

That Ought to Teach You!

Adult Counter-Aggression: A Parable of Why it Happens and How to Prevent it

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A PARABLE: Sam & the Music Teacher

Sam is a bright and talented high school senior. He takes pride in his accomplishments, especially in the area of music. He is generally self-motivated and compliant, but, at times, will openly question the purpose and benefits of what is being taught or of what he is being asked to do. His teachers have always seen him as an independent thinker who is not afraid to clarify details and open up new and creative options. He is seen as having a good sense of humor and a caring and kind attitude toward others. Sam, however, is not noted for his organizational skills or his attention to details regarding matters of personal responsibility.

Sam recently misplaced an important music folder needed for one of his extra-curricular school music groups with Mr. Jones. On the evening of his rehearsal, minutes before he needed to leave home for practice, Sam was racing through his house searching under chairs, in drawers, under beds, in closets and around the entire perimeter of his room trying to locate the missing folder. He informed his parents that he had been searching for days both in and out of school in an effort to locate the missing music with no success. He admitted that he had not told Mr. Jones about losing the folder because he knew his teacher would be very angry with him. Not unfamiliar with Sam's ability to "lose" or accidentally "misplace" items, Sam's parents suggested he go to rehearsal, explain the problem to his teacher and see what the teacher expected him to do about the dilemma. Within a short time, Sam's parents were surprised to see their son back home from rehearsal and tearing around the house again searching for his lost folder. He explained to his parents that when he told Mr. Jones that he could not find the music folder, he was directed to return home and continue looking because he was of no use to the group without his folder. Sam stated that he argued with his teacher that he knew most of the music by memory and could probably get through the rehearsal. However, Mr. Jones insisted that Sam drive back home and then return to school whether he found the folder or not. Sam did not find the folder and returned to school having missed most of the night's practice. When Sam returned home that evening he was frustrated with himself and angry with his teacher.

The following day, Sam had a rehearsal with Mr. Smith, his music instructor for another group. This rehearsal went very well and left Sam feeling good about himself and about the remainder of the day. Sam decided since he had such "bad luck" in keeping track of Mr. Jones' music folder, he would leave Mr. Smith's folder in the music room on his stand so that it would be there the next morning, first thing, for practice. Sam left the music room feeling that he had made a wise decision not to take the folder with him and risk misplacing it.

Sam arrived at school the next morning on time for his early morning rehearsal with Mr. Smith. As he entered the music room, he could immediately see that his folder was missing from the music stand! He became very anxious and began searching the classroom for the folder. At this time, Mr. Jones entered the room and asked Sam what he was looking for so frantically. Sam reluctantly told Mr. Jones that he could not find his music folder from Mr. Smith's class. Mr. Jones told Sam that he was going to be in trouble if he didn't find that folder and he again sent Sam back home to look. Sam left school in an angry rush realizing now that not only would he not have the music folder for Mr. Smith's class, but he would also be late for that class which was something that would get him into even more trouble with the music department.

When Sam arrived home his parents were furious that he was driving back and forth to school in such terrible winter weather in search of his music folder. Now they were told by Sam that he would be late for class with Mr. Smith because he was following Mr. Jones' direction to look for the folder at home. Sam's parents realized this was the same teacher who had sent Sam home two days earlier in equally bad weather. Again, Sam was not able to produce this folder because, as he insisted, he had safely left it in school on the stand in the music room!

After several minutes of searching by Sam and his parents, Sam returned to school admitting to Mr. Jones that he could not find the folder. It was at this time that Mr. Jones presented the missing folder to Sam telling him that he had taken the folder off the music stand to "teach Sam a lesson in responsibility." Sam, now furious with Mr. Jones, took the folder, left the room and arrived at his music rehearsal 45 minutes late. Mr. Smith was very upset with him and lectured him about his lack of responsibility to the group by arriving so late. Sam sat angry and sullen for the remainder of the rehearsal.

When Sam arrived home from school that evening, the events of the last few days were discussed. Sam, still frustrated over Mr. Jones' actions, expressed to his parents what he had learned as a result of his teacher's actions, and what he would be watching for in the future:

- a teacher whose words and actions didn't always match
- a teacher who carried a grudge and then retaliated
- someone who didn't allow for mistakes by his students
- an educator who taught how important responsibility was but then would risk a student's safety to prove a point
- a teacher who could not be believed or trusted in the future

Sam was asked, by his parents, if he had learned any lessons about responsibility because of what happened. Sam stated the following:

- you don't have to be responsible to hold a responsible position
- winning the point is far more important than acting responsibly
- adults can treat kids unfairly and not be held responsible for their actions

- adults are hostile and like pushing kids around

Sam's parents asked if he would like them to meet with Mr. Jones and express their concern and dissatisfaction with the way he had handled the incident or if he would be comfortable telling Mr. Jones how he felt about the incident. Sam was quick to say "No way! It will only get me into more trouble with him and things will just get worse."

ADULT COUNTER-AGGRESSION: WHY IT HAPPENS

When I first heard about this incident, I struggled with several questions of my own. Why does a teacher suddenly want to "strike back" at a student? How does the adult become caught up in the student's stress and begin to mirror the child's emotions. Where does this counter-aggressive behavior originate and what can be done to avoid it?

