

KID WHISPERING

and the Inside Kid

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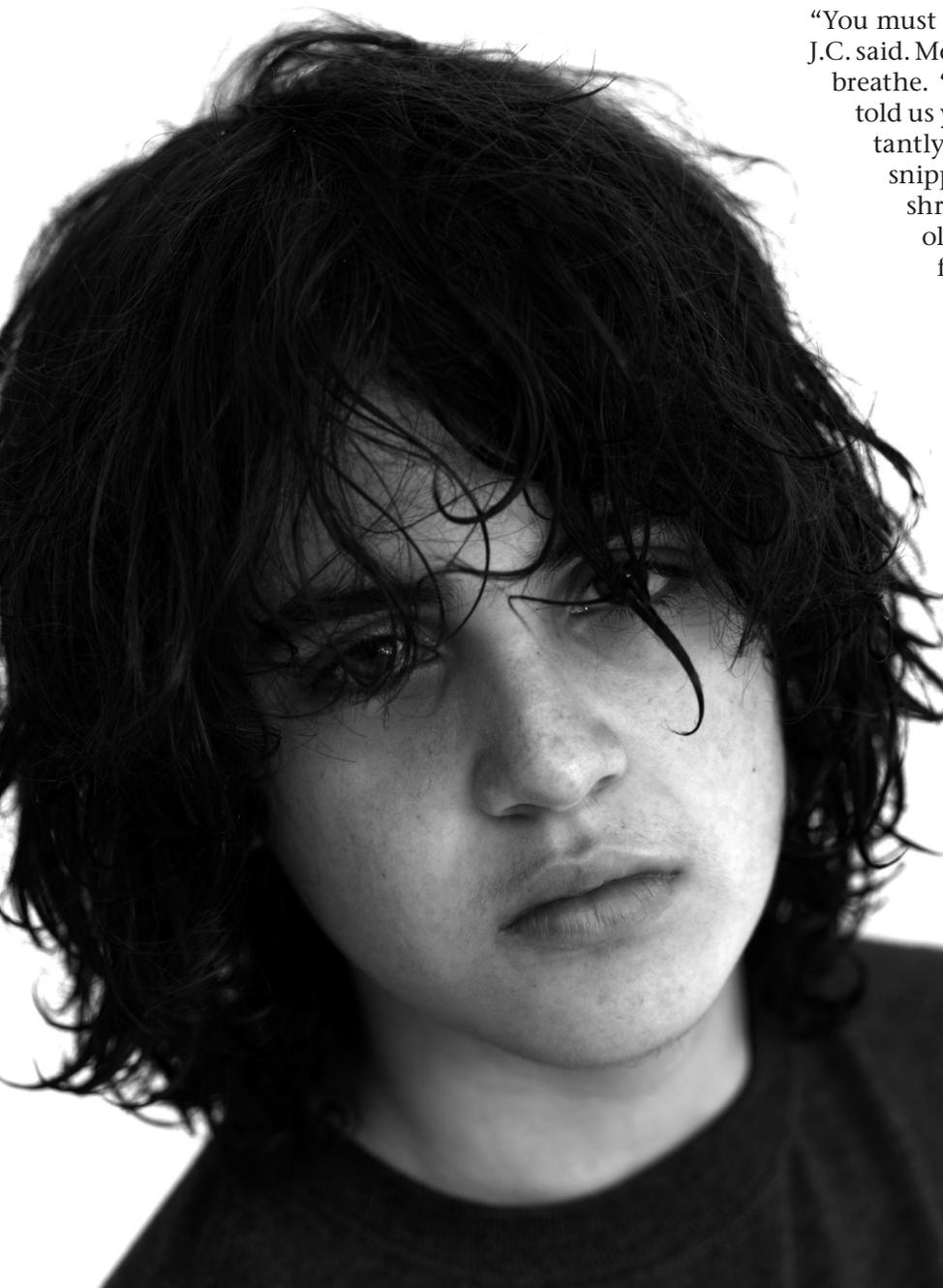
Our most challenging youth have learned to be experts at outwitting helping professionals. This article demonstrates the process of reconnecting with such adult-wary kids.

Dark black hair dropped down past his eyes, and she had nothing but concern as she attached herself to his side. They sat in the waiting room with no awareness of who this counselor was. They came armed with hope and some sense that because of the reputation of the counselor, maybe he was one who could connect with struggling youth.

“You must be RayJay, and you are RayJay’s mom,” J.C. said. Mom responded before the boy could even breathe. “Tommy Smith referred us to you and told us you could help!” She greeted J.C. expectantly. RayJay was suspicious and sullen. He snipped, “I’ve already seen a bunch of you shrinks!” It was later learned that RayJay’s older brother had had lots of trouble and failed experiences with helping professionals. RayJay’s comment reflected both his and his brother’s sentiments about counseling, or perhaps “being helped.”

This is not an atypical beginning to many attempts at therapeutic intervention with young people and families throughout the world. Whether the intervention takes place in outpatient counseling, or in residential, alternative school or community-based settings, there is usually a mixture of reluctance, fear, and hope as the process begins.

