

# **CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription**

Episode 74: Brienne Downing

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Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Hello, and welcome to *Unrestrained*, a CPI podcast series. My guest today is Brienne Downing. She is an administrator at the district level with the Santee School District in Santee, Southern California. Hello, and welcome, Brienne.

Brienne: Hello, good morning.

Terry: Good morning. Also joining me today is Jacob Nelson, a territory manager at CPI, covering the greater Los Angeles area. Jacob is here today to add his expertise about the CPI training process and the partnerships we create with the organizations we support. Hello, and welcome, Jake.

Jacob: Hello, Terry, thank you for having me.

Terry: You're welcome. Pleased to have you. Now, let me tell you a little bit about my guest. Brienne Downing has been in special education since 2007, where she started as an instructional assistant. She then was a K through 12 classroom teacher and is now a district-level administrator. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English, a Master of Arts degree in special education and a doctorate in educational leadership.

According to Dr. Downing, her passion is teachers' support and helping keep special educators in the field, in her words, beyond the threshold. She's been a CPI trainer for four years and takes great pride in empowering district staff to feel equipped, to help students maintain baselines and support their basic needs in order to maintain care, welfare, safety, and security.

Today, we're going to talk about her personal journey, her impressions of CPI training, restraint use in California schools, and more. All right, Brienne, let's start today with a story you told me during your pre-interview about a revelation you had when you were 15 years old, and that provided the lasting inspiration for your professional career as an educator.

Brienne: When I was 15, I was about a junior in high school and I was looking for classes to take, and I knew I wanted to do something that was really going to impact others, something outside of myself. And I decided to tutor in our moderate-to-severe special education program. I grew up in Seattle, and my high school was up there. And I found that my first year as a teacher was amazing. She really transformed my knowledge base, experience, and outlook on those who processed the world differently from me. And my senior year, I'm not sure all the specifics, but I just know that when I would walk by in between classes, I would see the students mostly just sitting there, not really engaging, looking at a TV.

And then, when us peer tutors would go in, we would seem to be the teachers; we would help do a lot of the community-based instruction. We would make rice krispie treats and brownies that we would work with the kids to sell at lunch. And I vowed to never let that happen on my watch. Again, I believe that everybody can do something and we just have to look at it a little bit differently, about how they're going to access it and dream dreams for them. And so, that sparked my passion for special education and what drew me into the field.

Terry: So, it was pretty much an instantaneous aha moment for you.

Brienne: Yeah, very much so.

Terry: Okay. And so, let's fast forward. Where do you teach now? And please talk about when you began there, how your role has changed over the years.

Brienne: So, I teach in Santee School District here in Santee, California. I'm the coordinator of Special Education. We're a small key district here in East County of San Diego. I began here in 2016. And when I first came in, my director asked me, "Hey, I'd like you to be the CPI trainer for our district." I had previously been trained just a year prior, not as a trainer, but just as a trainee. And so, I had very little experience but I had some knowledge base. And over the last four years, I've had an opportunity to really see how CPI has impacted our teachers, and our administrators, and school site staff just to help them feel more empowered.

And over the years, just feeling like I'm more equipped to better support students, better support teachers to realize, like, our go-to does not have to be to touch kids. That should be our very, very, very last resort. And so, really helping understand, you know, the *Verbal Escalation Continuum*<sup>SM</sup> and, you know, kind of the process and then journey that our kids may go through or even staff may go through, and how what we do, our behavior, influences them and vice versa. So, better empowering teachers and staff to be more equipped to positively influence kids to keep them at baseline.

Terry: And how did CPI training come into your school, Brienne?

Brienne: Well, into my last school, my administrator, at the time, brought it in. And then when I came into Santee, we as a youth county SELPA, our special education local planning area had kind of decided, "We're looking at ProAct versus CPI, and a number of the districts decided to move towards CPI. And so, when I came in, my director asked me to be kind of the lead trainer, if you will, but I was also going to have a co-trainer, which I feel very fortunate to have. We both can kind of balance that because it can be a lot sometimes, trying to do it all by yourself in a training, but we just really felt privileged to be able to kind of lead the charge in our district to better equip teachers and staff to feel equipped to support kids and support each other.

