

STRENGTHS- BASED COUNSELING WITH AT-RISK YOUTH

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Surviving and Thriving

It is not the person who is the problem. Rather, it is the problem that is the problem.

—Michael White

Geoffrey looked like a cuddly bear: A big mop of reddish hair that never seemed to be combed, freckles, a little fleshy around the arms and midriff in the way adolescent boys get when their appetites are healthy, their bodies about to sprout, and their diet chosen from a seemingly endless snack bar of potato chips, soft drinks, and pizza. When I was in junior high he sat at the back of my Grade 7 home-room. He'd sit slouched, his legs spread, doodling. Most days, he seemed completely inoffensive, just another mediocre student whom teachers might have forgotten if not for his knack of finding victims for his cruelty.

I often think about Geoffrey and how he treated me. In a way, we remained glued to one another for the first three months of Grade 7. Geoffrey needed someone's shoulders to stand on. He needed someone that he could put down, intimidate, and tease. He needed this someone if he was going to find some way out of that cesspool of mediocrity that breeds hopelessness and invisibility among lower-class kids from stable, rural communities who don't excel at school.

Geoffrey knew he was going nowhere. His solution, it seemed, was to defiantly make a claim to whatever fame he could find close at hand.

I was an easy mark. I had been advanced a grade when I moved from Montréal to a small northern community just before I turned 11. I was a little smaller than the other boys the year Geoffrey and I met in that first year of junior high. I did well at school. I liked to focus on projects as they came along. I was a volunteer reporter for a local newspaper. Most days, teachers liked me or, at the very least, they could ignore me in favor of students who needed more attention.

The Many Ways Youth Survive

Similar Backgrounds, Different Behaviors

The strange thing was that the families Geoffrey and I came from weren't that different. Geoffrey lived in a working-class home with a stay-at-home mom. There were rumors that his older brothers got in trouble with the police and that his father was an alcoholic.

I was from a working-class family that was creeping into the middle class. My father, a quiet man, had supported himself and my mother sweeping factory floors while he finished high school studying at night. We had our own secrets, though, ones far less public than drinking. For years, my mother coped with depression, a socially isolated, mildly abusive woman who experienced life secondhand through television and a make-believe world of friends. Before my father retired, he found it best to be absent a great deal of the time, maintaining respectability by spending his time at work, a content workaholic.

But of course, Geoffrey didn't know any of this about me. We were new to the community, and a year after arriving, I still remained relatively unknown to my peers, who were now mostly older than me. Geoffrey's abusive behavior toward me made the first three months of seventh grade a long, horrendous slog. Stomach aches didn't get me out of going to class. Hiding during lunch didn't avoid the taunts, punches, and threats as I was routinely routed out of my quiet spaces and forced to be on the playground by well-intentioned, rule-abiding teachers. I said nothing of course about what I was experiencing.

Doing Whatever It Takes

I'd like to say that this was all one awful experience, but I can't. Instead, I owe Geoffrey some measure of thanks. He planted the seed of an idea that would take another 25 years to bloom. Looking back now at Geoffrey, I see *he wasn't a bad kid acting bad* but a kid like me who each morning rose out of bed and made the simple promise to

coauthored and elaborately negotiated between the adolescent and those who are special in their lives.

Powerful Alternatives

As a first principle for helping youth find healthier identities, ones we associate with resilience, whether as pandas, chameleons, or leopards, adolescents must find substitutes for their problem behaviors. Whether we like to admit it or not, for Christine, truancy and everything else gave her a sense of control over her life. It provided her with a status among her peers that she would never achieve academically or through sports. She liked the way her friends looked at her. She liked the way she could survive.

