



## Education

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# Julia Steiny: New language skills can help troubled kids improve social skills

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This is the second of two columns about lessons learned at “alternative schools” for troubled youth in Pennsylvania.

The academic part of the school day is over. The core-content teachers have gone home. The kids and remaining staff — behavior specialists and counselors — drag chairs into a circle for their final daily ritual at the Community Service Foundation (CSF) school in Bethlehem, Pa.

This school educates troubled teens who are court-involved, druggies or otherwise unmanageable. CSF’s unique strategy is first to coax these semi-feral kids into the pleasures of belonging to a caring community, and then to teach them how to maintain social success with behavior that others can tolerate. The students are at very different points on this journey.

For example, four of them grumble complain, schlump slowly into place, and need to be reminded not to sit next to the pal who’ll get them into trouble.

One girl quietly takes her seat, seething visibly, as she has been all day. These teens seem more troubled than the ones I’d seen the day before, at a sister CSF school. Today has been so intense, the staff has had to put off our visitor questions until after the kids go home. I correctly guessed that the seething girl is new to the school.

Some students are elsewhere, in groups for those who are, say, drug-involved. So about 12 students and a handful of staff and visitors start the circle ritual, with a quick go-round of single thoughts or sentences about how the day went for each person. Certain students also indicate they have something they need to talk about. After the go-round, they go next.

“Okay, I need to take responsibility.” Other students nod and encourage a boy who has been driving the staff crazy all day. “I called the teacher a name.”

“And a filthy one at that,” adds a staff member.

Pause. The boy thinks for a moment, and says, “She deserved it.”

Ooooo. Tension courses through the room, piquing the interest of the new girl, who smiles malevolently. A silence falls. The kids know they are far more effective than the adults at connecting with defiant peers. But who should it be?

Several start talking at once, with words to the effect, “I have so been where you are, and here’s what my experience was...” Some students are as frustrated as the adults with this frankly, scary kid. Mind you, CSF is an alternative school for bad kids, so there’s no other place for this teen to go except prison, which will just make him worse.

The students politely take turns describing specific incidents, illustrating what it’s like to be on the receiving end of the boy’s wretched behavior. They acknowledge that in the past they too have pumped plenty of wretchedness into the lives of the people around them, but it didn’t really get them what they wanted. Now they have goals, which include earning the right not to have to hang with other “losers.”

The adults play second fiddle, but remind the group that “loser” is not a helpful concept.

However discomfoting, these interactions are central to the “restorative” strategy of the CSF schools. Misbehavior is a rip in the community’s fabric. Good kids, bad kids, all kids need to learn how to respond to their environment in responsible ways. Misbehavior is an opportunity to teach values, norms, strategies for solving problems and getting what you want cooperatively. Just punishing a kid into compliance succeeds mainly at satisfying our lust for revenge. But punishment’s track record for restoring miscreants to cooperative behavior is surprisingly bad.

But from the moment the CSF students walk through the door, they’re steeped in vocabulary for describing their inner landscape. On the walls of every classroom are different aids for teaching the language of emotions, from emoticon posters to pictures of facial expressions labeled “angry,” “sad,” “scared.” Kids who can name what’s going on with them start to gain control over acting impulsively.

And the CSF schools teach that saying “You’re a fat, ugly jerk” only invites more ineffective communication. Saying “I feel sad (angry, depressed) when you make fun of my hair (music, clothes, race)” has a better chance of getting through to the other person.

The boy who called the teacher a name starts arguing with his peers. The discussion heats up to the point where several adults stand up to take action, presumably to remove him. But rather than let his “loser” behavior escalate, he throws up his hands and snarls, “Okay!! I take responsibility for calling her (and he repeats the charming phrase), and I commit to writing her an apology.” No, there’s not a drop of sincerity. But it is token cooperation, which for the moment is going to have to be good enough. Another boy quickly says, “Great, then it’s MY turn.” We move on.

But what a terrific social convention to teach kids: “I take responsibility for...” followed by, “so I commit to...” Help the kid learn to own the effect their misbehavior has on others, and then to make amends. Granted, the bad boy above is only parroting a formula so far. But the staff and veteran CSF kids will continue to model and hopefully teach the practice successfully. Good stuff. Suspension, on the other hand, teaches nothing positive.

Misbehavior begs us to teach social skills. Punishment just postpones the work, and makes it harder.

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