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PRACTICE

Reclaiming the unreclaimable

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John Seita is a former youth at risk who beat the odds to turn his life around. In a previous issue of this journal, he authored the article "Resilience from the Other Side of the Desk," which described his development from a ward of the court to Dr John Seita, a consultant to programs for youth at risk. In this article he joins Larry Brendtro in examining how adults can build attachments to "unclaimed kids." Note that John's personal reflections are italicized.

I first met my co-author for this article, Larry Brendtro, in 1967 when I was twelve. The Cleveland juvenile court told me that I could no longer stay in my home community, and probably would never be allowed to see my mother again. I was sent, against my will, to Starr Commonwealth, an alternative residentialschool for troubled youth in Michigan. Since Dr. Brendtro then headed that program, I saw him as one of the enemy in my battle against the world.

My case file was thick with failed interventions. I never knew my real father and was removed from my alcoholic mother

and various step-siblings at eight years of age. Hurt and hating, I distrusted teachers and counselors, fought a string of foster parents, and repeatedly truanted from the court shelter to roam the Hough section of inner-city Cleveland. Four years and a dozen placements later, the court sent me out of state.

My court worker transported me to Michigan, where Dr. Brendtro tried to interview me for possible admission to Starr Commonwealth. I gave him the stony silent treatment. In a game of "therapeutic chicken," I repelled his attempts at rapport-building. My only vocalization that day was a stubborn declaration that, "I won't talk with you and l won't stay in this goddamn place!" Starr was not a locked facility, so I was returned to Cleveland. My court worker coerced me to return to Michigan, where I was enrolled at Starr Commonwealth.

Being taken from my home made me believe I was shamefully different. My pitiful self-concept was rooted in feelings that I was "damaged goods." It would be years before I would quit hating and fighting adults.

Unclaimed kids

Unattached children typically develop internal models of themselves as unworthy and unlovable (Bowlby, 1982). The result is depression, often mixed with rage and aggression. They target their anger at adults who fail to meet their needs for love, and at themselves for not deserving it. Angry and distrustful, they are society's unclaimed kids; and they are forever biting the hand that didn't feed them.

The stresses of modern society and the decline of extended kinship support is producing a horde of poorly socialized children. Adults struggling with stressors of single parenting, poverty, racism, and alcohol or other drugs have inadequate resources for positively rearing their children. *Home Alone* is not just the title of a funny film but the trademark of today's unclaimed kids.

Contrary to popular belief, it is not "broken families" that cause delinquency, but rather broken bonds between youths and adults. Describing these "psychological orphans," Merton Strommen (1979) notes that *distrust* between parent and child is 14 times more negative in impact than is *divorce*. Similarly, Hawkins and Weis (1985) found attachment to parents to be a more important predictor of delinquency than family structure. The quality of bonding in the family influences how the child will bond to school and to peers. Children with poor parental attachments typically have trouble with teachers and prosocial peers. As a result, many seek substitute belongings with gangs

of antisocial peers.

Children with histories of rejection are caught in an approach-avoidance conflict. They crave affection but fear they will be spurned again, so they guard against close relationships. Children who have not bonded to adults do not accept adult authority or internalize prosocial values. “Nobody tells me what to do!” they shout, masking their belief that nobody really cares. Often children also don’t care, plunging into antisocial lifestyles that defy and outrage adults.

Angry and rebellious youths regularly draw adults into conflicts and evoke rejection. The untrained response is to punish or avoid such youths. Suspend, expel, exclude, condemn, lock up — these are feel-good approaches for a public angered by anti social behavior. But a punish-and-control mentality only drives troubled youths further from social bonds.

How I kept adults at bay

Adults who tried to bond to me as a youth encountered resistance akin to trying to sandpaper the butt of a bobcat in a phone booth. My barbed words and nonverbal messages said, “I am hurt and pissed off at the world and ready to fight about it.” By keeping adults at bay, I developed a safe space, or comfort zone.

My adaptive strategy, developed over years of feeling rejected, was this: I would rebuff most overtures by staff and teachers, except when I really felt myself to be in a crisis. Then I would let them close enough for us to sort out the crisis, only to reject further relationship building following the crisis. I would do this by being aloof, cold, and distant. If that did not work, I would back them off with a verbal barrage of insults and swearing usually heard only on a dock or from a prisoner. And that is what I felt like, a prisoner inside walls of my own making, defending against adult enemies I had concocted.

In the short run, this survival strategy made sense. Fritz Redl (1966) showed that some of what is labeled as deviant behavior by troubled youth not only may be adaptive, it also may be a healthy response to an unhealthy personal ecology. Redl notes that the body rejects poison when it is ingested, a normal bodily function to a harmful foreign agent. Similarly, youths who have been abused, mistreated, or neglected are responding in a normal way when they reject well-meaning adult caregivers’ attempts to relate. Such was my belief as a youth in care.

