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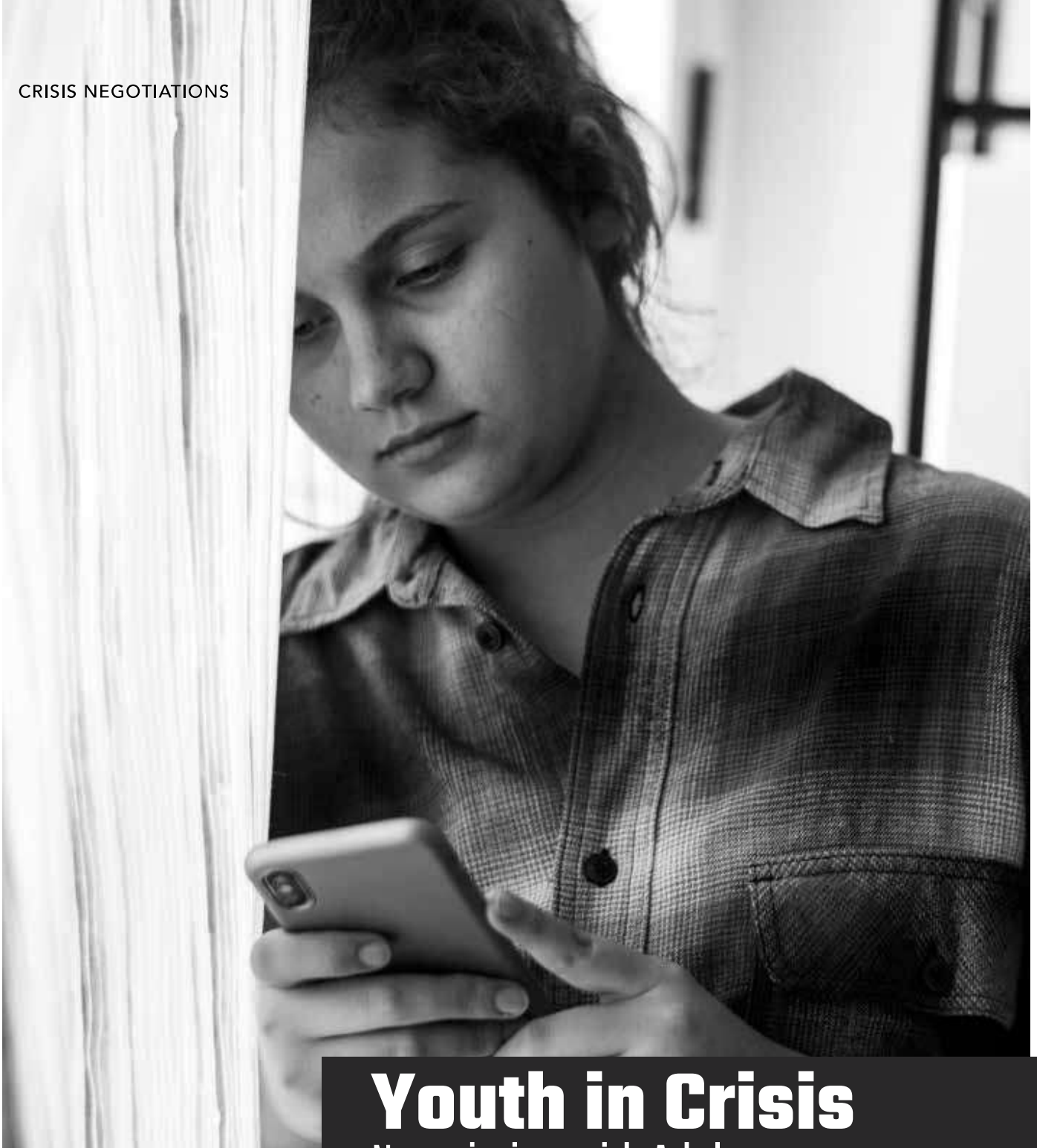


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Youth in Crisis

Negotiating with Adolescents

BY BRAD YOUNG

Are today's youth different than previous generations? Perhaps not, but they face new pressures that weren't present when we were growing up. Adolescents can be difficult, and we must try to understand what we're getting into when crisis occurs and a child is involved. Only one second legally separates a child from an adult. When the clock pushes from 11:59.59 p.m. to midnight on their 18th birthday, that child is an adult. They can vote, join the military — and go to jail. But that one second change does not necessarily mean they are thinking, or acting, like an adult.

As a negotiator, the more information you can have going into a situation, the better off you will be during the negotiation. It's important that we all understand the reality of dealing with children. Per the University of Rochester Health Encyclopedia, the brain becomes fully developed around the age of 25.¹ And, according to The Teenage Brain,² the adolescent mind develops from back to front. In layman's terms, the part of the brain that makes decisions using logic and reasoning — the pre-frontal cortex — is the last part of their mind to develop. The amygdala, or reptilian brain, is what is leading the decision-making process in adolescents and young adults. The amygdala is the part of the brain that gives the signal to fight, flee, or freeze when it receives some kind of stimulus. It then sends that information to the pre-frontal cortex to work with a few other parts of the brain to decide how to respond. The pre-frontal cortex and other parts of the brain then look at previous experiences or things it learned to decide what to do. In youth, this decision-making team is underdeveloped and has no experience to help regulate what happens next.

