Vicious Circles: Moving Students Away from Self-Defeating Patterns of Behavior

Middle Matters » January 2005, Volume 13 Number 3

by Tammi Ann Lawrence

A vicious circle, (n). 1. An on-going pattern of dysfunctional behavior that maintains dysfunctional results; 2. a behavior pattern that precludes someone from a chance of success.

Consider that definition for a moment and then see if it applies to students in your classroom or school. Are there students who display behaviors that leave them trapped in a vicious circle? Do you have students who do the same things over and over again, despite the consequences, and who perhaps seem surprised that they keep getting the same results? Are you or your staff members frustrated when you can’t seem to help them break that pattern?

For most educators, the answer to those questions is a resounding “yes.” However, there are ways to help students learn to break out of a vicious circle of self-defeating behavior. In order to do so, you need to help students understand why they are doing what they are doing, look at other ways to accomplish the same goal, and then allow them the opportunity to practice new behaviors. When this is done with individual students, progress can be made. When done school-wide, your entire student body can learn and benefit.

Why do they do that???
Both Abraham Maslow and William Glasser identified quite clearly that human beings choose behaviors based on what need is most pressing at a given time. When students walk into our schools each day, they are unconsciously working to satisfy their needs. We should not be surprised that students often have limited ability to determine effective ways to function in school settings to meet their needs. For those struggling the most in school, schoolwork and learning may not be high on their needs list. Rather, we may see them skip school to meet their need for freedom, argue and fight with teachers or other students to meet a need for power, and focus more on their relationships with other children than on their schoolwork to meet their need for connections.

It should be clear why our students choose some of the behaviors that they choose. They are simply seeking the means to satisfy some of their most basic needs. Unless this unconscious decision-making is brought to consciousness, many will continue to make disastrous choices that end up with them trapped in a vicious circle of self-defeating behavior.

A School-wide Approach
At Springfield Middle School, students throughout the building are taught and re-taught how behavior circles work. At the beginning of the school year, a week-long unit takes students through a behavior circle, illustrating how all behavior is circular and that “what goes around always comes back around.” Teachers use the unit to model how even adults operate within these circles, and they work with students to identify positive and negative behavior circles.

Students are encouraged to begin to understand that behavior is always a choice that they make. They can choose a behavior that improves their world or a behavior that makes things worse. The model of a behavior circle helps students not only hear the theory, but allows them to see the concept as well.
While working through behavior circles, students see how negative circles can become vicious circles and the impact a poor choice of behavior has on their determination of whether they are better or worse off. The exercise helps move students from choosing behaviors based on emotion to choosing based on logic.

For students who generally make wise choices of behavior, seeing a behavior circle with their chosen behavior on it helps to reinforce that they are making wise choices. For students with behavior problems, seeing how their behavior impacts them in a negative way often serves up the “ah hah” moment that such students desperately need.

Reinforcing the Lesson
The unit at the beginning of the year is not the end of the learning. Students who go to our Planning Center for disciplinary issues have an opportunity to use the behavior circles again with a supervisor, looking at their choice of behavior in the classroom. Students with more severe discipline problems may spend time in the office working with a hands-on model of a vicious circle made of tinker toys. This lets students see how a vicious circle can be destroyed when a different, more functional behavior is chosen. In each situation, the students learn to identify for themselves whether the choices they make are hurting or helping them. This is a far more powerful tool for long-term change than having adults telling students what they are doing wrong and how it doesn’t serve them well.

The behavior circle lesson and its connection to the vicious circles apply not only to social behaviors, but academic ones as well. Some students will come in and ask to work through a behavior circle based on what they’ve been doing in the classroom when they find that they are falling behind or failing a class. Being able to see visually how choosing a different behavior will lead to a different reaction and a different consequence is often exactly what a student needs to see in order to make a behavioral change.

For children at the middle level, their tendency is to start with the behavior, think about it, and then verbally defend it, despite the end consequence. While this may be developmentally normal, our job as educators is to help students move past this emotional type of behavior choice and move to a more logical, effective method of decision-making. Teaching students about vicious circles and how they work is a useful step in that process.

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