

Developing Social Skills and Relationships

James Freeman

Using the experience of a young person with lagging social skills, this article provides an example of a relational exchange using Life Space Crisis Intervention, a positive strategy for promoting growth and change.

Having witnessed severe domestic violence in her early childhood, Sophia has lived in four foster homes and at fourteen years old is significantly behind in her academic progress. She often finds herself in physical altercations at school

and in conflict around her neighborhood. These incidents often leave her confused and struggling to build relationships with adults and peers. She enjoys her experience in the after-school program and has made positive connections with a couple of the adults running the program.

In this application of Life Space Crisis Intervention, we observe highlights from the six stages (Long, Fecser & Wood, 2001) of the conversation between Sophia and a caring adult as she recovers from an incident with a friend.

Stage One: Drain off

Adult: Sophia, what's happening?

Child: You don't care and no one else does either!

Adult: I'm here with you. And I do care.

Child: Well, no one ever listens to me!

Adult: Can I try?

Child: You wouldn't understand. Haley hates me.

Adult: Walk with me, Sophia. Let's take a deep breath together and see if we can figure this out.

This stage of drain off is a quick way to connect with and support the young person in calming his or her emotions. Sometimes this stage can take some time, especially when a child is highly escalated. In this moment with Sophia there is an established trust between her and the adult so the goal is reached quickly.

Stage Two: Timeline

In this next stage, the goal is to get a sense of how the young person is experiencing and interpreting his or her exchange with others. It is less about understanding exactly what happened and more about how the young person is viewing what happened.

Adult: So who's Haley?

Child: Haley's my so-called friend. At least I thought she was.

Adult: Sounds like something happened between you and Haley.

Child: Duh. All I did was go up to her and she pushes me and laughs with her friends. I hate when people laugh at me!

Adult: Well, I can understand not liking being laughed at. She pushed you?

Child: She pushed me and I tripped right in front of everyone. I felt stupid. When I hit the other girl for laughing, I got pulled out by the staff and now they're going to make me meet with my social worker.

Adult: It sounds like things got complicated fast. What happened right before she pushed you?

Child: All I did was come up behind her and knock her in the shoulder.

Adult: Knock her in the shoulder? What do you mean?

Child: You know, knock her. Like a punch. I was trying to surprise her.

Adult: Do you mean surprise like scare or surprise like being friendly?

Child: Being friendly. I wanted to tell her about the media project we've been working on in class.

Adult: Is Haley someone you usually get along with?

Child: Yeah, we've been working on this project for two weeks and I thought she was my friend.

Stage Three: Central Issue

Adult: Are you saying that when you knocked Haley on the shoulder you were trying to get her attention to talk to you? That you were trying to be friendly?

Child: Yes, I guess so.

Often this stage is a quick check in with the young person to make sure the adult is understanding correctly the information that was gathered in the timeline stage. Since Sophia indicated the evaluation is on track the adult moves the conversation forward.

Stage Four: Insight

Up to this point, Sophia has experienced support and settling through the LSCI process of Drain Off, followed by the adult gaining an understanding of Sophia's interpretation of events through the Timeline and Central Issue stages. Now, in Stage Four, the exchange begins to focus on reframing the experience and helping Sophia gain some self-awareness. This is accomplished,

in part, by highlighting that Sophia displayed the right desires in connecting with Haley, but simply went about it in a way that inadvertently created new problems.

Adult: So, what did you expect to happen after you knocked Haley on the shoulder?

Child: I don't know. I guess I thought she'd be glad to see me. That she'd stop talking with everyone else and talk with me.

Adult: You wanted her to see you and talk with you?

Child: Yes.

Adult: You know, Sophia, I think you've got the right attitude about all this.

Child: What are you saying?

Adult: Well, here you were, trying to connect your friend. That's something that's been difficult in the past and now you're trying. That's a good thing.

Child: Sure, a good thing I got in a fight again, right?

Adult: No, the fight wasn't that helpful, but I'm talking about what you wanted from the beginning—connecting with your friend and having a good time.

Child: Well, then why am I in trouble? And why does it make me feel so bad?

Adult: I guess one reason might be because when you knocked Haley on the shoulder, to her it felt more like being hit. And then things got worse after that.

Child: Yeah, they did.

Adult: But even though things got a little worse, you and I have learned something really important. You really wanted the right thing out of this—connecting with a friend. That's the hard part—getting to the point where you are ready and eager to reach out to other kids and form friendships. The trouble is that you went about getting her attention in a way that wasn't so effective. But that's an easy thing to fix. We can work together on better ways to get a friend's attention.

Child: If I could do that, a lot of my problems would go away.

