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# School Safety

NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER NEWSJOURNAL

WINTER 1985

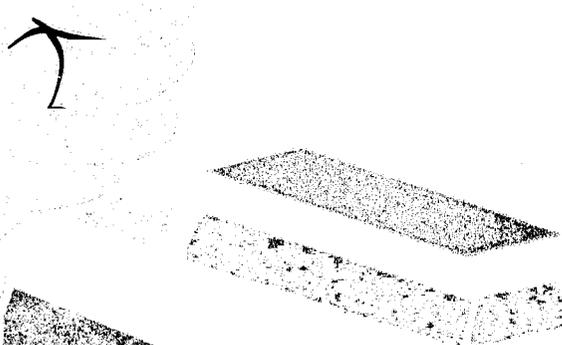


*Honoring  
Walt Disney's  
commitment to  
education  
& safety*



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123/38

Community  
Discipline  
Attendance



U.S. Department of Justice  
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**National School Safety Center**  
**7311 Greenhaven Drive**  
**Sacramento, CA 95831**  
**916/427-4600**

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## School Safety

NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER NEWSJOURNAL

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George Nicholson, Executive Editor  
 Stuart Greenbaum, Editor/Art Director  
 Vicky Kleppe Leavitt, Associate Editor  
 Mike Gold, Graphic Designer/Illustrator  
 Monica Winegar, Composer

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### About the cover:

Donald Duck celebrates his 50th birthday this year. Throughout his long and illustrious career, Donald the entertainer has been equally committed as Donald the teacher - dedicated to safety awareness and education. With this cover, we honor both Donald Duck and his creator, Walt Disney.

# Contents

SCHOOL SAFETY, NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER NEWSJOURNAL WINTER 1985

4



## 4 Safe, effective schools

For schools to be effective, they must be safe. To make schools safe, we must make them effective. 123135

## 7 "Peacemaking"

An important element in creating safe schools is providing school personnel with adequate training in the dynamics of behavior and personal interactions. 123136

## 12 Gangbusters!

Philadelphia's Crisis Intervention Network has developed a community-based approach to preventing youth violence. 123137

12



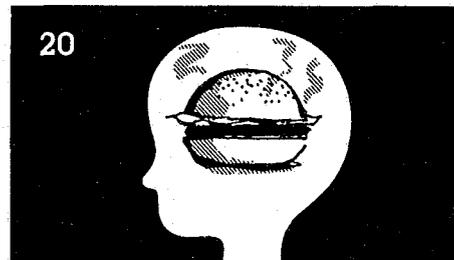
## 16 Student searches

The pending U.S. Supreme Court decision on *T.L.O.* may have a direct and long-range bearing on what school officials can or cannot do to maintain school discipline and safety.

## 20 Nutrition and behavior disorders

Social and medical research are showing the dramatic effects of biochemical and nutritional factors on antisocial behavior. 123138

20



## 30 Truancy and drugs

The problems of truancy and drug abuse appear to have some relationship.

## Sections

## 2 NSSC Report

## 18 Students respond

## 29 Disney media

## 32 Legal Update

## 33 Legislative Update

## 35 Safe at School



# 'Peacemaking' Confrontation management

By Peter Martin Commanday

**An important element in creating safe schools is providing school personnel with adequate training in the dynamics of behavior and personal interactions so they are able to difuse potential problems with students and thereby eliminate unnecessary confrontations.**

*Peter Martin Commanday teaches "Peacemaking: The Management of Confrontation©," a 14-week course in crisis intervention, resolution and prevention, to New York City school personnel.*

The school official asks: "Who started this?"

Teacher: "The student started it."

Student: "Teacher did."

Who is right? In most cases of disruptive behavior, the disruptor feels that the other person began the incident. In fact, it is rare that a disruptor acts spontaneously; most of the time he or she is reacting to the behavior of a teacher or other school official, usually the one who is trying to solve a problem created by the student's behavior.

