

"How Do We Get There from Here?" Nine Stages on the Reclaiming Journey

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Therapeutic change is seldom a neat pathway of progress. In fact, some children may temporarily display more problems as they strive to replace old ways of coping with more adaptive behaviors. This article describes a study of nine stages many troubled youngsters experience as they struggle to find a new positive identity. These changes are not random events but a predictable spiraling as a youth works in partnership with mentors toward the goal of transformation. As youth encounter the storms of life, concerned adults take the broader view and guide them on the road to resilience.

Troubled children present troubling behavior. Understandably, most programs serving them tend to focus on immediate problems in a particular setting. What if we were to take a longer view of the stages of change over time? If we were to closely observe troubled children and youth in a supportive program with skilled adults over time, what would we learn? Would we find that young people progress through identifiable stages in the process of reclaiming their lives? If so, do these stages give rise to predictable psychological, social, and academic issues? How would these stages influence our interventions with troubled children and youth?

This article extends research on stages of change in therapeutic programs for troubled children and youth. These ideas were first spawned in 1972 at the Rose School, a therapeutic day facility in Washington, DC. Dr. Nicholas Long and colleagues conducted a study that closely observed changes in the students enrolled in their program during the nine-month academic year across a four-year period. Candidacy for the study required that two criteria be met. First, the student had to have the same teacher for the entire school year. Secondly, the student could not experience a significant life-altering event during the time of the study, such as the death of a parent, which would impact the student's trajectory on its own.

While each child's response to an effective intervention is unique, the study found that indeed students placed in a well-managed and supportive learning environment with trained and caring adults proceeded through nine identifiable stages during their time at Rose School (see Figure 1). Each of these stages called for specific reclaiming skills from the staff working with these challenging students. Staff who had direct training in recognizing these stages and the mastering skills needed to respond effectively were more successful in bringing about desired growth in students. (See Figure 1 on page 53.)

Additionally, these findings indicated that change is not a linear process, but rather a "series of progressive loops" (Long, 1986, p. 5) in which the student makes progress and then appears to regress only to recover and gain ground in the next cycle. (See Figure 2 on page 54.)

The concepts from this early study are still valid today in the reclaiming journeys of children and youth in a variety of supportive education and therapeutic programs. This article revisits these stages and explores their implications for staff training and program development in the 21st century. Although the focus is on the student's progress within an education setting, many of the concepts apply in other care settings.

Figure 1. A summary of the nine stages

Stage	Key Student Behaviors	Key Helping Responses
1. The Honeymoon	Checks things out. Observes. Determines social order. Conforms to rules.	Clearly communicate systems and expectations. Build relationships. Enforce natural consequences.
2. Limit Testing	Tests authority. Splits staff. Disruptive. Oppositional. Difficulty managing their lives.	Avoid staff splitting. Establish safe and predictable environment. Effectively set limits. Recognize positive behavior.
3. Active Resistance	Openly defiant. Avoids interpersonal closeness. Creates conflict. Projects blame. Passively or overtly aggressive. Gets personal.	Remember the Conflict Cycle. Decode behavior. Use effective behavior management strategies. Implement effective crisis intervention and management strategies.
4. Beginning Trust and Achievement	Begins to participate positively. Behaviorally inconsistent. Right attitude/wrong behavior. Starts to build positive relationships with others.	Measure and share data on progress. Instruct in prosocial skills. Build on progress. Maintain clear personal boundaries.
5. Program Acceptance and Progress	Develops a sense of belonging. Demonstrates academic and behavioral progress. Positive relationships with others.	Fade external rewards and increase expectations. Continue prosocial skill instruction. Help student define and measure own progress.
6. Negative Personal Demands and Jealousy	Retests boundaries and relationship. Demanding. Sabotages own progress.	Decode behaviors/emotions. Understand dynamics of closeness. Teach skills for coping with change.
7. Clear Academic Goals and Progress	New skills and behaviors stabilize. Intolerant of others with problem behaviors. Ready for new challenges.	Reinforce emerging sense of self-esteem and progress. Encourage independence. Self-management strategies. Increase mainstreaming.
8. Separation and Regression	Anxious about future. Experiences separation anxiety. Substantially regresses to avoid change.	Decode and address underlying issues. Understand and support the process of letting go.
9. Attachment and Sadness	Experiences mixtures of emotion. Displays sadness about leaving—attachment to program. Proud of accomplishments yet wary of the future.	Ceremony/rite of passage to mark progress and change. Reinforce and support new skills. Good transition planning.

