Rule of Threes

An ARC-based Activity to Foster Attunement-Driven, Effective Caregiver Response to Challenging Youth Behaviors

Developed by
Joseph Spinazzola, Ph.D.
Rule of Threes: Background

➢ A practical exercise designed to promote effective adult responses to challenging behaviors exhibited by youth (or others) impacted by complex trauma

➢ Initially developed for and used extensively by service systems implementing the Attachment, Regulation Competency (ARC) complex trauma intervention model as a way to operationalize “attunement-driven” behavior management

➢ Can also be used as a standalone activity.

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Rule of Threes: Rationale

➢ Designed to foster behavior management strategies that are:
  • intentional, systematic, structured and consistently implemented across adult caregivers serving multiple youth in the same setting

➢ and that simultaneously are:
  • strength-based, non-punitive, and flexibly attuned to the unique needs of specific youth in particular moments and circumstances.
Rule of Threes: Applications

- Initially developed for use as a supervisory tool with multidisciplinary staff in congregate care settings serving multiple youth, including schools, community centers, group homes and residential treatment centers.
- Also for use as a therapist supervision tool in individual or group supervision.
- Also for use by caregivers and parents (biological, adoptive, foster kinship) as a home-based behavior management technique.
- Also suitable for use in individual therapy, mentoring or skills-coaching with a single client.
Rule of Threes: Premise

- Builds on underpinnings of the Attachment domain of the ARC model

- \( R^3 = \text{Reflect so you can Respond effectively instead of React} \)

- Inspired by motto: Get Curious Not Furious!
  - In ARC, Curiosity is the Catalyst for Reflection

- But first, just Breathe: We cannot be curious and Reflect if our own alarm system has been set off & we are in survival(fight-flight-freeze) mode.
Consider Functions of Behavior

➢ What is the behavior communicating to the world?

➢ What seemingly opposite, underlying or different feelings may be involved?
  • Ex: pushing someone away to avoid rejection; explosion of anger when made to feel shame or fear.

➢ What need is the behavior meeting?
  • Ex: safety, self-protection, self-expression, relational connection, social status, escape, survival.
Context of Behavior: Precipitants

- Precipitants can be **Situational**
  - What just happened to this person? Recently?
  - What didn’t happen for them that was supposed to?

- Precipitants can be **Relational**
  - Perceived / actual fondness, rejection, injustice, betrayal

- Precipitants can be **Internal**
  - What feelings have been building up for person lately?
    - Loss, shame, fear, anger, restlessness, boredom, loneliness
  - What basic needs haven’t been met?
    - Sleep, food, emotional nurturance, exercise
We have much in Common but Everyone is Unique

» When working with or raising multiple youth:

» Distinguish shared and youth-specific functions of behaviors

» Distinguish shared and youth-specific situations and circumstances that trigger common and unique emotional and behavioral reactions.

» Distinguish shared and youth-specific signs that their body’s alarm is being triggered.
Rule of Threes Activity: Instructions for use with One Person

➢ Identify 1 to 3 challenging behaviors experienced by this person you are caring for or serving

• Identify up to 3 distinct precipitants of each behavior for this person (up to 9 total)
  • Try to identify verbal and non-verbal cues or signs that indicate youth is becoming dysregulated in response to each precipitating factor

• Strategize 3 trauma-informed, potentially responses for each precipitating factor (up to 27 total)
Rule of Threes Activity:
Instructions for use with Multiple Youth

➢ Identify a common behavior problem encountered by multiple youth that you are raising or serving

- Identify up to 3 distinct precipitants of this behavior for each youth (up to 9 total)
  - Try to identity verbal and non-verbal cues or signs that indicate each youth is becoming dysregulated

- Strategize 3 trauma-informed, potentially responses for each precipitating factor for each youth (up to 27 total)
The Rule of Threes: Diagram

- Behavior
  - Precipitant?
    - Potential Effective Response 1
    - Potential Effective Response 2
    - Potential Effective Response 3
  - Precipitant?
    - Potential Effective Response 1
    - Potential Effective Response 2
    - Potential Effective Response 3
  - Precipitant?
    - Potential Effective Response 1
    - Potential Effective Response 2
    - Potential Effective Response 3
Rule of Threes: Example 1

Youth keeps kicking the door

Youth upset over a cancelled outing
- Validate frustration & offer alternate activity
- Engage in emotion regulation exercise
- Distract and redirect energy

Youth worried about a sick relative or upset about no-show of a parent on visitation day
- Provide emotional comfort and empathy
- Attempt to engage youth in choice of a fun activity
- Offer to give youth space
- Enforce limits in a calm but firm manner
- Process and problem-solve
- Apply a consequence if persists

Youth trying to impress a classmate, peer or sibling
- Enforce limits in a calm but firm manner
- Process and problem-solve
- Apply a consequence if persists

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Rule of Threes: Example 2

Youth has trouble sleeping several nights per week

Youth is bothered by memories, thoughts and fears related to her past

Youth is reactive to rotation of 3rd shift staff

Youth’s energy is too high in evening to transition to bed

Increase check-ins and structured activities before bed

Design and implement a nightly containment ritual

Adjust physical environment and lighting to increase safety (e.g., night lite; light in hall; door cracked open)

Increase level of physical activity in late afternoon/evening

Improve sleep hygiene: reduce napping, implement a nightly setting ritual before bed

Adults lead co-regulation ritual to help youth to expend energy then down-regulate

Convene meeting w/youth and caregivers to increase safety

Shift triggering staff member off nightly room checks

Address boundary issues with youth; set and enforce limits
Rule of Threes: Example 3

Youth keeps touching adult provider or caregiver’s hair

- Child seeking emotional connection through enactment of culturally normative behavior engaged in with biological mother
  - Use verbal & nonverbal reflection (words, tone and facial expressions) to empathically reflect, validate and meet underlying need: “I’m happy to be here with you too!”
  - Work with child to identify a more appropriate way to express physical connection and affection: fist bump, personalized handshake, hug plan
  - Work with child to identify an alternate object of physical connection & affection: doll, teddy bear
  - Assist youth in co-regulation through identification and practice of coping skills
  - Work with youth to identify an appropriate form of somatic regulation: weighted blanket, sensory tools
  - Label behavior, normalize desire for connection, express empathy, restate and maintain boundaries
  - Calmly and firmly restate and maintain program or household boundaries and limits
  - Name & validate youth’s personal agency, engage youth in identifying appropriate avenues for empowerment
  - Apply and enforce a consequence or loss of privilege if behavior persists

- Physical manifestation of emotional or physiological dysregulation
  - Attempt to test program limits, assert will over adult caregivers, or increase status with peers
## Rule of Threes Worksheet

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<tr>
<th>Precipitating Factor (Why?)</th>
<th>Intervention Response</th>
<th>Evaluate Response Effectiveness (Observations, Outcomes)</th>
<th>Intervention Modification / Refinement</th>
<th>&quot;Go-To&quot; Response? (Y/N)</th>
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