SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERVENING WITH A STUDENT WHO HAS "ERUPTIONS"

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When a student has eruptions of emotional energy that interfere with the safety and well-being of other students and staff, and the behaviour has not changed in response to our usual interventions then we must find other ways to intervene in order to help this student to get through their time at school.

Eruptions of emotional energy can often result in a student swearing, screaming, hitting, biting, spitting, running around, or running away or in a full blown meltdown or tantrum.

We call these behaviours "eruptions of emotional energy" because now that we are able to study the human brain, it has become apparent that we have part of our brain, called the Limbic System or Emotional Brain, whose role it is to ensure our survival and this survival reaction fuels our behaviour. The Limbic System is wired to react to threats and the most profound threat to us as humans is that of facing separation from what and from those to whom we are attached.

The Limbic System is meant to be tempered by the Cortex, the more complex part of the human brain. The Prefrontal Cortex is key to this tempering process. However, the Prefrontal Cortex is slow to develop and does not actually wire up to the Limbic System until between 5 to 7 years of age and it takes until well into the mid-twenties to fully develop.

We now know that even in the well-developed, adult brain, when our emotions run high, it is difficult for our Prefrontal Cortex to always manage the expression of our emotions (hence the reason we sometimes "yell" at those whom we love the most).

In young children and in children with developmental delays, the Prefrontal Cortex is either not yet functioning and/or gets very easily hijacked by an emotional state.

Humans are complex and have many emotions, but there are three that have been identified as being Primary Emotions. These are ones that serve us when our survival is at a stake and are the ones that can cause difficulty if their expression is not tempered. These emotions are:

1. **Pursuit or Seeking,** which manifests in the desire to connect. As humans, if we are connected to others, we have a better chance of survival. When we are in pursuit mode, we do everything we can to please those around us so that connection is maintained or restored.
2. **Alarm,** which manifests itself in caution, is the desire to avoid doing that which threatens our relationship. Sometimes this emotion can move us to want to avoid doing a task or an activity that may show the person we are with that we are not living up to their standards.
3. **Frustration** comes about when something is not working for us and manifests itself in the desire to change that which is not working. The desire to change is powerful and when it is thwarted by a "no", it can often erupt in attacking energy.

Emotions are meant to move us. When observing a young, immature student, we can easily figure out which emotion is the one primary one that is moving them in the moment. However, all three emotions can be and are usually present all at the same time but only the strongest one manifests and the other two are displace and reappears at another time or place. A student can be alarmed and frustrated but also be in pursuit. For example, when with their Phys Ed teacher, the student who is in pursuit, will behave beautifully, but when returning to the classroom, the student can have a meltdown from all the frustrations that have been gathering up during Phys Ed (too much noise, having to take turns, other students being unfair etc.) Once we understand that emotions can displace one another, we are not as surprised when they seem to erupt out of nowhere. The

frustration, which was being held in, finally was able to come out when the student was in the presence of a safe adult.

So, when determining how to intervene with a young or immature student who has eruptions, we need to understand that frustration can build up. There are many potential sources of frustration in the student's life that can add up by the time they arrive at school (being woken up, being tired, having to hurry etc.). Riding on a school bus can be a source of frustration (noise, smell, motion etc.). And so when we ask a student to engage in a task that is a bit difficult or to stop a task they are enjoying, their frustration (which has been adding up) can go "over the top".

When a young or immature student is enjoying what they are doing, having to stop is particularly frustrating. The ability to control behaviour when emotion is intense is hard for those of us that are mature, but even a greater challenge for the immature. The ability to manage our emotions usually improves as we get older. This is not a skill that can be taught (although we can gently help it along but for the young student, they need lots of support and help). Rather than working at having a student develop "self-regulation", our best intervention is "co-regulation". When we are calm, we can help a student return to calm.

So, what can we do while we are waiting for maturity to happen?

A. MANAGE THE ENVIRONMENT INSTEAD OF THE STUDENT.

1. If the student arrives at school in a frustrated state (looks angry or grumpy) spend time doing a physical activity that can diffuse some of the build-up of emotional energy. Activities that can be helpful are dancing, drumming, stomping bubble wrap, running, kicking a ball, throwing a ball etc. Have fun with the activity. This can be a time for re-establishing the connection with a student when the day begins (play is one of the best ways to prime attachment) and this also allows for emotional release.
2. Provide choices of acceptable activities, making it harder for a student to refuse to engage in a task.
3. Keep expectations realistic and note when the student is no longer able to sustain attention. Better to switch activities, than to wait until the student is upset. With time, the student will develop the ability to sustain attention.
4. Provide times for "brain breaks" both physical activity and quiet activity after a time of concentration.

