

S E C O N D E D I T I O N



# Teaching Toward Solutions

Improve student behavior, grades,  
parental support and staff morale

L I N D A M E T C A L F P H D

# *Teaching Toward Solutions*

*A Solution-Focused Guide to Improving Student Behavior, Grades,  
Parental Support and Staff Morale*

**Linda Metcalf, PhD**

*Illustrations by* **Ryan Metcalf**



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## *About This Resource*

*Teaching Toward Solutions* is a handbook written for beginning, experienced, and preservice teachers at all levels who desire to use a more positive, solution-focused approach with their students. The ideas developed in this resource will serve as a companion to *Counseling Toward Solutions* (The Center for Applied Research in Education, 1995), and together, the two books present a complete and comprehensive school program that focuses on student abilities and competencies instead of their misbehaviors and failure. Additionally, the book *Parenting Toward Solutions* (Prentice Hall, 1997) further supports the efforts of faculty and administration within the program, serving parents with an informative guide that describes the same approach utilized by the school.

The entire program stresses noticing “exceptions”, or the times when problems *do not occur* and explains how those times give educators clues to use as they develop a different context that is more successful for their students. Developing such a new focus means looking at students and parents differently and taking an introspective look at ourselves as educators, examining our thoughts and beliefs about education and people. Our perspective and perception of who we are and the task given to us each day is essential to instigating change within the classroom. That perception, coupled with renewed parental information, creates a *solution-focused* system in which students and parents begin to have more opportunities to become responsible for their own actions *and their own solutions!*

This book will give teachers and administrators an opportunity to re-examine their roles and develop new ones that will affect their students and faculty members positively, creating an atmosphere of change and competency that will be contagious. Each section will contain information on the following:

- Examples for using solution-focused theory with specific behavioral problems, emotional stressors, parent-teacher conferences, learning difficulties, psychiatric diagnoses, and special education issues.
- Case studies with simple summaries of “What happened here?” will be illustrated throughout each section to clarify the solution-focused ideas so that teachers can examine and learn practical applications that are clear and simple to use.
- A section practice exercise will be presented at the end of each section for the teacher to “solution solve”. These activities will assist the education professor, student teacher, or experienced teacher in gaining a new focus in the classroom.

The various techniques and strategies presented in this book have been developed by the author for teaching student teachers and experienced teachers this new approach over the past ten years. Teachers are shown how approaching classroom situations differently can change the behaviors of students and the atmosphere of the classroom.

## ***The Individual Sections***

Beginning with a dramatic case study by a new teacher who was determined to give a student one last chance, Chapter One describes new, guiding ideas and assumptions to use in the classroom that create a motivational atmosphere. Other never-before-described strategies help teachers to stop student misbehavior before it begins, creating respect and a responsible climate between student and teacher. This new alliance between teacher and student will keep future misbehaviors minimal. The ideas invite the teacher to think differently about his or her students, developing new behaviors as the perceptions evolve. The ideas/assumptions actually serve as life skills and give teachers the opportunity to not only learn the ideas for their own personal and professional lives, but also to teach them to their students and parents. The “Exceptional School Program” adapts quite easily to the classroom since it focuses on the same goals that schools were always intended to promote: competency, respect, and responsibility within each student.

Chapter Two focuses on assisting teachers to learn to identify their own abilities in solving past problems in the classroom and use such resources in their school. Language defines us and our students. Learning how we handle conflict, crises, offensiveness, anger, and disappointment can help us and also help our students in the classroom to see us as real, respectful people. Our assumptions affect how we handle student conflict—and changing these assumptions can change the outcome of many conversations! Chapter Two lists a specific process for teachers to take when intervening with students on their behalf. The importance of documenting a teacher’s perceptions towards his or her students will astonish even the most experienced teacher and will serve as a simple, quick, and effective way to get attention from the most difficult student in the classroom. This section suggests new ways to think about goal setting with students and assists them in writing a new “school story”. By understanding that the “*problem* is the problem”—not the student—today’s teacher will be able to quickly stop a conflict by helping his or her student to ignore “the problem” and, together, escape from its influence.

