Building Positive School Climate: Strategies for Success

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The Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center

- Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools.

- Provides training and support to states, including 11 grantees funded under the Safe and Supportive Schools Program and other state administrators; administrators of districts and schools; teachers; support staff at schools; communities and families; and students.

- Goal is to improve schools' conditions for learning through measurement and program implementation, so that all students have the opportunity to realize academic success in safe and supportive environments.

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Safe and Supportive Schools Website

http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov

Objectives

1	**Summarize the research** related contributing to creating safe and supportive school environments.

2	**Identify effective strategies** for building supportive relationships on campus, strategies for positive youth development in school communities, and strategies for de-escalation and risk reduction in schools.

3	**Develop a plan** for creating a movement within their area of influence, using evidence-based strategies and practices.

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Morning Agenda

9:00 – 9:15   **Introductions** *– Marilyn West, MH WEST Consulting and Sandy Keenan, Safe and Supportive Schools TA Center*

9:15 – 9:30   **Overview and Objectives** *– Clay Roberts, Trainer*

9:30 – 10:20   **Review of the Research Frameworks Contributing to a Safe and Supportive School Climate** *– Clay Roberts*
- Risk Reduction
- Positive Youth Development

10:20 – 10:30   **Break**

10:30 – 11:45   **Positive School Climate: Building Stronger Student/Staff Relationships** *– Clay Roberts*
- Background Research
- Application Strategies & Skill Rehearsal

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Afternoon Agenda

11:45 – 1:00   **Lunch**

1:00 – 1:30   **How can we be more deliberate and intentional in building and sustaining relationships?**
(examples from the field)   – *Clay Roberts*

1:30 – 2:15   **Risk Reduction: De-escalation**
- De-escalation overview – *Sandy Keenan*
- De-escalation strategies – *Clay Roberts*

2:15 – 2:45   **Positive Youth Development** – *Clay Roberts*
- Background Research
- Application Strategies & Skill Rehearsal

2:45 – 3:25   **Individual School Team Planning: Next Steps and Resource Review**
– *TA Team Facilitators and School Teams*

3:25 – 3:30   **Wrap-up and Evaluation** – *Sandy Keenan*

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School Climate Frameworks

Researchers and practitioners agree that school climate is a broad concept and should at least include:
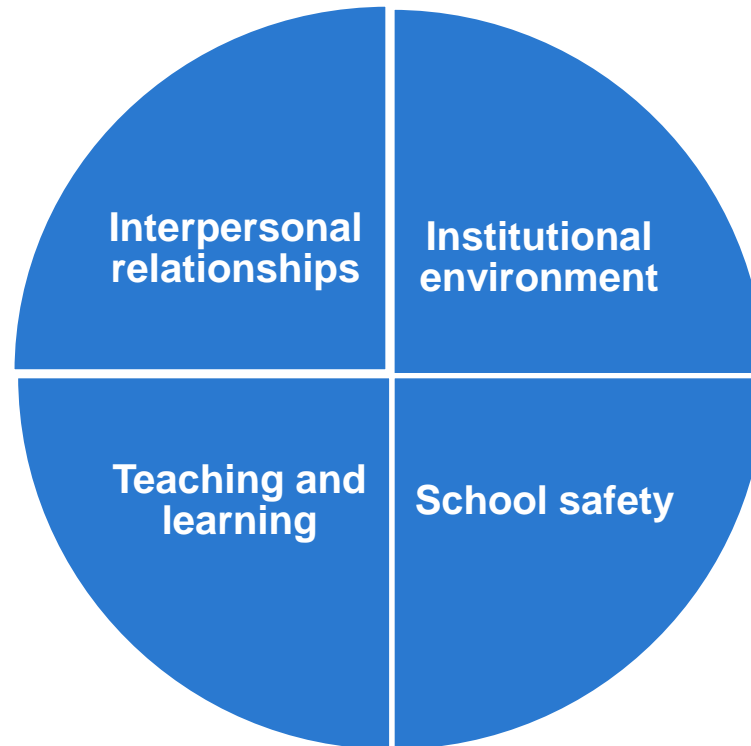
Risk Factors

- ## Family
  - ✓ history, management, conflict, attitudes, low expectations

- ## Individual / Peer
  - ✓ early aggressive behavior, friends, attitudes, early initiation, heredity

- ## School
  - ✓ academic failure, school commitment

- ## Community
  - ✓ availability, norms, media, mobility, neighborhood attachment, poverty

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Developmental Assets

- **External Assets**
  - Support
  - Empowerment
  - Boundaries and expectations
  - Constructive use of time
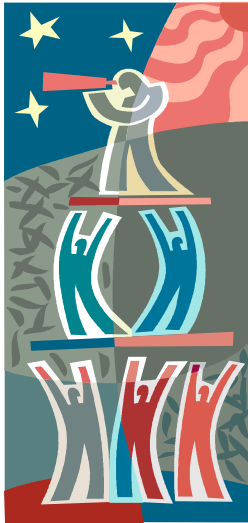
- **Internal Assets**
  - Commitment to learning
  - Positive values
  - Social competencies
  - Positive identity

