

Eight Strategies to Successfully Help Troubled Young People

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It is common that when adults come to psychologists, they want the silver bullet to help the troubled young person that brought them into the office. Many of these adults leave somewhat disappointed because practical suggestions at times can be elusive. That is the purpose of this article—provide a framework for practical answers to common problems working with difficult young people. The first two will be more extensive than the following six and will provide a framework to build upon. Over many years of working with the most difficult young people, the follow eight strategies have been found useful to parents and other helpers.

Number 1 - Step one is to get an accurate sense of where you are in relation to the young person you want to help. To do this, a practical tool may be helpful that first reflects where you currently are and second what can be the next step. With the following issues, ask yourself where the connection between you and the young person is currently. Each of the following can be viewed as stair steps with the next step built upon the foundation of the one before it. If for any reason there is a breach in the process, you and the child will fall back to the last step that is secure.

Safety – if you are just meeting the young person or if you have known he or she for six months or less, you can assume that you are on the first step of this process of connection—safety. For traumatized children everyone they meet starts off with questions about safety, ‘will you hurt me?’ ‘what bad things are likely to happen because of you?’ and ‘will you be just another adult in my life who leaves me with less than I had before?’ There is no way to skip this step, and it takes longer to establish safety than most adults, even inexperienced therapists, believe. Just because a young person is polite and following directions does not mean the child knows you are safe. Quite the contrary, overcompliance (following every rule to the letter) is usually a sign the young person views you as a safety risk. Skip the attempt to tell them you are a safe person and only here to be of help, they have heard that before and seldom has it worked out well for the child. You cannot move beyond this step without being consistently responsive and consistent with the young person. It is often a good indicator you have established safety when the young person acts out verbally or physically toward you. They know better than to pick a fight with a dangerous person, so you can celebrate when the young person picks a fight with you because he or she probably believes you will not strike back and are therefore not a threat.

Security – The next step gives the young person the important knowledge you may be safe but can he or she count on the environment to be one where they can let down their guard without being harmed. What gives a child this message is predictable

structure that is not oppressive but one that lets the child know what to expect. Consistency must be involved to create security and too often children in our system are moved from placements 'for their own good' or because there is no other option. A point often overlooked by adults is if you want the child to experience security then the center of control and decision making must be in the hands of safe adults, not in the child's hands. Most children understand they cannot keep themselves safe, they have experienced as much. They must count on a strong and safe adult. Without viewing you in this way, you will not get to the second step of security.

Acceptance – Only after you and the young person have taken the first two positive steps is the third step potentially available. Few troubled children have experienced that they are accepted for who they are. They conflate bad behavior on their part with being a bad person and who could ever care for a bad person? So your job is to differentiate between what the young person has done and who they are. No doubt most of these children have done bad things, but there is a child who is trying to survive and get by under the rough exterior. Find that child, nurture that child and allow the good in them to emerge and be noticed.

Belonging – Congratulations if you have taken the first three steps with a young person, but it only gets harder from here on. For children who have been removed from their own home and likely removed from many other placements as well, the basic need to belonging becomes an overwhelming challenge. These children must experience some sense of belonging where they find themselves. That is no easy feat when the child is waiting to lose their placement for any transgression, because this has happened over and over. One of the best ways a young person experiences belonging is by receiving genuine affection from a safe adult. A suggestion on how to create a sense of belonging, in addition to the young person staying in the placement for a long time, is to have physical signs that the child belongs in the environment. For example, in a foster home take new family pictures with the child in the picture and put it up on the wall. Foster children seldom see themselves in family pictures and thus do not belong but are simply passing through. This can also be done in classrooms and even in the therapist's office. Have a picture on the wall, a drawing the child made on the family information center (the refrigerator) or a stuffed animal of theirs in your counseling office while you work with the child. These are all important messages that the child belongs.

Trust – Unfortunately this is often the most difficult step of all and may not ever be reached. This is because it takes time to climb the first four foundational steps, and too often troubled children are not around long enough in one home, or one classroom to achieve the critical step of trust. Trust is demonstrated by qualities of the connection between adult and child such as respect, honesty, fairness and the chance for both individuals to feel influential with the other. Although it is the most difficult step so far,

it is also a requirement of the next step which moves the connection with the child to a true relationship.

