Preface

This second edition of our text on Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) is about talking with children and youth who are in crisis. LSCI is a process that can be used in almost any situation or location because it requires no props or equipment, only a skilled and understanding adult. Yet obtaining the skills is not easy, and the difficulties of helping today's troubled students are enormous. Skilled verbal strategies are essential requirements for adults in helping roles. Every crisis requires talk! An adult's skills in using verbal strategies will directly influence both the immediate solution to a crisis and the long-term effect of a crisis on the student. Crisis handled well can lead to positive, long-lasting changes; crisis managed ineptly will contribute to a devastating cycle of alienation, hostility, and aggression.

Today's students come from a wider range of family structures, lifestyles, and cultures than ever before. They present the schools with social-emotional needs at a level unknown in recent history, and they demand a quality of teacher understanding and skill that was once the province of the special education teacher or mental health professional.

The decay and dysfunction of the family and the shocking social problems in communities have created a level of deviancy and disturbance never before seen by educators and other adults who work with children and youth. We are involved daily with students who come to school struggling with painful realities—problems such as alcoholism, drug use, suicide, gang warfare, rape, physical and psychological abuse, crime, parental neglect and abandonment, brutality as entertainment, and poverty. Violence at home and in the neighborhood is a common experience for many students today.

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CRISES IN MENTAL HEALTH

Public mental health services are conceptualized through an illness model in which health is characterized as the absence of psychopathology or mental illness. The child-serving systems are overwhelmed and struggling, and are failing our troubled children and youth. There is growing evidence that systems are breaking down as overworked, underpaid clinicians are increasingly forced to function in a reactive mode. Professional judgment is often overruled by mavens of managed care who ration services and psychoactive drugs to silence rebellious youth. Interventions consist mainly of brief diagnostic assessments and short-term symptom management. The best practices ideal of a continuum of comprehensive intersystems services tailored to individual child and family needs has been lost.

The plight of mental health services for children and youth goes well beyond overworked staff and lack of financial support. A psychologist at a public mental

health center diagnosed this problem when she said, "We have an effective psychotherapy program, except the schools and courts are referring the wrong cases to us." Her observation is painfully correct. The children and youth being referred to psychotherapists often arrive with multiple problems of developmental neglect, abuse, and rejection. They often live in hostile environments comprised of fragmented families, alienated schools, and the destructive social forces of guns, gangs, drugs, promiscuity, and poverty. Therapists are often unable to separate intrapsychic problems from ongoing ecological crises at home, in school, and in the community. Consequently, the social-emotional needs of these troubled children and youth often exceed the resources and skills of therapists. Weekly psychotherapy sessions simply are not enough to be effective, and many youths are highly resistant to traditional office-based counseling. The multiple needs of troubled children and youth demand a broader, ecologically based intervention set. Increasingly, troubled and troubling children and youth depend on a variety of adults for support, including social workers, clergy, and teachers.

CRISES IN THE SCHOOLS

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The standard social constructs which defined teacher–student interaction in the past have changed. A generation ago the authority of the teacher and the school was rarely questioned. Students and parents had little to say about how teachers conducted their classrooms, and student "rights" were determined largely by teacher discretion. When conduct violations occurred, there was little interest in discovering or attempting to understand the student's point of view. The culprit was reprimanded, punished, and often marked as a misfit and a troublemaker. Students who too often clashed with the culture of the school were "removed."

Contemporary thinking, however, is inclusionary. Schools are presumed not to tolerate diversity but to welcome it, and to provide a stable learning environment amid the open expression of values and differences. Inclusion requires a shift in the way teachers think about their students. Rather than teaching homogeneous classes, teachers are now working with heterogeneous groups of individuals, both culturally and educationally. When a student is disruptive, teachers need to consider much more than what price the student will pay for his wrongdoing; teachers need to consider the motivating forces behind the behavior, whether the behavior is an isolated event or part of a predictable pattern, and whether the student is motivated to change.

