

We Need a Bigger Clicker

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June 24, 2018

I've been asked to write an article about school safety, as this concern is on most of our minds when we think about our country and our children. We at the Flippen Group are practitioners. We serve alongside educators in their quest to prepare our nation's youth for school success, lifelong success, and the challenges that lie ahead, both known and unknown. I want to present some thoughts and ask that you consider what our work in over 10,000 schools nationwide has shown us.

First, let me ensure we are clear about some debate topics that are playing themselves out currently in our communities. We will never make our children or anyone else completely safe through metal detectors, gun control, school resource officers or legislative actions. If it were possible then maximum security prisons would be safe places and they absolutely are not safe! However, our processes provide a better way to connect to most inmates with whom I've worked, and they can make prisons safer; I will illustrate later.

Second, we overlook the fact that teachers are our first responders in every school incident, and it has been that way since public schools began, and it will continue to be that way.

Third, if teachers are the first responders, then we should be focusing on what they can do and what they are doing that works to minimize violence in schools. School safety is about teachers and the education community and the immense influence we have over everything that happens on a school campus. To say otherwise is to abdicate our roles and our responsibilities to others, which I am not ready or willing to do.

Connected kids are far less apt to go on a violent rampage. The research is profound on this singular point and we cannot ignore the pivotal role every teacher plays in this process. (Resnick et al, 1997; Center for Disease Control, 2009). In repeated studies of over 90,000 adolescents (largest study to date) they found that the single factor that lowered adolescent risk behaviors is **connectedness to an appropriate adult at home or school**. You can debate this if you choose, but the facts are there and the discussion is not about are they right or not. The question is what will we do with the data?

To illustrate, allow me to tell you about May 26, 2016, which was one of the most incredible day of my life. It was my second day in the Luther Unit of the Texas Department of Corrections

(prison). We had been asked to work with capital offenders between the ages of 17-21 in a leadership skills program that was a pilot for the system. I had spent the first day going over the neuroscience of the brain and what causes “amygdala hijackings” and, in their cases, led to their being in prison. The second day was very stormy with heavy rains in the forecast as I drove up. We began with a review of the previous lessons on how the brain works and the effects of stress and threat on our response systems. That’s when a tornado hit the prison. The lights, power, backup generators, locks and everything electronic failed. I was in a room with 27 capital offenders by myself.

Now, I have a question we should all consider. How safe are you in the relationships you have around you? Have you done what you can do to build the best relationships you can...no matter who it is with? So, let me tell you what happened.

One of the guys asked, “Mr. Flip, are you okay?” I quickly responded, “I’m not afraid of the dark so I’m alright.” We all laughed as they knew they were talking about my being with them in a totally black room with no guards. While we sat there discussing what was going on, a riot broke out in another part of the prison. Fifty people went to the hospital that day.

Another question, do you think there were guards in the prison that day that were very much at risk? The resounding answer was yes! And, the reason is simple; they had little or no appropriate relationship with the inmates. In several scenarios, a few of them had been unduly harsh and abusive.

In the most dangerous scenarios, in war, prisons, schools, businesses and in every arena we all work, the defining characteristic of safety is the relationship we have with those around us (D. Grossman, 2009). Every psychological researcher and author of note speaks clearly and compellingly about the need for trust and psychological and emotional safety in individuals and groups. This is not a difficult term to grasp. The question is how can we create this environment in our schools? This is what the Flippen Group does, and our supporting research is compelling.

We can travel the world and stay totally wired to anyone, anywhere, yet we are without deep meaningful relationships in unprecedented numbers, which presents an amazing opportunity. Yes, we can complain about the situation, but I have never found that to be helpful. I remember this old cowboy saying, “The deepest manure ultimately becomes the best fertilizer.” This is an opportunity for us to grow each other. If kids come to us traumatized, disconnected, broken, alone, and despondent, then please tell me who is better than parents and teachers to be the ones to fill those gaps and heal those hurts? The challenge is actually directed more to educators because statistics show that we spend more time with kids than their parents.

Kids want to be with adults that like them, love them, challenge them, encourage them, affirm and celebrate them. All of us want to be with these people! Even when we are disciplined or corrected we want it to come from someone who has our best interests at heart. I recently heard a teacher say that she just didn't "click" with a particular little boy. She needs a "Bigger Clicker" rather than an excuse for her lack of depth and ability to love him and tend to the need he has inside.

There are few institutions today that have as much access to children as educators and the opportunity to model appropriate behaviors. As educators, we are their path to a successful, hope-filled life. If anyone is positioned to provide socio-emotional equity to children, it's educators! We can do it by creating an intentional culture aligned to socio-emotional, academic and psychological safety outcomes.

Cultures in the classroom, the boardroom, on a plane or anywhere are defined by the collective behaviors of the people within them. If you want to "create" a culture (remember there is one whether intentionally created or not) then you do it through behaviors. This is also true if you are working to change a culture. The more variability you have in behaviors the more variability you will have in outcomes. We all know what a great culture feels like on a campus; you can see it and feel it within minutes of being there. This is the result of **intentional behaviors** that are aligned, practiced, supported and accepted. There is a need to clarify a point here: If you allow or ignore an unacceptable behavior, then it becomes acceptable. If we tolerate the intolerable and accept the unacceptable then we can't complain about the outcomes; we are the ones who created them.

