

Thriving

children • youth • families

 Learning online journal

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Chicken Alfredo

- and other ingredients
- for an effective service plan

Thirteen-year-old Jimmy is a small, intelligent, and emotionally immature student in an alternative school program. He was the reason that I was asked to provide consultation to the staff and administrators in the school. With his constant verbal disruptions, threats to other students, and physical acting out, there were concerns that he may not be able to stay in the program. Upon our introduction, he responded with a tentative handshake and immediately began to set the tone for his interaction with me. “Freado...Freado...alfredo...alfredo... chicken alfredo. That’s it! I’ll call you chicken alfredo.” As he said that, he looked at me intently.

More than just a humorously provocative beginning, he appeared to be watching for my reaction. I smiled at him and told him that I had been doing this for a long time, but I had never heard that one. It was his first opportunity to size me up.

And so began a four-day observation, interaction, and relationship-building assessment focused on helping the team answer two important questions. The first had to do with the suitability of the placement, and the second question was, if this is a suitable placement, what should be done to help him?

In our mutual effort to get acquainted, Jimmy told me that he knew everything about World War II. He said, “Ask me any question about World War II.” So, I asked him where the Battle of the Bulge was fought. He said, “Not like that! Ask me about tanks.” Of course, I was very curious about his knowledge of tanks, and he proceeded to tell me about five different kinds of tanks used in the war. Impressed, I asked him where he learned so much about that. Jimmy told me he learned about it from a video game adding, “It’s historically accurate.” I was intrigued by his seemingly sincere interest in the details of these weapons. As he talked with me, I noticed that he did not sustain eye-contact and did not respond to my questions. He seemed interested in only telling me what he learned about tanks. Throughout the week he made numerous comments about the destructive power of various weapons. His references in that way were not threatening, but rather, demonstrated his fascination with power.

Like many of the young people we serve, Jimmy has experienced a great deal of frustration, failure, pain, and trauma. It is altogether reasonable that he would be wary of a new adult interaction

when he has yet to find safety or trusting connections. He was one of five students in this alternative school setting and significantly more outgoing than the others. Rather than sit back quietly and wait or hope that he would not be noticed or act sullen and hostile like several of the other students, Jimmy jumped right in to establish himself by his witty, provocative approach.

It is important to understand that young people are assessing us in light of their previous experience with powerful adults.

In the Art of Kid Whispering: Reaching the Inside Kid, we explore how children “dance” with us as adult caregivers. Jimmy’s dance began as one we might characterize as “fool” because he initially engaged in at-

tempts at intelligent and witty banter to see how I would respond. It was not long until his other dominant dance, “fight,” was exhibited. In that approach he was very verbally aggressive and physically aggressive toward property. Among our significant responsibilities is to develop the discerning skills necessary to recognize the dance and respond in ways that will safely and therapeutically engage the young person with an openness to their needs and interests (Chambers & Freado, 2015).

Psychologist Dave Ziegler identifies four ways that traumatized young people view adults:

- safety threat
- interpersonal threat
- easy mark
- irrelevant

A person with power may be perceived by a traumatized youth as a safety threat. Many well-intentioned staff members would be very surprised and disappointed to learn that they are viewed that way by youth in their care. It is important to understand that young people are assessing us in light of their previous experience with powerful adults.

At one point on my first day in the classroom, I observed Jimmy working on an assignment, and I touched his shoulder as I attempted to give him an affirmation. He recoiled from my touch. I apologized for the intrusion, and he told me that he does not like when people touch him sometimes. Promising to not do that again when he is unaware I asked if we could shake on it, and he did. That helped me understand some of his needs in that area and acceptable boundaries for him. An adult perceived as

a safety threat may stir up experiences in the youth related to physical or psychological safety causing the youth to constantly operate in survival mode. While it is important for adults to be viewed as having power, they need to be mindful that this power is not perceived by the child as a safety threat. (Ziegler, 2002). It was clear from interacting with Jimmy that he was very wary of adults who were safety threats as he made many statements that referenced being hurt or sexually abused.

Being regarded by a young person as either an easy mark or irrelevant is usually not comfortable for adults and is not very helpful for youth. Easy marks are seen by young people as having something they want, and kids are able to get what they want from them with little effort. According to Ziegler, youth who perceive adults this way “attempt to get as much as they can while giving as little as they can” (Ziegler, 2002, p. 92). On the other hand, adults viewed as irrelevant merit little attention from youth. As I observed Jimmy, he frequently interacted with adults in a way that implied he saw them as easy marks. Helping his caregivers move away from being seen that way became a part of the strategy in Jimmy’s service plan.

