

Interrupt Gateway Behaviors

The philosophy of identifying gateway behaviors comes from the **Broken Windows theory** coined by social scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in 1982. This theory says that when a society or community allows small anti-social transgressions, larger ones occur.

To test this theory, social scientist Kees Keizer and his colleagues at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands devised a series of experiments. In one, they locked a bicycle in two different but identical locations. Both were right in front of a large visible sign saying “No Graffiti”, and both were adjacent to recycling and trash containers. The only difference between the two locations was that one location was cluttered with litter all around, and graffiti-style vandalism on the walls. The other location was clean. After people locked their bikes in these racks, the researchers would place flyers a non-existent shop on the bikes’ handlebars.

The test was to see if the environment of order and cleanliness versus disorder via trash and graffiti on the walls would shift people’s behavior. And it did! People who parked their bikes in the disorderly area were twice as likely to litter by throwing the flyer onto the ground than the people who parked in a clean location.

Similar experiments were conducted in multiple locations, varying the conditions, and all revealed that the presence of some anti-social behavior incited other anti-social behavior, which would then balloon into more violent crimes. The low-level anti-social behaviors are gateways to higher order problems.

So what does this tell us about afterschool discipline? The culture of youth development prides itself on putting relationships before discipline, to lead with love and compassion versus rules and punishment. However, young people’s first experience of safety is structural. They ask themselves: What are the rules here? Who is in

control? What will be tolerated? What can I get away with? While some students will naturally appreciate a lax environment where adults believe youth will do the right thing given the choice, others will revolt on a lax structure by taking advantage of that philosophy, breaking rules, creating disruptions, and impacting the overall safety of the space.

So what’s the solution? We don’t want to abandon the youth development stance that youth will make the right choices when given the option. We also need to scaffold their experience of making choices by providing a great deal of structure early on, and gently allowing them more and more influence over time. As anyone who has worked with youth knows, it only takes one bad choice to ruin the environment for the whole group.

Be the Change Consulting coaches work with organizations to identify gateway behaviors that are impacting their programs. Some common examples are:

- Saying, “Shut up”
- Bumping into someone in the hall
- Flicking paper across a desk
- Passing notes
- Rolling eyes
- Whispering or telling secrets
- Wearing a hat pulled down over the eyes
- Texting

These are the small things that lead to the big things. In a school I taught at the “N” word would come flying out of our students’ mouths at the drop of a hat. But we chose to focus on the words, “shut up” instead, because it was a lower level problem. Through hyper-vigilance the staff cracked down on students who chose to tell their classmates to shut up. Every single person who said shut up was subjected to harsh consequences for breaking a community agreement—they wrote letters of apology to their classmates, phone calls were made to parents (who weren’t at all happy about receiving calls for what they considered a small problem), and privileges were taken away. And what we →

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noticed was that the words shut up became less prevalent, and subsequently the “n” word went away all together. We noticed an interesting shift in our climate- when a student did tell someone to shut up, the other students would gasp and ooh—it was no longer a common phrase that got thrown around for them, but a true sign of disrespect.

This is what we want in our classrooms—a shift from complacency with disruptive behavior or choices that break connections towards community building and higher expectations of what emotional safety can feel like. Without this foundation, it is impossible to get youth engaged in leadership projects, skill building or community change.

For more strategies on how to engage youth in identifying gateway behaviors and to intentionally shift the culture and climate of your program using these gateways over time, check out two curriculum from Be the Change Consulting:

- **BUILDING INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES:
EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITIES TO EXPLORE VALUES**



- **BUILDING INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES:
EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITIES TO CREATE A CLIMATE
OF PEACE, NON-VIOLENCE, AND RESTORATIVE
PRACTICES.**