At this point, Sophia has begun to see her role in the conflict. Through this part of the conversation, Sophia's openness to learning and practicing new skills has increased substantially. It's also an indication that the adult can move the conversation into the next stage.

Stage Five: New Skills

Adult: So, I think you've got the right idea about making friends; we just have to learn some new ways to get Haley's—or anyone's—attention when you want it.

Child: What?

Adult: You know, thinking up ways that you could get someone's attention that don't involve hitting. Have any ideas?

Child: I don't know.

Adult: Well, if you had to get my attention, and you didn't want to hit me, how would you do it?

Child: I would say something. I'd say your name.

Adult: That's a good idea! Would you come up from behind or in front of me?

Child: In front I guess. I wouldn't want to scare you. Maybe that's what happened to Haley.

Adult: You're on to something, Sophia.

Stage Six: Transfer of Learning

The brief conversation has been productive and the rhythm of the exchange is beginning to wrap up. In the distance, the adult sees Sophia's peers gathering to head out on a field trip and uses this as a cue to review and generalize Sophia's learning and finish the conversation.

Adult: Look, there's the group headed out to the van. If you were going to catch up and join them, how would you do it?

Child: I guess I'd run over and say "hey" and ask them where they're going. I'd say I want to go, too.

Adult: Nice idea! Want to try it?

Child: Sure.

Adult: Can I ask you one more thing? You said something about having to meet with your social worker. Any ideas about what you might tell her you learned from all this?

Child: I guess I could tell her I'm trying to make friends and not trying to hurt people.

Adult: She'd probably like to know that about you.

Child: Can I go catch up with the others?

Adult: Sure. And thanks for talking. Let's talk again when you get back, OK?

Child: OK. Thanks for listening. I didn't think you had the time.

Adult: Sophia, I will always make time when you want to talk.

Child: OK. See you later.

Notice the ingredients present in the final stage of the conversation. First, there is a focus on how Sophia will re-enter the activity. Second, there is a connection made with the outcomes or consequence of the incident (i.e., talking with the social worker) and an attempt to connect her new learning to that coming situation. Finally, there is a future connection indicated through the invitation to talk again later. This is important as it communicates the intent of the adult to follow through and reassures Sophia of the support offered to her.

Explanation

Social interactions require a variety of complex communication skills from young people. These include interpreting social cues, recognizing how behavior is affecting others, and understanding how one is perceived by others (Greene, 2008). This application of LSCI uses the New Tools approach (Long, Fecser & Wood, 2001) which is applicable in situations where young people are struggling with lagging or undeveloped social skills. The resulting problems may be perceived by others as intentional misbehavior.

In this situation, Sophia had the right idea (i.e., connecting with a friend), but lacked the skills (i.e., entering a group, recognizing how she was perceived) to carry it out. She was confused and shamed by the experience with her peers. Given what we know about her prior relational trauma, this has become a self-defeating pattern.

An interaction like this "involves thought and planning; it is not as spontaneous as it appears" (Stuart, 2013, p. 297). The adult knew the child and had an awareness of her patterns of behavior. It was part of the larger process of being with and interpreting her experiences (Freeman & Garfat, 2014). This process and intervention only can be facilitated through "being with and participating with people in the everyday moments of their lives" (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012, p. 15).

Through this brief and focused conversation, a caring adult entered into her conflict and turned this into an opportunity for learning. The stages of LSCI provided the adult with a map to guide the conversation. This is a much needed alternative to punishment, lecturing, or shame—all of which further distance her from connecting with others in meaningful ways. This reclaiming intervention is a step toward developing the social skills she missed in her childhood.

James Freeman, MA, CYC-P, has been involved in relational child and youth care for over twenty years. He is the training director for Casa Pacifica Centers for Children and Families in California and a master trainer for the Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute. He serves on the boards of the American Association of Children's Residential Centers and the International Child and Youth Care Network (www.cyc-net.org). He can be reached at jfreeman@casapacifica.org

References

- Freeman, J., & Garfat, T. (2014). Being, interpreting, doing: A framework for organizing the characteristics of a relational child and youth care approach. *Child & Youth Care Online*, 179, 23-27.
- Garfat, T., & Fulcher, L. (2012). Characteristics of a relational child and youth care approach. In T. Garfat & L. Fulcher (Eds.), *Child and youth care in practice* (pp. 5-24). Cape Town, South Africa: Pretext.
- Greene, R. (2008). *Lost at school: Why our kids with behavioral challenges are falling through the cracks and how we can help them*. New York, NY: Scribner.
- Long, N., Fecser, F. & Wood, M. (2001). *Life space crisis intervention: Talking with students in conflict* (2nd ed.). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Stuart, C. (2013). *Foundations of child and youth care* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.

Copyright of Reclaiming Children & Youth is the property of Reclaiming Youth International and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.