Jacob: Brienne, when you're looking at that difference from when you were a trainee of CPI to going to a trainer, and you talked a little bit about the impact that it made, can you talk about that more on a day-to-day basis, what you see from the people that have gone through your training classes?

Brienne: Yeah. I just find, and people have told me, you know, the word that keeps coming back to me is empowered. I think we all have our natural human reactions, so if someone comes after us, as a student grabs us, maybe they're just trying to get our attention, but we have our natural human

instincts and reactions. And so, we may overreact to a situation. We may underreact to a situation. And so staff have felt that they are just better equipped to respond and can kind of feel like they have that “permission,” if you will, to not have to go hands-on, to wait out a situation and understand that if a child is so dysregulated, that they're destroying a classroom, like that can be replaced, that our obligation is to make sure that the kids are safe and also that staff are safe.

So, it's really looking at that whole picture and better understanding our kids, and our district needs. That helps me in training to better empower students and better empower teachers to support students because I'm able to say, “Well, in this situation, what could we have done differently?” And when we're looking at the Decision-Making Matrix in CPI, that, to me, was super powerful when I became a trainer because, again, it's looking at, what is that likelihood? What is the severity, right?

And when we're in it day to day, it's like, “Oh my gosh, this happens all day, every day.” But when we really start looking at it and really start taking data, we're like, “Oh, it only happened five minutes right after lunch or, you know, 10 minutes right after, you know, writing or before writing.” And so, really looking at, you know, that helps us better be more proactive than reactive and hopefully help students maintain baseline.

Terry: I see. So, when you first had your... you've answered this kind of in a way, but I'm going to ask anyway. When you first had CPI training, what were your first impressions and what has stayed with you and proved the most useful?

Brienne: Oh, gosh, my first impressions were that I was better equipped. I was better equipped to respond to students in crisis. I think what stayed with me the most is I have verbal techniques that I can use just to de-escalate students or be proactive in situations to help kids. I think, for me, what proved most useful is that Decision-Making Matrix. I really have to look at, you know, how often has something happened and how severe is it really, and really understanding, too, that behavior influences behavior.

And so, everything that I or my staff do, or school staff do in our interactions with kids can influence what comes about. And so, really helping everybody understand that Integrated Experience and that behavior influences behavior so that we can be more mindful and self-reflective of how we're responding or how we're running a classroom to help kids, you know, maximize their time in our classroom and help them stay regulated.

Terry: Excellent. Every time I hear somebody like yourself repeat the fundamentals of CPI, I'm always taken by how powerful they are in practice. And today, now you're a CPI Certified Instructor and I'm wondering who at your school specifically receives training and what do you expect of staff who received CPI training?

Brienne: So, in our district, anybody who's willing and able to get trained can get trained. So we have, obviously, classroom teachers. We have classroom aides. I have a school custodian come and get trained because he saw that there was a need on his campus to support kids. And so, he came and got trained. I've got school administrators that are trained. And this year, we certified almost an entire school, which is pretty powerful. And then, in the coming weeks here, I am training our

transportation department, so they're better equipped to support our kids when they're taking them to and from school.

For me, the expectations of the staff who receive it are that they really are able to take a step back and understand the first seven units of the program. We're really looking at the verbal, nonverbal paraverbal communication and understanding that *Verbal Escalation Continuum*<sup>SM</sup>, that behavior influences behavior, and that they walk away understanding that we don't touch kids. We don't touch kids. Unless they're an imminent danger to self or others, we do not touch kids.

It's too much of a liability of students getting hurt, of staff getting hurt, and really can change our relationship with kids and families. And at the end of the day, you know, we want kids and families to come to school knowing that kids are safe and that we have all methods that support them if they do become in crisis. And so, I'm really making sure that my staff understand that. It's one of the most important things for me as a trainer.

Terry: So, do you find that this fidelity of training between teachers, teachers' aides, even transportation people, that is starting to change or has changed culture there where you work since everyone has the same vocabulary and understanding of these behavioral models?

