example of the Reality Rub

The following Reality Rub Reclaiming Intervention is an example of a student who misperceives reality as a function of his history and resultant perceptual filter. Mr. Joyce does Thomas a great service by helping him gain new insights into his behavior and helping him to realize he can change his patterns of self-defeating behavior.

Background Information

Thomas is a 12-year-old student enrolled for the past two months in a day treatment center operated by the Positive Education Program (PEP) in Cleveland, Ohio. He has an average IQ and struggles with learning difficulties. A pattern of aggressive behavior began during his primary school years, and he has been in a segregated classroom for students with severe emotional and behavioral problems since the third grade. His unmanageable and spontaneous violence toward both peers and staff, especially female staff, was the key factor in his referral to PEP. School staff reported that he had become increasingly oppositional, defiant, and confrontive when limits were set or when a female staff member re-directed him. Within the past year, he has injured other students on the playground and has belligerently pushed female teachers three times.

Thomas lives with his father and two sisters in a comfortable suburban home. His mother abandoned the family when Thomas was very young, yet he has occasional contact with her once or twice yearly. His father has been supportive, yet firm, with Thomas and is concerned about the increasing frequency and intensity of his aggressive behavior. For the past six months, Thomas has been seeing a therapist, who reports that Thomas continues to be resistant.

The Incident

It had been a fairly uneventful Tuesday morning as Thomas walked to the gym with his class and two staff members. As they did every day, the class of ten students stopped near the *Coke*® machine to regroup before going downstairs. There was a commotion, and the teacher, Ms. Foster, turned to see Thomas step threateningly into Jeremy's space, his fists clenched and an angry scowl on his face. Ms. Foster quickly reached the boys saying, "Both of you, back to the room with me right now." Jeremy began walking toward the classroom without a word, but

Thomas shouted angrily, “F— you! I’m getting out of here!” and turned toward the exit door. Placing her hand on his arm, Ms. Foster said, “Thomas, wait . . .” but before she could finish her sentence, Thomas whirled around, angrily colliding into Ms. Foster and knocking her to the floor. Thomas then turned, walked back to the classroom and sat down at his desk, staring blankly out the window. Ms. Foster, uninjured but shaken, briefed Mr. Joyce about the incident and asked him to mediate with Thomas. She took Jeremy with her to the gym, leaving Mr. Joyce and Thomas alone for LSCI.

The Drain-off Stage

Although Thomas was sitting at his desk, his tense posture, set jaw, and heavy breathing signaled that he was angry. Mr. Joyce and Thomas have a good relationship. When he pulled up a chair, Thomas began to talk in a raised voice about Ms. Foster. Mr. Joyce acknowledged that Thomas was upset, as would be expected under the circumstances. He told Thomas that he had not seen what had happened and asked him to tell it from his point of view. Mr. Joyce was calm and interested, and Thomas was able to begin the time line.

The Time Line Stage

Mr. Joyce began by exploring how Thomas was feeling earlier in the day and noted no indication that a prior event triggered the incident. Thomas then hastily recounted his perception of what happened. He and Jeremy were just having some fun and kidding around. When Thomas stepped into Jeremy’s space, he really wasn’t going to hit him. Ms. Foster yelled at them both and told them to go back to the room, which Thomas interpreted as losing his entire gym time. He became enraged and was going to go outside to cool down when Ms. Foster grabbed his arm. He spun around to face her and accidentally knocked her down. He didn’t mean to do it, but he was glad it happened because she deserved it.

Teacher: Thomas, you said a lot—tell me if I have it straight; you were with the group, ready to go downstairs. You and Jeremy were “kidding around.” Is that right?

Student: *Yeah, just joking.*

Teacher: Can you tell me how you were joking? What were you saying to each other?

Student: *I don’t know, just kidding stuff. He pushed me.*

Teacher: He pushed you? So it was physical, too. What was your response?

Student: *I came up in his face, like this. (Thomas stands, chest forward, arms back, looking threatening.)*

Teacher: Can you show me exactly what that was like? (Mr. Joyce stands and Thomas comes within six inches of his face, in a threatening posture). So you were doing the

tough guy thing; that looks pretty threatening.

Student: *Yeah, but we were just playing.*

Teacher: What did Jeremy do when you came up in his face like that?

Student: *He raised his fist, but he didn’t say anything.*

Teacher: Now, Thomas, where was Ms. Foster when all of this was going on?

Student: *She was right there!*

Teacher: Was she standing next to you, looking at you guys?

Student: *No, she was walking to the stairs.*

Teacher: So she was facing away from you?

