

## What Troubled Young People Can Teach You

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As someone who has worked with troubled children for five decades, I often hear someone say to me, 'What a wonderful thing you do to help these difficult children.' So is that what this is all about, helping the children? You will have to excuse me when my primary attention is on how much they give to me with their teachings rather than the other way around. OK I will admit it is some of both, but anyone who works in the world of helping children will not last long unless the individual becomes a good student to all that young people have to teach us. This is not some flowery sentiment, it is very real and something I want to address in this article. So let's get after it (I like that phase)!

For anyone new to working with troubled children the first thing you will learn, actually in the first day and perhaps the first hour, is they tend to be brutally honest. Not necessarily with their emotions, although this happens often with negative emotions, they are brutally honest in telling you the flaws they see in you. Perhaps this is to even the score because they experience everyone going out of their way to point out their flaws. But this is not the only reason they give us unfiltered criticism (or distain may be a better word).

Somewhat like a guard dog, troubled children lead with a fierce bark while showing their teeth. Their goal is to first scare the target, and second to drive the intruder away. Troubled children may need a significant amount of help, it is just that they seldom want yours! In their minds the goal is to end their encounter with you in a hurry before they get the 'helper talk.' You know what that is—'Hi my name is Kelli Doright and I help young people like you to have better lives so in our time together...blah, blah, blah.' These children have heard it before, and their experience is the outcome is seldom what they would consider real help. Because what they really want is nearly always something you cannot give them. They want loving, nurturing biological parents who they can return to live with happily ever after, or at least to survive as best they can. With such a goal you are generally seen as part of the problem, not part of their solution. You are a part of a system that keeps them from their biological parents. Throughout this article I will attempt to offer a suggestion for every difficult dynamic I mention. Regarding this first issue I will point out that a troubled child will likely size you up in the first five minutes of meeting you. What you do first, second and third may well determine the amount of respect you will receive, and therefore the odds of actually helping this young person. I suggest you skip the 'I am a good person who is safe' because they will not believe you, why should they? I suggest you not start with what you want to say, but instead what will mean something to the young person. Something like—"I realize you have had a difficult time and you may not want to be here, but I am glad you are, and I have an immediate suggestion for you—do not trust me until I earn your trust." I say this because the child is unlikely to trust you and the last person that gave them the helper talk might well have ended up grooming and sexually abusing the child. For a traumatized child it is a survival skill not to trust adults. The best you can do is let the young person know that you acknowledge their situation, and your first request is something they will readily give you—not trusting you until they learn you are a safe person.

There is a positive aspect to the initial brutal honesty of troubled children, at least for us. Feedback from another person is a gift, but few adults will tell you what they really think about you. But difficult children will! I often suggest to new helpers that they first take an appraisal of their own flaws and make peace with them because these flaws will soon be pointed out by the young person. Are you lanky and tall, then learn to like that about yourself. Are you old, young, overweight, have an unusually large nose, perhaps a birthmark on your forehead, speak with a lisp, or have large ears (as in my specific case), then be ready to have all your flaws pointed out to you. Although the feedback is designed to be hurtful and scare you away, turn the tables and learn from what they observe about you. In reply to often rudely worded comments about your flaws, I would suggest you reply with a calm reflective tone with something like—“You are very observant, I have often noticed my ears being larger than most people.” Then surprise the young person and carry on unphased. This will communicate that you can take their raw negative comments, and you are someone who has the self-confidence to decide what you feel, and you do not wilt in the face of tough or even vulgar comments.

One of the most important survival skills a troubled young person must immediately learn is how you handle your anger. It is easy to see why this is a survival issue. Most of these children have experienced adults who strike first and think second. It is not always this blatant, because some troubled young people have experienced a different and more complex type of anger from adults when the adults gets upset and only later strikes get back by throwing you out of their home or program. Therefore the young person must immediately figure out first what makes you angry, and second how it is likely to be expressed. I have a suggestion in this case. Although we want children to be able to express a full range of emotions and they learn from our modeling, one thing a traumatized child does not need is your anger. Anger is a loaded emotion and one that is integrally linked to violence for these children. Violence can come in many forms and no violence will be helpful to a troubled child. When it comes to anger, I suggest you keep it to yourself and express it later with someone you get personal support from. Let me say it here—working with troubled young people is a team sport, do not try to do this on your own! I admit that these children can be very skilled at angering adults, some could be on the Olympic Team for angering others, if there was such a thing. But this issue is one of the best examples of what we can learn from helping difficult young people.