B. ANTICIPATE WHEN AND HOW TROUBLE MIGHT HAPPEN.

1. Recess Time:
    a. As much as a student might want to play with a large group of friends, the give and take that is required, may be too much for the student to handle. This can be especially difficult when the student is expected to share or take turns.
    b. INSTEAD: pick one or two children who come to a designated area that is supervised by an adult so the adult can intervene or distract when things start to become challenging.
2. Sharp objects:
    a. If a student is prone to using sharp objects when in the attacking mode, it is best to put these and other such objects away in a place that is not easily accessible. If scissors are being used, they should be blunt-nosed.
3. Transition to a new task:

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a. Try using a Time-Timer without the "bing" so the student can see time passing and it is the red patch/time that is disappearing. Focus on the sadness that "time" has gone away.

b. Provide a choice of the next task and make it one the student enjoys. Use play and playful activities when doing tasks that are less fun – singing the clean-up song, dancing the blocks to their home, etc.

4. Read the level of emotional energy:

a. When it is obvious that there is a lot of pent up emotion, sometimes the adults have to let go of their agenda. However, rather, than "letting" a student do what they want, the adult can stay in charge of the situation, by "giving permission" for the student to continue. This is called "staying in charge when you cannot be in control". "**I** have decided that you can keep colouring for now."

5. Participating in class and school events:

a. Unfortunately, sometimes even fun events can result in an eruption. When the Limbic System is activated even with pleasurable emotions, these can quickly transform into other emotions.

b. Fun events also have transitions and have to end. They also often require co-operation with others.

c. When deciding whether or not to include a student in one of these events (which he/she will desperately want to participate in) the adults must decide if they would be able to handle the situation if an eruption were to occur. Do they have a solid plan for handling the eruption? Rather than setting everyone up for a potentially unpleasant situation, it may be better to plan an alternate activity that is equally fun for the student at that time. While the student may be very disappointed in the short run, the long term benefits of not having had to deal with a crisis will be worth it.

C. INTERVENTIONS TO AVOID

1. Using a reward system:

a. Reward systems don't actually grow a student up. They engage the pursuit emotion. The student earns the reward to please the adult or to get the reward. This does not change brain functioning, nor does it diminish frustration if it is in the student's system. So, the student will be "good" to earn the reward, but the underlying frustration that has been displaced by pursuit will emerge even during the pleasurable "reward" activity.

b. Reward systems can cause frustration, because if the student cannot earn the reward then frustration is increased.

c. A young student, because the Prefrontal Cortex is still immature, has a hard time connecting their behaviour with why they did not earn the reward. Not getting the reward just seems terribly unfair to them.

d. Reward systems give us a false impression that maturation is taking place. Good behaviour is not necessarily a sign of good development. Maturation takes place when the student feels safe and is rested. It takes time.

2. Using Time Out or Ignoring:

a. For any student, being ignored or sent away from those who are meant to care for them just increases frustration. Attachment is the primary need of all children and in Time Out or when ignored the emotions of frustration and alarm are evoked. If the

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student needs time by themselves, the adult who is near-by should avoid speaking, but look pleasant and approachable.

D. OTHER INTERVENTIONS TO FAVOUR:

1. Increase attachment:
    a. Collect before you direct. Get into the student's space in a friendly way. Collect their eyes, nod and a smile. "You really like making puzzles." When the student is nodding and smiling, slip in your directive, "It is soon going to be time to head home.".
    b. Use delight and playfulness to help the student feel that you care for them. Sometimes in our attempt to get things done, we hurry these steps. We forget to collect and we forget to show our pleasure at being with the student.
    c. Find little ways to show the student that she/he is special to you.
2. Slow down:
    a. Young children have a different sense of time than we do. Sometimes we become urgent because we have an "agenda" and when we start rushing, they instinctively slow down even more or start to resist. Sometimes we need to go at their pace to slowly get to where we want to go with them.
3. Come alongside Emotion:
    a. We need to help the student recognize what is happening in their emotional world. To do so we need to spend time, firstly, just naming what is happening:
        i. Frustration: "That wasn't what you expected." "This isn't what you want." "This isn't working for you.
        ii. Alarm: "That was scary." "You were afraid that she didn't want to be your friend."
        iii. Pursuit: "You really want her to like you."
    b. We match their emotion through our tone of voice.
    c. Then, we try lead them to a sense of **sadness** that things don't always work out as they wish.
    d. Give lots of place for sadness and tears. These are healthy signs of adaptation. Some children need to do a lot of crying because there is so much that does not work in their world.
4. Reassure the student that you will be looking forward to seeing them the next day:
    a. No matter how the day plays out, all children need to know that the adults who care for them want to be with them the next day or next time that they will be together.

For more ideas about how to intervene with students with these challenges please visit the CEBM website: https://www.cebmmember.ca/frustration-and-aggression

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