Relationship – This step can be defined as a connection between two individuals where neither person is used or abused. Relationships involve reciprocity or a two-way street. There is give and take from both the adult and the young person. A frequent mistake helping adults make is to believe they have achieved a relationship with a troubled young person long before this is actually the case. Too often this is a figment of the adult's imagination or perhaps better stated as more of their wish than a reality. When you are able to climb this high on the stairs, the process can get very tricky. If the young person begins to perceive that you are not someone trustworthy, experiences belonging, or accepted and safe, the connection with the child may well tumble to lower steps when you were unaware this even happened. Remember traumatized children frequently have very inaccurate perceptions. If, or more likely, when this occurs, consider what step you are now on and work to rebuild and climb the steps once again. The good news is that every time the child climbs these steps with you, it can be easier and take less time to do so once again. In the same way, every time the young person is able to climb the steps with any adult, it will be more likely this can take place once again with another safe and caring adult.

Self-awareness – You can only hope to reach the top two steps with any troubled young person you try to help. It is through genuine relationships that we learn about ourselves and thus helped to become more self-aware. We need to be able to see ourselves through the eyes of another to get a more objective self-view. Self-awareness is a hope all adults have for troubled young people. It may never happen with you, but it is very possible that you have established the framework that the young person can experience this step with someone in the future.

Personal Worth – The top step is something many helping adults are still working on. We must consider how well we exemplify self-respect and self-love. We want young people to reach this step so that when the world tries to tear them down, and it will, something inside the young person can provide the belief in self and one's value and worth. If you want the young person to ever reach this step, then your task is to model for them genuine personal worth that you experience and reflect.

Number 2 – Similar to the first strategy, this is both a way to understand your connection with a troubled child, and also a built-in strategy. When a traumatized child first meets someone, he or she will size the person up in the first few minutes. This forms as a survival skill to determine if the person is a threat to the child's safety. But this is also a way to attempt to establish the nature of the relationship with the young person attempting to call the shots. Traumatized young people will put adults into four categories almost immediately. It is important that you understand what they are doing because three of the four categories will prevent you from being of any help to the young person. Here are the four categories.

1. **Safety Threat** – This category is the first priority for the child’s primitive brain, and is at physical risk from this person. You cannot be viewed as a safety threat or the child will be traumatized by you regardless of what you do, because the child will connect you with others who have been abusive. If the young person is over compliant or shows signs of dissociation, then the odds are good that you are being viewed as an unsafe person.
2. **Interpersonal Threat** – This is the category where the young person has the experience that you are a competent adult who can hold your own. You may still be a threat but on the level of the child knowing that to get what the child wants he or she will have to go through you. Of the four essentially negative categories, this second one is the only category you want to fit into.
3. **Easy to Manipulate** – Within minutes a young person will size you up to determine if they can get what they want by whatever means they wish. You do not want to be viewed in this category or your interactions will be a constant struggle for power and control. You can save both of your time and energy by being a competent and self-assured adult.
4. **Irrelevant** – Other than being a safety threat, you really don’t want to be viewed as irrelevant. You will pick up if the young person has placed you in this category when they ignore you entirely. If the child does this, be clear from the beginning that you expect attention, respect and compliance from the child.

Number 3 – Striking the Firm and Friendly Balance – Parents and helpers often ask for specifics in how they can work with a traumatized child and know they are being effective. One of the best ways to do this is to find a balance between being firm with the young person and coming across as friendly. There are hazards with going too far in either direction. Too firm and the young person will view you in the same way as hurtful adults in their past. But too friendly and the young person may view you as easy to manipulate. Remember that troubled children need competent adults in their lives more than they need a friend or buddy. Regardless of the issue and what is going on, if you keep this balance in mind it can assist you in striking the right balance.

Number 4 – The Art of Translating and Understanding Speaking in Opposites – To be most helpful to troubled young people, you will need to learn to translate what the child is communicated to you. This can be easier said than done because their message is seldom consistent with their words. Too many adults make the mistake of taking words at face value. However, it is often the case with traumatized children that they speak in opposites. If you hear one of these children say they hate living in your home, is this what they really mean? To learn to translate their message accurately, try changing their words to the opposite meaning and see if it may be closer to the truth. ‘I hate this house’ may actually mean ‘I am starting to

like it here and that makes me vulnerable.’ Unless you can accurately know what the young person is communicating to you, then real connection will be unlikely.

