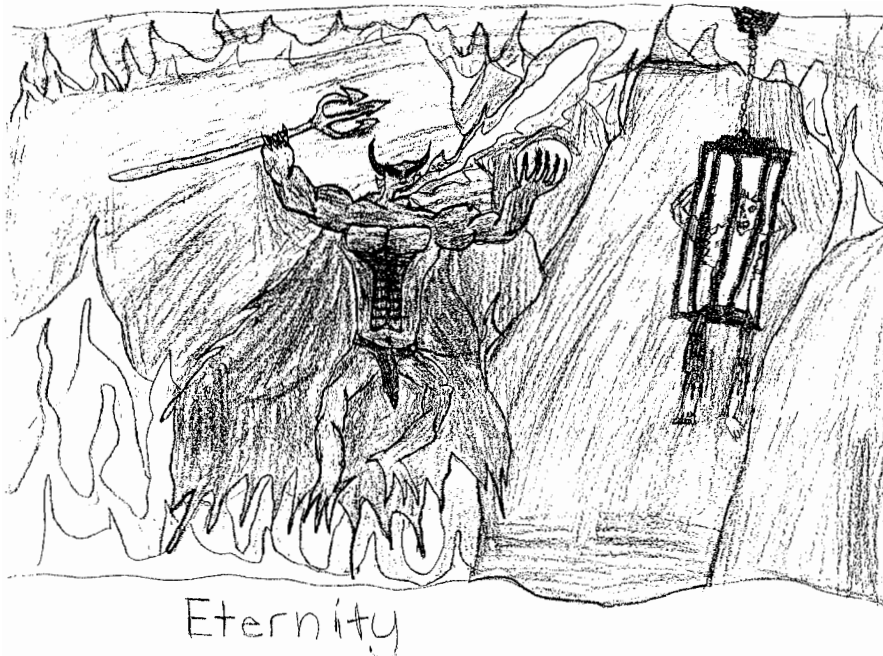


He Was Making Fun of Me: A Red Flag Carry-Over Crisis

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Drawing by William Cohen, a student at Fitzpatrick Public Elementary School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

How many times have you heard a troubled student say, "He's teasing me!" "He's messing with me!" "He's looking at me funny!" "She is laughing at me, and I'm not going to take it!" If it is less than a thousand times, you must be a beginning teacher. Peer teasing or verbal abuse seems to be as common to junior high school students as the pimples on their faces. Every student seems to participate at some level in this provocative and negative interpersonal style. Some questions for the teacher are: When is peer teasing a normal developmental issue? When is it contagious? When is it abusive and needs to be stopped? What about the student who is the target of peer teasing? When he complains, is it a genuine expression of his frustrations, a way of attracting peer and teacher attention, or an available smoke screen he can use to justify dumping his hidden anger on his teasing peer?

In previous issues, I have discussed the theory and strategies of the Red Flag Intervention, especially the Carry-in Crisis and the Tap-in Crisis. In this article, the third type of Red Flag Intervention, the Carry-over Crisis, is presented.

The diagnostic pattern of a Carry-over Crisis involves a student who *overreacts* to some typical frustration, such as teasing, with unusual intensity and anger. His degree of anger is significantly out of proportion to the frustration and is uncharacteristic of his usual behavior. The teased student yells, screams, threatens, and even may try to assault the teasing peer. If he is successful, the student may justify his assault by saying, "He deserved it!" "He started it." "It was his fault!"

During the initial stage of the crisis, the student is extremely difficult to control; and he may move his verbal attack from the teasing peer to the helping teacher. For example, "You didn't do anything!" "You never punish him!" "You let him get away with everything." "You probably like it when he is mean to me!" All of these "you" messages are designed to push the helping teacher's emotional buttons and to get her into a power struggle with the student. If the helping teacher is not trained to read this behavior and reacts emotionally, then this peer conflict could escalate into a destructive student/teacher crisis.

However, a trained teacher not only can identify and control her counter-aggressive feelings, but she also would begin to think diagnostically about this student. She would reflect: How could this degree of anger be generated by such a typical and common type of peer teasing? This is not the first time Tyrone was teased by Juan. It happens a lot. So why did Tyrone “blow up” at Juan today? If all of Tyrone’s anger cannot be explained by Juan’s teasing, then where did it come from? What is the primary source of Tyrone’s anger?