Brienne: Yeah, absolutely. I think that the more staff feel equipped and the more that they understand the big picture of how everything in the classroom influences itself, it allows them to respond accordingly and not feel like, "Oh my gosh, the students, you know, dropped to the ground like a dead fish, I gotta pick them up and move them." No, no, you don't. You've gotta use your proactive strategy. You gotta use what you know works for kids, you know, token boards or icons or whatever to get them up and moving, but we don't have to touch kids because it can be more detrimental than it can be helpful.

Jacob: When you're training this, Brienne, and you typically are co-teaching a lot, what dynamic does that bring with having kind of two trainers in the classroom for your staff that are going through the program?

Brienne: I think that he and I, we have two very different perspectives. I've been in the classroom as a classroom teacher, and so, I kind of understand, you know, how to read the room when we're training. But I also think, you know, the relationship, he's been in the district, like, 20-some odd years, I think the relationship he has with staff and throughout the district and the level of trust that they have for him on a different level maybe, because they know him more.

So, you know, we really try to create a culture of trust in the room. And we really talk about the stringent guidelines of CPI, and we really don't flex on that. So, when we send out our pre-email, we say, you know, we understand that that happens but, you know, you have to be here a minimum amount of time. And if for some reason you have to leave early or you get a phone call, we're going to ask that you reschedule because we really, really take it seriously. And if someone's only there for a part or they're only half listening and something were to happen, you know, I personally would feel responsible that "Oh, maybe I shouldn't have certified them," because that comes back on me as a trainer. But what we find is people come in with a very serious and focused attitude and response, and they really walk away feeling equipped to better serve kids.

Terry: And how do you go about refresher training, then? Do you track the effectiveness of CPI training across time?

Brienne: Yes. So we are starting to really track here in California. The state now is monitoring our BERs, which stands for Behavior Emergency Reports that we have to submit. So, if we do have to go hands-on with the students, there's a form that the team has to fill out. And there's ed-co that comes along with what our next steps are in terms of that. But what we found is that we've added one CPI training a month to give more people access more frequently to get trained, and we average anywhere from six to eight people a training—sometimes more depending on the time of year. And what we also do is I've found that if an event has happened and staff weren't fully sure if they handled it appropriately, or if they did a hold or disengagement technique correctly, then what I do is I go out and meet with the school site staff, and I really look at what could we have done differently, did you do this right, you know, and help them in the moment with their team be more equipped to respond next time.

Terry: Excellent. Now, in our pre-interview, Brienne, you talked about an acronym Q-TIP and how it pertains to implementing the lessons taught in CPI training. Could you tell our listeners about that?

Brienne: Yes. So, when I co-trained and I first got trained, our trainer talked about this acronym Q-TIP, which stands for Quit Taking It Personally. And it's something that I train our team to possibly use in the moment because we all have our own personal stories. And one of the units talks about staff fears and anxieties, and I know what mine are. And I'm very candid with my trainees, you know, that I'm petrified to get hit in the face, or whatever the case may be. And so, you know, sometimes in those moments, we can ramp up as the adults. And, you know, we're getting called every name in the book, and this is the third day in a row. And we're just burned out.

You know, we may have to look at a staff member and say, "Hey, I need you to go Q-TIP in the office." And that's just the silent signal that says, "I need you to leave right now because you are becoming escalated, you're making the situation worse." And my obligation right now or the staff obligation is to de-escalate them. And so, just helping staff understand that when a child is dysregulated and in crisis, it has nothing to do with them.

They may feel like it is. They might have been the one that said, "Hey, you know, it's time to do math or, you know, they might have been the one to introduce the subject or to let them know that there's a transition. But at the end of the day, it's really not about the adults. And so, really helping adults rationally detach and say like, "This is not about me. There's something bigger here going on." How to better support kids to me is really important.

Terry: Great. And what a powerful kind of addition to the concept of rational detachment to have that acronym and to actually take people aside to remind them to quit...I mean, because in the throes of a conflict, it can be very difficult to remember that.

Brienne: Yeah, very much so.

Terry: I understand you have a very strict restraint law there in California. Could you talk about that, Brienne?

Brienne: Yes. So, we just had a law come into effect in January where, like I said before, the State of California is really monitoring—they [the state of California] use these words in the law, CPI does not use words, they use these word in the law: “seclusion and restraint.” And so, it's really looking at, you know, how are we protecting kids and keeping kids safe, and responding accordingly, but also, making sure that kids are safe. And CPI is really good about talking about, you know, monitoring those physiological and psychological responses if we're having to go hands-on to disengage or to hold or to keep them in an area to keep them from going after other kids or other staff, whatever the case may be.