Today we work in schools under conditions which demand that we become more knowledgeable about how to handle ourselves and others. We must develop skills which increase the probability that we will not be hurt and that someone else will not be hurt. After we learn these crisis intervention techniques, we can then learn ways to increase the probability that crises will be resolved (crisis resolution) and that there will be fewer crises in our schools (crisis prevention). It won't happen with the wave of a magic wand; nor will good intentions suffice. The skills required to use our instincts positively and to mobilize our knowledge and experience into effective action requires training in specific techniques. It requires learning new ways to think about behavior, about what others think and feel and how they react to what we say and do.

How many times have you uncon-

sciously provoked an incident? In what ways do each of us, unaware, provoke others to become angry, disturbed or violent? It is possible to unconsciously provoke a negative reaction in someone by your words or physical behavior, although you believe you are speaking and acting in a positive way.

If we are to reduce the amount and severity of school violence, we must become more finely tuned, more sensitive to the actions and reactions of others and the subtle messages we convey by what we say and do.

In the Peacemaking course I teach to school personnel in New York City, I start with an unaccustomed premise: that disruptors perceive Y-O-U (the teacher or school official) as provoking or escalating incidents; and that, in fact, unconsciously you, the professional, do initiate the violent response.

It happens something like this:

Mr. Jones, a teacher on break, is on his way to the cafeteria. In the hall, alone, is Frankie: a surly boy who cuts school often, cuts classes when he comes to school, rarely does his homework in Mr. Jones' class or any other class and very often gets into fights.

To get to the cafeteria, Mr. Jones has to pass Frankie. If he stops, he knows Frankie will give him a hassle. If he doesn't stop, he knows Frankie will realize he is deliberately avoiding him.

Mr. Jones walks directly up to Frankie who is standing in the center

of the hallway. He positions himself in front of Frankie, careful not to get too close, but close enough to let Frankie know he is there. Mr. Jones smiles. Frankie looks at him, lets out a sigh and takes a step backwards. Mr. Jones smiles again and, as he takes a step forward, says to Frankie in a pleasant tone of voice:

"Let me see your pass, Frankie."

Frankie looks at Mr. Jones but says nothing.

Mr. Jones, still pleasant and with a smile, again says, "Let me see your pass, Frankie."

Frankie moves away from the middle of the hallway to the wall. He leans back against the wall, crosses his arms over his chest and remains silent. Mr. Jones stays put. With extreme care to remain cool, he slowly removes his right hand from his pocket, sweeps his hand across his body, past Frankie's face and points his index finger down the hall toward the Principal's office. Frankie's facial muscles tighten slightly but he doesn't move. Mr. Jones raises his voice a bit:

"Frankie, let's go to the Principal's office."

All of a sudden Frankie burst into a tirade of words and emotions that suggest: Mr. Jones should go f--- himself, leave Frankie alone and get out of his face.

Mr. Jones has had it. He tried to be nice; he tried to do his job. He takes Frankie by the arm, just above the elbow, and escorts him to the Principal's office. Once inside, Mr. Jones immediately explains to the Principal what has happened, what Frankie did to provoke this confrontation and how Mr. Jones thinks the Principal should immediately deal with Frankie's insults.

Frankie jumps out of his chair, glares at Mr. Jones, turns to the Principal and screams: "He started it - not me."

Scenes like this are played out in schools across our country daily. If we are to become more effective at preventing such confrontations, we must learn how our behavior sometimes provokes student outbursts. Let us analyze the situation with Mr. Jones to discover what Frankie was probably feeling, and perhaps understand how Mr. Jones may

have caused Frankie to react the way he did.

Even though Mr. Jones chose his words carefully, tried to be friendly and pleasant and stayed calm, Frankie did not perceive him as being friendly or even neutral. Rather, Frankie felt attacked and therefore defended himself with the weapons he had available: rantings, ravings and all-around bluster. Had Mr. Jones pushed the situation just a bit further, Frankie might well have used his most potent weapon: fighting - deciding "to hell with the consequences."



## Nine major errors made by Mr. Jones

### I. The approach

When Mr. Jones saw Frankie standing in the hall, he remembered the boy's dismal record. He wished he could walk the other way but realized he had to deal with the situation rather than avoid it. He walked *directly toward* Frankie. Frankie, perceiving this action as a frontal assault, immediately became alarmed. If Mr. Jones had approached Frankie *diagonally* rather than coming straight to him, he could have lessened Frankie's apprehension.