Number 5 – Disconfirmation – There are many well-meaning adults who do their best to help a young person only to actually do harm. We all want to avoid such a scenario because in such a case everyone loses. Like the Hypocritic Oath (first do no harm), a young person can be harmed if your interaction results in confirming all the negative message he or she has from other adults. In order to avoid doing unintentional harm we must avoid confirming and therefore we must disconfirm messages like: you have bad behavior, you don’t treat others right, you are lazy, you don’t listen well, etc. What many adults see as critical feedback to the young person, can land as confirming all the negative messages they have received and have internalized, and our perceptions become internal reality for everyone. If we want the young person to have a more positive sense of self, then we must disconfirm what they have heard and believe about themselves.

Number 6 – Self-Regulation, the key to a successful life – Of the many things a traumatized child needs to learn, self-regulation is on top of the list. The reason for this is the most pervasive impact of trauma on the child’s brain is the loss of self-regulation. Trauma sends all sensory information through the limbic brain that stores negative memories of past abuse and neglect. The limbic brain primarily reacts in order to aid survival. Self-regulation is facilitated by a different part of the brain that facilitates higher order reasoning (the prefrontal cortex). What many adults do not consider is that self-regulation must be learned, and this happens through experience. Every time the young person is dysregulated (losses emotional control) there is a learning opportunity for self-regulation. There are many methods of teaching self-regulation, but one is to teach the child when getting upset to relax, rethink what is actually happening, and respond rather than react or the three R’s.

Number 7 – Promoting Positive Brain Change – All effective interventions must be directed at the human brain. The goal with helping children is to promote positive brain change and positive growth. After trauma, the brain is profoundly altered and without help the negative brain impacts will not improve overtime but can get even worse. A general roadmap for positive brain change is Neurological Reparative Therapy. The three parts of this term reflect what it is—focus on neurons in the brain, all positive steps must be repeated often to build new templates in the brain that can process new sensory information in a positive way, and therapy in the term is an active process of helping the young person. Neurological Reparative Therapy provides a roadmap for how the helper can move in a positive direction. This framework has the following five goals:

1. Facilitate perceptual changes of self, others and the child's inner working model – the first step is to overcome the negative perceptions that trauma causes in the brain. For example, perceptions such as ‘all adults are threatening,’ ‘I deserved the abuse I received,’ ‘no one will ever love me,’ etc. It is the long-term impact of negative

perceptions that are usually the source of emotional dysregulation and problematic behavior.

2. Enhance neuro-integration – Most traumatized children have components within the brain that function adequately on their own but do not work well with other brain regions. The brain is extremely complex and works optimally only when all parts of the brain work together--thus neuro-integration.
3. Alter the region of the brain's processing information system – Trauma causes sensory input to come into the limbic system of the brain where it is processed by past negative memories. The limbic part of the brain is reactive and does not facilitate higher order thinking and reasoning. This third goal is to teach the brain to process information in the prefrontal cortex where the young person thinks before acting.
4. Facilitate Orbitofrontal Cortex activation – The most complex part of the brain is found just over the eyes in the front of the brain. The Orbitofrontal (above the orbits of the eyes) Cortex is where executive functions of the brain are found and is often considered the chief executive officer of the brain where complex decisions are made.
5. Neuro-template development through repetitive practice – The final goal is to ensure that all helpful interventions are repeated frequently so they can become the new pathways within the brain to make positive brain growth.

Number 8 – Modeling Working on Yourself – It is fitting to end this article with the focus on ourselves. We may not be able to change the world or make all the change we would like to make in a young person you want to help, but we have complete control over ourselves. In our programs we have a motto that everyone is in treatment, not just our clients. We all have work to do, we all have changes we can make to be our optimum selves. Helpers can use their helping as a vehicle to change and improve, and while we are doing this we model to our clients what it means to learn from others and our experiences to make personal improvement. We all want troubled young people to learn from life's lessons and the best way to teach is to be a role model.

In summary, working with troubled young people is one of the most difficult tasks there is. To be successful we need as many tools and skills as we can develop. This is why so many strategies have been offered here. You will not need all of them with any particular young person, and some approaches will be more successful than others with a particular individual. But building on strategy number eight, practice a few of these approaches even at times when it may not be required. Work on yourself and be what you want for the individuals you are trying to help. You may well find that helping others is one of life's great gifts and one of the reasons why helpers actually live longer and more fulfilling lives than non-helpers. Thanks for all you do for others!