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High-Risk Behaviors
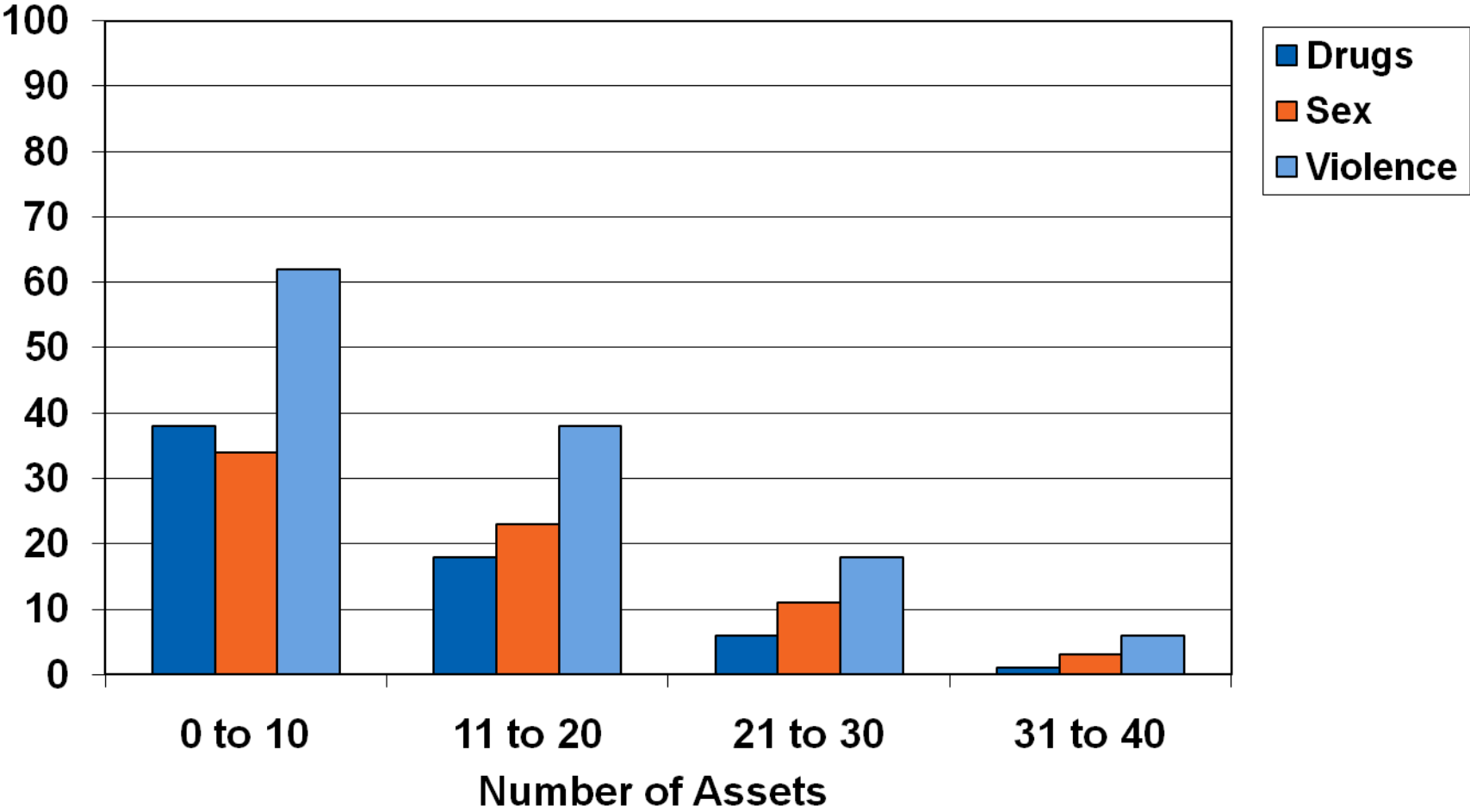
