

The Green Chair: A Motivation for Teenagers to Replace Aggressive Behavior with Words

by *Laura Lipetz*

This is a report of how the practice of putting words to aggressive feelings, rather than having them impulsively acted out, came about in an alternative high school classroom setting. The drama of this report is how the practice of using “the green chair” for that purpose created motivation that seemed almost magical to me: the students wanted to talk instead of take aggressive action. I explain how I discovered my approach by using the concepts of modern psychoanalysis and how the magical motivational premise of using “the green chair” has been unleashed in many other educational settings. I also hope it conveys how motivational this process has been for me.

The Process

One day I was standing between my classroom and the adjoining one, which were separated by a floor-to-ceiling wall. It served as a door between the two rooms. Suddenly the door came flying right at me. I frantically got out of the way. The door had been violently pushed in my direction by one of the sixteen-year-old boys in my class. I screamed: “Joe, you almost killed me!” “I know,” he replied nonchalantly.

The setting was an alternative high school for adolescents with emotional disturbances. The school was located within a modern, one-floor building, a former elementary school. I taught English and human behavior. There were only eight classrooms. Seven, clustered together, were for the high school. The eighth was set apart for students of middle school age. Because the school was so small, news of any incident spread quickly through the building. Knowing that, I felt humiliated, enraged, and incompetent after the incident with Joe. I also wanted to know why it happened. So I asked Joe and he said, “Because I felt like it.”

The principal, social worker, psychologist, consulting psychiatrist, and I convened for a

meeting. Each of them had a different perspective. The psychiatrist said Joe’s outburst was caused by transference: that I reminded Joe of his mother, with whom he was enraged. I could not understand what would bring up such severe rage and negative transference, because I had a generally positive relationship with Joe.

At the time I was also taking a course called “Dealing with Aggression in Ourselves and Others.” I had hoped it could help me with my work. As much as I enjoyed the course it was not helping me reach the destructive actions of students like Joe. And I was haunted by a short passage I had read that said how necessary it was to re-channel aggressive behavior into constructive energy. Only it did not tell me how!

The following fall I enrolled at the Philadelphia School of Psychoanalysis as a candidate in training. As part of the requirements I began a training analysis. There, the assignment each week was to lie on the couch and put everything into words. That theme was taught and practiced in all the academic classes: the couch was the place where anything could be said. There patients would learn more and more to say what was on their minds rather than act it out. Talking would take the place of impulsive or misunderstood behavior. In doing so patients then would be able to more clearly and thoughtfully live their lives.

One morning I announced the new rule to first-period class: “From now on you don’t have permission to go off [their term for acting out], but you do have permission to sit in the green

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chair, next to my desk, and say anything you want to say." I made the same announcement to my other five classes as well. (When we were at maximum enrollment, I saw sixty-six students daily.) The students, at first response, were angry, confused, and challenging. Wasn't talking an action? How could I stop them from going off if they wanted? Could any words, including profanity, be used? (Yes.)

Word spread quickly through the school. At the end of the day the principal wanted to know about the green chair. I explained its premise. I asked him to trust me; I had a strong feeling it would help. He gave me his blessing, shook his head a little, and hugged me.

Despite some early resistance the kids started to use the green chair. When one of them came up to the green chair I would ask my teaching assistant to take over the lesson as I went over to my desk and to the student waiting in the chair. The students, initially, would give a curious look or comment but be guided back to task by the TA. As time went on the students could continue class, on their own, without being distracted by my attention to the student in the green chair, even when his or her voice was loud or furious.

Joe was making progress. He was one of the first to want to use the chair and he used it often. By early winter his approach to academics was changing. Joe had been functioning at a fourth-grade reading level; a learning disability prevented him from spelling at all. Now he was reading

daily, without duress. His skills were improving. He let me try a new spelling approach with him and it was working. Overall he was developing in all areas of language arts. Moreover, there were no more acting-out incidents. He loved coming to class and he felt he belonged among us.

By mid-year many of the students were using the green chair. Once a huge boy held a desk over my head and screamed that he was going to go off. I looked straight up at him and told him that he did *not* have permission to go off but he *did* have permission to sit in that green chair and say anything he wanted to say. He slowly put down the desk. "You're nuts," he said. "I don't know why I'm listening to you."

The chair was gaining such credence and reputation it was now the talk of the school, which operated on a behavior-modification system. Students who accumulated a certain number of points were allowed to smoke during break time and at lunchtime. Kids from other classes were now standing in line, at smoke break and at lunch, to sit in the chair and talk. Because of the length of the line, many actually had to give up their smoke to talk. Even the principal occasionally lined up among the students. After his turn, he would smile and say he felt better!