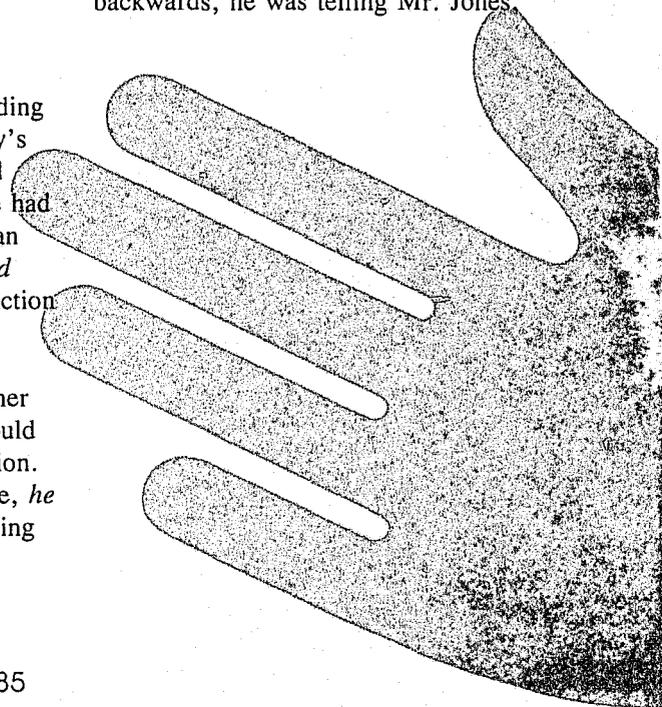
When Mr. Jones reached Frankie, *he stood in front* of him. This "squaring

off" posture is confrontative and, symbolically, a direct challenge. Recall those Westerns where the gunfighters confront one another with this direct, face-to-face, "it's either you or me," position. Frankie knows about standing toe-to-toe because on the streets it is the beginning of a challenge that usually ends up in a fight. Frankie already felt threatened by Mr. Jones' frontal approach, and the situation is compounded by Mr. Jones positioning himself right in front of Frankie.

Instead of stopping directly in front of a student, a teacher could choose a place *a bit to the side, on a diagonal*, so the student feels less threatened. The amount of "friendly space" left between people is important in establishing positive feelings, even before any words are spoken.

### II. Reaction to the approach

When Mr. Jones stopped in front of Frankie, he created concern, not only because he was directly in front of Frankie, but also because of how close he stood to Frankie. Mr. Jones chose the amount of space which made him feel comfortable. His choice of space, however, was not necessarily Frankie's choice. Everyone has different ranges of "friendly" space they accept. The range changes in response to different people or different circumstances. In this situation, Frankie was not comfortable, made apparent by his step backward. Mr. Jones, however, then took a *step forward*, albeit smiling and speaking pleasantly. When Frankie stepped backwards, he was telling Mr. Jones,



nonverbally, that he was too close and that more "friendly" space was needed. Mr. Jones should have honored Frankie's request by *not moving forward*. Demonstrating sensitivity to this need for space will make the potential disruptor feel more comfortable, thus increasing the possibility that the relationship and the situation will take a positive turn.

### III. The words

Note the first thing Mr. Jones said: "Let me see your pass, Frankie." Prior to this, Frankie had already reacted to Mr. Jones' encroachment of his space and assumption of a direct, face-to-face position, interpreting these actions as being hostile and a warning of an impending confrontation. Mr. Jones justified Frankie's fears by opening their conversation with school business and a *nonpersonal* greeting. He did not recognize Frankie's personal existence but rather approached him and then said something which Frankie read as a challenge, in spite of the pleasant manner and tone. Mr. Jones' first sentence did include Frankie's name, but not until the end of the sentence. By that time, Frankie had already decided to reject the request to see his pass.

What if Mr. Jones had approached Frankie with good "friendly" space, had stood still when Frankie stepped backward and had opened the conversation with a *personal greeting*: "Hi Frankie, what's up?" Everyone wants

to be noticed. Using a student's name first and adding a greeting which is socially acceptable in his world - "What's up?" - establishes a link, for students like Frankie, between his real world of nonschool time and the "official world" of school time. The greeting should also be a very short sentence; the less said and the less complicated it is, the better it is received.