The responses of both—Mom’s willingness, hope, and expectations, and RayJay’s resistance—are connected to past disappointments and relational pain. They may have very specific



evidence that intervention or any offers to help just stir things up and leave them hanging. When engaging youth with struggles in the presence of family members or others, it is important to address the youth first. Young people grow accustomed to being talked about in their presence by the adults surrounding them. When adults watch and listen closely to the communication from the youth, the youth pay close attention. This is especially true of adolescents who want and need to speak for themselves. They are attentive to how the adults see their place in this new relationship that exists because of trouble they are experiencing or causing for others. The language in this critical process is both spoken and unspoken, and only adults equipped with specific ability and willingness to respond effectively to youth in these circumstances will be able to reach and teach them.

J.C. asked RayJay where his father was, to which the young man rolled his soft brown eyes and spoke briefly, “We sometimes have him, most of the time not; besides, [Mom’s] here and that’s all that counts.” Beneath his words was a tone that indicated important territory. Mom is home base and Dad, for some reason unknown to J.C. at the time, was on the outside. As J.C. often does, he asked permission to snoop further, “who’s all a part of the family living at home?”

Counselors treated this kid like an “it” rather than a “you.”

RayJay, poised and protective, responded this time more assertively, “my (older) brother and little sister! She doesn’t have to be in this, does she?” Was he being resistant or protective? J.C. chose to interpret it as the latter and responded, “You really love and want to protect your little sis!” RayJay replied, “She don’t need to know about my problems and my mistakes.”

Often with hurt kids, if interactions move beyond the stuff plainly spoken and capture the emotional nuance, the student will respond with an amplification of his emotional tone. Hurt, abandonment and rejection make this student adult wary and impact his interactions with anyone perceived as a threat in his space. His expectations of strangers outside his

circle have been imprinted by past hurt, abandonments, and rejections, and in this case, past abuse. His expectations are for more of the same unless he protects himself.

Shame Begets Wariness

J.C.’s inquiry yielded the following information: previous counselors and youth workers treated this kid like an “it” rather than a “you.” Psychologist Daniel Goleman describes “it” as “a range of relations that comes from minimally detached to utterly exploitive, where in the spectrum, others become objects or treated from the perspective of their role” (2006, p. 105). In this case, counselors

treated RayJay as a client. J.C. discovered that RayJay’s father had been in and out of his life due to an ongoing battle with crack cocaine addiction. His father also had problems with anger, and his rage usually intensified with the use of cocaine.

RayJay’s disclosure brings an understanding of his dealings with older men and how through his lens, men generally are self-centered, erratic, at times violent, and relationally insensitive and unavailable. His mother, on the other hand, was reliable, sensitive, too tolerant, steadfast, and mentoring. He trusted his mom and protected her but did not rely on her to be strong or even able to protect them from his father’s periodic outbursts in the early hours of the morning. Hurt, disappointment, abandonment, and/or neglect beget wariness. New relationships begin under a cloud. According to Gershén Kaufman (1996), RayJay’s experience is a shame based experience:

This binding effect of shame is central to understanding shame’s impact on personality development. The binding effects of exposure, of feeling seen, acutely disturb the smooth functioning of the self. Exposure binds movement and speech, paralyzing the self. The urge to hide, to disappear, is a spontaneous reaction to the self’s heightened visibility; it can overwhelm the self. To feel shame is to feel inherently bad, fundamentally flawed as a person. A consuming loneliness gradually can envelope the self in the wake of shame, and deepening self-doubt can become one’s constant companion. Even so, shame remains an ambivalent affect.

In the midst of shame, there is an ambivalent longing for reunion with whomever shamed us. We feel divided and secretly yearn to feel one, whole. The experience of shame feels like a rupture either in self, in a particular relationship, or both. Shame is an affective experience that violates both interpersonal trust and internal security. Intense shame is a sickness within the self, a disease of the spirit. (p. 18)

In spite of the intense conflict in RayJay's relationship with his father, he still desires a consistent father/son relationship. RayJay's exposure to his father's addiction and violent outbursts and his mother's related depression and despair have shattered his interpersonal bridge to others, friend or stranger. Building a bridge to RayJay required interpersonal adjustments which needed to be made in his present counseling relationship.

RayJay hints to J.C. in their first meeting that he has a desire to have a relationship with his father, despite the intermittent absence and abuse. Beyond that, he may also have a dream about how that relationship will manifest and the effect it may have on his entire family. Young people who are in pain, transitioning again to a new therapeutic setting, are wary of "help" due to an experiential reference that tells them nothing good will come from this. RayJay's dream is likely well defended at an early stage of his relationship with his new counselor. He will tell more of his story, revealing more about the kid inside the kid, as J.C. carefully engages him and seeks that important middle ground of communication that lies between pressing too hard and seeming disinterested.

Hope and optimism predict many desirable outcomes.

Being able to attain a respectful working relationship with the outside kid that everyone sees will give RayJay the message that this counselor is interested and is willing to start from the place RayJay decides is safe enough for him. As the therapeutic relationship develops in a way that he can be invested and have a controlling interest, he will determine when it is safe to expose the inside kid.