Trust between a child and adult is essential

Traumatized young people may also regard adults as an interpersonal threat. Adults who are seen this way are also powerful. The distinction is that the youth do not perceive them as a safety threat. Ziegler refers to this category as the one of the four that provides opportunities for developing healthy relationships and therapeutic opportunities with young people. I refer to this category as the “sweet spot” in our approach to working with traumatized youth. Adults who are perceived as interpersonal threats engage with young people in a give-and-take for influencing what happens. These adults are interested, attentive, and involved. They are able to build reachable moments with young people to find and use the teachable moments. This reflects the strategy that the alternative school staff would take with Jimmy. Of course, the term “interpersonal threat” doesn’t sound very positive, because Ziegler framed it in the way a traumatized youth views an adult with such a presence. However, reflecting the function of adults who take this approach with youth we can use the term “healthy challenger” (Ziegler, 2002) (Chambers & Freado, 2015).

Building Jimmy’s service plan had to first include a foundation of safety for Jimmy, other students, and the program staff. The Model of Leadership and Service (Figure 1) provides a strength-based, developmental template for creating service or treatment plans for troubling and traumatized youth by examining six areas all humans need to reach their full potential: Safety, Belonging, Achievement, Power, Purpose, and Adventure.

Safety

Helping Jimmy and the staff to have a sense of “felt safety” would require the staff to engage more as healthy challengers in their interactions with him. It was important for Jimmy to know that his needs would be met and that the staff would respond with interest and expectations about the way he approached them. They would continue to engage with him in helpful, caring ways while being clearer about boundaries. Safety is not only about protection and survival but also relates to one’s self-worth. Establishing a consistent pattern of responses among the staff members would bring a sense of predictability and order to frequently hectic and highly emotional interactions. This would allow the staff to have a greater sense of control, also enhancing their sense of safety (Strother, Maikoetter, Freado, & Brendtro, L, 2016) (Hobbs, 1994).

Belonging

Jimmy’s social history and his own description of his interactions with others showed a young adolescent who spent a great deal of time alone. His relationships with his parents and siblings were strained. When I asked him about friends or peers outside of school with whom he interacted he said there was no one. “They don’t like me,” was his reply. When I tried to talk with him about that he refused and changed the subject. He told me that he spent most of his time playing video games. Jimmy appears to have no stable or satisfying relationships. It is in healthy relationships that people thrive. Bruce Perry writes, “Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love” (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006, p. 230).

Addressing this need focused on working with Jimmy to create stability in his relationships with peers and develop trust between himself and the staff. Fostering relationships with staff members creates a foundation on which other relationships and new learning will be supported. Nicholas Hobbs wrote, “Trust between a child and adult is essential...the glue that holds teaching and learning together,

The Model of Leadership and Service

the beginning point for reeducation” (Hobbs, 1994, p. 245). A predominant part of Jimmy’s interaction with others was an attempt to impress them with his certainty of superior intelligence. That typically involved his talking over people and frequently making derogatory comments toward them.

Developing and improving relationships with others is particularly important for young people who have experienced the kind of rejection, loss, and betrayal that Jimmy has endured. He was aware of the outcomes that came from his approach as he stated people would stop listening to him or just walk away. He rationalized that it meant they could not win the argument, failing to realize others were not interested in arguing. Because of Jimmy’s past experience with limited and broken relationships, he apparently had no idea what he was missing. The ability to create and maintain healthy relationships requires reciprocity. Even as people around him were willing and available, he lacked the sense of safety and interpersonal skills that would make better relationships possible. The goal of staff became to mediate and help Jimmy learn to be more patient in his interactions and more attentive to what others were saying. The staff would encourage and support his interaction and focus specifically on listening and responding skills.

Achievement

“Competence makes a difference, and children and adolescents should be helped to be good at something, especially schoolwork” (Hobbs, 1994, p. 251). Students placed in alternative schools often have trouble being good at schoolwork. This non-traditional setting can be a very effective place to get the time and attention they need to begin achieving at the expected academic levels and return to the regular classroom. Sometimes the circumstances that result in alternative school placement involve academic deficits and social or behavioral problems. That was the case with Jimmy. He is an intelligent boy who can complete academic tasks, but he seldom cares to do so. He requires frequent prompts to be on task. While the staff provided encouragement and affirmations about his ability to do the work, his refusal to do schoolwork and his disruption of the classroom and disrespect toward others resulted in concerns about the appropriateness of his placement in the alternative setting. Before academic achievement could be addressed, it was apparent that Jimmy needed supportive intervention in how to be a member of the classroom.