Not only does Frankie wish to be noticed but he also needs to feel (as we all do) that he belongs. Students like Frankie are often outcasts. They have trouble on the streets, at home and in



school. There are a few things these youngsters are sure of; one is that there is a general pitter-patter that goes on between people who belong to the same environment. A greeting such as "hi man, how's it going," helps the student feel that he belongs to something and it helps the teacher make contact without losing position or status. The result is a more relaxed atmosphere which may prevent the student from becoming immediately defensive.

### IV. "Jailing"

Frankie was provoked to confrontation by misuse of "friendly" space, threatening use of "moving" space and a

"depersonalized" opening greeting. He reacted by becoming openly defiant, moving away from Mr. Jones to the wall, leaning back, crossing his arms and legs and staring silently right at Mr. Jones. Mr. Jones then increased the probability of conflict by remaining in the hallway facing Frankie against the wall and trapping him in an "invisible jail."

From Frankie's perception, imaginary lines extended from Mr. Jones' shoulders and sides to the wall at Frankie's back. Mr. Jones had "jailed" him and he felt trapped. Frightened, and feeling like a caged animal, Frankie could react violently.

Instead of standing in the hallway facing Frankie, Mr. Jones could have chosen to turn slightly, talking or not, and walk backwards until *his back was against the wall* and he stood alongside of Frankie. By moving to the side of the student, both the student and the teacher have to turn their heads sideways towards each other to talk. The student might turn his whole head or he might just focus his eyes on the teacher. Even if he does neither, he knows the teacher is there. By not creating the "invisible jail," the mounting tensions within a student can be reduced without using words. If there is not enough "friendly" space for the student to feel comfortable, he might ask for more space by sliding a bit further down the wall, which should be allowed.

What might happen next? The student could choose to stay where he is; he could slide a bit down the wall; he could turn on the wall and face the teacher directly or turn his back to the teacher; or he could choose to come off the wall and turn and face the teacher. He may start ranting and raving. He could even feel more powerful if he has moved into the hallway placing the teacher in the "invisible jail." The teacher, however, understanding the symbolic position, does not have to respond negatively. Rather, he remains the powerholder and continues calming the student and also learning what the student is doing in the hall.

If a student like Frankie, feeling more sure of himself because he has



when we speak to one another, we find ways, while standing still, to take hold of the elbow of a friendly person. These are usually gestures made between equals. There are times, however, especially in a school setting, when an adult decides to take hold of a young person, either to get his attention or to move him to another place – a persuasive manipulation. As might be expected, some students (though not Frankie in this case) might break away from the hold and say something like, “Get your f----- hands off me man.” If this does happen, the adult should step back, open his hands in a friendly gesture and immediately apologize. It is better, however, not to produce the situation in the first place.

A disruptor does not want to be “chained” or restricted when he is angry. There are touching techniques that are more readily accepted by a disruptive person which can create a sense of comfort rather than discomfort. For example, instead of “holding” Frankie’s elbow, Mr. Jones could have gently touched Frankie’s wrist at the pulse point, without using any pressure: without squeezing with his fingers or propelling the arm, but rather just resting his fingers under the wrist with his finger tips gently on the pulse. The gentle touch on this point creates a calming effect. The power play of holding/grabbing/pushing is replaced with positive touching to make the student feel less threatened and sometimes even more comfortable in the situation.