Positive Outcomes
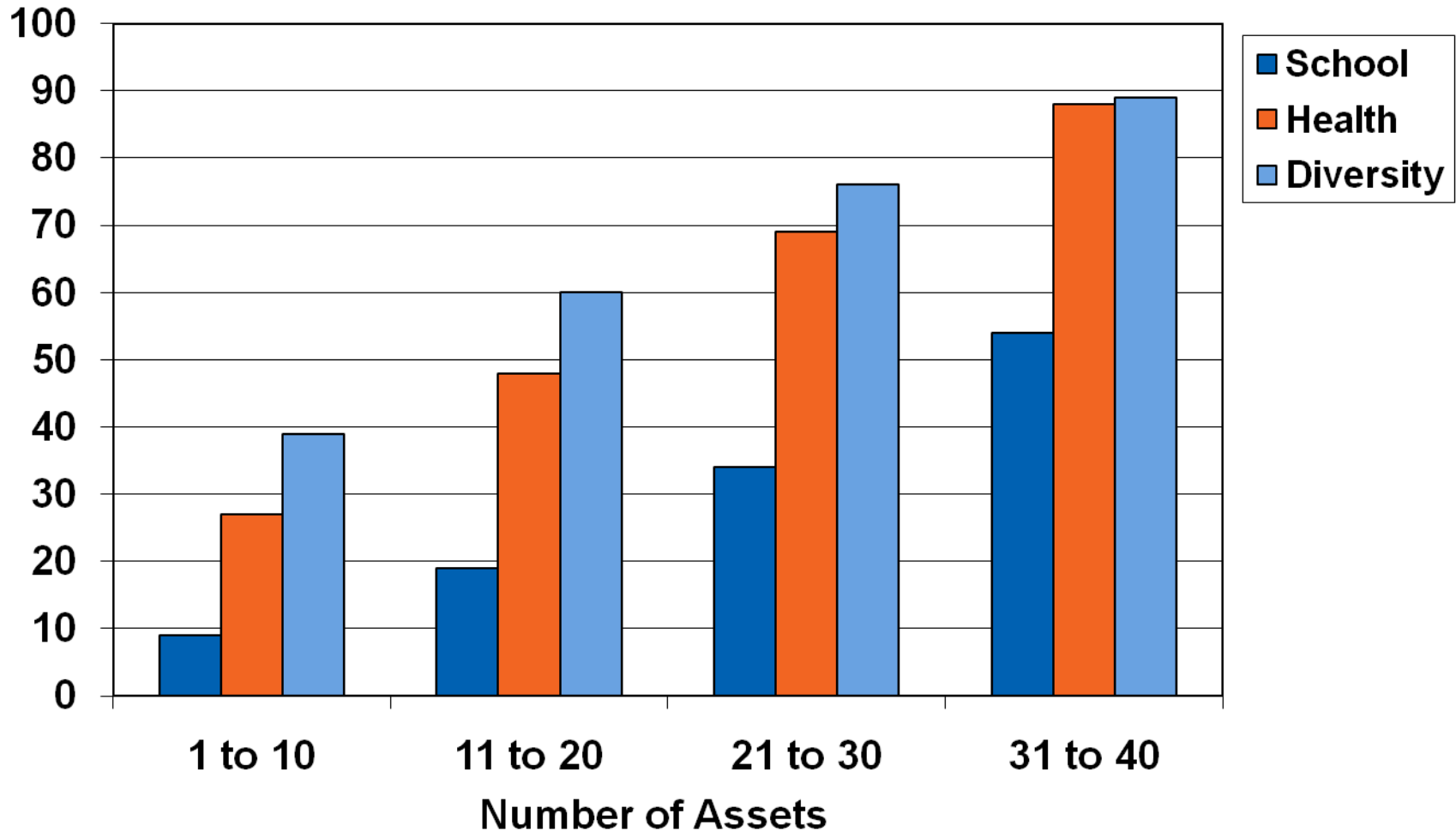
New Three R's in Education

