

How a Social-Emotional Learning Model Supported Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing and their Teachers During Unprecedented Times

By Taylor Super



About the Author: Taylor Super, M.A., is a preschool teacher of the deaf at Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech in Philadelphia. She has been working with the deaf or hard of hearing population for five years and worked in the special education field for two years prior.

Ms. Super attended Fontbonne University (Missouri) where she obtained her Master of Arts in deaf education. Her students bring her such joy!

Maddy, a student who uses hearing aids, looks down as her classmates practice songs for their holiday performance. She crosses her arms and looks to me, her preschool teacher of the deaf. I say, “Maddy, your arms are crossed, and you are looking down. You look upset. Would you like to go to the ‘Safe Place?’” She nods and walks to a cozy chair. After some breathing exercises, Maddy points to the anxious face on the “I Feel” chart. I say, “You are feeling anxious, let’s talk about that.” She explains that she feels anxious that she will not remember the words to the holiday songs in time for the performance. I validate her emotions and I provide some options to help her work through this. These steps, part of the Conscious Discipline methodology for social-emotional learning, benefited Maddy the next time she experienced complicated emotions.

Before the pandemic, before the social unrest, before masks, before virtual school, would Maddy have been anxious about learning songs? It’s hard to say.

I am a preschool teacher of the deaf at Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech (Clarke), a nonprofit organization that teaches children who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH) listening, learning and spoken language skills. Our students use hearing technology including hearing aids, cochlear implants and BAHAs (bone-anchored hearing aids) to access sound.

My students may experience developmental delays in listening and spoken language skills due to their hearing loss. These delays can compound social-emotional growth. The continually unfolding events of the past two years have not made learning, socializing and relationship-building any easier.

Educators and researchers around the world continue working to measure, communicate and address the impact of unprecedented changes to learning since March 2020. I am grateful my school implemented Conscious Discipline, a social-emotional learning model, in 2020. The strategies and practices we adopted gave us the tools to address social-emotional learning both virtually and when we returned to the classroom.

Addressing Social-Emotional Challenges with Preschoolers who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Preschoolers who are DHH often lag in the development of social-emotional regulation due to language and communication challenges. Hearing loss limits our students’ opportunities for incidental learning. For example, without the ability to casually overhear conversations taking place around them, they miss cues that would help them to incidentally learn about social behavior. The language and actions used to address emotions and navigate social situations and relationships must be directly taught to children who are DHH.

A child who is DHH often uses words such as “happy” or “sad” to describe a broad range of emotions. Their tendency to generalize situations results in a communication breakdown, especially when it comes to complex feelings (e.g., joyful, delighted, disappointed, excited, frustrated, etc.). They may cry and say they are sad when they are really experiencing frustration.

Continued on next page

The global pandemic has further affected the social-emotional development of children who are DHH. Most children spent more time at home with stressed out families, seeing friends and teachers through a screen. Confusion was common and establishing connections with peers and school-based caring adults became more difficult.

The Clarke team, like so many other educators, recognized this lack of authentic connection. The Conscious Discipline approach to behavior management became our most critical ally in teaching social-emotional skills.

An Overview of Conscious Discipline

Conscious Discipline is an evidence-based, trauma and brain-informed social-emotional learning methodology for all ages, developed in 1996 by Becky Bailey, Ph.D., author, educator and child development expert (Conscious Discipline, 2019). It provides educators with tools to change their behavior management from traditional discipline to conscious discipline.

Traditional Discipline teaches us:

- to avoid bad behavior
- **that** reward and punishment is key
- **that** rules drive behaviors

Conscious Discipline teaches us **that**:

- all behavior is a form of communication
- building connections through relationships impacts behavior and is essential to behavior management
- self-control can happen and positively impacts others

Implementing Conscious Discipline at Clarke

Our team participated in a 10-session online training by Dr. Bailey. To continue the learning and implementation across all settings, carryover activities were sent home to Clarke families. We welcomed Conscious Discipline strategies into our classrooms and direct instruction, including:

- Establishing “Safe Places” for students in quiet areas of our classrooms.
- Listening for students to share how they feel throughout the day and why.
- Encouraging students to share the acts of kindness they engaged in or observed throughout the day by coloring in hearts on the Kindness Tree chart.
- Using morning meetings with students to collectively discuss feeling anxious and upset.
- Meeting weekly as a staff to share our own experiences from inside and, optionally, outside the classroom.

The more we practice Conscious Discipline in the classroom, the more it is a seamless part of how we interact and teach.

Perhaps the most transformative component we learned and implemented is the Brain State Model. This model teaches staff to understand where certain behaviors in children and adults arise from inside the body. The predominant “states” include the Survival State which comes from the brain stem, the Emotional State which comes from the limbic system and the Executive State which comes from the prefrontal lobes (Conscious Discipline, 2021).

For example, behaviors originating from the Survival State are often related to a compromised sense of safety and security. A child in the Survival State may use physical force because they do not feel safe. If they do not feel safe, they cannot learn. To calm a child experiencing the Survival State, we must create security by noticing the behaviors, establishing routines throughout the day, demonstrating composure when addressing the behaviors and establishing a safe place for the child to process.