Chapter Three examines the thinking and actions of the challenging student. Actual examples from teachers who have used solution-focused techniques to lessen resistance and gain cooperation are described and explained thoroughly. Summaries of each case further the educator’s understanding toward a solution focus rather than a problem focus. This section also explores more specifically how to converse with students of all ages and abilities differently so that conflict is replaced by collaboration and respect. The section includes “Guiding Questions” in many formats, ready to copy and use for many situations including how to develop lesson plans that work for particular classrooms, and how to conduct more positive, effective team meetings, teacher/counselor meetings, and parent/student conferences that are solution focused.

Chapter Four presents the “Exceptional School Program” to encourage the educator to become part of the team with administration and the school counselor/psychologist/diagnostician. In this section, the nuts and bolts of running a solution-focused classroom and creating a positive atmosphere are presented through the multiple reproducible forms offered, ready to duplicate and apply immediately to parent conferences, individual education plans, diagnostic meetings, and much more.



Sometimes noticing abilities and competencies in academically challenged students is difficult and teaching them takes perseverance for the regular classroom teacher. Steps for teachers to take to identify these abilities are listed in Chapter Five and give teachers examples of successful students who, when guided by educators using this approach, became successful in their own right. Also included are targeted forms for teachers to fill out to help bring out the best in even the most challenged students, and help them to develop a new attitude. The section also includes questions to ask colleagues that solicit strengths of students, rather than their weaknesses, so that teachers have additional information to help them identify successful strategies that colleagues have discovered work with their shared students. Parents are included in this section as important sources of information for the regular classroom teacher. This method of researching abilities instead of deficits allows the creation of a new system in which the student can immerse himself or herself more positively. The suggestions given in Chapter Five are geared to elementary or secondary situations.

Chapter Six shares valuable information on student issues from childhood depression, anger disorders, ADD, conduct disorders, and a gathering of other labels and diagnoses that teachers must deal with daily. Today's student presents enormous challenges, and this section discloses how successful teachers have worked with parents, counselors, and psychologists to create a unified system that compels students to become more successful. Whether the children in your classroom are dealing with learning differences, sexual abuse, divorce, death and loss, this section is the reference that will take you through difficult times and help you to step into the troubled student's world. There will be suggestions for teachers at the end of each diagnosis so that working with the troubled student becomes less worrisome and more confident, sending a message of safety to the student.

Chapter Seven uses as its premise a quotation that is at the heart of this book: "Some people think you should fight fire with fire ... funny, I always use water" (Howard Gossage). Looking at situations differently helps student attitudes to dissolve so that they can become more compliant people. Even Albert Einstein talked about how "you cannot solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that created it". Instead of thinking how a student is "testing" a teacher, teachers are invited to understand what the testing does for the student. Does it mean he/she needs to be in charge of an event, time, or help pass out papers while discussing a joke? Does it mean a teacher needs to change or improve his or her relationship with the student at lunch or after school? Whatever the case, disciplining today's students is vastly different from what it was during the past thirty years. Too many influences have changed and evolved that have helped to deteriorate the teacher-student relationship. This section provides the teacher with several new strategies and ideas to alter the temperament of even the most volatile student.

Chapter Eight gives the classroom teacher an opportunity to teach one more subject—social competency. Whether the students are elementary or secondary, there are exercises and suggested topics that will encompass even the most volatile of schools. Teaching our students how to survive in the world without fighting to the end is the goal of "Conflict Resolution, Solution-Focused Style". This material assists the classroom teacher in assisting his or her students to solve their own problems. This new approach dissolves anger and resistance and opens the door for students to a way of thinking that is nonblaming and more collaborative.

Chapter Nine offers administrators the necessary tools to create a new vision for their school. Included are guidelines for leading a faculty to a new way of thinking theoretically. Additionally, there are handouts for the administrator to copy and hand out to minimize paperwork and maximize thinking. Administrators who have tried program development in the past will be surprised at this section's organized approach to leading people. Based on research by the author, the section contains planning and strategizing used by America's top companies to motivate and inspire their employees—a way to teach and reach today's faculties.

The solution-focused educator does not let the world's problems overtake her enthusiasm for teaching her students a better way to build their world; rather, she focuses on the times when the world has worked better and sees those times as exceptional. The solution-focused teacher does what works. Best wishes to you!