- **Rigor**

  - **Relevance**

    - **Relationships**

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Research on Establishing Relationships in Schools

Why Are Relationships Important?

They increase academic achievement.

- Students who feel connected to school are:
  - ✓ More likely to attend school
  - ✓ More likely to stay in school longer
  - ✓ More likely to have higher grades and test scores

- Students with feelings of closeness with their teacher have been shown to:
  - ✓ Work harder in school
  - ✓ Spend more time on homework
  - ✓ Receive better grades
  - ✓ Have more confidence in their academic abilities

Citations ▪ 2, 5, 7, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19

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Caring and Fair Staff and Academic Confidence

Percent of Students Reporting Academic Confidence, by staff type

Bar chart showing Percent of Students on the y-axis (0% to 80%):
- Do Not Have Caring & Fair Staff: 47%
- Have Caring & Fair Staff: 73%

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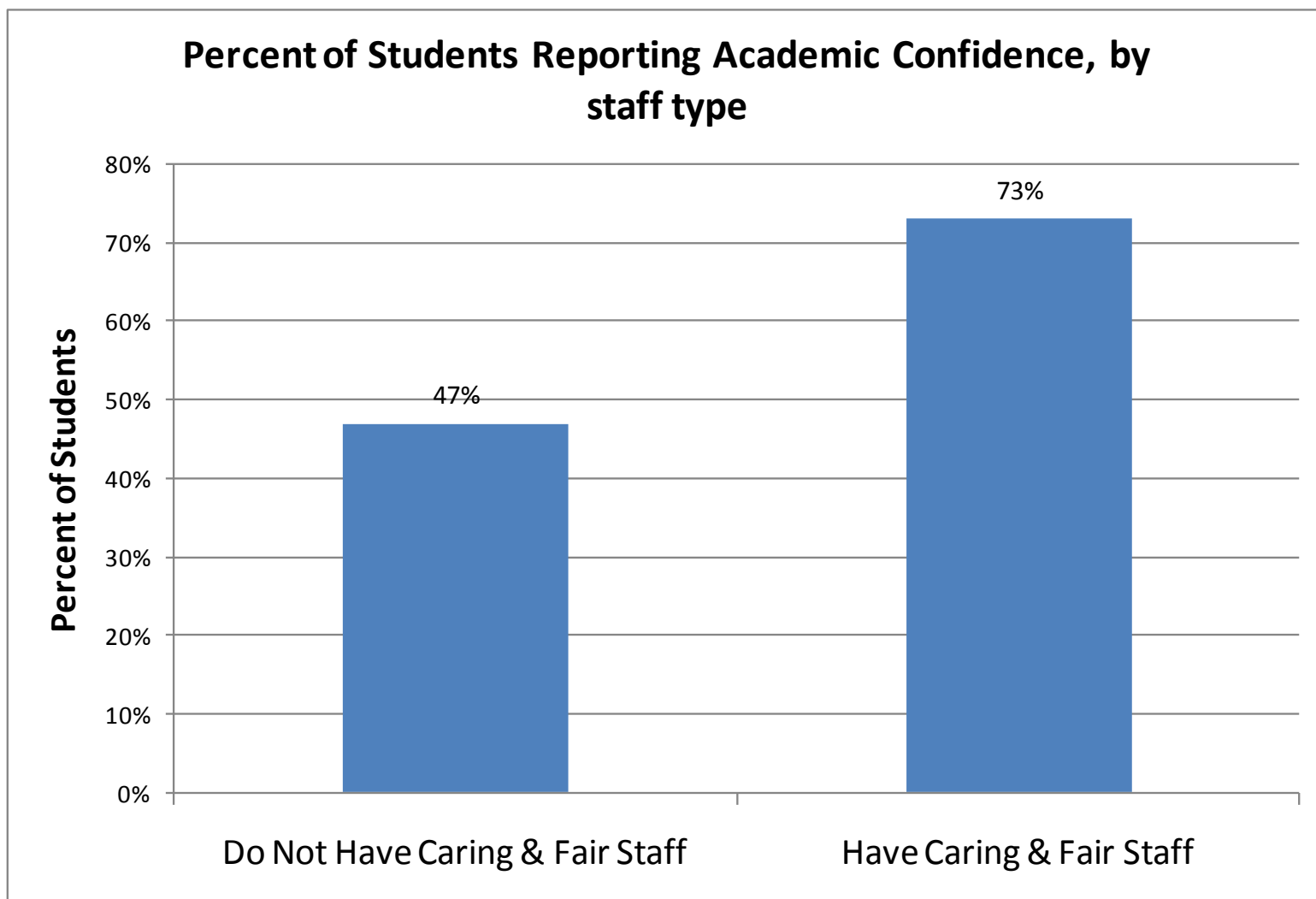
Why Are Relationships Important?

They decrease high-risk behaviors.

- Students who feel connected to schools are
  - ✓ Less likely to smoke cigarettes
  - ✓ Less likely to drink alcohol
  - ✓ Less likely to have sexual intercourse
  - ✓ Less likely to have emotional problems
  - ✓ Less likely to experience suicidal thoughts or attempts

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Why Are Relationships Important?

They make schools safer.

- Students who feel connected to schools are
  - ✓ Less likely to carry weapons
  - ✓ Less likely to become involved in violence
  - ✓ Less likely to be involved in dangerous activities

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Who Can Build Relationships?

- Certificated staff
- Classified staff
- Students
- Community and Families

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Who was there for you?

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Developing Supportive Relationships

Levels of relationships and influence:

- **Level 1 - Inviting a relationship**
  - ✓ Basic positive social interaction

- **Level 2 – Nurturing the relationship and building trust**
  - ✓ Taking a personal interest in the student
  - ✓ Demonstrating respect and empathy
  - ✓ Understanding needs
  - ✓ Treating students fairly
  - ✓ Identifying and encouraging gifts and talents

- **Level 3 – Leveraging the relationship**
  - ✓ Challenging them
  - ✓ Mentoring them
  - ✓ Maintaining contact

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Model for Establishing Relationships in Schools

Some Things to Consider

- Your attitude and beliefs

- Cultural competence and responsiveness

- Students needs and experiences

- The specific situation

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Establishing Individual Relationships in Schools

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Strategy # 1

Encourage Staff to Express Care

- Nonverbal messages
  - ✓ a smile, a nod, a thumbs up,
    a high five, a pat on the back
- Affirming people
  - ✓ verbally and in writing
- Giving your time
- Going beyond peoples' expectations
  - ✓ a gift, a card, attending their game or performance, helping them with a problem
- Telling people that you care
  - ✓ about them as a person and about their academic success
- Using humor and "playing together"

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Strategy # 2

Equip Staff to Provide Effective Feedback

- Pay attention (don't ignore)

- Be kind (no putdowns)

- Focus on Positives (three positives for every correction)

- Redirect inappropriate behavior

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Redirecting Inappropriate Behavior

- Be calm.