By late spring the school was filled to capacity. It was a public school, with rolling admissions that served as an alternative to the two main high schools within our district. When one of them decided that they were not meeting a student's needs, and if the student was classified as eligible to receive special education services, the student was transferred to our school. One afternoon a very tall, boisterous seventeen-year-old, new to our school, came to the famous wall. He was replete in gold jewelry, leather, studs, earring, and tattoos. And he was not happy. He yelled: "I hate this f—ing school. . . I'm going to go off!" By that time my students were so well-trained and motivated as a group they cried: "No, no, Alan, you can't go off, but you can sit in that green chair and say anything you want to say!" Alan looked at me. I invited him in and he sat in the chair. He talked a few minutes while my students went on with their work. Afterward he patted his stomach and said: "Hmm, I feel better. Thanks," and he left. The next day the same scenario: Alan at the wall threatening to go off because "I hate this f—ing school," and my students imploring, "You can't go off in here. Come and sit in the green chair and talk with Lipetz!" Alan sat, talked, patted his stom-

ach, said he felt much better, and left. By the third day Alan came to the wall and simply yelled: "I need the chair!"

Alan was another student who had been a non-achiever throughout his school years. In kindergarten diagnosticians told his family that he'd never really be capable of academic work. He was highly impulsive, inattentive, and difficult to control. He had never read a book.

The following fall he was in my English class. It took him awhile to settle in. Alan needed the chair often. He began to read high-interest, low-level novels. One in particular, *The Contender*, was powerfully engaging. Alan very much identified with the main character, a boxer like himself and an underdog like himself too. That year Alan went on to read *Death Be Not Proud* and *Catcher in the Rye*, both on the mainstream general-education curriculum list for seniors at the other two high schools. One day, while reading *Death Be Not Proud*, he called out to ask what "i-n-t-r-i-g-u-e-d" spelled. When I told him he passionately responded that he was intrigued by the courage of the boy with the brain tumor.

The next spring Alan was reading *Catcher in the Rye*. He came in one morning reporting what a great night he had had. I was very curious and worried at the same time. Spring was known by all of us as "high season" for drug use. Alan informed us that the night before he and "his boys" were out behind the 7-Eleven, the scene of many nights of getting high and of confrontations with other gangs. Now I was prepared for the worst! That night, though, he told me, they had discussed *Catcher in the Rye*. Alan said it was the first time since kindergarten that he had felt normal, that he now could contribute to a discussion about what the other "normal" guys were studying. Now there was no stopping him academically and emotionally. And the former rebel had become a school leader: a respected caretaker, role model, counselor, and emotional and academic mentor.

It is noteworthy to add that the year following Alan's graduation he was hospitalized at a psychiatric facility. Alan was terrified. Finally the doctors diagnosed him with temporal lobe epilepsy, an undiagnosed condition Alan had been suffering from all his life. The news made Alan enraged at all the educators who for all his school years had considered him incorrigible, one who did not have the ability or desire to learn. That early experience had set the pattern for the next eleven years of schooling, until he came to us. No one,

not family, physician, or educational professional, had considered, wondered about, explored, or picked up the possibility that there may have been a physiological condition that, untreated, had tormented him all those years. Alan told me that while he was in the hospital, so terrified, he would think about all we did together, and that he would read. Both activities gave him solace and kept him connected to us through an internalized place where he was safe, accepted, and loved.

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The story of how the green chair can alter motivation would not be complete without including a scene with Sam and Jerry. After Alan's class graduated, our school population changed. We were receiving more hard-core students, those diagnosed as conduct disordered or sociopathic. For instance, we had one student who was up for attempted murder. He had broken into the next-door neighbor's house in the middle of the night with a samurai sword. He had slashed and permanently disabled the arm of a sixty-five-year-old man trying to protect himself and his wife.

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Sam and Jerry called themselves cousins. In reality they were not but they seemed to take great pleasure in convincing everyone they were. Their crimes consisted of stealing cars off new-car dealers' lots in the middle of the night throughout our affluent town. They were fifteen and sixteen. Jerry was very tall, Sam very short. Their level of impulsivity was extremely high; you never knew when one would go off. Yet they both took very quickly to the green chair. One day Jerry was sitting on the chair talking. Sam came in, very hyper: "I need the chair; I need to use the chair." "Wait, wait," Jerry said, "I'm not finished." "Hurry up, 'cause I can't wait anymore," Sam replied. He reminded me of a small child being toilet trained who had waited to the very last minute. He was jumping up and down, no



longer able to wait. Suddenly Sam pushed Jerry's legs over to the far side of the chair with his foot. Then he firmly established his foot on the chair and yelled "F—!!" He emoted with the word for what seemed forever. I stood there, stunned, almost clapping. Then I cried and laughed like a proud mother.

Adaptations

As I said in the introduction, my discovery of the effectiveness of the underlying premise of "the green chair" set me on a course that could be described as almost magical. The adaptation and use of the modern psychoanalytic process—i.e., helping to motivate people to want to talk instead of acting out, as using the green chair accomplished—has become a mainstay of my work in many varied educational settings. They include a private school for previously hospitalized psychiatric adolescents and students with severe acting-out behaviors; a private practice; a state department of education; universities at which I served as a program counselor for international business students and as an executive director for international services and programs; and a general education high school setting, where I was able to motivate other teachers to motivate our students to talk instead of going off. I smile when I recall the echoes of students in the halls saying "Lipetz's class—no actions, just words!"

All these have been wonderful opportunities for me to learn and to grow. I am deeply indebted to all the students and adults along the way who trusted and joined me in the constantly amazing discovery that "thinking your actions is better than pounding somebody's face in" (quote attributed to G.C., former student and self-proclaimed rebel at the alternative school).