Student: *Yeah, but she knew we were just kidding.*

Teacher: Thomas, have you and Jeremy ever been in a fight before?

Student: *Yeah, we’ve been in fights, but we weren’t going to fight this time.*

Teacher: You knew you weren’t going to fight, but how could Ms. Foster know that? Think about it; she was facing away from you, and she turns around to see you up in Jeremy’s face and Jeremy with his fist raised. You guys have fought before; she can’t read your mind.

Mr. Joyce helped Thomas accept the possibility that Ms. Foster saw the boys’ behavior as a prelude to a fight. He went on to explore the events which followed. Thomas said that when he heard Ms. Foster direct both of them back to the room, he assumed he had lost his gym time. He became immediately angry as Thomas looks forward to gym with great anticipation, and Ms. Foster knows he needs the activity to blow off some stress. Thomas felt that Ms. Foster was using the horseplay as an excuse to deprive him of his favorite time. Mr. Joyce asked Thomas what evidence he had that Ms. Foster intended for him to stay in the classroom during all of gym. When he could produce none, Mr. Joyce pointed out that Thomas hadn’t asked Ms. Foster about it, and therefore, he couldn’t really know how much time he was to stay in the classroom.

Teacher: Thomas, you’re doing a great job remembering all of this, and I appreciate your willingness to talk with me. Now, when you heard Ms. Foster tell you to return to the classroom, you had all of these thoughts about missing gym, and you were angry—very angry—even enraged. So what did you do?

Student: *I said the “F” word and then I said, “I’m out of here.” But I didn’t go anywhere. Then she grabbed my arm.*

Teacher: You said “I’m out of here,” and you didn’t go anywhere? Seems like it would be hard for you to say that, and then just stand there.

Student: Oh yeah, I started to go toward the door.

Teacher: So you were in a rage and you went toward the door and Ms. Foster grabbed you. Can you tell me, how did she grab you?

Student: She took me by the arm, like this. (Demonstrates by taking Mr. Joyce's upper arm briefly.)

Teacher: Now the way you showed me, that was a pretty gentle grab. It wasn't like a pull or a jerk, more like just a touch. Did she say anything?

Student: I don't know.

Teacher: What did you do next?

Student: I just got even madder and I turned around real fast to get her off of me. I guess I bumped into her by accident.

Teacher: Yes, you were angry, and when you turned, you did more than just bump into her, right?

Student: I didn't mean it! Even if she deserved it, I didn't mean it!

Teacher: What happened?

Student: She fell down on the floor.

Teacher: And when that happened, Thomas, right then, what went through your mind?

Student: I don't know; I thought I was in big trouble.

Teacher: So, you realized you had made a big mistake, and how were you feeling?

Student: I was kind of nervous, and I didn't know what to do. I could tell she wasn't hurt, so I just went back to the classroom.

Teacher: You came back here and sat down; in other words, you followed her first direction.

Student: Yeah, but now I'm in big trouble.

The Central Issue Stage

Through the time line, Mr. Joyce was able to lead Thomas to recognize that the choices he made were based on an untested assumption. Because he did not check out his belief that he was going to lose his entire gym time, his reasoning jumped overboard and his emotions took over, causing a chain of events that spiraled out of control. He helped Thomas accept the possibility that Ms. Foster recognized how angry he was, and may have been trying to prevent him from making matters worse by attempting to guide him back. Clearly, Thomas could benefit from a Reality Rub Reclaiming Intervention. Mr. Joyce will attempt to help Thomas connect his thoughts and feelings with his behavior and to see the incident from a new point of view.

The Insight Stage

Teacher: All right, let's review what happened. The group was walking to the gym, and you and Jeremy were kidding around with each other, looking threatening and ag-

gressive toward each other. Ms. Foster, who doesn't know it's friendly, turns around just in time to see you confront Jeremy by stepping into his space with an angry look on your face. She sees Jeremy raise a fist. She yells for you both to go back to the classroom with her. Jeremy follows the direction, but you believe you have lost all of your gym time, and you become enraged. You say the "F" word to Ms. Foster, and then you say you're getting out of here. Is this accurate so far?

Student: Yeah, I guess.

Teacher: You start toward the door, and Ms. Foster takes you by the arm. Because you are so angry with her, you spun around fast and knocked into her hard enough for her to fall to the floor. You are surprised and a little stunned that she actually fell. You don't know what to do, but you realize you have crossed a line; you realize you're in trouble. So you go to your classroom and sit at your desk. Is there anything I said that you don't agree with?