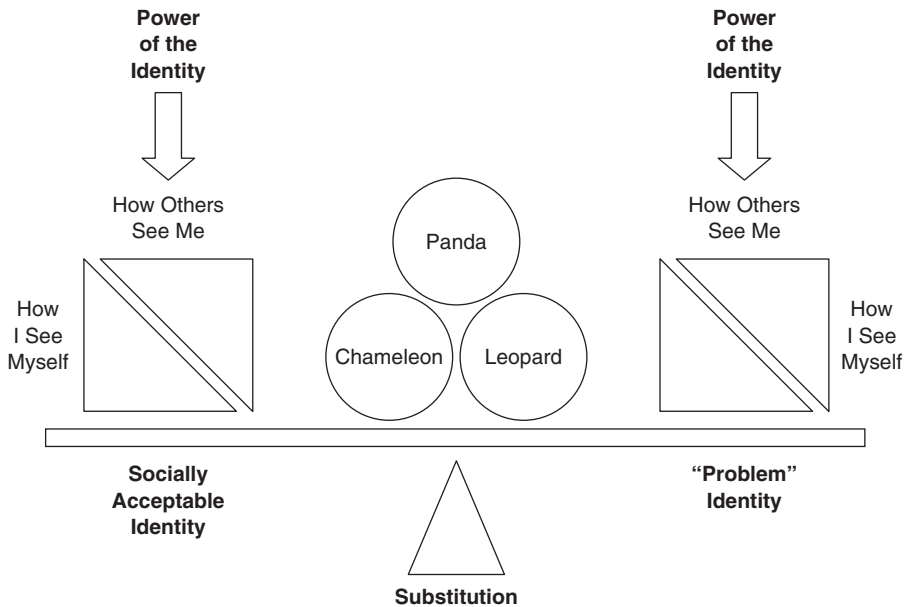
Finding a substitute meant placing in front of her something of equal value. Once her mouthy, defiant personality found a niche, a place where it could perform in a conventional way, she was drawn there like a moth to a flame. Problem behaviors will extinguish much more easily when there is a substitute.

Alternatives Must Be Chosen, Not Required

Despite beliefs by some adults, there is no evidence that interventions that try to force kids to stop behaviors work. They stop smoking not because they are told to stop but when there are alternatives that bring the same experience, are a better use of their money, and are supported by their audience, both peers and adults, who see them as being just as cool, just as adult, and just as much in control of their own lives as when they smoke. Is it any wonder then that cell phones have caught on so well even as cigarette use is declining? Both trade in the same currency: an adultlike social activity that breeds an image as hip.

The same goes with sex. Abstinence will be a draw only for those kids attracted to the alternative: identification with a lifestyle or set of religious beliefs that replaces the cachet that sexual activity brings. We are mistaken if we think admonishing behavior stops kids. It is offering them a well-considered alternative that is key to successful interventions.

Figure 1.1 plots the relationship between socially acceptable and “problem” identity choices. Pandas, chameleons, and leopards are precariously balanced between these choices, pulled in one direction or the other by how others see them and how they see themselves. To the extent that we as educators and caregivers intervene with a pro-social substitute for problem behaviors, the more likely we are to tip the balance and provide the opportunities for youth to gently move their way toward identities as teenagers who survive and thrive (are resilient) in ways that don’t harm themselves or others.

Figure 1.1 Identity Choices for Pandas, Chameleons, and Leopards

Negative Alternatives Make for Fierce Competition

It's not always quite so easy to find alternatives. What can we *really* offer a student who is dealing drugs on the playground and who tells everyone to f___ off at the slightest provocation? Frankly, if we admit the truth, most times we have little else to offer than mediocre prospects to achieve minimal grades, a high school diploma, and a service-industry or manual-labor job that pays minimum wage.

If we are honest, sometimes we have little to offer young people that will bring them as much power, as much status, and as much wealth as they find through their problem behaviors. Admitting this to them is the first step to helping youth look for alternatives that are realistically available.

Jamie

Jamie is only 12, but already he has adult-sized problems. He has been running drugs for years for some older boys in his neighborhood. Once he himself came of age and he could be charged with possession, he decided it was better to jump in fully and begin selling for himself. After

The Resilient Youth Strengths Inventory—Individual

<i>To what extent does each statement describe the youth?</i>	<i>Not at All</i>	<i>A Little</i>	<i>Some-what</i>	<i>Quite a Bit</i>	<i>A Lot</i>
1. Is comfortable asking for help	1	2	3	4	5
2. Can solve own problems	1	2	3	4	5
3. Keeps going even when life gets difficult	1	2	3	4	5
4. Believes that own actions today will influence his or her future	1	2	3	4	5
5. Feels confident in challenging and confusing situations	1	2	3	4	5
6. Is aware of personal strengths	1	2	3	4	5
7. Is aware of personal weaknesses	1	2	3	4	5
8. Is comfortable with self-expression in close relationships with peers	1	2	3	4	5
9. Is comfortable with own sexual expression	1	2	3	4	5
10. Feels a part of a group when with friends	1	2	3	4	5
11. Knows that family, friends, and relatives will be supportive during difficult times	1	2	3	4	5
12. Thinks most problems in life will get solved in a positive way	1	2	3	4	5
13. Empathizes with others when bad things happen to them, even if he or she doesn't like them	1	2	3	4	5
14. Understands others' feelings	1	2	3	4	5
15. Has a vision of how the future should be	1	2	3	4	5
16. Strives to finish started projects	1	2	3	4	5

(Continued)