- Take them aside.

- Express your feelings and identify the inappropriate behavior.
  - ✓ e.g., "I was surprised when you …" "I was worried when you…"

- Indicate that the behavior is not like them.
  - ✓ e.g., "I often see you…" "I know you are capable of…"

- Ask what happened.

- Say that you understand but the behavior was inappropriate.
  - ✓ e.g., "I understand how that could make you mad, but what you did was…"

- Identify and model an appropriate alternative.
  - ✓ e.g., "Can you show me?" "Would you like me to show you?"

- State the consequences if this is a repeat behavior.

- Thank them for listening.

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Strategy # 3

Encourage Staff to Develop a Relationship Plan

- Is there any damage I need to repair?

- Is there anything I need to stop doing?

- What am I going to start doing?

- What am I going to keep doing?

Organizational Strategies for Establishing Relationships in Schools

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Strategy # 4

Engage Students in School Decisions

- Have students help in identifying criteria for hiring of staff.

- Involve students in the hiring process.

- Use student input in staffing assignments, decisions about curriculum and other important decisions at the school site.

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Strategy # 5

Adapt Scheduling to Facilitate Relationships

- **Looping** - Schedule students so that they have some of the same teachers for multiple years, thus increasing the opportunity to develop supportive relationships.

- **Academies or Houses** – Create smaller learning communities within the school that allow students and staff to spend additional time together around common interests and themes.

- **Advisories** – Structure time within the school day or week where students spend time with a student advisor.

- **Transition Support** – Provide both staff and student orientation and support for incoming classes and new students.

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Strategy # 6

Establish Staff Norms

- Identify staff norms that contribute to a positive school climate and reinforce, reward, and hold each other accountable for those behaviors. For example:

  - ✓ high expectations for all students

  - ✓ positive approaches to discipline

  - ✓ no display of anger or sarcasm

  - ✓ model pro social behavior

  - ✓ no bullying or harassment

- Agree on hallway behaviors that invite relationships, e.g. smiling, making eye contact (as culturally appropriate), using students' names, being present before and after school and during passing times.

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Strategy # 7

Launch a Social Marketing Campaign

- Identify a brand for the campaign.
- With the help of students and staff create different strategies for communicating that message.
- Make sure there are multiple messages throughout the year.
- Strategies should be designed to reach both students and staff.

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Strategy # 8

Use Staff Meetings to Shift the Culture and Expectations

- **Relationship Stories** - Begin each staff meeting with five minutes of relationship storytelling.

- **Model Supportive Relationships** – Both in staff meetings and in day-to-day interactions.

- **Turn-Around Kids** – Have staff nominate young people who have made a significant change for the better. Invite the student and their family to the staff meeting to be recognized.

Strategy # 9

Recognize Staff for Emphasizing Quality Relationships

- **Relationship builder of the month** - Each month select a staff member who has done something out of the ordinary to make a connection with a student or family. Involve staff and students in the selection process.

- **School storybook** - Capture the best examples and stories of relationship building in a booklet. Share the booklet with staff and new hires to recognize and reinforce the relationship culture.

Develop Staff- Student Mentoring Models

- **Staff to students** – Involve students in selecting of staff as mentors. Target students who are struggling academically or behaviorally.

- **Student to student** – Involve students in identifying a core group of trusted students and staff. Provide on-going training and support to improve relationships and climate at school.

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In Summary

- **Relationships matter** – not just teacher-student but the whole web of relationships in a school community.

- **Deepening positive relationships can be a powerful tool** – for learning, for reducing high-risk behavior, and for creating safer schools.

- **Quality relationships don't "just happen"** – they can be intentionally nurtured and cultivated through field tested strategies.

- **On-going measurement is important** – for improvement and to reinforce and sustain the effort.

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Risk Reduction

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Goal of De-escalation

Reasoning with an enraged person is not possible. The only goal of de-escalation is to reduce the level of aggression and arousal so that discussion becomes possible.

National Association of Social Workers

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De-escalation

Fight or Flight Response

….our body's primitive, automatic, inborn response that prepares the body to "fight" or "flee" from perceived attack, harm or threat to our survival…

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What Happens in Our Brain?

This response actually corresponds to an area of our brain called the *hypothalamus*, which—when stimulated—initiates a sequence of nerve cell firing and chemical release that prepares our body for running or fighting.

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Fight or Flight Response Is Activated…

- Sequences of nerve cell firing occur and chemicals like adrenaline, or adrenaline and cortisol are released into our bloodstream.

- Body undergoes a series of changes
  - Respiratory rate increases
  - Blood is directed into our muscles and limbs
  - Pupils dilate; awareness intensifies; sight sharpens
  - Impulses quicken; perception of pain diminishes

- We become prepared—physically and psychologically—for fight or flight. We scan and search our environment, "looking for the enemy."