This level of diagnostic thinking about the source of student anger usually leads to the supposition that Tyrone’s explosive behavior may be a function of a psychodynamic defense mechanism called *displacement*. Displacement is a process where a student experiences some frustration in a setting in which he cannot express his anger. Instead, he swallows these feelings and carries them over to the next class. In this setting, his teacher and peers are unaware of this student’s internal agitation and the difficulty he is having trying to keep himself in control. When a peer teases this student, it triggers an aggressive outburst in which he blames everyone around him for his anger and unhappiness.

What is important to remember is that the student has little insight into this process and will not make the connection between the source of his anger and the expression of his anger in the classroom. But this crisis can become an opportunity for personal learning.

INTERVENTION SKILLS AND OUTCOME: THE GOALS OF A RED FLAG CARRY-OVER CRISIS

- To recognize the student’s behavior was unusual today and out of proportion to the incident.
- To identify and control one’s counter-aggressive feelings in order to focus on the student’s needs.
- To drain off and de-escalate the student’s emotional explosive behavior.
- To help the student identify the real source of his anger.
- To help the student identify his pattern of self-defeating behavior—the concept of displacement.
- To help the student accept the natural consequences of his behavior.
- To teach the student new skills when he is angry.
- To encourage the student to talk to staff when he is angry.

AN INSTRUCTIONAL EXAMPLE OF A RED FLAG CARRY-OVER CRISIS

Background Information

I was consulting in a junior high school when Ms. Capello asked me to speak to two of her students who were fighting in her classroom. Ms. Capello was one of my graduate students and teaches in the Learning Disabled Resource

Room. She explained that the two students, Doug and Walker, were 14 years old and assigned to her resource room during the seventh period. They usually seek each other out in her classroom and seem to be “friendly enemies.” They spend much of their time teasing each other and enjoying it. When she separates them, they usually ask to sit together the next day.

Ms. Capello reported that Doug is a typical ADHD student. He is bright, impulsive, speaks before he thinks, and has a low frustration tolerance and low self-esteem. Walker is more socially skilled and sensitive, and usually is cooperative when confronted. At times he can become a class instigator but he rarely provokes his peers when they are upset. Ms. Capello also commented that Doug was noticeably on edge when he came into class. His body seemed tense, and his facial expression was stern and sullen.

As she was engaged in helping another student, Ms. Capello heard a blast of abusive statements between Doug and Walker. Then Doug picked up a book and threw it at Walker, hitting him in the arm. Walker reacted by jumping over a chair and hitting Doug. Ms. Capello intervened, separated them, and asked them to walk with her to the office. She wished she could participate in the LSCI, but she had six other students in her class and had to return. She introduced me to Doug and Walker, explained who I was, and said I would talk to them about the fight. I thanked Ms. Capello and said I would meet with her after school about this incident.

Drain Off

I asked Doug and Walker to come into an office and to get comfortable because I was interested in hearing about the fight. Both students seemed anxious, sat in chairs, and did not look at me. Doug still appeared troubled, so I started by encouraging him to talk about the fight.

N.L.: I don’t know you, Doug, but you seem to be stirred up about what happened to you in class. You are not saying anything, but I know you must have lots of thoughts and feelings about the fight. Ms. Capello gave me a brief description of what she saw, but I’m more interested in hearing about what happened from your point of view. Doug, I’m not interested in blame. I’m only interested in discovering why two students who are friends, at times end up fighting.

Doug: Well, he’s not my friend anymore! It’s all his fault. It’s always his fault when I get into trouble. (cognitive distortion: overgeneralization) He started this problem! I didn’t do anything! I walked into class, and the first thing I saw was Walker making fun of me.

N.L.: So you were upset by Walker’s behavior when you entered the class. (affirming)

Doug: Yeah.

N.L.: What do you mean when you say he was making fun of you?

Doug: He was giving me his shit-eating grin!

N.L.: So he was smiling at you. Did he say anything before you noticed him smiling at you?

Doug: No, he was smiling at me funny-like. He was trying to tease me.