Schools face these challenges at a time in which funding uncertainties abound and a shortage of teachers, especially in special education, is on the rise. At-risk and troubled students bring the social ills of society into the classroom, causing many teachers to feel overwhelmed and helpless. Interestingly, as more special education students are included in regular classes, more "alternative schools" for troubled students are also being developed. Such programs often become little more than "curriculums of control." In some areas, alternative schools are not even an option, and youth are

expelled, banished to roam the streets. The legal principle of "zero reject" (all students are entitled to an appropriate education) is being overridden by the political newspeak of "zero tolerance" (students are held fully accountable, but schools abdicate responsibility for them).

Instead of providing special services, some schools are criminalizing misbehavior by transforming schoolyard conflicts into violations of the criminal code—doing whatever it takes to get rid of a particularly disruptive child. What once might have been seen as a playground fistfight becomes battery, and threats and profanity become assault. Recently, in an east coast school district, one second grader who carried a plastic butter knife from the cafeteria and another who poked a peer with a pencil were each charged with possession of a weapon. Both situations require intervention; however, we are amazed by the absurdity of placing these matters in the criminal justice system. Surely schools can address such problems more effectively and less expensively than courts.

Many seriously emotionally disturbed children are being deprived of appropriate special services with the rationalization that they don't have "real" disabilities, but are simply choosing to act in socially maladjusted ways. The key issue, however, is why a youth would decide to keep behaving in a self-defeating manner which systematically destroys the quality of life. Some school districts, perhaps in an effort to trim costs, go to great lengths to avoid identifying troubled students as handicapped in order to make behavior problems a juvenile justice issue rather than a treatment issue. In some districts, special education is off limits to students with conduct problems, oppositional-defiant behavior, or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, even when these conditions interfere with the students' ability to learn. Strikingly, children with these disabilities constitute a majority of youths who end up incarcerated in the juvenile justice system (Garfinkel, 1998).

Traditional strategies for discipline fail dramatically with a significant portion of highly troubled students who do not benefit from either punishment or exclusion. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders are the most likely to be suspended and expelled, and, ultimately, to become dropouts or "pushouts" from school. These youths fail to graduate at a rate greater than that of any other group with disabilities. When behavior problems persist despite efforts at intervention, a sensible response would seem to be to discard the intervention instead of the student.

CRISES IN THE COURTS

In a typical year, three million children in the United States come into contact with the juvenile justice system. This happens to be the same number as those who come to the attention of the child welfare system because of allegations of neglect or abuse. Research by the Child Welfare League of America (Petit & Brooks, 1998) shows that these are often the same young people. Children who first encounter the child welfare

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system because of neglect or abuse are 67 times more likely to be delinquents before they are teens.

Whatever sympathy the public has for the young victim of child abuse quickly dissipates when the victim becomes a victimizer in the community or a terror in school. Mary Sykes Wylie, senior editor of *Family Therapy Networker*, puts it this way: "It is as if, in the public mind, a pathetic, battered little child enters a black box and emerges from the other side a strange, terrible creature . . . a vicious thug who certainly has nothing in common with the poor little tyke who went in" (Wylie, 1998, pp. 34–35).

As the mental health and education systems wash their hands of troubled children, the justice system becomes the placement of last resort. Experts in juvenile justice are calling for reforms based on positive youth development and restorative justice, which tend to build competence in offenders. However, many politicians prefer to serve out just deserts, as they continue to shift resources away from prevention and treatment, and toward warehousing. There is no scientific evidence that this punitive approach has any value. The pendulum may swing back when leaders realize they are pouring scarce resources into a black hole.

These problems with troubled children and youth will not disappear by themselves. Teachers, counselors, administrators, social workers, juvenile correction workers, and special educators are demanding more sophisticated training in crisis intervention skills to help troubled students. Daily we have witnessed the critical need for advanced skills in crisis intervention.

This book is our response. We believe in the power and effectiveness of LSCI as a crisis intervention strategy with short-term and long-term benefits in the lives of students who participate. More than 100 combined years of work with disturbed children and youth lead us to the conviction that it is important and possible to teach effective LSCI skills to others. LSCI is not easy to learn since it involves adults in the complex, often irrational, defensive, disorganized, and, at times, fantasy world of troubled students. Crisis often occurs in chaotic or destructive social settings, always involves others, and taps the emotions of the student, the group, and the adult. Once an adult learns to see a crisis through the eyes of the student, greater empathy and support, realistic problem solving, and behavioral self-control can occur. When an effective LSCI is done, a crisis situation that could otherwise end as a destructive and deprecating experience for the student instead becomes an instructional and insightful experience. This is what LSCI is all about.