The Nine Stages of Reclaiming

Stage 1: The Honeymoon

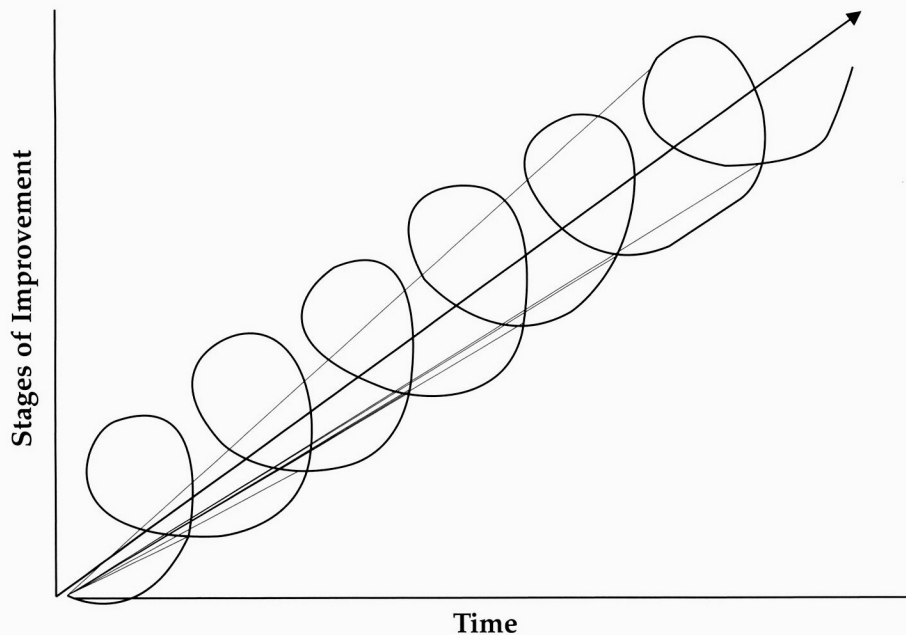
Ethan is a twelve-year old boy who has been moved from a general education classroom into a program for children with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Although he has not arrived at his new school yet, his reputation precedes him. Stories through the grapevine paint him as difficult to manage, aggressive toward adults and peers, producing little academic work, and overreacting to the smallest of incidences. However, when Ethan arrives, he is

compliant. He follows the rules of the classroom and finishes all the classroom products that are requested of him. One may begin to think, "This kid isn't so bad; all he needed was a structured environment and a supportive teaching staff."

Typical Student Behavior

During this stage, the student will be focused on observing the environment, determining what the social order is in the classroom. He identifies the power players as well as those who may be lower in the pecking order than he is. He decides with whom

Figure 2. The inconsistent nature of student progress across the nine stages



to align, whom to avoid, and whom to exploit. During Stage 1 the student will be following the classroom rules and expectations, causing adults to wonder why in the world this child was placed there.

Reclaiming Adult Behavior

With very few problem behaviors present, this is the time for the adults to begin building a relationship with the child, finding out what interests him, learning about the child's likes and dislikes, and who is central in his life. This initial connection lays the foundation for the latent relationship that later will emerge as the key to social and emotional development. During Stage 1 it is important for staff to clearly explain the program's expectations, the routines and rituals, as well as behavior management systems, while maintaining natural consequences for undesirable behaviors.

Stage 2: Limit Testing

At this point there is a dramatic increase in Ethan's inappropriate behaviors. He begins to challenge even the smallest of directions and is oppositional and disruptive. He has had the opportunity to observe the consequences for other children in the program and now wants to know if these consequences hold true for him. Ethan is testing to see if the adults can manage his acting out behavior. He also wants to establish himself as "tougher" within his peer group.