N.L.: Okay, so you felt he was doing this deliberately to upset you.

Doug: Yeah!

N.L.: Okay. (I turned to Walker.) Let me hear what happened from your viewpoint.

Walker: Doug was weird today! I was in class when he walked in. I could tell he was upset, so I smiled at him to cheer him up.

N.L.: You wanted to make him feel better, so you smiled at him. (pause) Was it a typical Walker smile, or did it also have some hand movements or finger signs to it?

Walker: No, it was an ordinary smile.

N.L.: What happened next?

Walker: He yelled at me, so I yelled at him. It got worse. He threw his book at me for no reason. I got mad and hit him. Then Ms. Capello separated us.

At this time I thought they had expressed their first layers of frustration, so I moved to the timeline.

Timeline

N.L.: I appreciate your willingness to talk about this incident. It is not easy to do so. I want to thank you for your cooperation....All I know at this time is that the two of you are upset with each other. You both feel the other one started it, and you both believe the other one is at fault....It is also true that in the past, not today, the two of you usually get along. So today sounded different.

Walker: That's right!

N.L.: Let me be more specific. Have there been other times when the two of you started teasing each other and it got out of control to the point where you hit each other? (testing for depth and spread of this pattern of interpersonal behavior)

Walker: No, this is the first time. (Doug nodded his head.)

N.L.: So today was the first time something this severe or troubling happened to the two of you. This fascinates me! Let's see if we can figure out what caused this problem to get out of hand. Let's start at the beginning. Walker, tell me again what you saw.

Walker: Doug came into the room, and he looked mad.

N.L.: Did he say anything to you?

Walker: No.

N.L.: So you know Doug so well that you can read his body language and know when he is upset, sad, and happy?

Walker: (smiling) I guess so.

N.L.: So you smiled at him as a way of saying, "Doug, what's wrong? I'm your friend."

Walker: Yeah, I wasn't mad at him at this time.

N.L.: How do you explain why your usual greeting didn't work?

Walker: I don't know. He accused me of making fun of him.

Doug: (shouting out) He was!

Walker: I wasn't!

N.L.: Okay, Doug, I hear you are still upset with Walker.

Doug: Yes, I am. He was teasing me.

N.L.: So when Walker smiled at you, it was too much for you and you ended up throwing a book at him.

Doug: Yes, but I didn't throw it hard.

N.L.: Okay, so you showed some control. But it did hit him in the arm.

Doug: Yeah, but he hit me, too.

Walker: Yes, but I didn't hit you very hard! I only hit you in the shoulder.

N.L.: So you both showed some control! This is interesting. Let's review. Two guys are angry at each other, but each is concerned about not hurting the other....Is it possible a part of you perhaps knew this fight was unusual?

Doug: (interrupts and changes the subject) Ms. Capello should have stopped us earlier. (irrational belief—external locus of control) She didn't do nothing.

N.L.: So you wanted Ms. Capello to prevent you from throwing the book at Walker.

Doug: Maybe.

N.L.: Does she usually let her students fight in class?

Doug: No.

N.L.: Is it possible she didn't think the teasing would get out of hand?

Doug: Maybe.

N.L.: Let's go back to the time you came to class. Both Ms. Capello and Walker said you looked upset. Did anything unusual happen to you prior to this class? (probing for a Red Flag issue)

Doug: (no answer)

N.L.: Can you describe what kind of mood you were in when you came to class?

Doug: Okay, I walked into class, and I was in a bad mood. This has been a terrible day for me, especially in English.

N.L.: So something happened to you in English class that was upsetting to you.

Doug: Yeah, they were laughing at me. So when I walked into class, I saw Walker watching me with an ugly smile on his face. I tried to ignore him, but he kept on smiling; so I knew he was laughing at me, and I wasn't in the mood for it.

N.L.: Sure, you were already upset, and next you saw Walker smiling at you. As you thought about it, he was laughing at you....Tell me, is Walker in your English class? (reflecting his point of view)

Doug: No.

N.L.: Then how does he know what happened in English class?

Doug: I bet someone told him, because he was teasing me.

N.L.: Let's find out. Walker, did anyone tell you about what happened to Doug in English class?