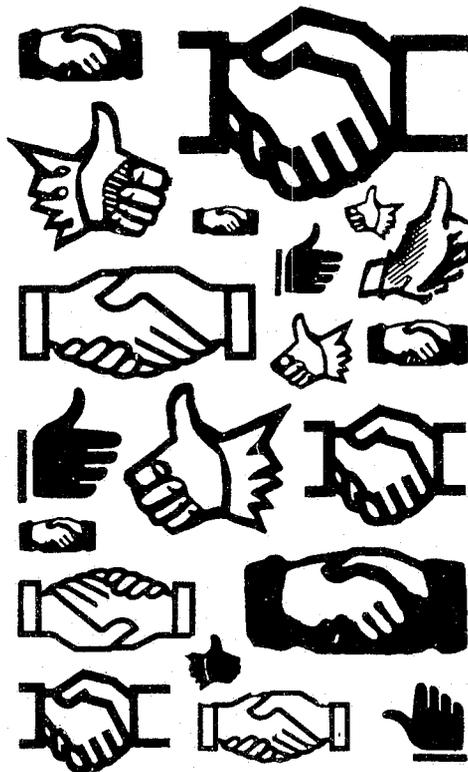
### IX. Second comes first

Once Mr. Jones was inside the Principal’s office with Frankie, he immediately “explained” the situation to the Principal. Frankie was reduced to assuming second place without the Principal having said a word. Now he was confronted with two adults. He was alone. After the teacher told “what happened,” Frankie exploded. Did he explode because of what the teacher said – or when he said it?

Frankie’s outburst was unconsciously provoked by Mr. Jones’ assumption of the right to speak first. The Principal did not have a chance to determine

who would tell his story first because Mr. Jones grabbed the opportunity and jumped right in. Frankie immediately started to fume and finally blew up again.

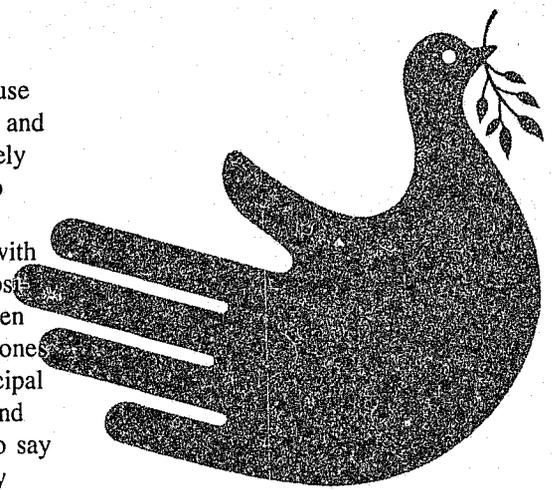
The adult, in all confrontations with younger people, should take the position that he will speak *second*. When they both entered the office, Mr. Jones could have pointed out to the Principal that there had been some trouble and that Frankie would like a chance to say what was on his mind. By patiently hearing the other person out first, without interruption, the teacher is in



the stronger position. Speaking only when asked by the third party will help diffuse the disruptor’s anger and will show the teacher to be a mature person who can calmly explain the situation.

During the entire preceding confrontation, Frankie was in charge – not Mr. Jones. The teacher was functioning on an *action-reaction* basis. Throughout their interchange, Frankie acted and Mr. Jones reacted when it should have been the other way around.

When confronted with a situation, a teacher should *think backwards*. What is the last step he wishes to accomplish with the student? As Mr. Jones



approached Frankie, he was thinking negatively about how bad Frankie was and how he wished he could avoid a confrontation. Such thoughts, however natural, are a waste of time. Instead, Mr. Jones should be concentrating on what outcomes are desirable and acceptable. Concentration on the achievement of a predetermined goal also helps avoid distraction during the conflict. Rather than involuntarily reacting to the student’s behavior, the teacher will remain more clear-headed and able to guide the situation’s outcome in an acceptable direction.

This, of course, presupposes that teachers – and other school personnel – have adequate techniques and training so they may defuse and not unconsciously escalate a potential crisis. I have just demonstrated how a teacher’s behavior, which at first seemed perfectly reasonable and innocuous, had the power to incite a disruptor into a violent verbal outburst.

All of us are in the shoes of Mr. Jones unless we are adequately trained. We must raise the consciousness of those who establish the curricula for teacher training. Certainly, our teachers must be literate and knowledgeable in their subject matter. But they must also be trained in the dynamics involved in behavior and personal interaction so they can handle the variety of experiences which await them in the classrooms, cafeterias and hallways. Guns, chains and knives may be dangers faced primarily by those of us in urban centers; but defiance, disruption and disorganized behavior, all of which interrupt learning and disturb the learning environment, occur even in those schools we think of as “safe.” □