Typical Student Behavior

In this stage, the student is increasingly oppositional and defiant, often testing the authority within the classroom and playing adults against each other, also known as staff splitting. This allows him to find inconsistencies in the classroom and to avoid responsibility by confusing the expectations.

Reclaiming Adult Behavior

During this stage, adults must be as consistent with the classroom rules, routines, and structure as possible. Establishing a safe and predictable environment is important, and a daily schedule can contribute to a sense of order. The authors have found that a schedule that alternates challenging tasks with rewarding ones, as discussed by Premack (1965), can be useful. Open communication among adults in the presence of the student, known as "cross-talk," conveys to the student that staff share in decision-making, are "on the same page," and respect and support each other. Setting clear and enforceable limits while frequently acknowledging appropriate behavior tells the student that adults are keenly aware of the full range of behavior and respond accordingly. Providing anticipatory prompts for desired behaviors helps to reduce comments such as, "I didn't know I was supposed to do that." It is also critical that clear expectations exist even during unstructured times, such as transitions. Creating a safe,

encouraging, and predictable environment provides the foundation that supports the student in his reclaiming journey. This foundation is especially important in the next stage.

Stage 3: Active Resistance

Ethan has now become openly defiant within the program and avoids interpersonal closeness. When asked to get out a pencil for math, he throws a fit saying that he is a prisoner in this classroom and that the teacher is the warden. During a birthday celebration for another student, Ethan secretly writes curse words on the birthday card the class had made and suggests that one of the adults "... should not have any cake since he is already pretty fat."

Typical Student Behavior

During this stage, the student often says or does things to embarrass and/or anger the adults, exploiting and exposing personal sensitivities causing staff to react emotionally rather than professionally. The student is defiant and defensive, either overtly or passively aggressive, distorting situations to justify outrageous behavior. Because student behavior at this stage is so difficult to manage, it often results in students being sent from the classroom or rejected from a team, youth group, day care center, or other program. When this happens repeatedly, it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for the child; there is no place that he can be successful or belong.

Reclaiming Adult Behavior

This is perhaps the most demanding stage of all nine stages because students are using all of the defenses in their repertoire. Adults must consciously avoid power struggles and refuse to reflect the student's feelings and behaviors. Long elaborates on this critical skill in his discussion of the Conflict Cycle (Long, 1986; Long, 1996). Decoding student behavior during conflict helps the child connect his feelings to his behaviors. Conflict offers an opportunity to teach students that behavior is an expression of emotion, and that there are choices they can make in how they express their feelings. This strategy helps adults remember that behaviors are rooted in emotion, and that emotion can be a by-product of the child's "world view." Effective behavioral and cognitive techniques, such as stimulus cues, social skills instruction, "I" messages, and token economies are

strategies that help to teach personal responsibility at this time.

Stage 4: Beginning Trust and Achievement

Due to the predictability of the program and the consistency of the concerned adults, Ethan's defiant and disruptive behaviors begin to subside. Some days he participates in the daily routine of the classroom and is invested and excited by his success in the program. Other days he throws pencils at peers and cheers on fights between classmates. Ethan tries to turn the tables by using probing questions about the personal life of staff, their children's names, what they like to do on weekends, and is confused by their ability to "handle" him successfully.

Typical Student Behavior

This is a time of inconsistencies in student behavior. The student will have the right intentions but often will be unable to link them with the appropriate behaviors. When asked to begin an assignment, the student might argue and refuse to participate even as he takes out paper and pencil to begin working. The student has not achieved this much success before and may have an unrealistic sense of his progress, believing that he reached the summit of the mountain when in reality he is still near the trailhead.

Reclaiming Adult Behavior

Both student and adults have been through some difficult times and finally are beginning to see light at the end of a dark tunnel. During Stage 4, the adults are heavily invested in the student's success and there is a tendency toward overprotection and "rescue fantasies." Staff must accept that their role is to help the student solve his problems, NOT to solve problems for him. Staff must maintain clear personal boundaries regarding their roles and responsibilities in the student's life. Community resources can be helpful in enabling student independence and supporting needs outside of school. prosocial skill instruction also remains an important strategy during this stage. At this time, progress should be defined and measured concretely. Point systems and other positive data that reflect a clear picture of the behavioral progress of the student can be kept daily and posted publicly for all to see.

