

## **Common (and Understandable) Mistakes Adults Make Working with Challenging Young People**

**Dave Ziegler, Ph.D.**

The best place to start is by saying that nothing is easy when it comes to understanding and helping troubled young people mature and find their way in the world. When it comes to parenting, raising a child is the world's toughest job, with the only job tougher being the parenting of a troubled child. But too often we adults make the job even more difficult when we make preventable mistakes that set everyone back in achieving our goals. Some years back David Letterman popularized his "Top Ten" lists. Letterman has gone into retirement but for the time being I have not, so here is Dave's Top Ten Mistakes in parenting or working with challenging young people.

**#1 Taking Behavior and Insults Personally** – The first thing to remember about troubled young people is there is typically a lot of pent up rage and anger over the trauma they have experienced. These feelings are like an emotional pressure cooker, when you take the lid off, you need to be careful and prepared. You did not cause the trauma or the rage, but unfortunately it will often be directed at you. These young people need to vent their pain as a part of the healing process. To use a medical analogy, it is like removing an embedding splinter, which is painful at first but needs to be removed to prevent festering and allows healing. Recovering from trauma is nearly always painful. To be most helpful you cannot just focus on the immediate pain but instead on the healing process. The second thing to remember in not taking the young person's behavior and insults personally is you are actually not that important to the youth. All their negative energy is not about you, it is about their past and a world they experience as unfair and uncaring. At times when you show caring, then you get blasted for all the previous adult who did not care. Part of the dues we all pay to help young people heal is to be the target of their pain. To be of optimum assistance you cannot take what they express personally because it isn't personal.

**#2 Hearing Their Words but Missing the Meaning** – Damaged children overtime have taught me that they often talk in opposites. I share that with any adults who will listen because too many of us listen to the child's words ('I hate you get away from me') and miss the meaning ('I want you to care but that makes me vulnerable'). If we listen to the words alone, we would believe the young person wants to fail, perhaps wants to die, wants to be left alone, believes they have all the answers, and does not want the good things of life. But think about it, isn't it more accurate that the young person would rather succeed but does not know how and wants to live a good life but doesn't believe this is an option, and actually is tired and fearful of being lonely and alone, etc. Yes, some of these children have serious emotional issues and may at the time really want to die. But not if they have experienced a better option and that is our job to have them get a taste of: success, closeness without paying a traumatic price, and experiencing a life that includes good things like love and joy.

**#3 Letting the Young Person Set the Tone** – It is easier for young people (and also adults) to get attention by setting a negative tone through being negative, angry and hurtful rather than being positive, calm and caring. It is very hard to ignore the person in the situation who is tantruming and wanting everyone to have the bad day he or she is having. Whatever we give our attention to with young people, we will get

more of. If the young person can set a negative tone, then everyone loses. You cannot control another person, but you can keep the other person from controlling you and your mood. If young people are successful in setting a negative mood for everyone around them, this confirms their faulty perception that negativity is what life is all about and all life has to offer. We must model for the young person that there is a better way, but we cannot do this unless we set a positive tone.

**#4 Mirroring Reactivity** – Think about it, if someone you are trying to help is scared and panicking then how will it help if you start to panic as well? Perhaps this is an extreme example, but adults often reply to a young person's negative energy with a similar tone, and this is the last thing the situation needs. If the child is frustrated, is it helpful if you get frustrated as well? If he or she yells, argues, becomes stubborn or expresses a host of other less than helpful responses, is it helpful if you do the same? When we take the time to think about it we know the answer, but in the heat of the moment it is a mistake to respond in kind to a reactive young person. This is related to letting the young person set the tone. Therefore do your best not to match the young person's affect, behavior, voice tone and overall negativity. If the two of you are to work through a problem, then the adult must take the lead. Work to return calmness when you run into amped up energy, return reason when you get illogical ranting, and return positive support when you receive blaming and name calling. It is often not easy to do this, but it will work out best for everyone involved.

**#5 Not Having a Long-range View** – This mistake is more complicated than the others and is often missed. Most adults know what they want in the present—have the young person turn off the video game, go do homework or go to bed. It is easy to fall into the trap of being focused only on the present task because it is hard enough just to get through the day. But to be most helpful to the young person, we need to consider long-term goals. Some adults pride themselves when they manage to get a reluctant young person to comply by offering an incentive. The immediate result may be positive but is it really? Did the young person learn from the experience what it takes to cooperate with expectations in the future? Bribing, pleading, threatening or even the currently popular negotiating may help in the short run, but consider what it teaches in the long term. Will a future boss offer bribes or negotiate about a directive? Will a police officer or college professor meet the young person half way when they hear something they don't like? Young people must learn at some point to do what is expected of them even when they don't like it. Why not learn that from you? Ask yourself after working with a young person, 'Did what just happened help the young person in the future? Did she or he learn something important for future success even if it was difficult in the present?' Ask yourself if what you just taught the young person will be helpful for their success ten years from now? When you think about it, the young person's future is actually much more important than your getting through the school day or getting through the weekend without a blow up.

**#6 Being Blind to Small Improvements** – We have all had the experience of visiting the family of a close friend only to find your friend's children who were waist high on your last visit and now they are looking down at you. If you see your friend every few months and comment on the growth of the children, often the parents notice the growth only when new clothes and shoes are required. The reason for this is when a child makes daily imperceptible change, it goes unnoticed without heightening awareness to the change.

