BEHAVIOURAL SUPPORT

NVR can help parents and teachers handle challenging behaviours in students. Photo: Shutterstock

NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE THERAPY BUILDS EMPATHY

With a focus on inclusion and community, schools like ICHK are adopting strategies to support students and build a culture of relatability, writes **Grace Langford**

Many figures in history have instigated great change while resisting oppression and harm. In the 20th century, Gandhi, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King all used non-violent resistance (NVR) to object to sociopolitical problems and bring about change. First applied to the behaviour of children in the 1990s by Professor Haim Omer, NVR is a caregiver-centred, relational approach used to respond to destructive behaviours within schools and homes.

Having gained popularity in Europe, the model has made its way to Hong Kong where, during the pandemic, students experienced severe disruptions in learning, routines and socialising. To cope, many developed a heavy reliance on screen time and technology. It is no secret that this has left a mark on schools and families, leaving many parents and teachers struggling with how to effectively handle challenging behaviours in children.

In an educational setting, the purpose of NVR is to develop a positive authority among teachers and staff, adopting effective strategies to address difficult behaviour in pupils, while avoiding punishment and escalation.

"Parents need good advice and guidance and, when things risk getting temporarily out of control, interventions like NVR, which draw on the strength of wider communities of mutually supportive adults, can make all the difference," says Toby Newton, executive head of International College HK (ICHK).

ICHK is grounded in the conviction that young people should be supported in developing their character, including but not confined to academics. "At ICHK, we don't have strict rules. There's one rule: 'work hard and be nice'," explains Newton.

The school practises a "five plus one" model, based on the work of Carol Dweck, professor of education at Stanford University, Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, American psychologist Erik Erikson, professor Kieran Egan at Simon Fraser University, and Eric Berne, a Canadian psychiatrist.

With a goal of nurturing success, students are guided into a "learning zone" through an innovative curriculum, delivered in an environment of safety and trust. Newton was hired by ICHK specifically to introduce these ideas.

"Initially, parents needed reassurance and to trust the school. Now, the students generally trust what we are doing. It's not unanimous, but the community understands our values, priorities and operating parameters. This creates a much less abrasive and conflictual environment, and a part of that is NVR."

NVR training is delivered by practitioners, who come from a variety of different professional backgrounds including family therapists, clinical psychologists, social

GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

workers and mental health professionals. Recently, PartnershipProjects UK, the leading provider for NVR training, has seen a rise in international interest.

"In terms of NVR globally, it's becoming increasingly recognised as a valid intervention model. People are realising that many current approaches aren't working, so there is a search for something different," Jackie Lindeck, company director and accredited NVR practitioner explains.

PartnershipProjects UK sees NVR as a way to empower school staff to build strong, safe relationships with the young people that they care for, and to respond to any harmful or destructive behaviour in a non-confrontational fashion.

For example, instead of excluding or punishing students for talking back in class, NVR places the focus on inclusion and belonging. This shift changes the culture from one of conformity to one of community, creating a conducive learning environment.

At ICHK, Newton presents the model to parents as a set of tools for intervening, avoiding any accusatory terminology. "I often say it's unfortunate that it's called NVR because the term 'non-violent' can evoke negative connotations. People hesitate to associate with it because they fear what that label implies."

When a child is acting in a harmful or disruptive way, it's commonly categorised as "bad behaviour", but awareness is expanding and parents and schools are increasingly beginning to associate children who are controlling their environment with neurodivergence, learning disabilities or high levels of anxiety, rather than just "being naughty".

"In the UK, there's a culture of exclusion driven by arbitrary rules that dictate who can learn based on superficial criteria. There's a lovely African proverb that says, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' But the other part of that proverb says, 'A child who is rejected by the village will burn it down to feel its heat.' When we punish, we are effectively excluding," Lindeck says.

And Newton agrees, "Too many rules and regulations, couched in terms of 'expectations' and 'consequences' can inadvertently give rise to an environment in which teachers and children come to feel opposed to each other, with all the power residing, increasingly arbitrarily, in the hands of the adults."

An NVR intervention is innovative in that the change takes place within the parents' or teacher's approach, as coached by the practitioner, and the young person does not need to participate in any training in order for the work to be effective.

From left, Tony Meehan and Jackie Lindeck, and above, Toby Newton. Photos: Handouts (left), Xiaomei Chen (above)

> **Parents need good advice and guidance and when things risk getting temporarily out of control, interventions like NVR ... can make all the difference**
>
> TOBY NEWTON, ICHK

ICHK uses NVR strategies as intervention techniques

Lindeck explains, "Training professionals challenges them in terms of the models they're already using, encouraging them to think about how NVR's philosophy aligns with their own values. We start the training from a position of, 'What is your understanding of non-violence? What is your understanding of resistance? How do these values resonate with you?'"

Next, the teaching staff will discuss how to support families to make changes like improving attendance or increasing concentration.

PartnershipProjects UK recommends allowing 12 weeks to see results, and says that once a community of care has been established through NVR, relationships improve and destructive behaviour patterns have been seen to reduce.

This September, Special Needs Network Hong Kong hosted a Zoom webinar introducing non-violent resistance therapy to parents and caregivers in Hong Kong. However, many schools are reluctant to adopt the new framework.

"In Hong Kong, there's a tendency to keep problems under wraps due to concerns about shame and loss of face," Newton suggests. "Parents often prefer to suffer in silence rather than face the stigma of losing control."

Accredited practitioner and associate at PartnershipProjects UK, Dr Tony Meehan has worked directly with families referred by ICHK. "I think incorporating NVR as a holistic system in schools versus having families at the end of their tether, prevents them from reaching that breaking point," says Meehan.

"I remember a family where the child was only rewarded if he did something," he recalls. "I asked if there were treats in the cupboard, and the father said, 'Yes, but only if he does this.' I told him to give the child a treat now, for nothing. The child looked confused, following his father as if to say, 'What just happened?' That is what NVR does. It emphasises that you are valued simply for being you."