I developed what I now call a “variable permeability.” I could be porous as I chose and let the small bits of caring in at my

discretion, or I could seal out adults with a hard shell of invulnerability. This paradoxical strategy reflected my need to be close, coupled with my unrelenting belief, based on countless experiences, that letting adults close was a ticket to pain and rejection. Being hurt again was not a risk worth taking.

Adults seldom knew what was going on, since I camouflaged my behavior to hide my true feelings and needs. Typically, I would reject adults' efforts to connect with me even though it was what I most wanted. This process of inviting and then rejecting relationships caused many adults to be unwilling themselves to risk being hurt by me. I protected myself to the point of total alienation; I was on the road to relationship hell.

My journey in and out of schools, foster homes, and institutions taught me that nothing was stable and that l should hurt others before I could be hurt. I was an expert at relationship refusal, and I learned how to avoid being "figured out". Fortunately, some adults were able to "decode" my behavior and understand the reasons for my contradictory "come close, stay away" manner. I could not scare away these adults, and they eventually would help me change the trajectory of my life. Slowly, I trusted enough to connect with caring teachers and adults.

As an adult, I have spent several years of my professional life working with youth with backgrounds similar to mine. I have had abundant opportunities to reflect on how to foster the turnaround of troubled youth. Successful programs require staff who see beyond troubled behavior, who restore broken belongings, and who mentor youth in their journey from risk to resilience.

Rebellion or resilience?

Hemingway once said, "Life breaks everybody, and then some become strong at the broken places." Many unclaimed kids become strong by developing inner resources and securing the support of substitute significant others. We call these youth "resilient" because they spring back from adversity and survive in spite of the odds.

Although unclaimed youths may become survivors, they also are scarred by the experience. Many youths develop a type of negative resilience. Trusting no adults, they conclude that they have to "go it alone". Their opposition to authority can become a raging battle as they struggle to gain some recognition and control over their world. They survive, but they are wounded by lives of conflict and alienation.

Developmental research has shown that extreme rebellion is

often a strong signal that adults have not met the child's basic needs for secure attachment and autonomy (Newman and Newman, 1986). Overt, hostile acts of rejection are not the child's preferred strategy. Fighting against adult caregivers is an extreme form of coping used only when all other means of legitimately meeting needs are blocked (Balswick and Macrides, 1975). From this perspective, rebellious, antisocial behavior can be seen as resilience, a valiant attempt to meet normal human needs, albeit using flawed coping strategies.

Among the youth most alienated from adults are those who live by the law of the streets. Anderson (1994) describes how some urban youths adopt an "oppositional culture" that enables them to survive in highly violent neighborhoods. These street youths have a profound lack of faith in any adult authority figure. Buffeted by forces beyond their control, they believe they will be safe only by proving their autonomy and competence at taking care of themselves. In the code of the street, survival means gaining "respect" by being treated with deference by others. These youths have a menacing demeanor, and fight back at the slightest provocation. Winning some semblance of respect is immensely important when so little respect is to be had. Tragically, these youths seldom gain respect from important adults in their lives.

To be respected, to have some power over one's life, to find attachment, autonomy, and achievement — all are honorable goals. The fact that youths are pursuing worthy ends, though with the wrong means, is an encouraging sign. These young persons have not given up; they still are struggling to redress untenable situations. Thus teachers and other adult mentors are potentially powerful resources for helping these young persons reconstruct their lives.

Reclaiming unclaimed kids

There are two diametrically opposed paradigms for intervention with troubled youth. One is *deficit-based*, a preoccupation with treating pathology and controlling deviance. The other is *strength-based*, the search for potentials and the development of resilience (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern, 1990; Jacobs, 1995).

We have found strength-based interventions to be particularly powerful with youth who present patterns of severe difficulties with attachment and rebellious authority relationships. Many strength-based interventions might seem counter-intuitive: Rather than demanding respect and seeking to overpower defiant youth, adults become mentors in the youth's private campaign for respect and power. Following are practical intervention strategies for reclaiming these "unreclaimable"

youth:

1. Recast all problems as learning opportunities. We need to shift from "crisis management" to "crisis teaching". To the maximum extent, we try to reframe all problems as opportunities for growth. If a bully intimidates a victim while other students laugh, we have a whole curriculum of opportunities for learning: We teach the bully to develop positive leadership skills, the victim to be assertive, and the onlookers to be responsible citizens of a caring community. Even when students must experience negative consequences for their behavior, there is always some potential for learning and growth. When students botch things up, we become like coaches after a losing game, figuring out what went wrong so they can win next time. This is social-skill training *in situ*, as we teach them to disengage from conflict cycles, to assert instead of aggress, and to respect alternate points of view.