When developing a culture, it's important to understand the underlying theories that impact our efforts. For instance, Albert Bandura, social cognitive theorist, posits approximately 70% of all learning is from modeling (Bandura, 1986). This is especially true for younger children. For those of us who have raised kids, we've seen this played out watching them mimic our voice tone, body language and facial expressions in role plays. However, if children are exposed to conflicting signals from parents and/or inappropriate modeling by adult supervisors, it can create cognitive dissonance. We have known cognitive dissonance outcomes since 1957 when Leon Festinger first referenced and defined the term in his book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Festinger, 1957).

When our belief systems and our behaviors are in conflict, it creates mental discomfort that causes us to seek resolution. For example, if legislators, administrators and teachers say, "Our schools are safe," however, fatal shootings continue to occur in schools, it creates anxiety which negatively impacts all learning to some degree. Do we not have enough evidence by now to be able to identify potential threats by observing student at-risk behaviors and provide the appropriate intervention? If a student is disconnected to an appropriate adult at home or school,

and is struggling socially being bullied or put down in both environments, he may eventually feel compelled to modify or eliminate one of the truths. This may result in suicide or an act of aggression against others. These behaviors should be observable by teachers and administrators. However, I have not read of a school shooting by a student or former student that was expected. Everyone is surprised initially. Only after examining the facts and evidence leading up to the shooting does our reflection create clarity.

The most recent Valentine's Day school shootings in Broward County, Florida, where 17 lost their lives in a seemingly random act of violence, may fit the connectedness, or lack thereof, research scenario, as do most school shooting perpetrators. The shooter, who attended the school previously, had a history of violence. Most of us would probably agree that he wasn't born violent. Then, it must have been an acquired behavior. How did he, and other school shooting perpetrators, get to a place mentally that resulted in the taking of innocent lives? The Resnick study may shed some light on the causal factors. Early indications are he did not have a significant "appropriate" adult in his life at home and at school. Overtime, the lack of relational capacity with a mature, responsible adult, while being exposed to bullying tactics, put downs and traumatizing experiences may have led to mental health issues, which eventually gave rise to a culminating act. Evidence suggests he was exposed to violent family behaviors and he exhibited violence as a teen at school, which obviously was not corrected in loco parentis (in the place of the parent). For teachers to act in the place of the parent, they must treat their students like their own children, i.e., teach them respect for themselves and others, provide a work ethic, exhibit grit, take responsibility for their actions, provide future vision and follow their instruction (Gillett, R., Baer, D., 2017). This is the real achievement gap in schools!

We can also assume his self-talk about his life probably wasn't very positive. In fact, recently released videos from the shooter's cell phone proved he had planned the attack. He indicated the number of victims could be around 20. He named the school and said everyone would soon know his name. He said he was done with being told he was an idiot (among other put downs). His protective factors against violence were virtually non-existent, therefore, he became marginalized. Were any of the factors he described known by school officials or teachers prior to the shootings?

Marginalized kids can become random actors if parents or teachers ignore the early warning signs ("My child is a troubled kid, even though he acts out violently at times, he would never hurt anyone." – cognitive dissonance!). Most marginalized kids in schools have been taunted, disrespected, bullied or treated differently than we would want our own children treated. If we are unable or unwilling to create a caring and supportive environment for our children, why would we expect them to not act out in anger? As heartbreaking and tragic as many of their actions are, kids still provide insights into their thoughts through their tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, appearance, etc. By getting to know each student and being

observant, we can detect when a student behaves outside his or her norms. These are signals that they may need someone, like a teacher, to notice and step up. We can ask if everything is ok and try to create a supportive environment for them. If school leaders set the expectations for teacher and student behavior by modeling, and engaging in a process that connects all students with their peers and supervising adults (i.e., Capturing Kids' Hearts and Lead Worthy the Course: adolescent curriculum; www.Flippen Group.com), we can expect that most marginalized students will become connected. We know school connectedness is related to adolescent mental health, and other health risk factors such as injury to oneself or others. Therefore, it should be a priority for everyone in a school to know how to create kid connections. If it can be done in prison, then it can certainly be done in our classrooms.

As we define the cultures of our classrooms and schools, we ultimately define the culture of our society. Most of us are failing at this great task. Our school leaders, principals, union heads and superintendents must all ask, "What are the acceptable behaviors we expect from our education professionals that we will do everyday with fidelity? And, we must agree they must be modeled by each of us. What are the behaviors that lead to a civil society, and how will we make this a normal way of doing business on our campuses? If we fail, what are the behaviors we will teach our kids about conflict and disagreement?"

Connected kids are happier, healthier and more productive people. And when we win their hearts, we also win their minds. Then, we all win!

If school administrators, teachers, custodians, food service workers and bus drivers behave in ways that cause students to emulate them, then we will become a people of great moral fabric with the ability to face the challenges rapidly approaching our society. Ultimately, the question each of us must answer is not will we, but do we have the will to do it, and if so, then let's get started.

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