Stage 5: Program Acceptance and Progress

Ethan is now invested in the daily routine of the classroom. He is interested in academic success and concerned with his progress in the behavior management system. When a new student teacher comes to visit the classroom, Ethan offers to explain the point system to her and shares his personal chart of daily points earned. Ethan has made two friends outside the classroom and meets them each day to play basketball at recess. Adults are thrilled to see Ethan smile more and are hoping that this will last for the rest of the school year.

Typical Student Behavior

At this stage the student is invested in his success and school has taken on new importance. He may miss being at school on weekends and vacation days and has come to identify strongly with the positive adults. The student is committed to his behavior intervention plan and completes academic assignments. During Stage 5 the student is proud of his school and classroom and shows them off to visitors. The child is smiling more and seems genuinely happier.

Reclaiming Adult Behavior

This is a rewarding time for both child and adults, and it is tempting to become content with this progress. Instead, the student should take new responsibilities by redefining success "as overcoming a difficult challenge, not an easy one" (Long, 1986, p. 15). While increasing interpersonal influence, external rewards fade. The bar may need to be raised on the expectations, but the student should remain involved in decision-making and changes. Having the student use self-management techniques to monitor behavior will develop personal responsibility and a more realistic perception of growth. Stage 5 offers an opportunity for the student to be a leader in prosocial skills training, class decision making, experiential learning, and service learning projects.

Stage 6: Negative Personal Demands and Jealousy

Out of nowhere, Ethan's behavior begins to deteriorate. During a group meeting, he was upset and angry when he did not get a chair next to the adult and insinuated that this was purposeful on the adult's part. He acts jealous of any attention given to other students and often misinterprets what adults are say-

ing to him. After Mr. Mackey, an English teacher, returned from several days of sick leave, Ethan requested that he sit with him the entire day. When Mr. Mackey said that was not possible, Ethan sulked and said "you do not care about me anymore" and chose not participate for the next three academic periods. The adult may feel angry at and disappointed in Ethan after "all that has been done for him."

Typical Student Behavior

During this time the student can easily fall back into his old perceptions of adults as enemies and return to old defense mechanisms. He feels exposed, frightened, and suspicious that his success cannot be real. His feelings of success are too new an experience. The student retests the boundaries and structure of the classroom, sabotages his own progress, and anticipates rejection and failure. Additionally the student becomes demanding of the adults within the classroom, behaving jealously when attention is given to others.

Reclaiming Adult Behavior

During Stage 6, adults must be aware that the close, positive relationship they have built is a new experience for the student. The child's feelings of closeness can be frightening and may bring up old defensive thoughts and behaviors. It takes an incredible amount of effort to change the basic attitude of a troubled child, and this step back is just part of the spiral model of student change. This stage can be a difficult one. Often adults have their own feelings of disappointment and anger when problem behaviors reemerge, which can interfere with the adult-student relationship if not recognized and dealt with productively. A number of strategies can positively structure interactions with the student. For example, the inappropriate behaviors can be decoded for the student to help provide perspective, empathy, and awareness about the choices made. The conversations in Life Space Crisis Intervention (Long et al., 2001) can enable the student to learn new interpersonal skills, recognize patterns of self-defeating behavior, and gain insight for change.

Stage 7: Clear Academic Goals and Progress

Ethan is now successfully integrated during part of the day into a general education fifth-grade classroom. He speaks with confidence about his success and believes adults are there to support him. Upon

returning from his mainstream classroom, Ethan tends to revert to some old inappropriate behaviors and begins threatening the smaller and younger students in the classroom. When his unacceptable behavior is pointed out, Ethan responds by saying, "The teachers are not tough enough on the kids in this class and, until you crack down, I'm going to act up."

