

Professional Development Activity on Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Discipline

Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg created this model in the mid-1980s at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Building on the rationale that SFBT can make a positive difference in dealing with individual student behavior and discipline, we offer a case-based activity to practice engaging the team in this technique.

Time Frame

Team members will need to review the brief therapy scenario prior to this activity; it should take five minutes to review. Beyond that, the team should allow thirty to sixty minutes for this activity.

Materials

This activity requires a copy of the solution-focused brief therapy scenario for each participant. The team might benefit from having the school rules or policies that address bullying behavior displayed publicly.

Process

One team member should volunteer to serve as facilitator. The facilitator should take the following four steps.

1. Ask team members to ponder the following situation. A student approaches a teacher, stating that he has been experiencing bullying for several weeks. He describes a situation in which another student constantly calls him names. The teacher refers the reporting student to the office so an administrator can investigate the incident. (If the team has a recent similar experience, use the additional local context to inform discussion.)
2. Ask the team to assume that the reporting student is being truthful and the student being reported was exhibiting some bullying behaviors. Ask members how they would typically approach this situation, from knowledge of the issue through final resolution. Questions to ask them include the following.
 - “Who on the team is most likely to investigate the issue and assume the lead role?”
 - “How should the team organize itself most effectively to address the issue?”
 - “What is the typical outcome for the harmed and the harmer?”
 - “What rule or policy guides the outcome?”
 - “How are parents, guardians, and others who need to know involved or informed?”
3. Provide each member a copy of the solution-focused brief therapy scenario, and ask the team members to read it to themselves.

4. As a team, discuss the strengths and challenges of the suggested SFBT approach. The facilitator asks the following questions.
- “Which procedures from this activity might be plausible?”
 - “Which procedures from this activity would not work for the team?”
 - “Depending on who assumes a lead role, how might we involve other team members? Are there more appropriate team roles in this case for dealing with the harmed or harming students, parents and guardians, or others?”
 - “What else enables a more supportive, less punitive approach?”
 - “What is the root cause for issues like this in the school, and how can we address them more strategically as a schoolwide issue?”

Results

Participation in this activity strengthens the team’s capacity to deal with student behavior and discipline in a more supportive way for the harmed and the harmer. It fosters stronger team-student relationships, which in turn build a more effective team.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Scenario

Using a solution-focused brief therapy approach, consider the scenario given in process step 1:

A student approaches a teacher, stating that he has been experiencing bullying for several weeks. He describes a situation in which another student constantly calls him names. The teacher refers the reporting student to the office so an administrator can investigate the incident. If the team has a recent similar experience, use the additional local context to inform discussion.

Now, follow the five steps.

1. After collecting evidence and beginning an investigation, the counselor might consider providing emotional support for the bullied student while an administrator follows up with the student exhibiting bullying behavior.
2. Meet with the student exhibiting bullying behavior to discuss the allegations, being careful to keep the focus off who reported the incident. Consider the following options.
 - Help the student remember a time he was a victim of bullying.
 - Use questions to direct the conversation. Ask, "I wonder if your experience being bullied plays a role in name calling?"
 - Use positive blame to help the student accept accountability. State, "It sounds like you have had some difficult things happen to you." Ask, "How do you manage not letting that get in the way of making friends?"
 - Help the student figure out how to make amends. State, "We all like to have our feelings acknowledged. Would you be able to apologize if someone thought you were bullying him or her?"
 - Praise the student for his or her work, and recognize the efforts he or she has made to take responsibility for the issue and help solve it.
3. Based on this conversation, determine if the event was bullying or other conflict. The team members who spoke with the students can determine this through discussion and consensus. Now consider how policies or guidelines may influence this outcome.
4. Contact the parents or guardians. Because phone calls home are often only about behavior issues, begin the conversation by sharing a positive about their child. State, "Someone perceived your son demonstrating bully behaviors. I have spoken with both students, and we have resolved the problem." If the student was willing to apologize, share with the parents or guardians how proud you are of that choice. State, "I wanted you to be aware of the situation. I value your input and support."
5. Make a phone call to the bullied child's parents or guardians as well. State, "It was brought to our attention that your child was bullied at school. Our school counselor-administrator team addressed the issue immediately and it has been resolved. Our investigation revealed [insert solutions such as an apology, a suspension, or the like]. What questions do you have? How can we support you?"