*Linda Metcalf*

## Chapter Two

# Creating Possibilities for Student Success Through Language

*"If in our world language plays a very central part in those activities that define and construct persons, the redescription of persons is called for."*

—*Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, David Epston and Michael White

Mr. Clark dreaded the parent conference with Ms. Yu that afternoon. For days he had rehearsed the statements he would make about Philip's academic failure and had brainstormed different ways of talking to Philip's mother so that he would appear empathetic, positive, and professional. His fellow teachers had consoled and warned him to stand his ground or Ms. Yu, they said, would "eat you alive"! Forewarned, Mr. Clark approached the conference room where Ms. Yu sat, already defensive, it seemed, ignoring his greeting and his outstretched hand. He began the conference by opening his grade book, and speaking calmly to Ms. Yu.

**Mr. Clark:** I want you to know first and foremost that I enjoy having Philip in my classroom. I rarely have to correct him and he seems quite polite. However, Ms. Yu, it seems that Philip has problems turning in his homework on time. He also seems to have difficulty memorizing the definitions I assign in class. He seems to be an average student, yet he does not catch on as quickly as some of the other students. I have certain material to cover in my class and sometimes I have to move on even if Philip hasn't grasped the ideas completely. I'm sure you understand. At times he seems to be daydreaming and loses his place, particularly when we are reading a chapter out loud. I'm concerned about his success here at school.

I would like to offer Philip tutoring after school, three days a week. He can come into my classroom and for thirty minutes I will review the previous day's work and help him with whatever he needs. This way if he misses something we discuss in class, he can catch up. If there's anything you can do to encourage him to do his homework and turn it in, that would be very helpful.

Silence. Then it happened, just like his colleagues had warned. Ms. Yu exploded!

**Ms. Yu:** How dare you assume that my son can't learn. He has always had mild difficulty with memorizing terms, but he can do it. He's passed other classes where memorizing was important. How can you sit there so smug, and describe to me all of the things that are wrong with my child. Why, and to offer tutoring to him when I, myself, am a teacher? How dare you! Don't you realize that I should be the one doing the tutoring? I am insulted. Where is your principal? How can he allow such insulting behavior at his school by one of his teachers! This happened last year with Ms. Kinsey. You all think you know exactly what's wrong with my little boy. Well, you are not going to treat him this way.

This dialogue is from a true story, relayed to me by a principal of an elementary school. What productivity happened in this conversation between a sincere teacher and a

concerned, yet defensive parent? Nothing. Mr. Clark's descriptions of what was *wrong* with Philip were ample and he even took time to compliment Philip as a polite and enjoyable student. Yet his problem focus soon took over and sent a message to Ms. Yu that *Philip couldn't learn as well as the other students*. Even worse, he attempted to give solutions without consulting the person in need of help and his mother. Ms. Yu responded to the problem focus with threats and blaming. No one accomplished anything. As far as Ms. Yu was concerned, the problem was with her son's teacher, not with her son.

## Changing the outcome by changing the conversation



Consider how the following alternative solution-focused conversation could have been created by Mr. Clark. Suppose that Mr. Clark began to think differently about Philip, using a different focus. Suppose he went looking for abilities and competency in certain classroom settings and situations instead of what Philip's problems were. He might have noticed the following competencies, as relayed to me by another of Philip's teachers:

- Philip learns best when he is closest to the teacher's desk. This seems to enable the teacher to prompt Philip often.
- When Philip is told before a lesson begins that he will be called on to read aloud, he pays closer attention, resulting in more productive assignments afterward.
- When Philip is asked for his homework assignments before leaving the classroom, Philip seems to remember to turn in the assignments, helping him to learn a responsible habit through repetition and routine.
- When Philip is reviewed orally with the class before a test, his long-term memory is refreshed and he performs better.

With these thoughts and observations in mind, Mr. Clark might have started the conference differently:

**Mr. Clark:** Ms. Yu, I want to say first and foremost how much I enjoy your son in my class. Last week, I asked the class for volunteers to take care of two gerbils in our class and your son's hand went up first. Did you know he was that responsible?