In the above situation, Sam begins experiencing stress when he can't locate his music folder. He adds to that stress by not telling anyone about his dilemma, hoping he can find the folder before he has to rehearse. Sam knows that if he does not find the folder he will have to purchase a new one which will be very expensive on his limited earnings. Sam is confused about where to turn, frustrated with himself for having lost the folder in the first place and angry about the prospect of being expected to replace the folder at his expense and not the expense of the school.

When Mr. Jones sees Sam arrive at rehearsal with no music and a surly attitude, he assumes that there is no reason for his behavior. When Sam tells Mr. Jones he has lost the folder, Mr. Jones knows that if Sam does not find the folder soon he will not have the necessary music to practice for the upcoming performance. He also knows that if the folder must be replaced, he will have to personally go to a local music store to acquire all the music again and that he will have to cover the expense of the folder until Sam pays him. Mr. Jones prides himself on his organizational skills and his responsibility to his position. He sees Sam's lack of responsibility and organization as a harsh rejection of his own personal values. Mr. Jones is confused, frustrated and angry about the situation.

His feelings mirror the exact feelings that Sam has based on the stressor of the lost music folder. Instead of using Sam's behavior as an indicator of how Sam was feeling about the stress, Mr. Jones internalized those feelings and took Sam's actions personally. Mr. Jones' response became one of counter-aggression, retaliation and a way to "even the score." Mr. Jones' follow-up actions of taking Sam's other music folder, sending him home a second time, and causing him to be late for class were all part of the counter-aggressive action that resulted from Mr. Jones' reaction to the violation of his personal values regarding organization and responsibility.

The question arises as to where can a positive outcome be realized from a situation such as the one described in this incident? If Mr. Jones identified his judgment error in taking Sam's second folder, either through self-evaluation or through supportive insight of an observing colleague, he could have had an opportunity to model apologizing for that error and learning from a mistake.

More often than not, however, the counter-aggressive act goes unrecognized or disregarded as this one did. The unfortunate incident leaves parents quietly questioning teacher motivation and ethics, a student dramatically impacted by teacher action/reaction to an event, and the trauma of the attack far overshadowing whatever lesson the teacher may have intended.

If you feel yourself saying “OUCH” I think I’ve been there some time in my teaching career, you would not be alone. Although I may be grateful, at times, for “selective amnesia”, I have come to understand that counter-aggressive actions slip into the professional as well as the private aspects of our lives in one form or another as we deal with: getting caught in the conflict cycle, a bad mood, rejected ideals, stress related baggage and not being able to make things work out the way we want. Counter-aggressive responses have many faces and personalities. In the school setting, they can be as subtle as not calling on someone today when they misbehaved all day yesterday, making sure some activity Joe enjoys is added to the schedule on the day he has his out of school suspension, giving a pop quiz on the day after the big basketball game because it’s a sure bet the kids all went to the game and didn’t study that night.

Counter-aggression can also be more extreme like yelling back at a student who has raised his voice or even becoming physically aggressive with a student in response to their words or actions. The intent of the act is to teach some lesson to the student such as responsibility, respect for authority, following directions or following the rules. The result of the act is to alienate the student from the staff member involved and from a positive school environment. The message received is not about the action of the student but about the reaction of the adult.

HOW TO PREVENT BECOMING COUNTER-AGGRESSIVE

The first step toward this goal is recognizing that the conflict cycle between student and staff will account for at least half of the counter-aggressive interactions. The job of adults is to identify when the student is in the conflict cycle and then staying out of it themselves. Remembering that 90% of the time there is a reason for a student’s behavior and that 99% of the time you are not that reason can help. There is some stressor (staff probably can’t see or are not aware of) that causes the student to feel a certain way (angry, frustrated, anxious, out of control) and results in a particular behavior. The student isn’t comfortable telling the adult how he feels so he will act it out. The adult’s job is to recognize where the student is in the conflict cycle and help him to express himself in an appropriate way. When a staff member becomes caught up in the conflict cycle with the student, behaviors of both parties escalate and counter-aggression becomes a by-product.

The second step is determining if the student’s words or actions “push certain buttons” in us as a reaction to: a violation of personal values, a struggle with an already bad mood, a let-down regarding professional expectations, a lack of appreciation or rejection by students, a feeling of vulnerability and personal danger. When this occurs, counter-aggression can become the instinctual response. The planned, well thought out intervention is lost to the emotional moment.

In this instance, it is important not to hold the student responsible for our feelings but to use those feelings as an alarm to make us stop and think about how we should react to produce a positive interaction for both student and staff.

When students, like Sam, are faced with counter-aggression from a teacher reacting as Mr. Jones did, there is unnecessary damage to the student/staff relationship and the wrong lessons painfully reinforced. Being aware of what may cause counter-aggressive feelings within us and how to recognize those variables, we may be better prepared to prevent and control those feelings and make more enlightened choices of intervention. With this knowledge, we reinforce our determination to successfully establish professional, supportive and productive relationships with the children we teach.