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Our Response to Fight or Flight……

- Fight or flight system bypasses our rational mind—where our more well thought out beliefs exist—and moves us into "attack" mode.

- This state of alert causes us to perceive almost everything in our world as a possible threat.

- We tend to see everyone and everything as a possible enemy.

- We may overreact to the slightest comment. Our fear is exaggerated. Our thinking is distorted.

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Our Response to Fight or Flight…..

- It is almost impossible to cultivate positive attitudes and beliefs when we are stuck in survival mode.

- Our rational mind is disengaged.

- Making clear choices and recognizing the consequences of those choices is unfeasible.

- We are focused on short-term survival, not the long-term consequences of our beliefs and choices.

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Escalation Cycle

- Something within the environment happens…

- Triggers response…

- Verbal or physical response escalates.
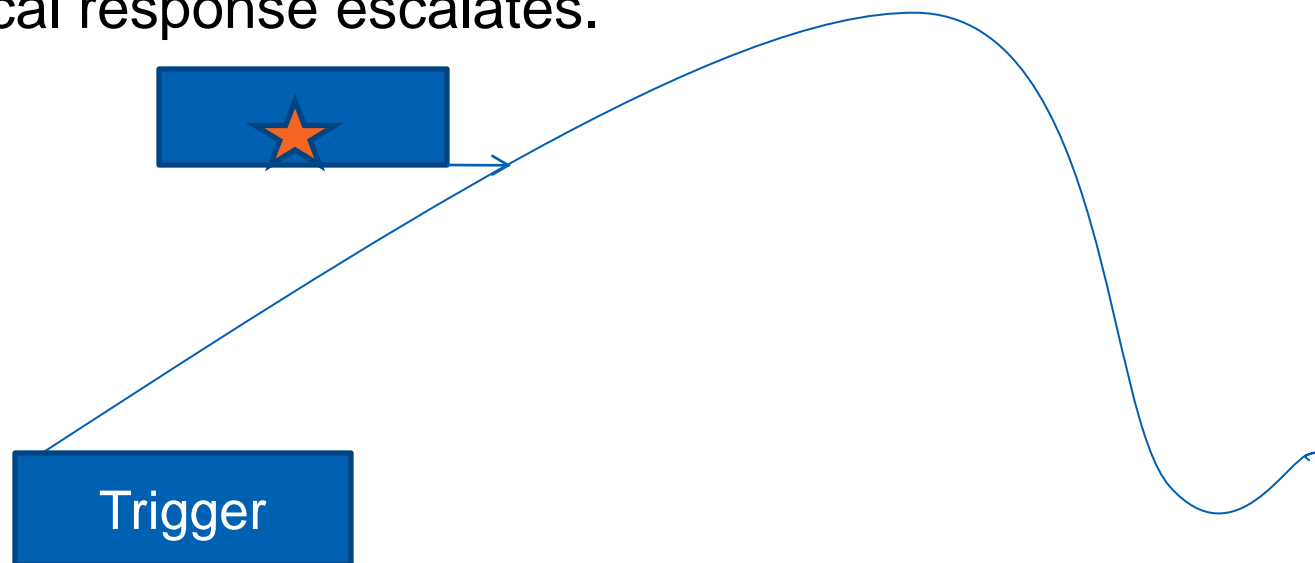
Trigger