You know, when I looked at Philip's grades this morning in preparation for our conference, I noticed something very interesting. He makes passing grades on his tests when we review thirty minutes before the test. That observation has taught me to start doing it regularly! Then, I also noticed that he gets most of the definitions correct when I write them on the blackboard for the class to copy instead of just reading them out loud. He also does better when I stand next to him and remind him that I might be calling on him to read. He seems less distracted, too, in the past few days, since I have moved his desk nearer to mine. I have been reminding him to turn in his homework after he has a chance to finish it in class as well, and that seems to really be helping

## Chapter Four

# *The Exceptional School Program*

### *Changing Teacher–Student Relationships*

*“Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher.”*

—Japanese Proverb

### *The exceptional educators*

#### *A fictional case study for the future*

The time on the digital clock read 8:10 a.m. Ms. Rodriguez was busy putting finishing touches on her sixth-grade classroom. In 20 minutes, a school-appointed colleague would arrive with a camera and she wanted to create just the right impression and environment for her students and herself to have a good morning together. The science lab was ready for the individual groups that worked so well last week. The math center was filled with toothpicks for the morning experiment. Touching and feeling items kept the interest level with these “regular” students. The library passes were ready for just the right moment when a student was curious about an idea. Ms. Rodriguez knew the importance of spontaneity. Finally, her morning story from the daily news was on her desk. She routinely talked about the news with her students and had them recall “their” news as well. This lively 10-minute discussion always seemed to convey the true feelings for her students and get them off to a good start with something different each day. She checked her lesson plans and made sure that today’s plan was different from yesterday, full of intermittent stimuli and in sync with what she and her students had decided worked for the first four months of the school year. She was ready.

In Ms. Rodriguez’s school district, the administration had begun a project three years ago that had enhanced teaching styles and encouraged motivation among its educators. Elected by their individual schools, teachers were chosen as “exceptional teachers” who consistently created an environment in which students felt competent, successful, and excited about learning. The teachers were nominated by students and chosen by their colleagues. Instead of awarding certificates at the end of the school year, the district chose this route that benefited all of its staff members districtwide. The district chose from several volunteer teachers who were handy with video cameras to videotape the “exceptional teachers” each semester and the videotapes were played to similar grade level/subject matter teachers in the district at bi-yearly inservices. This method of illustrating “what works with students” was welcomed by the teachers, who gained hands-on knowledge of their colleagues’ expertise, and felt they were not being given information by an outsider. Instead, a teacher in the same situations as they, with the same struggles and frustrations, showed his or her way of creating a competent

atmosphere. Typically, the “exceptional teacher” accompanied the inservice and explained his or her strategies. Discussions were held after the tape was shown and collaborative conversations developed.

## *A new approach to team meetings*

Upon leaving the inservice meetings, attending teachers held weekly “team meetings” in their separate buildings, where they discussed utilizing some of the ideas they saw on videotape and added their own personal styles. In their team meetings, which now lasted a maximum of 30 minutes each week, ideas were exchanged about what worked in certain assignments (each was required to bring at least one). Instead of complaining about students, each team teacher brought up concerns about particular students. The team members then discussed, from their personal experience, how they managed to cooperate with the student, helping that student to behave or be responsible in class. The team of teachers, who all taught Student A, for example, might decide upon a strat-

egy to use during the next week. They also might decide to notice when Student A did better. The teachers discussed their findings in the next meeting, always beginning their meeting with “What’s going better for this student?”



## *Three principles that will work for your students*

In today’s busy classrooms, weaknesses and struggles become the focus as teachers try to create environments for learning in environments that often must be quite negative and problem-focused to keep order and control. While well meant, these programs ignore the strengths of students as teachers try to keep classroom

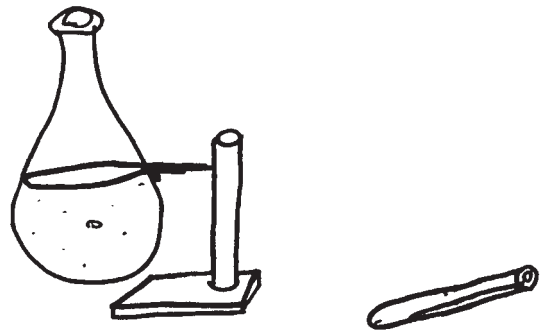
order. It almost seems difficult to decide who suffers more: the students, unnoticed for their strengths due to their misbehavior, or the teachers, burned out from being disciplinarians with little energy left for creative teaching. Caught in a difficult situation, many teachers respond negatively towards their students due to stress and the constant need to be in charge. The students, in turn, respond defensively; thus, learning becomes a scarce commodity.