Assessing students’ emotional states within this framework provides strategies for addressing challenges in the moment and helping students to process. These are the social-emotional skills we’re working to build. As we navigated waves of pandemic protocols and social unrest, this framework remained consistent. And it’s this framework that I personally drew upon to self-regulate during particularly trying times in the past two years.

I wasn’t the only one. Ashley Mahlstedt Weaver, director of Clarke Philadelphia, said, “One of the components of Conscious Discipline that I find has been most impactful for us, is the focus on adults’ social-emotional state, not just that of our students. The curriculum focuses on the adult recognizing their brain state before determining how to respond to students’ needs. I have seen the value in how staff interactions with their colleagues, students and the families we serve have changed for the better.”

Jane Zankman, preschool teacher of the deaf at Clarke, agreed: “What makes Conscious Discipline so powerful is that it not only encourages and supports a mindset shift, but it does so while also providing the tools for you to make changes to how you communicate, empathize and help students grow. I think my biggest takeaway has been that it is never too late to learn. My students have really thrived and absorbed so much about understanding their feelings and how to best process them at such a young age!”

Benefits of Conscious Discipline

Through our school’s Conscious Discipline approach, we focused on feeling-based language, lessons about the Safe Place and understanding new emotions. From the height of the pandemic until now I have seen students rebound from anxiety and frustration to blossom into joyful, confident and proud young children before moving on from Clarke into a mainstream setting.

Students in my classroom demonstrated an understanding of their emotions and learned self-regulation techniques. Nathan confidently explains how he feels upon arrival: “I feel joyful because it feels like spring!” The oldest

may refer the student, as appropriate, to a student assistance program, a law enforcement agency, an evaluation under the IDEA or section 504, a student's existing IEP team or existing team established to implement a student's Section 504 service agreement. However, prior to a team referring a student to a behavioral service provider, health care provider or a county agency, the student's parent or guardian must provide consent.

Section 1302-E specifically notes that nothing precludes school employees from acting immediately to address an imminent threat and that imminent threats and emergencies shall be promptly reported to law enforcement. In addition, nothing in Section 1302-E limits the responsibilities of school employees or other mandated reporters to report suspected child abuse as required by law. Moreover, nothing in that section limits the authority of a school entity to refer a student to the student assistance program without referral by a team, so long as the student's behavior does not indicate a threat to the safety of the student, other students, school employees, school facilities, the community or others.

School administrators are always under heavy scrutiny in exercising their responsibilities in the governance of their schools and programs. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the incidence of mental health issues, and suicides in particular, sadly are no stranger to school administrators. However, the state and federal laws discussed

above provide not only the expressed obligations on the part of school entities and school officials but also provide examples of what can be thought of as "best practices" in terms of addressing what appear to be mental health issues exhibited in the schools which either interfere with student opportunities or worse, create identifiable dangers. School administrators are thus urged to review these laws as well as the resulting school policies enacted and enforce them as stated. They not only provide guidance to address such issues and procedures to follow but also establish the reasonableness and appropriateness of such responses in rebuttal to potential legal challenge. In addition, when addressing student mental health issues, it is imperative for school site administrators to consult with central administration and their solicitors to coordinate and ensure that a response, if any, is proper under the circumstances.

Of course, the underlying issue – the recognition of mental health issues and especially those that evidence suicidal or violent tendencies – is not always easy or a simple process. Students do not present their mental health issues in the same manner or in the same degree. One cannot address warning signs unless one can recognize them. Therefore, in addition to the above referenced legal guidance, part of this process also requires administrators to engage in training specifically geared toward recognizing such issues.

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Continued from page ?

preschoolers use phrases such as "I don't like it when you ____, I like it when you ____" when solving a conflict with a peer. Families report they have seen a change in confidence in their children and are even learning from them as well. One parent stated, "Angela reassures me that it is okay if I make a mistake. She will tell me, 'It's okay mommy you can try again. You can take a breath.'"

The success of social-emotional learning initiatives, and the benefits for staff and students, rely on the example set by administrators. Their attitude paves the way for students, staff and families to utilize models like Conscious Discipline with confidence and proficiency. An ongoing focus on training, implementation and sharing is key.

Our director takes pride in implementing such strategies throughout our school. She shared, "During a time in education where professionals are being asked to face unprecedented circumstances, Conscious Discipline takes into account the social-emotional well-being of the adults in a school setting in addition to our students' needs."

School administrators are successful in these initiatives when they:

- make positive connections with the entire school population
- are well informed about the importance of social-emotional development
- provide continuous professional learning opportunities for staff and families

- think deeply about how to implement and reinforce a model effectively
- provide a supportive culture within the school setting

With Conscious Discipline in place at Clarke, our students made strides in their social-emotional development – whether they were learning virtually or in person. They have used language to build positive relationships with peers and adults. They have grown more in tune with their emotional states and learned methods for self-regulation. When the right strategies are directly taught, modeled and practiced, it is remarkable to watch these children grow into their authentic selves with such pride and joy.

For further information, please contact the author at tsuper@clarkeschools.org

Author's Note: The names of students mentioned in the article have been changed to protect the students' identities.

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