What makes you angry? Not higher cable bills or the jerk on the highway who tailgates you to make some unknown point. What makes you truly angry to the point that part of your reptilian brain considers some form of verbal or physical violence? If you said nothing, sorry, it is there in all of us and you are not self-aware enough to know what it is for you. The thing is that in modern life we are able to avoid most situations that would bring us to this point. But some troubled children intentionally will try to push you to this point. No, most do not have a death wish, they need to know if you are someone they need to totally avoid, or the opposite—do everything you ask because you are a risk to their safety. You do not want to be in either category if you want to help the young person. You are unlikely to have run into an adult who will push you as far as a troubled young person will. You can learn a great deal in these situations, because when else will you have someone younger and smaller (most of the time) than you try to push you over your emotional edge? How will you respond? The answer will tell you a lot about yourself, and as I mentioned earlier, it is a gift to learn about ourselves when interacting with others. Personally, I did not find true primitive anger within myself until I began working with difficult young people. Although the times I have reached that point have been few, these situations gave me practice in how to handle potentially violent outbursts that I had previously never knew existed inside me.

It almost goes without saying that working with challenging young people can teach you what works and what does not. If someone works with these children for any period of time, you learn that striking a balance is critically important. Here are a few of the issues where you must find a balance.

*Firm and Friendly* – traumatized children must be incredibly sensitive to the energy they experience from adults. The child must find out quickly if you are a safety threat or not. Once the child learns that you are not a violent threat, the next question the child has is how much can they get away with from you. Therefore you neither want to be too firm, and be associated with the abusive adults the child has run into, and you do not want to be too friendly, or the child will attempt to take charge and determine what does and does not happen next. It is often a good idea to begin an interaction with a challenging young person on the firm side of the continuum and move closer to the friendly direction over time. It can be very difficult to do the reverse.

*Optimum Level of Expectations* – expectations are very important with troubled children. You will very seldom have the child meet your expectations, but you will almost never get more than you expect (as in good things). In other words, the higher the expectations, the more you will likely get from these children in areas such as chores, school work and respect towards adults. However, if you set your expectations too high, the young person will do what he or she nearly always does and that is to give up when things get challenging. Therefore expectations are an important issue with troubled children and finding a balance of expectations that are high, but not too high, is wise.

*Structured vs Flexible* – It is currently a popular recommended approach to negotiate with children. This is an approach that over time has come in and out of favor. In the past this approach has been called permissive parenting. Currently a similar approach is being marketed as enlightened parenting. This approach is unlikely to hold up over time because what troubled children need is clear structure from caring and competent adults. These children do not need to learn that rules are negotiable. An important responsibility of adults is to prepare children for a world they will experience in the future. Everyone functions within rules and seldom are they flexible. A boss will seldom negotiate a later work day because a worker is not a 'morning person'. Professors seldom negotiate when a term paper is due to meet your needs, and police officers do not consider speed limits as negotiable speed recommendations. Finding a balance is once again important, but in general troubled children need predictable structure more than they need negotiable rules.

Being balanced is not the only skill that young people can help you improve. A positive aspect of working with difficult young people is getting immediate feedback. But like all lessons challenging children can teach us, the more open we are to learning, the more we gain from the experiences these children provide us. Working with challenging young people is one area where you will not get bored, that is unless you stop learning.

The last two areas that will be included here are internal lessons and what you can learn about yourself. The first is learning how to love someone who does not love you back. This can be considered both a psychological as well as a spiritual lesson. No one easily handles unreturned caring. A person reaches out to another with interest and receives disinterest in return. For most of us, we begin this struggle as young children when we want to play with another child on the playground and find the other child does not have the same interest in us. This is infinitely easier to handle than our first experiences with a love

interest, or more precisely infatuation. When we invest in what we think is the love of our lives only to be rejected, this can be a searing pain that we are initially not sure we can recover from. But we move on and learn that even the wound of unrequited love can heal. An even deeper pain can come when a parent loves a biological child and for any number of reasons, the child does not return the love.