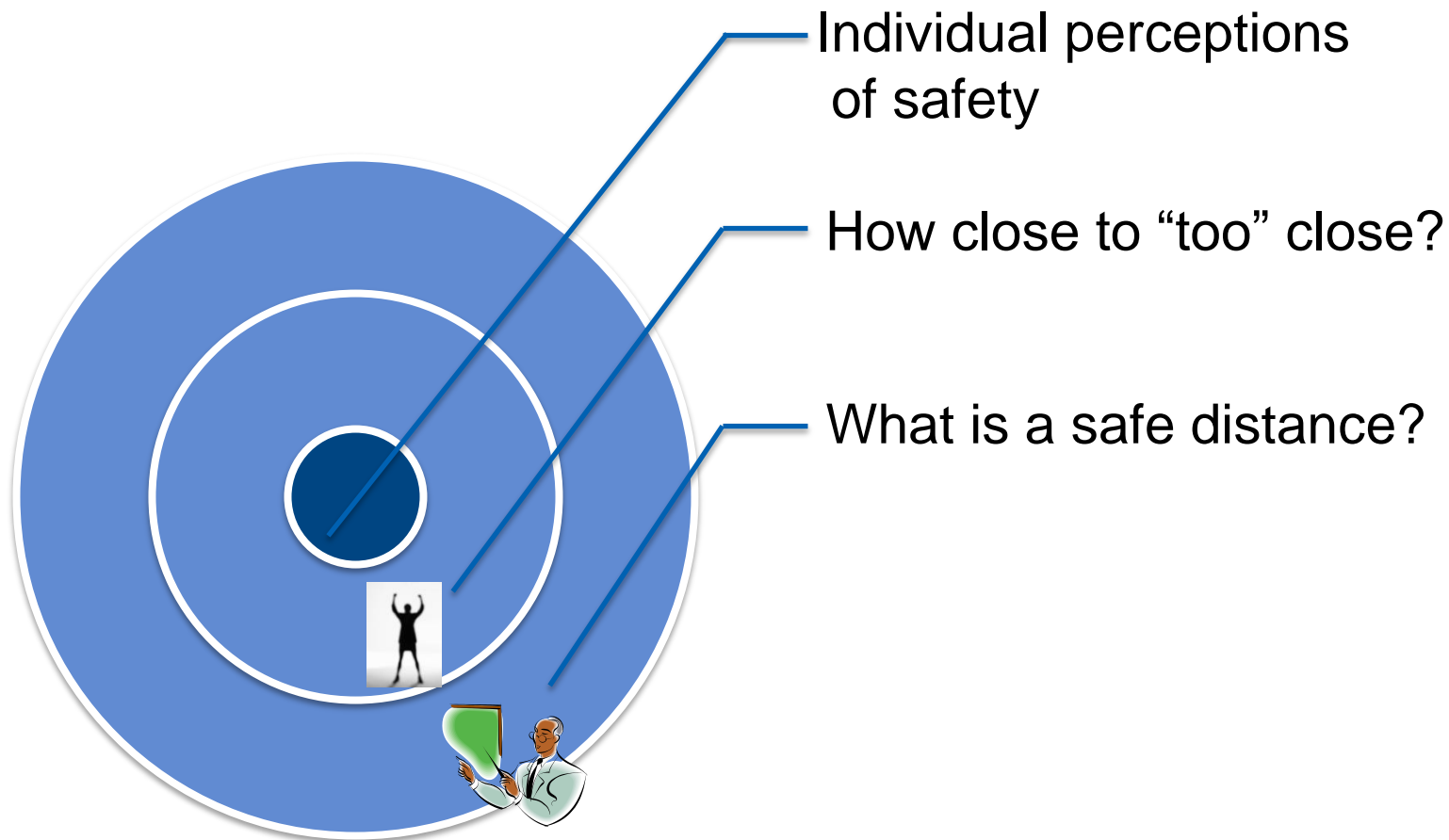Reaches a "point of no return"; Fight or Flight engaged; this is not the time to engage is rational discussions about their behavior……

De-escalation Strategies

- Teach alternate ways of dealing with stressors or "triggers"

- Increase the frequency of positive interactions with caring adults and peers

- Teach the "escalation cycle" so they can understand what happens and recognize signs earlier in the cycle

Comfort Circle

Individual perceptions of safety

How close to "too" close?

What is a safe distance?

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Sensory Needs

- Visual stimuli

- Auditory stimuli

- Sensitive to touch

- Level of activity/ agitation/ arousal

Key Steps in De-escalation

- **Maintain Control of Your Emotions**
  - ✓**DO** - appear calm, centered and self assured, use a modulated low tone of voice. Be aware of options. You can leave, tell them to leave, or call for security or the police. Be very respectful even when firmly setting limits or calling for help.
  - ✓**DON'T** – be defensive even if the comments or insults are directed at you.

- **Communicate Effectively Nonverbally**
  - ✓**DO** - allow extra physical space between you and the aggressor, get to the same eye level, keep your hands out of your pockets to protect yourself, and stand at an angle to the student.
  - ✓**DON'T** – turn your back, stand full front to the student, maintain constant eye contact, point or shake your finger, smile, or argue.

- **De-escalate the Discussion**
  - ✓**DO** – trust your instincts, empathize with feelings but not with the behavior, suggest alternatives, and explain limits in a firm but respectful tone.
  - ✓**DON'T** – get loud, yell, scream, argue, or analyze.

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Positive Youth Development

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Five Models of Positive Youth Development

Model	Contexts	Person	Developmental Success
America's Promise – the Alliance for Youth (The Five Promises)	Caring Adults Opportunities to Serve Safe Places, Healthy Start Effective Education		Marketable Skills
Communities that Care/ **Social Development Research Group** (Protective Factors)	Family School Community	Competence Self-efficacy Pro-social norms	Range of thriving and risk reduction including: School success; Self-control ATOD use; Violence
Forum for Youth Investment (the Five C's)	Connection	Character Competence Confidence	Caring/Compassion
National Research Council (Personal and Social Assets)	Relationships, Belonging, Social Norms, Mattering, Skill-building	Personal and Social Assets	Avoid risk behaviors Acquire positive attitudes, competencies, values, social connections
Search Institute (Developmental Assets)	External Assets: Support Empowerment Boundaries and Expectations Constructive Use of Time	Internal Assets: Commitment to Learning Positive Values Social Compentecies Positive Identity	Thriving Indicators: Helps others; Overcomes adversity Exhibits leadership; Values diversity Maintains good health Delays gratification Succeeds in school; Resists danger