Developmentally, children and adolescents thrive on *acceptance*, *validation*, and *structure*. When the school program centers around assertive discipline, the teachers’ and administrators’ reactions to the students typically happens when the students misbehave. While many teachers praise their “behaving” students, those students who misbehave miss out on praise and perpetually get attention negatively. While some would say that it is the student’s fault for not receiving praise (“If she would only behave, I would praise her”), often the negative behaviors occur *because* the student does not feel



accepted, validated, and successful. If you have ever failed repeatedly to achieve something, you know how difficult it is to motivate yourself toward trying one more time. The same occurs for students. My work as a teacher, school counselor, and family therapist has taught me how these three principles make a difference in motivating people to change their lives. Because of the changes I've witnessed when these ingredients are present, I continue to implement and suggest them. However, today's teacher is under tremendous pressure and can easily forget to accept, validate, and expect structure when students seem to be out of control. However, like any new habit, once the habit pays off, it becomes easier to do. If you have a student in your classroom who always seems to misbehave, experiment with the following ideas for one week.

1. Tell the student that you would like to do an experiment. Tell her that during the next week you want to change your mind about her behavior because you think that you have not been able to see what a fine student she really is. Tell her you will write down daily the things she does well and would like to send a note home with her on Friday to tell her parents what you noticed during the week.



2. Watch! Notice how she answers in class sometimes, how she finishes some of her class work, how she refrains from talking slightly.
3. Observe what you do in the classroom that helps her to pay attention more often, refrain from talking, do her work. Does she respond better when you circulate more and stand by her desk when she talks? Does she finish her work when you walk by and compliment her on anything, even her hair or dress? Does she seem to answer in class when you call on her and compliment her even when she is incorrect?
4. Send a note home on Friday. Even if the student does not make a wealth of changes during the week, write her parents and tell them that you are determined to help their child/adolescent feel better about herself and that during the next week you will be watching for what she does well in class. Tell them it is your new strategy to bring out the best in their offspring.

### *We can't wait any longer*

When schools *do* offer the three principles of acceptance, validation, and structure to their methods of approaching and instructing students, the students succeed and their resistance is low. The key is, *how* do we show acceptance, validation, and structure? Past theories of educational discipline techniques and behavior modification approaches *waited* for students to prove to educators that they knew how to act in school. However, in today's schools—volatile with peer pressure and less parental involvement—rarely

This book offers teachers a positive alternative for students with challenging behavioral issues and poor results. The techniques and strategies included are practical and clearly presented. Ideal for newly qualified and student teachers as well as experienced teachers looking for a really effective solution-based approach.

### Sections include:

- How to create a motivational atmosphere
- Stopping behavioral problems before they begin
- Conducting meetings with resistant parents
- Dealing with ADHD, anger, abuse, school phobias and depression
- Discipline
- Creating opportunities for students to change their reputations and improve



This is a book packed with wisdom, detailed approaches to conflict resolution and 'historical' accounts drawn together to illuminate the path to the successful management of behavior and change. I found it highly readable, revelatory, in parts movingly funny and yet all the time studiously observant and convincing, defining the exasperations that educators, parents and managers of people face when dealing with the assertive and disenchanted young. Linda Metcalf presents a joyously eclectic celebration of good practice which she rationalizes into 'towards solutions' systems, defining its success according to her highly intelligent and optimistic end-vision. As a parent and teacher I will take away bags of tips, structures and good practical ideas and my own thinking about behavior management will certainly never be the same again.

**Garry Burnett,**  
author of *Learning to Learn and Parents First*



*Teaching Toward Solutions* is based on a simple yet profound idea: notice, and ask students to notice, what's happening when they are behaving well—then recreate the conditions. Sounds easy, but the approach requires you to view problems, pupils and even yourself differently. Fortunately, the book shows you how by providing all the language tools you'll need to turn yourself and your students around. The result? Transformed attitudes, relationships and behavior.

Linda Metcalf's extensive experience as a family counselor and teacher shines through. The method she describes with such conviction and detail avoids binding systems and restrictive rules. It liberates teachers to be creative and calls on students to use their self-knowledge to devise personal behavior strategies. *Teaching Toward Solutions* provides an uplifting and motivating approach to the most difficult aspect of any teacher's job. Read it!

**Paul Ginnis,**  
author of *The Teacher's Toolkit*

**Linda Metcalf, PhD** is a former teacher, school counselor and coordinator for safe and drug free schools in Mansfield ISD, Texas, USA. She consults with schools throughout the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK.



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