So, California is really looking at what does that look like and making sure that students are safe if they are in crisis, making sure that they're not left alone in rooms just being monitored by cameras. You know, staff needs to be there present, readily available to help should something occur, and then making sure that when we are disengaging and when we are holding or what the law says, restraining, that it is only because the child is an absolute imminent danger to self or others. And so, you know, I talk about this law now in our training and I really drive home the fact that you've really gotta look at, are they in absolute imminent danger to self or others?

If they're just trying a classroom, but they're not hurting themselves and they're not hurting others, then, you know, you gotta really weigh your pros and cons, right? Sometimes for some kids, doing that heavy work, you know, unfortunately, it's to the detriment of a classroom, but it can help them de-escalate. And so, it's really looking at what is the imminent danger to other staff, other students, to the person in crisis or are they, you know, doing something to themselves and to whether or not we have to go hands-on because [00:19:00] it's not always the least restrictive. And we really have to make sure that we're doing the least restrictive to best support kids.

Jacob: And that's a trend that we've seen in legislation, you know, throughout California, not only with school districts but also with, you know, organizations that get their clients and participants from regional centers. Now, campus security is also going to be doing some de-escalation training. And you mentioned that you're, you know, training to a variety of different departments throughout your district. If you were bringing in a department that hadn't been exposed to this type of de-escalation training before, how would you apply your techniques and your approach towards those relationship-building aspects of the training to somebody that might not be familiar with it?

Brienne: I think the biggest thing, and this is the thing that I talk about, to me, no matter what type of service field you're in, to me, when you're working or somebody working with clients, if you will, it's all about relationship. And so, if we have good relationships with our clients, for me, as a student, staff, but no matter what the field is, if you have relationship there or you can quickly understand who the person is or what the issue is. CPI really helps better understand us within ourselves is what I find.

So, when we're aware of what we do, the tone that we use, the volume that we use, and how we're just holding our body, and what that can communicate to somebody in an unfamiliar situation. So, if you have students who are new to a group home or your security on campus, and there's people constantly coming and going, you have to be aware or—I've trained with hospital

security guards before as a trainer, and just hearing their stories, it's like, you know, you don't often have time to build those relationships.

And so, it's really being aware of us within ourselves, how we respond to people, how we interact with people, and what we're doing that can possibly create a situation. And so, CPI has really helped me be more self-reflective. And that's really what I try to train our staff to do. No matter what the department, it's really about being aware of what we're doing, and how we're doing it, and how that can positively or negatively influence the situation.

Terry: Well, that's a very powerful observation, I think. And when we were talking about restraint in our pre-interview, you said something, I think, very quotable and something that brings about the gravity of going hands-on. And you said this quote, "Any time we go hands-on with a student, we change our relationship." How does putting your hands on a student change that relationship?

Brienne: Depending on the student, it can be a loss of trust. You know, every student is coming in with a different story.

Terry: That's huge.

Brienne: And for some of our students who have trauma in their background or whatever reason it may be, this can trigger something for them. And, you know, when we're really looking at our relationships, really wanting students to feel safe in the classroom, if they think that now when they escalate, that their teachers or their staff, school staff, are going to hold them in a position to de-escalate them, that can potentially cause them to come to school every day with anxiety, which then is already bringing them in at an escalated level. And that's why, for me, like, I always say to our staff when I'm training, I'm like, "If you have to go hands-on, if you have to hold and disengage, it's all about also what you're saying in that moment.

And I cannot stress enough that there is one voice. There's one voice. There has to be one voice because that student already is feeling in a chaotic situation. And our job, not only at that moment, is not just to de-escalate but to reassure, reassure that they're safe, reassure them that, you know, "Hey, when you can tell me a calm body or a safe body," you know, we will either fully let go or go to a lower-level hold because we want them to continue to trust us. You know, we wanna help meet their basic needs in that moment, but we also have an obligation to keep them safe if they were imminent danger to self or others. And so, it's definitely a fine line that we walk of keeping kids safe, of keeping others safe, but also, you know, maintaining our relationship with kids.