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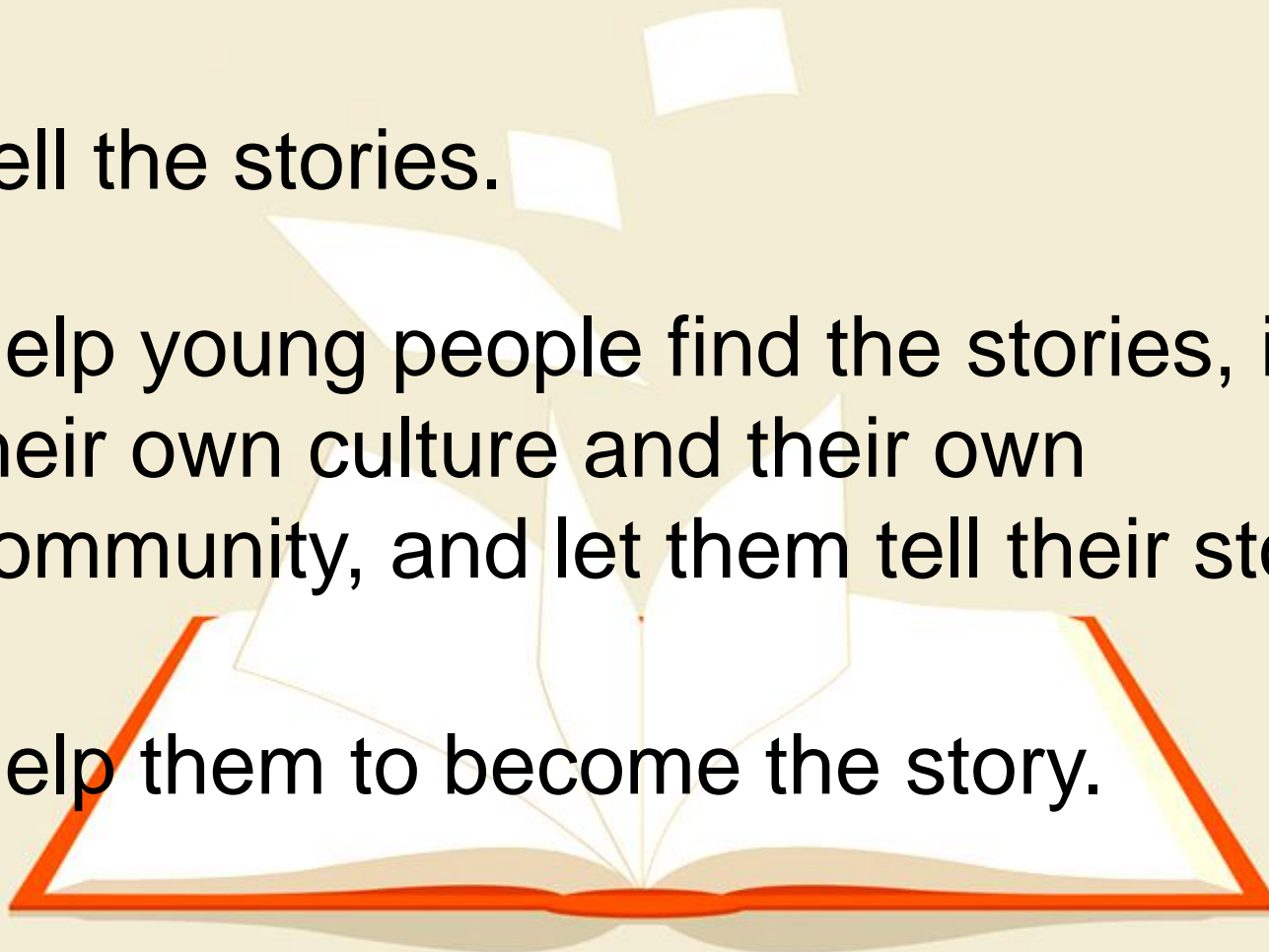
Tell the stories.

Help young people find the stories, in their own culture and their own community, and let them tell their stories.

Help them to become the story.

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Steps in Teaching Social Skills

1	Motivation
2	Small Steps
3	Model
4	Explain
5	Practice
6	Feedback
7	Transfer
8	Customize

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Resisting Peer Pressure

- **Ask questions**

    "What are we going to do?"

- **Name the trouble**

    "That's . . . ."

- **Identify consequences**

    "If I do that . . . ."

- **Suggest an alternative**

    "So why don't we . . . ."

- **Leave, but leave the door open**

    "If you change your mind . . . ."

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Creating a Movement

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Creating a Movement

- Movements require committed and visionary leadership.

- Movements need a common vision and a common language.

- It's the power of a few that start movements.

- Movements are "sticky."

- Movements normalize desired behaviors.

- Movements require multiple messages from multiple sources over time.

- The movement begins with you.

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