DREAM CATCHING

In an opening scene in the movie *Antwone Fisher*, a young boy stands alone in a field, dressed in his Sunday suit. Before him is a large building, gleaming bright white in the sun. As he approaches the building, a door opens and a tall, broad man looks down at him. After a moment for dramatic effect, the man smiles warmly, extends his hand and leads Antwone into the building where scores of people seem to be awaiting his arrival. A woman takes him by the hand and leads him past the people, all of whom smile and nod to him in joyful, welcoming gestures. As he is seated at the head of a large table, covered with food of all sorts, a large plate is about to be set before him. Suddenly, his dream of what might be is interrupted by a horrifying recurring nightmare that more reflects the reality of his life.

Waking up in traumatic startle was typical for Antwone as it is for many of the young people facing interventions. The effects of trauma can be lasting, especially in people without a healthy resilience reflex who are not operating in a stable, healthy ecology. When the trauma is ongoing, the effects may become more damaging over time.

Helping young people in pain and trouble articulate their dreams is a way of helping them maintain hope. Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman in *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004) write, "We have noted that hope and optimism predict many desirable outcomes: achievement in all sorts of domains (academic, athletic, military, political and vocational); freedom from anxiety and depression; good social relationships; and physical well-being" (p. 576).

Join-up Adjustments

Monty Roberts is author of *New York Times* best-seller, *The Man Who Listens to Horses* (1999) as well as *Horse Sense for People* (2001). Monty Roberts departed from the tradition of "breaking" horses through fear and punishment. He pioneered his own method of "starting" horses, called "Join-Up®," in which the trainer elicits top performance from horses by establishing a relationship of communication, trust, and respect with them. Monty Roberts' website states, "Monty first developed Join-Up® to stop the cycle of violence typically accepted in traditional horse breaking.... Monty created these consistent...principles using the horse's internal methods of communication and herd behavior. The result is

a willing partnership in which the horse's performance can flourish to its full potential" (Roberts & Roberts, 2006).

RayJay critiques what other counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists did wrong with him: "They tried to shrink me, they never talk, just nod their heads. They always seemed busy or unwilling to deal with me." The authors have had many late night discussions about how they believe it is the youth specialist's responsibility to make the adjustments with the students they see. Their job is to adjust their output and input channels to match the students' style of communicating their story. The students get to drive while the youth specialists have the very important responsibility to navigate. Richard Bandler, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) trainer, proclaims specialists need to match their client's output in order to lead them in a different direction.

Nicholas Long, the developer of LSCI model, challenges all who work with struggling students to learn to read student behavior. Pain-based and shame-based reactions often point to core trauma and/or hassles. Richard Kagan (2004), in *Rebuilding Attachments with Traumatized Children*, echoes Dr. Long's challenge when he states:

The youth professional's job is to decode the distressed behavior in youth—that is, connect outside behavioral responses with inside needs.

A child's behavior signals what kind of attachment he or she has experienced. The child who appears inhibited and focuses his or her attention almost exclusively on the gestures and verbalizations of the adult has often learned to anticipate adult responses with the hope of getting what he or she needs from an inconsistent adult, perhaps a parent consumed by his or her own problem. A child who acts wild or in a destructive manner may have learned that this is what he or she needs to do in order to get attention or any thing at all.
(p. 11)

The youth professional's job is to decode the distressed behavior in youth—that is, connect outside behavioral responses with inside needs. When youth have the most difficulty expressing or acknowledging their distressed behavior, Nicholas Long and colleagues present what they refer to as The Third Level of Decoding. The adult moves away from a discussion of behavior and directly addresses avoidance and denial (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001).

J.C. was talking in the local mental hospital with RayJay. They were discussing his past because his current behavior tends to be highly unrelated with youth who experience neglect and/or abuse. RayJay replied, "Yeah, I know. Do you know if my dad's coming today?" J.C. answered, "No. Did you hear what I was saying? He said "Yeah!" crisply, like that was enough of that and could they move on? J.C. reflected his avoidance and said, "RayJay, you seem to be very uncomfortable with my comments and questions today. Can you tell me why?" He snapped, "I don't like going backwards.... I haven't talked to anyone about that stuff!" J.C. responded, "And you don't have to now, I just want you to know that sometimes our current hassles are related to hidden secrets!"

Figure 1



Beyond Words and Behavior

The skill of listening is a complex, multidimensional skill that requires listening with the ears, the eyes and the heart in order to really understand the important communication of young people. The Chinese symbol for "listen" literally means that one should listen with one ear, ten eyes, and one heart. See Figure 1.

Kid Whispering requires the skill and sensitivity to give significance to what the young people say in the context of the way they say it and the circumstances from which the words come. Kid Whisperers are able to respond to the offensive and defensive language of youth while looking for meaning in their non-verbal communication and their needs.

The art of Kid Whispering is being developed to help find ways to create a trusting partnership with youth. Kid Whisperers can then help youth develop the Inside Kid to a more successful and satisfying way of living.

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