Typical Student Behavior

The student once again feels successful and confident about her growth within the classroom and often believes that she is more successful than her peers. She is glad to leave the more restrictive classroom and spend time with typically developing peers. The student is often critical of the adults for not being hard enough on other students within the program, even when these students are exhibiting behaviors similar to her own when she first arrived. Often periods of success are followed by periods of collapse. For example, the student may tend to hold it together during her time in her mainstream classroom only to "fall apart" upon returning to the more restrictive setting later in the day.

Reclaiming Adult Behavior

This is a time of change for the student, and careful attention must be given to structure the transitions to other programs. Many students fail when returning (see Figure 1) to a less restrictive setting, so it is important that the process is strategically planned. The staff meets the receiving teacher, coordinates plans, keeps track of academic and behavioral growth in both environments, and reinforces the emerging sense of progress and self-esteem. They openly communicate with all the adults responsible for the student and keep the intervention plans consistent across settings. When the student returns from the mainstream classroom, a time should be set up for a private check-in meeting. They know that they have worked hard to be successful outside the restrictive setting, and it is important to allow them to talk about their experience and be validated by a valued adult. Self-management strategies can be very helpful for the student, increasing investment and awareness of progress.

Stage 8: Separation and Regression

Ethan is aware that his success in a mainstream setting is leading to his eventual departure from the

classroom which has been his source for structures and expectations that he understands and adults who have been supportive and caring. Moving from the known to the unknown is always difficult, but because Ethan has been abandoned by many of the adults in his life, leaving these supportive and caring adults will be particularly painful. When Ethan is present, he is reverting to most of the behaviors that resulted in placement in this classroom in the first place. Each day, five minutes before the bus arrives to pick him up and take him to his mainstream classroom, Ethan becomes physically threatening and aggressive, thus sabotaging his ability to leave. Ethan's continued absences at his mainstream setting are causing him to fall behind academically, making it more difficult for him to be successful.

Typical Student Behavior

Stage 8 is a time of high anxiety and regression for the child. The student exhibits behavior that seems worse than ever. He may sabotage his progress by behaving in ways that might interrupt his carefully planned reintegration. When speaking of his success, his enthusiasm does not match his words.

Reclaiming Adult Behavior

This change in behavior need not be confusing nor surprising, and one should heed the advice that "to be forewarned is to be forearmed" (Long, 1986, p.11). Knowing that these downward spirals are predictable allows preparation for these challenges. This is a temporary state; do not panic or overreact. Decode for the student the underlying issues of anxiety and fear of change and be confident in the student's ability to be successful. It is helpful to remind the student of past accomplishments and new skills, while supporting him in the process of letting go and saying goodbye.

Stage 9: Attachment and Success

Ethan is ready to leave the self-contained program and become a full time student in his mainstream classroom. A graduation ceremony for him has been arranged, and his classmates are writing him goodbye cards and wishing him success. During the party, Ethan is asked to share with the group some memories of his time in the program. Ethan reminds the class of the field trip they took to a bird sanctuary and how they counted 37 different types of birds that day. He remembers that Billy stepped in a big

mud puddle and his shoes squished for the rest of the afternoon. He acknowledges this was the best place for him to learn, and he is sad to leave everywhere there.

Typical Student Behavior

The student is flooded with mixed emotions during this stage. He is nostalgic and reminiscent of his time in the program and may talk about specific experiences. The student may express genuine feelings of attachment and sadness in saying goodbye to classmates and trusted teachers, all the while being excited and overwhelmed about his new adventure.

Reclaiming Adult Behavior

Ceremony and ritual bring a sense of importance and closure. Adult mentors create rites of passage, be it a graduation ceremony or a special class meeting, to mark this wonderful event. This is the time to reinforce all the new skills the student has gained and help the student say goodbye. Creating memory books and allowing opportunities for saying farewell to significant people may help the student find closure. This is a warm time for the student, peers, and adults as they express mutual feelings of caring and success.