Negotiators understand that when emotions are high, logic and reasoning are low. Time allows this imbalance to regulate and reasoning to take over. In kids, it can take a lot more time than with an adult. We have to consider the stimulus that kids are inundated with daily, such as phones, TV, computers, tablets, and other types of technology, to better understand what a negotiator is up against. The amount of time a child spends on a screen has a direct impact on how their brain develops. A child's brain will prune away the less used neural connectors and build new ones.³ A neural connector develops with each new experience, creating a "bank" to draw information from when the child is exposed to something. The brain processes the information received during that day and then exports it into memory for future use while the child is asleep. Screens impact sleep patterns and the amount of sleep a child gets, which can affect what is being stored in order to help the decision-making team in the future.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTH

Social media and digital games are designed to cause a child's brain to light up and activate the reward system. This activation causes a dopamine drop. It feels good, and we all want more of this. So, deeper into gaming and the social network they dive. Social media is not unlike drugs in how it affects the brain. When a teen posts a picture or video on a platform and gets positive engagement, they get a dopamine hit. Their brain uses this information to establish a pattern of behavior to get that hit of dopamine. This is the beginning of a learning process called addiction.⁴

With an understanding of how behavior and brain development coexist, we can better understand trends within the adolescent community. We live in a world that is frosted with only the best pictures, experiences, and places. We

rarely see anything on social media that resembles reality. We see attractive people doing fun things in amazing places. When we see something that we like, we want to be like that. It is one of Cialdini's principles of influence — liking.⁵ When popular kids or people do something different than the norm, it changes the environment of their followers and people that like them. It causes a shift in clothing, pop culture and behavior.

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We see cultural trends elevated to the top of news streams, social media posts, educational curriculum, and social issues. When these items make it to the top, people want to be a part of it in order to fit in with their peers. Without the ability to think critically or take a bird's eye perspective of things, it is easy to see how people, especially teenagers and children, fall into trends.

The same is true regarding suicide. When a suicide is highly publicized, then the number suicide attempts and completions increase in the geographical area the story was published. This is called the Werther Effect.⁶ Even more so, there will be an increase in attempts and completions made by people who have perceived commonalities with the suicide victim. When a child dies by suicide, there is a chance that both attempts and completions will also increase, because they witnessed the reaction to the loss. If they were already feeling depressed or suicidal, the suicide of their peer gives them social proof, another Cialdini principle, that their feelings are OK, and their life will be honored and glorified in the period after.

Because an adolescent is still trying to navigate the nuance of social interaction, acceptance is really important. When social media goes bad it can be devastating for a child. The things their peers will say in their private messages, in person, or whisper behind their back cause their brain to panic. Without proper direction and reassurance from an outside source, they have very little to help them deal with the immediate "threat" in front of them.

What are some other things that can cause a kid to go into crisis mode? Breakups, school issues, parents, divorce, injuries, criminal activity, mental health, and bullying all impact the emotional wellbeing of a kid. These things can

break up foundational beliefs, support systems, and the identity of the child. Consider these signs and symptoms to help triage the crisis you are trying to resolve. In other words, we can't develop a strategy or tactical plan to de-escalate or gain voluntary compliance without knowing what is causing the crisis.

Bullying behavior looks a little different today than it did when we grew up. Traditionally, bullying was physical, verbal, and social. Pushing, fighting and name calling are examples of this. Social bullying can simply be making up a lie and getting several people to believe it or repeat it. While traditional bullying hasn't gone away, technology has presented a new avenue to pick on others. The internet is forever, and today's youth have exceptional methods to retain digital evidence of what happens on the internet. They develop workarounds to keep "disappearing" messages and videos. They create multiple fake accounts to rally against a cause or another kid. They share intimate and personal information, photos, and videos of each other with the intent to cause pain or discomfort in their intended target.

The reasons a child may be bullied can be that they are "new" to the school. They are quiet and isolated. Economics, grades and home life are all causes of victimization. It could be that their target is somehow seen as a threat to the perpetrator. And, there is a correlation to bullying and suicide.⁷ According to UC Davis, suicide rates increased nearly 60 percent in ages 10 to 24 between 2007 and 2018.⁸ This information is pre-pandemic, so it doesn't include the isolation, distance learning and other repercussions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which have led to increasing rates of mental health issues among youth.

This is general information. It doesn't take into consideration youth who have multi-risk factors including developmental disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, diagnosed mental illness, history of suicidal ideation or attempts, familial suicidal completions, sexual or physical abuse, or cultural barriers. We know that isolation and pressure, regardless if they are real or perceived, are indicators of suicidal intent. Our children are experiencing both isolation and pressure in a whole new frontier that we are trying to better understand ourselves.

There already was concern about our children's mental health. As COVID-19 changes what is normal, the strain on their mental health is more severe. As crisis negotiators, we have the skills to provide proper direction and reassurance when we are confronted with a youth in crisis. We just have to have a clear understanding of who we are talking to and what they are dealing with on a daily basis.

SUMMARY

Negotiators must be patient when dealing with children in crisis. Due to the process of brain development, youth have trouble considering long-term concepts. Looking at consequences and strategies through a short-term perspective is more effective than projecting long-term ideas.

Children are more "feelings" oriented, so emotional labels are an effective tool during negotiations. Because they are still trying to figure out social interactions, effective pauses may seem longer. Maintain your position and let them talk first. Try to find out what support network they "think" they have. Appealing to their need to be safe and supported will serve the negotiator well. Find out what their biggest stressors are. Ask about grades, relationships, and parental expectations. Use this information to develop themes to resolve the crisis.

There is a lot that kids face daily. Use a strengths-based approach in addressing their perceived hurdles. We have to try to see their crisis through their perspective rather than our own. Are today's youth different than previous generations? No, but the world around them is.

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brad Young began his law enforcement career in 2008. He has served on the CAHN Board, presented at regional and state training conferences for negotiators, and taught CIT throughout California. Currently he is the law enforcement outreach coordinator for Get Safe. His work focuses on de-escalation and crisis intervention with developmental disabilities, youth, and officer wellness.

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