Terry: Now, I can imagine some teachers out there who are thinking, "Well, that's well and good, but I've got some really serious behavior at my school. And I understand that you work with a lot of kids on the spectrum who might turn very challenging or even violent. And you spoke with me about something called deal-breaker behavior. What is that and how can educators curb or control it?"

Brienne: Yeah, so, for me, you know, we do have very challenging kids in our district. And really, what it is, it's about all of those proactive strategies. The more that we can be proactive and in anticipation of what may come and really understand our kids, again, coming back to relationships, and understanding what their needs are, you know, can help prevent situations. But, you know, and I got this term from our district behavior specialist. So, she will go over with her kids at the beginning of the year, you know, what a deal-breaker behavior is. So, what we do is we build in, for

some of our classrooms, multiple levels of reinforcement. So they have their tier-one choices, like their top things that they would like to earn.

And then there's, like, the tier two, which is like, "Oh, I would still be okay if I earned that, but it's definitely not my top choice." And then their third, to now your third choice. And so, they know that they engage in a certain behavior is an automatic, like, deal is broken. So, that's why it's called a deal-breaker behavior. And so, they know if they engage in that behavior, every item that was on their top list of things to earn is automatically out. So, those can still earn something. It might be a tier two or a tier three, depending on what the behavior is. Because we still want them to feel successful, right, but we also need them to know that when you engage in that behavior, that is unsafe or unkind, or impacts, you know, the greater good of the school site or the classroom, then you don't get, you know, your top one reinforcer. That's a natural consequence.

And so, we really have those conversations with those kids and really put those systems into place and talk about, you know, what does that look like and why are those deal-breaker behaviors, and have them sign contracts that they understand and agree, and we're constantly reviewing those as well. So, we find that with our highest need populations, that when those deal-breaker behaviors are in place, and those contracts are in place, and those multi-tiered systems of support are in place, we find that we're better able to curb or control problematic behavior.

Terry: So some very formal limit setting then?

Brienne: Very much so. They know where those boundaries are and they know where they can bounce around. But the limits are there.

Jacob: And that kind of speaks to just general classroom management. You know, it's something that we have some blogs and articles on, you know, what limit setting and setting those expectations at the beginning of the school year can do. Is that how you approach no matter what classroom you're training towards? These are some replicable systems for any educator.

Brienne: Absolutely. Absolutely. We really tried to talk and, you know, not in, like, so specific that it's like a skill set to a certain teacher or a specific skill set that "Oh, you have to be behavior trained." It's like, no, these are great classroom-wide systems that can be put into place no matter what age, no matter what grade level, no matter what type of class, gen ed class, special ed class, RSP [resource specialist program], if it's a pull out. But when those limits are there, kids want structure, kids want boundaries.

And so, when they know where their limits are, initially, they're going to try and push them, as all kids do, right, natural human instinct. But when they know where those boundaries are and they know that we're not going to flex on certain behaviors and certain limits, then we find that kids will maintain within the limits that we have set.

Terry: Brienne, during our pre-interview, you shared a story that I think our listeners would find fascinating about a girl on the spectrum who was completely incommunicative until something happened that changed everything. Can you share that story with us, please?

Brienne: Yeah, so when I was in my credentialing program, one of my professors had a young lady come in, I think Susan, that's her, 20s at the time. And all through her K12 education, you know, she was

wheelchair-bound and had some physical handicaps, and was, like you said, completely noncommunicative. And adults will talk about her around her, and she was absorbing everything, heard everything, heard the negativity that people spoke about her, remembered it all, processed it all. And then she was given a communication device, something like an AAC, which stands for alternative augmentative communication, and she was able to use a keyboard as her voice.

She basically spilled everything that everybody had been saying about her over the years. And she repeatedly said, you know, "I'm not stupid. I'm not dumb. I can do these things. I have a brain." So, when we look at kids, and we look at people in crisis, and we look at individuals who struggle with mental health, like, we never know, you know, the battles that they're fighting and everything that we do or say positively and negatively impacts people. And so, we have to just be ultimately aware of what we're saying and how that's influencing those around us and what kids may be processing because we never know. The brain is a very complex, fascinating thing. And we never know what those around us are absorbing and how that's impacting them. So, no matter what their level of communication is, that doesn't necessarily always reflect, you know, their cognitive abilities.