Implications for Practice

Long's findings underscore two important points related to developing and supporting effective programs for troubled children and youth. First, he brings attention to the importance of the student's relationship with the adult models encountered on a daily basis. These interactions serve as a bridge between the student's history of problem behaviors and relationships with a healthier, more satisfactory way of meeting the world. For many children these are the first adults who can see beyond their troubling behaviors and build positive, supportive bonds with them. The need for a "stable and consistent force in the student's life" (Long, 1986, p. 6) calls for developing consistent, skilled staff as the anchor of effective programs. However, this is a considerable challenge. For example, in a recent year, public schools began the year with 60,000 unfilled positions for special educators trained to work with students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). As a result, schools employ long-term substitutes or others with emergency certifications with-

out skills and training to work effectively with troubled children. This can lead to a frequent turnover in staff and can seriously impact program quality. Without the presence of consistent and skilled staff, the relationship building process is undermined. Sadly, this sends the message to students that adults cannot or will not take the time to get to know and help them. This can reinforce the student's belief that adults are not to be trusted.

Secondly, these findings remind us that it takes time for a young person to learn a new way of interacting with the world. Some students with significant emotional or behavioral difficulties may need access to a supportive, well-managed program for longer periods of time. For students diagnosed with emotional or behavioral disabilities, school-based programs are most likely to provide ongoing interventions as part of a student's Individualized Education Plan. In many mental health and community based programs, the emphasis on time limited, managed care often places artificial time limits on a child's access to programs regardless of his need for continuity and consistency. These limits on programs often interrupt the reclaiming process, reinforcing the child's negative experiences with programs designed to support them, further deepening their defenses. The development of stable, ongoing, and effective programs for troubled children and youth remains the best investment towards helping them rebuild their lives.

Implications for Training

Perhaps the most important finding in Long's study is the importance of adequate staff training in recognizing and responding to student needs and behaviors throughout the nine stages of reclaiming. When adults have an understanding of these stages and are able to effectively respond to a young person's changing needs, the reclaiming process can occur more effectively. Training that includes strategies for recognizing the different stages as well as the corresponding skills should be included in both pre-service and in-service training programs for professionals working with troubled children and youth. Along with assisting staff to interact more successfully with students, this knowledge provides a context for communicating with other professionals and serves as a framework for the development of more effective behavior intervention plans.

Along with including the nine stages in the training of staff, students and their families should be introduced to this process so that they can have a better understanding of what they will be experiencing throughout the reclaiming process. This knowledge could help family members respond more supportively throughout the child's program and be better prepared when they encounter the more difficult stages along the way.

Limitations

As a part of his study, Long also outlined some limits to these findings. The nine stages of reclaiming are based on the premise that a positive, ongoing interpersonal relationship is critical to the reclaiming process. Students with severe autism or psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia present different needs and behaviors. Therefore, these stages may not be as representative of their needs and the recommendations cannot be generalized to these groups. Additionally, because the daily relationship is so critical, when a primary helping adult is absent for a long period of time or faces her own emotional or behavioral difficulties, this can have a significant negative effect on the student's progress. Finally, ongoing progress is also dependent on some stability in a child's home or community life. Students who experience traumatic life events in the course of their placement in a program, such as a prolonged illness in the family, physical or sexual abuse, or witnessing violence at home or in the community, will be overwhelmed emotionally, resulting in significant behavioral regression. These students' needs for psychological and physical safety must be met before they will be able to demonstrate ongoing progress and growth.

Conclusion

Although each child's response to a supportive and effective intervention program is unique, an understanding of the nine stages of reclaiming provides a road map for instructional and behavioral interventions. Concerned professionals and family members can use this framework for program and policy development and to maintain programs that encourage a troubled child or youth on the pathway to responsibility.

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NOTE:

For more information on many of the strategies mentioned in this article see: *The Tough Kid Book: Practical Classroom Management Strategies* (1992; 1998) by Rhodes, Jenson, & Reavis available from Sopris West; *Antisocial Behavior in School: Evidence Based Practices* (2004) by Walker, Ramsey, and Gresham available from Thomson/Wadsworth; *Conflict in the Classroom* (1996) by Long and Morse available from PRO-ED, and; *Behavior Management: From Theoretical Implications to Practical Applications* (2003) by John Maag available from Singular Publishing.