Student: No, I guess that's what happened all right.

Teacher: You know, this is not an easy thing to talk about, but I have to tell you that I'm impressed with how you're handling it now. Let's go on. Looking back at the whole sequence, do you see where you let your emotions take over and, as a result, you made some poor choices? Has anything like this ever happened to you before?

Student: Yeah, sometimes I get really mad.

Teacher: And this is not the first time you pushed a teacher, is it?

Student: No.

Teacher: So when you get mad at a teacher, one of the things you sometimes do is get physical. How is that working for you? Does it make your problems bigger or smaller?

Student: Well, I'm here, aren't I? (Sarcastically referring to the fact that he is placed at PEP)

Teacher: So letting your anger get the best of you and acting out physically is really complicating your life. You're multiplying your problems. The good news is that you have the power to change that. Let me ask you a question. After Ms. Foster saw you and Jeremy "posturing" and she told you to go back to the room, you jumped to the conclusion that you were not going to get to go to gym. Your anger flared up and you lost control. You really didn't know what Ms. Foster had in mind. Can you think of something you could have done then that might have been a better choice than to swear and head for the door?

Student: Like what?

Teacher: Well, I can think of a few things. Even though you were angry, you still could have walked back to the room, and then maybe explained to Ms. Foster that you and Jeremy were not really about to fight.

Student: Sure, like she'd believe that!

Teacher: Well, you don't know what Ms. Foster's reaction would have been because you never tried to explain it to her. Seeing both you and Jeremy cooperative and agreeing that you were kidding; she might have cut you a break. But, Thomas, this is the important part—you never checked that out. See, you jump to conclusions, get angry, act out, and get yourself deeper and deeper into trouble. That's your pattern and part of the reason why you're here. Do you see what I mean?

The New Skills Stage

Mr. Joyce knew that insight comes slowly, but he continued to work through the situation helping Thomas identify key moments when he could have made better choices, which might have led to a more satisfactory outcome. They talked through two hypothetical situations during which Thomas identified one or two alternatives to acting on his emotions. Recognizing that Thomas is quick to anger, Mr. Joyce helped him associate some physical signs such as muscle tightness and clenched fists, which Thomas could use as signals to use self-talk to interrupt the escalation. Thomas appeared willing to try out a plan to curb his impulsive actions, and Mr. Joyce committed to helping him with it.

The Transfer of Learning Stage

Now that Thomas had gained a glimmer of insight into his repetitive pattern of self-defeating behavior and had a brief opportunity to consider alternatives, it was time to discuss next steps as he returned to class. Mr. Joyce prepared Thomas to speak with Ms. Foster about what had happened, consider an apology, and receive the consequences for his behavior. He helped Thomas anticipate how he would feel when Ms. Foster talked with him, what she was likely to say, and how he would respond. He made a mental note to talk to Ms. Foster about how they might arrange for Thomas to participate in an anger management group, and about his commitment to check in on Thomas a couple of times daily for a while to support him in his effort to change his behavior.

Closing Comments

This Reclaiming Intervention is an excellent illustration of the Re-ED principle, "self-control can be taught." Thomas has had a complicated upbringing. He has been through a series of life experiences that have taught him to be distrustful and guarded when it comes to adults, particularly if they are female. He does not understand how to differentiate between the behavior of the adults who are relatively new to his life and "hang over" expectations of behavior from those who were a part of his earlier life. In Life Space Crisis Intervention, we do not concern ourselves with sorting out the aftermath of complex interper-

sonal dynamics, but instead focus the student on interactions here and now. Some of what drives Thomas's anger and behavior may be deep-seated, but some is also under clear conscious control. We want to help him learn to recognize that he is not a slave to his outbursts, but rather, there is much he can do to manage his emotions. Redl (1966) comments:

One simply does not sail interpretively into material that is at the time so "deeply repressed" that stirring it up would only unnecessarily increase resistance or lead to marginal problems in other areas. On the other hand, material of high ego proximity had better be handled directly, else the child might think we are too dumb or too disinterested to notice what he himself has figured out long since on his own. (p. 53)

Mr. Joyce skillfully guided Thomas to recognize a pattern of aggressive, impulsive, and unproductive behavior, which has become so much a part of Thomas' way of being that he may not have examined it previously. Mr. Joyce took the first steps in helping Thomas realize that he has the power to change this pattern and began to build the skills to do it. He also committed his assistance as Thomas begins his fledgling efforts to find a better way of living. There will be mistakes and setbacks, but with caring adults to guide him, Thomas can begin to feel hope that he can overcome his challenges.

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