Nearly always when we are referencing troubled children these are not biological children, but young people we choose to reach out to with our care and concern. Once again, no one likes to be rejected, but more often than not, difficult young people will do just that—reject our overtures. Regardless of how much we understand why the young people does this, it remains difficult for us. Here is where rejection can have a profound spiritual lesson or what can be considered learning to love unconditionally. There are very few relationships in our lives where we have the opportunity to learn about unconditional love. The term is exactly what it says—loving with no conditions or expectation of getting something in return. We don't have that with our partners, our friends and we don't have that with our children. With little practice, most adults have little or no understanding or experience in unconditional love. In most spiritual traditions, unconditional love is held out as the highest form of love and something that approximates divine love. Therefore, working with troubled young people can provide a true spiritual exercise in unconditional loving. Troubled children provide this teaching and they don't even ask for anything back from us. But how many of us take advantage of this spiritual gift?

This article will end with the general area of how working with troubled children can help us work on ourselves as we attempt to help them. What every adult wishes for a young person is that the child learn to self-reflect and maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. Without self-reflection it is unlikely that any individual will learn from the many lessons of living in order to build a successful life, and all adults want a successful life for children. But self-reflection is not taught in schools and is seldom represented in movies and the media. So how will a child learn this basic tenant of a successful life? The answer is the modeling from significant adults they interact with. For most traumatized children this most often rules out the modeling of biological parents. Many troubled young males have grown up with no modeling from a consistent male because they mainly come from fatherless homes. Many others have had experiences with a father that has often been negative. This means that the majority of troubled children have mostly negative modeling in their past and the only source of guaranteed positive modeling in the future comes down to you.

Working with difficult children is an excellent opportunity to self-reflect and assess yourself on any number of issues. Do you make positive decisions? Do you invest in your own mind, body and spirit? If you would like to start now to self-reflect then take a few minutes to rate yourself on the following scale. Your results will be only as helpful as your honesty.



## **Personal Contentment Inventory**

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For each of the following 20 questions give yourself a score:

**2 - If you do this most of the time**

**1 - If you do this some of the time**

**0 - If this is seldom true for you**

1. Do you bounce back when things go badly?
2. Do you laugh multiple times each day?
3. Do you make healthy lifestyle choices and avoid unhealthy behaviors?
4. Do you get pleasure and enjoyment out of what you do?
5. Do you invest yourself in your work and non-work activities?
6. Do you generally have a positive outlook?
7. Do you believe in and support yourself?
8. Do you ask for what you need from others?
9. Do you allow others to support you?
10. Do you have a personal belief system?
11. Does your belief system sustain you when life is difficult?
12. Do you use positive coping styles with the stress in your life?
13. Are you generally optimistic about your life?
14. Are you often grateful for what you have?
15. Do you share your good times and bad times with your support system?
16. Are your emotions primarily positive?
17. Do you thank others for being helpful, and forgive others when they aren't?
18. Do you go out of your way to perform acts of kindness?
19. Do you make sure you spend positive time with your family and others you love?
20. Do you find ways to make your life more meaningful?

## **Results**

31-40 Your personal contentment is excellent, you are likely happy, satisfied, and healthy.

21-30 Your personal contentment is good, you hold your own in life and meet your goals.

11-20 Your personal contentment is fair, you likely struggle with stress and disappointment.

0-10 Your personal contentment is poor, you likely are overwhelmed by your life.

So how did you do? Did you overstate how well your life is going, meaning you need more practice at critical self-reflection? Are you like everyone else that some areas of your life need additional attention? If so, there is no time like the present. And while you are at it, you may not only move toward a better you, but you will also model for those around you, and any troubled young person you are trying to help, that self-reflection is the foundation of growth and a successful life.

Of course, there is much more that could be said on the topic of learning from young people. We could take each of the questions in the above inventory and point out how we can learn something from the difficult children we are trying to help. Just remember, when it comes to teaching, it is often the teacher who learns the most, not the student. When it comes to parenting and youth work, it can be the worker who can emerge from the experience enriched in so many ways. And when this happens, there is a synergetic quality that we model for young people one of the most important 'secrets' of living--the one who gives the most, get the most in return.