This is what we must do when helping young people. The mistake is to focus solely on problem areas without noticing slight and imperceptible improvement. Like a guest noticing young child's growth, we need to take a step back and realize that yes he still argues but with less intensity and less often than in the past. Unless we can do this, we can be blind to the successes taking place. When blind to success the frequent result is frustration, disappointment and discouragement. When we work hard to help a child change and we don't notice improvement, we can unknowingly vent our frustration at the young person when in reality the adult should be celebrating the improvement. So if this is particularly difficult for you then get opinions from others and ask if they see any improvement. When they tell you yes, believe them!

**#7 Trying to Do Too Much by Yourself** – Raising a child is the world's most difficult job and it is also a team sport. Unfortunately, modern living has robbed many families of the interaction of multiple generations where young people learned from multiple adults and the young spent abundant time with the old. But even in modern times, we need to develop a team to produce a healthy and successful young person. With difficult children, some adults try to do too much rather than ask for help. If the child is a problem at school, don't find fault with the school (which can be easy to do), but instead join forces with school staff and have the adults on the same page with common goals. From experience I suggest parents not home school difficult children. I take this position because both of you need a break from each other, and children need to learn much more than the three Rs at school, like understanding social interactions with many individuals and some may be more challenging than the young person is. Ask for help, develop a team of caring and committed adults who will work together particularly when it gets challenging. Ask for professional help when needed, and when you find a professional who makes sense to you, then listen and follow their advice. On this point psychology is like medicine where the biggest barrier to physical health is the patient not following the doctor's advice.

**#8 Wanting Too Much Back from the Young Person** – It is not just the young person we are trying to help who has needs, we all do. But here is the hard message—get your needs met from someone other than the young person. I say this in part because traumatized children have learned the survival skill of resisting adults who act like they want something from the child. In the past, many times what the adult wanted was something that child paid a dear price for. The traumatic memory in the child's brain generalizes this distancing survival skill to most if not all adults; and the child learns to avoid any adult who wants something from them, even if what the adult wants is something positive. To avoid this dynamic, offer what you have to the child and give without needing something in return. To help the young person understand what relationships are about, it is still important that you hold out expectations of politeness, gratitude, and communication. But that does not mean you will actually receive these positive acts of reciprocity. A guiding principle is to expect much but be prepared to handle getting little. This is one area where working with troubled young people is an excellent training in unconditional love.

**#9 Forgetting that Time Is on Your Side** – Time is usually your friend when helping troubled young people. To give an example, most adults are unaware that the vast majority of juvenile delinquents do not go on to a life of adult crime. Even without effective behavioral treatment, most delinquents become adults who function in the community without a criminal lifestyle. A major reason for this is brain development. The last section of the human brain to develop is the area where moral and ethical reasoning occurs. Most

of the time very negative future predictions are too negative and incorrect. Quite literally, young people need to have a brain that helps them make good decisions and override impulsive and illogical desires. You can help with this brain development by exposing the young person to decisions with ever expanding complexity. Good versus bad may work for very young children, but most ethical and moral decisions are in the grey areas of reasoning. Help the young person's brain develop by challenging them with complex choices and a framework to guide their thinking (for example the Golden Rule, the Ten Commandments, Boy/Girl Scout Oath, etc.).

**#10 Forgetting the First Priority is to Work on Yourself** – Without exception, helping young people is one of the very best ways to work on yourself. That is unless you miss this point entirely and think your only job is to change the child. Self-improvement is also one of the best ways to manage this difficult task of helping troubled children and do so for an extended period of time--perhaps decades. Every situation gives the adult another opportunity to learn, to grow in understanding and become more proficient at modeling self-improvement. When working with a young person you can insure that at least one of you wants to learn and grow, and you have a good chance of getting the young person on board. However, if your focus is only on the youngster and you are not interested in growing yourself, then you have no chance of mutual success for both of you. Don't make the biggest mistake possible and believe you have no need for change, learning and growing. Coming from such a position, you have little chance of success, and little chance of experiencing the fulfillment that can come from helping a young person be all he or she is capable of becoming.

We all strive to be reasonable, logical and fair in all we do. Unfortunately, coming from this position with challenging young people will likely leave you confused and frustrated. 'What is going on here?' is a common question psychologists are often asked. To be truly effective you may need to leave logic at the door and instead climb inside the peculiar mind of the troubled young person. If that is difficult for you, I understand, but try harder. It is understandable why so many adults make the top ten mistakes mentioned above, most adults approach the challenge from adult thinking, not the young persons. If you want to train a mustang, you better start thinking the way the horse does or suffer the consequences. Young people are smarter, more complex and overall much more difficult than training a horse. The bottom line is you can do this, and it helps to remember that once you were an obstinate young person. If you have forgotten this then ask a parent, a sibling or someone who knew you back then. Get out of your adult mind and consider how young people think but bring your wisdom along for the ride. There are people who succeed at training elephants, milking poisonous snakes, and studying massive sharks. They either learn to adjust, understand and succeed at the challenge or they are not around long. Young people pose a significant challenge but seldom to your survival, so yes you can do this! Understand what you are facing in each situation, avoid these common mistakes, lead with confidence and genuine caring, and model working on and improving yourself. That way if your parenting or helping a troubled young person doesn't produce the results you had hoped for (a frequent reality), then at least you have grown from the experience and have a chance to do better the next time.