

Preface

From earliest times, children thrived by connecting to a caring family and community. But in modern society, the bonds between elders and the young have often become tattered. Children weakly attached to adults do not fully learn responsible behavior and values.

If children cannot find concerned mentors or positive peers, they may seek safe haven with other cast-off kids or substitute sex and drugs for genuine bonds. Hungry for respect, many become prisoners to their peers and are easily misled into destructive behavior. Hungry for personal power, they may challenge external authority figures and behave disrespectfully. Some turn inward in loneliness and despair; others become self-destructive.

These behaviors are distress signals that basic needs have not been met. Beneath their defiance, apparent indifference, or reckless bravado, many of today's young people flounder in rivers of pain. Families, courts, schools, churches, and communities could reach out to them, but instead often feel forced to either exclude them or mete out further punishment for their challenging behavior. When their actions bother or frustrate others, these youth are likely to be dealt more pain. This only drives these wounded young people further from the human bond.

be resilient. We know we have done our work when those we've taught also become teachers.

It all starts with connecting with kids where they're at. And for many, like Amy, that place is a place of pain.

Pain-Based Behavior

In an extensive study of youth in ten residential treatment programs, Dr. James Anglin concluded that *every* young person there, *without exception*, was experiencing deep and pervasive psycho-emotional pain.¹ Perhaps what has traditionally been labeled “deviance” or “disorder” might be better understood as *pain-based behavior*.

This is an important distinction, for as caregivers, we usually find exactly what we're looking for. As long as our attention is focused on the destructive behavior a child displaying, we will conclude that he or she is a problem, based on the pain he or she is causing us. We label kids as disturbed and disruptive if they disturb or disrupt us. But if we can gain a window into the inner world of a youth in pain, we see a very different picture.

Pain is very a powerful motivator that permeates emotions, thinking, and behavior. In Amy's account of her conflicts, for example, she exhibited *painful feelings* of fear and anger, *painful thoughts* that she was bad and unworthy of love, and she reacted with *pain-based behavior* by exhibiting hostility to others.

- *Painful emotions* include negative inner states such as fear, anger, sadness, disgust, hopelessness, helplessness, guilt, hatred, and shame. While there are dozens of labels for negative feelings, most are variations of a handful of basic emotions.
- *Painful thinking* may include distressing thought processes such as worry, anxiety, distrust, pessimism, blame, vengefulness, denial, and inappropriate rationalization.
- *Pain-based behavior* puts painful emotions and thinking into action as an attempt to escape from pain, defend against pain, reciprocate pain, relieve pain, or resolve the

chapter two

The Road to Resilience

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" asked Alice.

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

—Lewis Carroll

Jermaine had troubles in school and with the police since he was eleven years old. His mother was the sole parent and worked hard at two jobs to make ends meet. Left to fend for himself, Jermaine gravitated to the street, and his male role models soon became older gang leaders, who initiated him into delinquency as a "lookout."

By age fourteen, Jermaine was having both behavioral and learning problems and was expelled from school. Adrift on the streets, he wound up in the juvenile justice system, shuttled between residential placements.

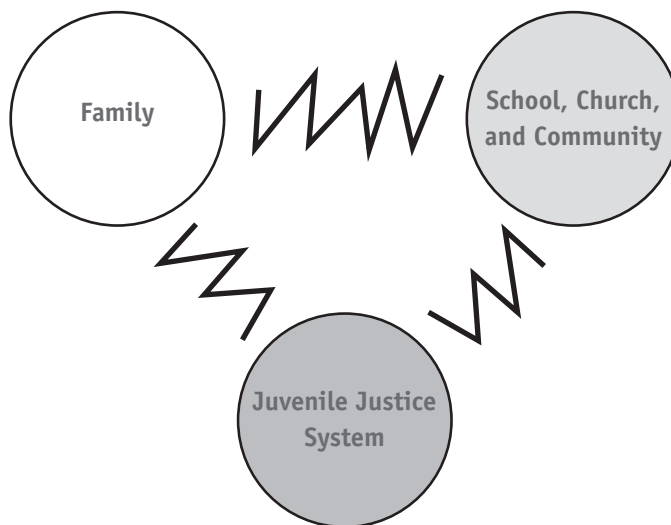
In residential placements, Jermaine's life actually improved. He attended school and fed his hunger for positive adult mentors. He

Systems in Conflict

A child in conflict needs to be surrounded by a multifaceted supportive community. Sadly, the stakeholders in the child's ecology often operate in isolation or against each other, rather than collaborating with one another and the child. In fact, as Chapter One noted, those potential sources of support—family, school, law—can become sources of the most intense stress. Our kids are in conflict, but so are our systems (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

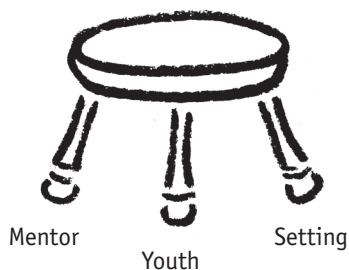
Systems in Conflict



Family

The family is perhaps the most influential system. Every family functions as a complete system—a whole made up of interrelated and interdependent parts—and the unwritten goal of every family is to bring that system into balance or equilibrium. Like an old-fashioned scale, when something is added to one side, a corresponding adjustment must be made on the other side. As a result, individual family members become very adept at intuitively sensing what is needed and naturally fulfilling that role.

Key Aspects of a Teen Mentoring Program



In our experience, unless two of the three legs of the stool are solid, the mentoring relationship will have little chance for success. Because we can assume the youth might be fairly unstable, the real challenge is in making the other two legs as strong as possible by providing kids with competent mentors in supportive settings. As those elements are strengthened, the young person becomes stronger as well.

Schools can provide both structured and spontaneous opportunities for adults to interact with youth, although many educators are uncomfortable operating outside their formal roles. Those untrained to talk with kids in conflict are likely to retreat from problems or revert to moralistic, authoritarian methods. Some teaching roles lend themselves especially well to building strong connections, such as coaching and the arts. Many schools have also added after-school programs, which offer a more friendly setting for cross-generational connections.

When youth are living in a residential program or mandated to report to a community center, these settings can also serve as a stable third leg, simply because youth are going to be there already. If a program is offered on Wednesday evening from 7:00–8:00 p.m., there is a good chance that kids will attend if it meets their needs or desires.

Straight Ahead Ministries and its affiliates offer Bible discussion groups led by local volunteers in hundreds of juvenile facilities across the country. Typically, thirty-five to forty percent of the youth choose to attend. This can be the first step in forging meaningful mentoring relationships.