The "talking" strategies we describe are based on in-depth clinical interviewing skills developed from Fritz Redl's (1959b) concept of Life Space Interviewing (LSI). Redl described the LSI process as "a mediating role between the child and what life holds for him" (1966, p. 40). The intent is to convey the adult as mediator among the stress, the student's behavior, the reactions of others, and the private world of feelings that students are sometimes unable to handle without help. This remains an accurate way to describe the expanded uses of LSCI as a mediating process. While the psychodynamic theory of LSI has been maintained, LSCI has been expanded into a multi-

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theoretical model integrating new concepts from cognitive, behavioral, social learning, and developmental theories. For a historical description of LSI, we recommend the classic works by Redl and Wineman, *Children Who Hate* (1951) and *Controls from Within* (1952), and Redl's *When We Deal with Children* (1966). A monograph edited by Ruth Newman and Marjorie Keith (1963), *The School-Centered Life Space Interview*, offers rich reading about early applications of LSI in school settings. We include a history of the field validation of LSI in Appendix A.

William Morse (1981) describes LSI as "a living, action process" with a direct connection to a student's past experience:

> One can and should know all of the personal and situational antecedents possible. But it [LSI] has a life of its own that is not constricted by case histories. It is a slice of life action. Rather than past oriented, it is future oriented about resolutions. One begins to develop the structure of the youngster's self-concept from the current behavior—the emotional state, distortions, attributions, expectations, values, and hopes for the future. Of course, one includes that part of the past which has present currency. But one is free of the dominance that results from looking backwards. If one knows children and knows disturbance, one comes to each situation with a vast [information base] . . . and it becomes easier to associate the relevant past with the present. (p. 70)

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In the first edition of this book, the term *interview* was changed to *intervention* to emphasize that crisis always evokes verbal intervention. The quality of an adult's verbal intervention is the key to success or failure in obtaining a therapeutic outcome of a crisis. When first used outside clinical settings, the term *interview* was sometimes misinterpreted to mean questioning a student to extract information about an incident and resulting behavior. To some, the term seemed to suggest interrogating students in the hope of obtaining confessions of rules violations or admissions of wrongdoing. The term also was misinterpreted to mean something done once in response to a specific problem. None of these interpretations is accurate. Such limited approaches do not produce positive, lasting behavior changes. As a result, we substituted the term *intervention* to emphasize the dynamic nature of the interactions between adults and students in a crisis. Talk is a form of intervention, and it can be therapeutic if skillfully done.

Over the last decade, thousands of teachers, childcare workers, psychologists, and others who work closely with troubled and troubling children and youth have been certified in LSCI. Their stories of how the skills have helped them work effectively in crisis situations has prompted us to add the word *crisis* to LSCI, to more accurately describe the nature of the situations in which these skills are so useful.

We hope this second edition has captured the excitement and rewards of talking with children and youth in crisis, while demonstrating that crisis presents a unique opportunity for staff to teach and for students to learn. We also want to thank our colleagues for their many contributions to the theory, teaching, and advocacy of LSCI in

public schools, alternative programs, residential programs, and juvenile justice programs around the country and internationally. Specifically, we want to thank Norman A. Klotz and his production staff for their skills in filming and editing the comprehensive LSCI Video Series (1996), and the competent staff at the Positive Education Program (PEP) in Cleveland, Ohio, for their professionalism in allowing us to film them during crisis situations. We also appreciate Mary Beth Hewitt at Wayne-Finger Lakes Board of Cooperative Educational Services, New York, for her creative and successful teacher-friendly training of LSCI, and Carol Dawson, coordinator of a talented team of senior LSCI trainers at the New York City Public Schools, District 75, Alternative Program, for their success in integrating LSCI as part of their ongoing inservice training program for teachers working with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. We also want to acknowledge the important role Larry Brendtro played in promoting LSCI as a national program at the Black Hills Seminars in South Dakota, and for his creative use of LSCI in his Developmental Audit for extremely resistant youth. Finally, we appreciate our kind-spirited spouses, Jody, Norman, and Mary Ellen, for their ongoing encouragement and support during the writing of this book.

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