2. Provide opportunities for fail-safe relationships. Bronfenbrenner often notes that every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him. But one may not be enough with an extremely guarded youth, since the risk is high that a singular relationship may disintegrate in a time of crisis. Airplane pilots always use redundant navigation systems in case one instrument fails. Likewise, we must have a fail-safe against relationship crashes by establishing "redundant" attachments. Form a "fan club" of advocates for this youth. This small team of persons (perhaps including family members, a court worker, school counselor, employer, or lawyer) can provide multiple possible sources of support.

Youth should not just be recipients of adult relationships. They also need opportunities to show friendship to others. Programs that nurture peer and cross-age helping provide experience in the empowering role of nurturing others.

3. Increase dosages of nurturance. Adult-wary youth will not assume that you care about them in the absence of some concrete evidence. However, as students become older, adults usually are less comfortable in expressing affection. Although teens cannot be physically nurtured like small children, the advent of zits doesn't mean they are disinterested in adult warmth. "All I want is some kind of noticement,"

wrote an angry youth in conflict with his teachers.

When conversing, project a genuine interest and avoid a "casework" type of concern. Giving the young person time is the best proof of one's genuine concern. While public displays of attachment would be threatening and suggest favoritism to peers, unattached youth are highly alert to subtle symbols of special interest. Most positive interactions — such as humor, high-fives, or other spontaneous gestures of friendliness — take only an instant of time. A passing comment such as, "Wow! That's a classy shirt!" will register with students unaccustomed to positive "noticement."

4. Don't crowd. Most of us, no matter how comfortable we are with ourselves and others, have a personal space that we do not want violated. Relationship-wary youths may initially need to keep a certain "safe" distance. Not surprisingly, when teachers and caregivers of troubled youth earnestly try to fashion relationships with these youth, such enthusiastic attempts often fail. This is not because we do not try hard enough, but because we try too hard. Respect the air space of troubled youth. Sometimes at the very time when a strong positive relationship is emerging, a youth will need a little time to back off a bit. The adult should not interpret this as failure but as a temporary adaptive distancing.

5. Use the back door. Direct attempts to build relationships often backfire with adult-wary youth. But when an adult meets some other, less threatening need (such as safety needs or needs for power or competence), the youth will end up attaching to that adult.

Mr. Luther, who was a recent graduate of college when he first met me, had no training in bonding with relationship-resistant youth. Few of us do. But he reached me through the back door. He doggedly attempted to find a special interest of mine, namely my dreams of being a sports hero. Although l did not trust other adults, he connected with me through a common interest. Initially, he would engage in good-natured debates about whether my prized Cleveland Indians were as good as his Detroit Tigers. I could be argumentative while building a trusting relationship. A "you-can-trust-me-John" approach would have failed.

Most kids, no matter how troubled, have a special interest that may be the key to the back door.

6. Decode the meaning of behavior. In effect, we take a "life ecology scan" by making a mental inventory of possible reasons why a student may be having rocky relationships. Examples of questions we could ask ourselves include: Is this some temporary situational stress, or is this a pervasive problem? Is the problem school-based, or is it a "carry in" from home? Are there problems with peer relationships, boyfriends, or girlfriends? Is the student fearing failure in school? Is the youth being intimidated or abused?

Unless we think causally, we are vulnerable to such naive diagnoses as "he is just being a jerk". By reflecting on why a youth rejects attempts to relate, we avoid personalizing the problem and we develop a framework for understanding the troubling behavior. A life ecology scan, whether a formal checklist or a more intuitive mental model, helps generate hypotheses that may help decode puzzling problem behavior.

7. Be "authoritative". Authoritative adults respect the autonomy of youth without abdicating their own role as an influential role model. They demand responsibility instead of obedience.

Permissive and dictatorial adults are both equally inept with youths who have conduct problems. Adults who place no demands are seen as pushovers or, in Redl's terms, "friends without influence." And dictators can demand obedience, but they fail at the crucial task of teaching inner discipline. Gold and Osgood (1992) found that *authoritative* adults who hold delinquent youths accountable while providing them some autonomy neutralize the delinquent counterculture and become more attractive models for identification.

8. Model respect to disrespectful youth. Even if their behavior is immature, we must guard against treating youth as if they were small children. They do not respond to preaching, moralizing, and criticizing. Approaching a youth with respect is a model for reciprocal respect. If we inadvertently offend a youth, we can offer an apology; a genuine apology is a rarity for youth who are accustomed to being blamed by adults for everything.