Walker: No, honest. I heard a funny joke, and I was going to tell Doug, but before I could, he got mad and threw his book at me. I don't know what got into him.

N.L.: Are you saying you never heard one thing about what happened to Doug in English class?

Walker: I didn't!

I thought Walker was telling the truth. He appeared to be upset by Doug's behavior and not the instigator of the crisis. I thanked him for his help and told him I would follow up with him later. I asked him to return to class with a note for Ms. Capello, which he did willingly. I also decided I wanted to privately explore what happened to Doug in his English class.

N.L.: Doug, you were telling me something important about you classmates laughing at you during English class. I know this is difficult to talk about, but I don't understand why they were laughing at you.

Doug: My teacher, Mrs. Jackson, was laughing at me, too.

N.L.: So you had a double dose of laughter—both your teacher and the class!

Doug: Yeah, it was terrible.

N.L.: Doug, what happened to make them laugh?

Doug: (with hesitation) Mrs. Jackson asked if anyone knew who wrote "The Raven." I raised my hand and said, "Edgar Allen Foe." She said, "Edgar Allen Who?" Then I realized I said "Foe" and not "Poe," but it was too late. Everyone was laughing at me—my teacher, my class, everyone. It was terrible! (Doug looked away and struggled to hold back his tears.)

N.L.: (with affirmation and support) This was a very upsetting and awful situation for you! You knew the answer. You thought you would shine in front of your teacher and classmates. Instead, "Poe" came out "Foe," and everyone laughed. I can understand how upsetting this would be for you!

Doug: I was embarrassed.

N.L.: Sure you were embarrassed! No one likes to be laughed at because of an honest mistake.

Doug: It made me angry at all of them.

N.L.: I can understand why you felt angry at them. But tell me, how did you express it? Did you say anything or do anything?

Doug: No. I just put my head on my desk for the rest of the period.

N.L.: Did the teacher say anything to you when you had your head down on the desk?

Doug: No. They left me alone for the rest of the period.

N.L.: Can you estimate how long this was?

Doug: About twenty minutes.

N.L.: During this time, when you were not saying anything out loud, can you remember what you were saying to yourself privately?

Doug: Oh, I was saying how I hate them....Also what a dummy I am, and how I always mess things up. (irrational belief)

N.L.: Sounds like you were angry not only at others; but also, you were angry at yourself.

Doug: I guess so.

N.L.: Now I can appreciate why you were in a bad mood when you came to class today....Doug, I would like to review what you told me. Please correct me if I left anything out or I don't have the same sequence or behavior correct.

By summarizing the timeline, I was convinced this crisis with Walker was due to a Red Flag Carry-over Crisis from the English class.

Insight Stage

N.L.: So, when you entered Ms. Capello's class, you were carrying a heavy emotional load in your head.

Doug: (nods in agreement)

N.L.: You told me you were feeling embarrassed by saying "Foe" for "Poe." You told me you were angry at your classmates and teacher for laughing at your mistake. And you told me you were "putting yourself down" by calling yourself names like "stupid," etc. That is a huge load to carry around in your head. So, when you saw Walker smiling at you, you were convinced he was...

Doug: also laughing at me.

N.L.: Sure, and you didn't want one more person to tease you! (affirmation)

Doug: That's right.

N.L.: Is it possible that Walker didn't know about the incident? Is it possible, because you were loaded with anger, that you came to the wrong conclusion about his smiling behavior?

Doug: (He lowered his eyes and looked at the floor.) I don't think Walker knew about it; and if he didn't, I should not have thrown my book at him.

N.L.: I'm impressed that you can talk about this problem in such an open way. It takes a lot of courage.... Doug, here is another tough question for you. When you threw the book at Walker, who would you like to have hit?

Doug: (He thought for several seconds, then grinned.) Mrs. Jackson and those kids who were laughing at me.

N.L.: Sure, you were upset with them, and you were upset with yourself. But who did you give your anger to?

Doug: Walker.

N.L.: That's right! He got your anger. But did he deserve it?

Doug: No.

N.L.: But he got something he didn't deserve.

Doug: Yes.

N.L.: So you were angry at what happened in English class and you...

Doug: Took it out on Walker.

N.L.: Would you please say that again, I want to make sure I heard you correctly.

