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Impulse Control Rap: "We Got a Skill to Help You Chill"

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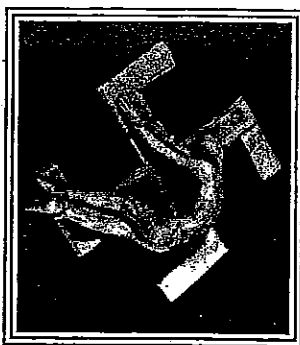
The art on the cover is a photograph of the sculpture "The Struggle" done by Delilah, who is featured in the article "A Child Leads Us" in this issue. Photo by Bill Simpson of Mile High Photo Co., Inc. Used with permission.
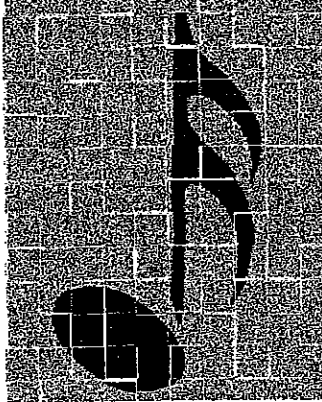
TALENTED BUT TROUBLED

Impulse Control Rap: "We Got a Skill to Help You Chill"

Tyrone Owens, A. Hall, and John W. Eull

A creative, streetwise youth employs rap lyrics as a means to develop self-control for himself and fellow students enrolled in the Alpha School, an alternative day-treatment program in Omaha.

"Stop and think." Words difficult to act on for many youth. Impulse control and the importance of being able to "stop and think" form the basis for the Alpha School replacement skills program. For Tyrone (age 16), the importance of stopping and thinking was made meaningful for himself, students, and staff through musical, linguistic, and personal expression.

Tyrone, in the language of youth and the streets, has "juice." He is respected not only by his African American peers but also by the other students at Alpha School, a mental health day-treatment program in Omaha, Nebraska. At 6 feet, 3 inches tall, this handsome young man has grown physically, academically, and socially over the past 18 months. He has worked hard on his studies and looks forward to returning to public school as an 11th grader.

Tyrone has mastered the steps of Alpha School's personal growth replacement skills program (Weidner & Esser, 1996) by saying the words (at first reluctantly), then role-playing the steps with other students and staff, and, finally, using the skills without prompts throughout the school day. Where he was once aggressive, Tyrone is now reflective and self-contained. Although he did not get along before, Tyrone now enjoys positive social interactions with students and staff alike.

Stop and Think

Encouraged to use elements of interest, preference, and choice based on functional assessment, Tyrone approached his teacher, Mr. Chris Hall, with an idea. "I've been writing a rap using the impulse control steps (1) Stop and think, (2) What do you want to do?, (3) What will happen if you do it?, and (4) Is there a better way? and would like to use it for a class project." Personal growth is designed to help students learn to control their behavior and see how the choices they make shape their experiences. Personal growth

skills are learned (Introduction), practiced (Integration), and used (Generalization) at Alpha School every day. Replacement skills help students, who were referred by their local school districts and the courts, choose to solve problems with words rather than their fists and choose to walk away from trouble, thereby reducing the potential for escalating aggression and violence.

The Music Studio

Tyrone's idea was accepted. Mr. Hall utilizes individualized treatment (Clarke et al., 1995) and positive behavioral support strategies (Horner et al., 1990; Meyer & Evans, 1989), which avoid intervention that is aversive and intrusive, using instead functional assessment (Foster-Johnson & Dunlap, 1993; O'Neill, Horner, Albin, Storey, & Sprague, 1990) to identify student characteristics for prevention and instructional intervention. Tyrone's rap became a "Music Studio" theme used to connect the elements of literacy, mathematics, and content in his daily class work, including readings about famous musicians, the importance of music throughout time, music in different cultures, musical notation, and musical finances (profit and loss).

Reform-minded thematic instruction (Allen & Piersma, 1995), which includes elements of preference and choice (Carroll, 1994), is based on task individualization, functional assessment, and manipulation of positive antecedent teacher and student interaction stimuli. Working cooperatively, Tyrone's classmates became "studio" members, helping to set up the drum machine, amplifiers, microphones, keyboards, tables, and cables. Students worked expressively, saying and writing their own raps. Thematic classroom activities, consistent with meaning-emphasis paradigms whereby knowledge is constructed and answers and meaning are negotiated by teachers and students, utilize social background and experience. In this example the importance of rap and music as a form of individual expression was emphasized.

"We Got a Skill to Help You Chill"

Tyrone's lyrics were written initially in rough-draft form, each carefully edited and revised several times. Studio copies used for rehearsal were corrected and word processed. Tyrone also had to perfect a beat and "risk" rehearsal in front of his studio team members and staff. Finally, rehearsals incorporating keyboards and guitar were added. In Tyrone's final version of "Impulse Control Rap," he tells us:

I'm about to blow so here we go
I'm about to let you know about impulse control
Everybody's gettin' mad thinkin' that they're so bad
But I gotta say
There's a better way.
We got a skill to help you chill
Keep you off the bubble
    and outta trouble
But you gotta learn so
    you won't burn
And the first thing to do
Is stop and think
What do you wanna do
How will it play
Is there a better way?
No one else can get
    me goin'

Drawing by Noel Thomas, age 18, a student at Won-Ska Cultural School, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Used with permission.

When I lose control I just keep goin'
You know I'm strong
Strong enough to decide
I'm stayin' calm right here inside.
You know it scares to choose
Do it smart or lose
Yeah, you got a voice
So make the right choice.
It's easy to see from this little rhyme
It's up to you to be in control this time.
So stop and think
What do you wanna do
How will it play
Is there a better way?
Everybody's gettin' mad thinkin' that they're so bad
But I gotta say
There's a better way.
We got a skill to help you chill
Keep you off the bubble and outta trouble
But you gotta learn so you won't burn and
    the first thing to do

Is stop and think
What do you wanna do
How will it play
Is there a better way?

Power

Tyrone's portfolio now contains a permanent product demonstrating mastery of social skills, self-evaluation, and self-control (Cosden, Gannon, & Haring, 1995; Kern et al., 1995). Tyrone's accomplishments contribute to the respect students and staff have for him. With legitimate power, he no longer needs to get his power through illegitimate means—fighting, skipping school, and running away. The words "Stop and think" were made meaningful for Tyrone, other students, and staff through Tyrone's musical, linguistic, and personal expression. Our goal for every student is improved literacy, inclusion, and a return to less restrictive public school classrooms. Tyrone has made this important transition.

Tyrone (age 16) has returned to public school. Chris A. Hall is a teacher at the Alpha School in Omaha, Nebraska. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: John W. Hill, Professor, Department of Special Education and Communication Disorders, Kayser Hall 115-B, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE 68182.

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