Jacob: Is that something you guys are conscious of trying to celebrate those winning moments for staff members, where they've, you know, crossed a hurdle in a relationship-building with any student at all? That's something I think in the training lies. Maybe we don't emphasize enough on the back end is celebrating some of those wins. Is that something that you incorporate into kind of your day-to-day culture and how you guys, you know, look at areas that you are doing really well in?

Brienne: Yeah, definitely. I mean, there's a lot of focus on when kids are doing the right thing and when kids are earning. And that comes across when we have our IEP meetings. You know, parents are, you know, just so vocal about, you know, "Thank you so much. You know, I really feel like, you know, we've made progress and our kids are much happier." I had a case last year where a kid was just really struggling in the setting that he was in and nobody, for two years, could get him to do anything. And we moved him to a different program with a little bit more support, smaller class size, and the kid is thriving.

And he wrote a note to his teacher and said, "You know, I've never enjoyed school more. Thank you so much for believing in me. "And those, to me, are the victories. You know, when I get those emails, or text messages, or phone calls about kids, what I call winning, you know, I know that we've done right by kids in that we've put the right systems and structures, and support in place for them because we don't expect kids coming in to school knowing how to read, write, do math, know everything about social studies or science.

So, why do we expect kids coming into school knowing how to behave? Right? Every kid has a story. Every kid is coming from a different background. And so, it's really our obligation to put the right structures and supports in place to help kids succeed. And sometimes that requires a different setting. But our initial line of defense when we're looking at an educational multi-tiered systems of support, really looking at what can I do first to help this kid so we can keep them in the least restrictive environment but really help them continue to access their academic program?

And that's not always possible. Sometimes it requires more adults and that's okay, you know, that's why the programs exist, but really helping teachers understand how to best support kids and how to be more proactive to support kids can make all the difference in the world.

Terry: Well, that sounds like you've kind of started to talk about some of my last question here, which was to give a summary of what you feel, Brienne, are the greatest benefits of CPI training for the teacher, the teacher's ancillary staff, the students, and their families.

Brienne: The benefit for teachers and school staff is empowerment. They're better equipped to put those proactive strategies into place and better at what I call the self-talk. "Okay, this kid's doing this, but what's," using the verbiage of CPI is what I try to train them to do is, "Okay, what's the likelihood this is going to happen when we go into the situation, or what's the severity if this does happen, or what am I saying right now that's influencing the kid and really helping people to understand that it's not always the kid, right?"

And sometimes what we're doing is negatively influencing them and myself, and I know my behavior specialist, too, sometimes when we go into a classroom, where there's a student that's engaging in maladaptive behavior, the first thing we're looking at, we're doing an environment analysis, what proactive strategies are already in place that are setting the kids up for success or the students up for success. And if they're not there, then that's going to be our first line of defense. Maybe they have a reinforcement system, but they need it more frequently, whatever the case may be.

And so, really helping staff look at the bigger picture to better support students. The greatest benefits for students is just helping to keep them safe, helping to keep our positive relationships with kids and with families, so that we're not having to disengage or not having to hold, but we're able [00:34:00] to use, you know, what we call our verbal Judo. You know, it's unit 1 through 7, use our verbal techniques to really help de-escalate a situation or completely prevent a situation.

So, CPI has really helped myself to be more empowered and really helped me empower and equip our staff to give them alternatives to going hands-on and really helping them to feel that empowerment and feel equipped to best support students and staff to keep everybody safe and maintain *Care, Welfare, Safety, and Security*<sup>SM</sup> for everybody involved in the situation.

Terry: Well, excellent, thank you. My guest today has been—my guests, rather, have been Brienne Downing. She's an administrator at the district level with the Santee School District in Santee, Southern California. And Jacob Nelson, he is a territory manager of CPI, covering the greater Los Angeles area. Thank you both so much for joining us on *Unrestrained*.

Brienne: Thank you so much, Terry, for having me.

Jacob: Thank you, Terry. Thank you, Brienne.

Terry: Thank you, and thank you all for listening.