Doug repeated and acknowledged the concept of displacement without ever using the word.

N.L.: Of the two problems you had today, which one was the critical problem?

Doug: The first one.

N.L.: I agree. But tell me again how the first problem is related to the second problem.

I always enjoy this stage of the LSCI, when the student begins to connect an event to thinking, to feeling, to behavior, to consequences.

Doug: I was upset for saying “Foe” for “Poe.” I was embarrassed, got angry; and when I saw Walker, I gave him all my anger. Then he got mad, and we ended up in a fight.

N.L.: Doug, I’m impressed! It sounds as if you learned an important concept. You now know how a personal problem in one setting can get acted out in a different setting, and the problem you caused (fighting with Walker) is not the cause of your problem (embarrassment/self-anger)....Has this pattern happened to you before?

Doug: (thoughtfully) One time I was mad at my older brother, Tom, so I picked a fight with Gary, my youngest brother.

N.L.: Doug, I’m pleased to hear how quickly and accurately you understand this concept. Now we need to discuss ways in which this new insight or idea can help you the next time you are angry.

New Skills Stage

At this time, we listed the following skills that Doug needed to learn in order to change his Conflict Cycle into a Coping Cycle—or to move conflicts to prevention.

1. Doug needs to talk to Walker about the fight. That is, he must learn the prosocial skill of how to apologize.
2. Doug needs to restructure his irrational beliefs—i.e., “I’m stupid!” “I *always* mess up!”—by learning Cognitive Restructuring Techniques.
3. Doug needs to learn how to talk to a staff member when he is angry. That is, he must identify his feelings of anger and learn to talk about them instead of acting them out.
4. Doug needs to accept the normal and natural consequences of fighting in the classroom.

We role-played prosocial skills numbers 1 and 3—how to talk to Walker about the fight and how to talk to a staff member when Doug is upset. We also discussed how Ms. Capello would work with him on Cognitive Restructuring Skills and would determine what consequences he would have for fighting in the classroom.

I was pleased by Doug’s reaction to the LSCI process. He was relaxed, comfortable, and more interested in learning new skills than defending his actions. It was a rewarding change from his initial comment, “It’s all Walker’s fault.”

Return to Class

I asked Doug to review what we talked about and asked if he was ready to talk to Ms. Capello about this incident. Since this was the last period of the day, I arranged for Ms. Capello to join us. Doug initially was nervous; but with support, he described the sequence of events accurately. When Ms. Capello heard about Doug’s problem, she was most support-

ive and helpful. She agreed to set up short-term and long-term behavioral goals with Doug, including an active behavior modification component.

Postscript

The Red Flag Carry-over Crisis represents a school crisis that can happen to any student, including regular students, high-risk students, learning-disabled students, and emotionally disturbed students. Teachers need to recognize this self-destructive pattern of behavior and have the skills to use the crisis as an opportunity for student insight and learning.

This particular LSCI is an excellent instructional example because it follows the theory and the sequence of the Red Flag Intervention. Doug was involved in the process and responded in textbook fashion. Once he felt emotionally supported, Doug became introspective and cooperative. He identified his pattern of displacement and acknowledged the importance of learning new skills.

One of my concerns about writing a successful LSCI is that it makes the process look too easy. While the “write up” can demonstrate the sequence of the LSCI process and some of the intervention skills, it does not communicate the quality of caring and the degree of empathy necessary to carry out an LSCI. Unfortunately, these important skills become lost in the translation. It is like taking a photograph of a sunset in black and white. The picture captures the event, but the excitement of the different colors and hues is lost. Similarly, an LSCI needs to be heard, seen, felt, and internalized to be appreciated. When beginning trainees are limited to reading about LSCI, they tend to overvalue the power of words. They look for “key phrases,” “insight statements,” and “therapeutic interpretations” instead of developing their interpersonal attending, listening, and responding skills. Remember, every comment, phrase, or statement can be expressed with sarcasm and flatness as well as it can be expressed with warmth, compassion, and caring. Our basic belief about LSCI is: *All significant learning evolves and revolves around people and not facts.* It is an interpersonal process involving specific cognitive skills, and not a skill process independent of empathy and caring.

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