When relationships became turbulent, the distrustful youth believes he or she will be rejected. Threats to

remove a youth from a program only feed into a belief that, when the going gets rough, adults will give up. Often students who say they don't care anymore are really asking whether we think there is any reason to care. We become a mirror as they search our words and actions to discover whether we have lost hope as well. The Russian youth-work pioneer, Makarenko, once told a teacher who had given up on a youth, "Well, if you have no hope, you should not be allowed in contact with this student!"

9. Enlist troubled youth as team members. While traditional programs do things *to* troubled youth, strength-based models view youth as partners in their own healing. Young persons have rich insights into the problems of peers, and they are our only real experts on themselves. Professionals now have the technology to involve youth in educational and treatment planning (Brendtro and Bacon, 1995) and in the provision of treatment to their peers (Giacobbe, et al., 1994). We often offer youth access to the progress reports we write about them and even ask for their help in writing reports and suggesting changes. Students who are invited to join in meetings with parents and professionals generally handle this responsibility with surprising maturity, although the young person's agenda may not be our own. Adults who do not respect the views of young persons should not expect to be taken seriously by them.

10. Touch in small ways. Sometimes "less is more". Intermittent and smaller contacts with troubled youth may make a cumulative impression that is far more lasting than intensive frontal efforts to establish a relationship.

Many of my more memorable interactions with teachers and caregivers are incidents they have long forgotten. When Larry Brendtro was president of Starr, he encountered me in a waiting room outside my counselor's office. I sat there with pants too short, wearing what we boys called "ankle busters", cheap, institutional socks that barely reached the ankles on my size-13 feet. Larry quipped that perhaps the clothing store should issue these socks to staff. Then, as if to join me in a solidarity society of the poorly dressed he sat down and lowered his own socks to ankle-mast. There we were, the badsocks twins, as if posed for a fashion photo for Gentlemen's Quarterly. *Larry had used humor to treat me with dignity. He*

does not recall the incident, but I have preserved this memory as part of my life narrative for 25 years. I was touched in a small way.

11. Give seeds time to grow. The most pernicious thinking error of professionals is to assume that present problems predict future behavior. In the midst of a crisis, youths may act as if nothing we say makes sense or is even heard. Some time later, we may be surprised to discover that they remember and are able to benefit from the interaction. We often are surprised at the serious reflection a young person may give to a problem, though outwardly communicating indifference or antagonism.

The human animal has a built-in self-righting tendency; we are born problem solvers. In fact, the human brain is programmed to keep pondering unsolved problems (even when we sleep!), and thus our therapeutic seeds often bear belated fruit. We also know that the brain constructs our life narratives by selecting and remembering certain pivotal incidents that have major influences in defining the trajectory of our lives. A colleague recounts that when she was a poor African-American child, she asked her principal if she thought she could someday be a teacher. "Young lady, you could even be a *principal*," the woman answered. Today, that colleague has her doctorate in school administration.

12. Keep positive expectations alive. Against the greatest of odds, rebellious youth refuse to give up. We should not try to break their spirit, but we should kindle the belief that great things can happen in their lives. Some psychologists see such ideation as pathological "grandiose thinking," but we find it more useful to see these hopes of success as a measure of the youth's resilience. If a youth says he is going to become an actor or athlete, we use this as a chance to talk about college and career challenges, rather than seek to give our version of "realistic" expectations. We give the youth writings by persons who have surmounted great personal hardships to achieve success and happiness. We show the youth how he or she has many of the qualities of these resilient persons. We try to redefine stubbornness as persistence in the face of adversity. When youths are loyal to delinquent friends, we know they have the capacity for generosity. And if they are negative leaders, they already have leadership ability and need alter only the valence. The essence of strength-based education was articulated by Johann

> Goethe two centuries ago: We must search for the kernel of virtue hidden in every flaw.

Nothing in this list should suggest that relating to reluctant youth is a simple matter. Dr. Waln Brown, director of the William Gladden Foundation, also has written about his experiences as a youth sent to special schools and treatment programs (Brown, 1994). He once was asked by a teacher at a conference, "When nothing works, how long should we keep trying?" His response was Churchillian: "Never give up. Never. Never."

Never giving up means heroic efforts at restoring troubled families, rather than removing troubled children. Never giving up means inclusion, rather than expulsion of troublesome students. However, if safety dictates that some children should not stay in their own families or do not belong in a regular class, these children absolutely need to belong somewhere.

The life story for angry, adult-wary youth is acted to a script of "you don't care" and "you can't control me." These belief systems are not signs of pathology, or "thinking errors," since this is a logical way of constructing theories about a world that has been hostile and coercive. Rage and rebellion even can be seen as promising signs of health and strength. These youth have not yet succumbed, but they battle back as best they can to find belonging and independence. They have not yet given up on themselves, and neither can we.

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