One area that was targeted was his propensity to interrupt and either demand, or at times, ask politely for something he wanted. Part of the service plan included a change of strategy on the part of the staff. Rather than tolerate his interruptions and acquiesce to his demands or requests, staff members began to prompt that he was interrupting and provide him with feedback about how to engage in a more socially acceptable manner, i.e., waiting, re-entering the room slowly, and letting his need for attention be known in a less intrusive manner. The staff would then return to what they were doing, allowing Jimmy to choose whether or not to respond to the prompt. He would be attended to, instructed, and in turn have his question or concern addressed. Edward Deci notes that, “Feeling competent is important both for extrinsic motivation and for intrinsic motivation” (Deci & Flaste, 1996, p. 64). This form of behavioral shaping didn’t use tokens or rewards and punishment. Rather, it involved being engaged with Jimmy in the action of developing social skills competence. The staff members were establishing themselves as healthy challengers.

Power

“Powerlessness is the greatest threat to a person’s promise of contributing to society, as well as to their individual health and well-being” (Keltner, 2016, p. 157). There were two often repeated themes in Jimmy’s communication. He made frequent references about sex, mostly about male on male oral sex. It was used as a general disruptive comment in response to peers and in angry



Jimmy's class at the rocket launch



ways directed at adults. Sometimes he directed remarks toward the adult males present, stating they must be child abusers. Many sexual references were also aimed at one of the female staff members. The other frequent theme was about power, like the tanks he wanted to tell me about on the first day. He talked about weapons of different types and their destructive power and even did his own research on the most powerful nuclear blasts possible and projections of mass casualties.

Both of those themes were addressed. Initially he rebuffed inquiries about his fascination with power by either restating whatever he had just expressed or by changing the subject. After several days of reflecting back to him his fascination with power, he began to express his urge to direct destructive power toward someone in particular. While it was difficult for him to verbalize the fear that these emotions elicited, he instead stated that he would be able to take care of it himself. Moving forward, the staff members were encouraged to point out his references to weapons and offer him an opportunity to talk more about what that means to him.

As for his sexual statements, a two-fold approach would be used. First, he would be told that the comments were inappropriate and would receive no further response. The second approach was to let Jimmy know that if there were things he needed to talk about, the staff would listen or get someone else who would listen.

His initial response to the second approach initiated an acting-out episode that lasted for hours. Sometime in the recent past a call had been made to the child abuse hotline as a result of some of his verbalizations. An investigation was started and then terminated almost immediately. During the episode, Jimmy was out of control, and at one point he screamed that no one could help him and no one wanted to help him. Dachar Keltner notes that, "powerlessness is the most robust trigger of stress and cortisol release" (Keltner, 2016, p. 141). This episode was accompanied by overturning furniture, tearing things off the wall, and disbursing various food items all over the room. None of that was directed at harming himself or others. Jimmy's sense of powerlessness made it very difficult for him to self-regulate. The staff response during this episode was focused on attempts to co-regulate and help him calm down. It was apparent that this was an important area to address with Jimmy and would continue to be part of his service plan (Strother, Maikoetter, Freado, & Brendtro, L, 2016).

Purpose

“Children draw on their connections, competencies, and power to give purpose to their lives” (Strother, Maikoetter, Freado, & Brendtro, L, 2016, p. 47). Jimmy’s story is one that is significantly lacking in all of these areas of need. He has not enjoyed stable, healthy relationships and frequently experiences rejection. His story has included significant problems in school, and he emphatically stated that he feels powerless.

Healing trauma includes finding a context for feeling safe, having the opportunity to express the trauma without being re-traumatized, and engaging in healthy experiences repeatedly over time. Jimmy has a very difficult time expressing himself in ways that others can listen to and understand. Keeping such feelings inside creates frustration and uses a great deal of energy (Van der kolk, 2014).

The plan in the alternative school is designed to address each of those critical drives. One of the goals is to help him feel more welcome and engaged in the classroom through the support, direction, and accountability provided by the staff. Learning and practicing more appropriate social skills will enhance his relationships, as well as allow more energy for attending to academic tasks and interacting with staff in more therapeutic ways. Continuing to offer him opportunities to have voice, access, and ownership within the boundaries established by the staff will enhance his sense of power in that setting. Finally, recognizing his progress and success in ways he can understand and acknowledge will enhance his sense of safety, connections, competence, and power and encourage him to reach further.

Adventure

In the Model of Leadership and Service, adventure is about curiosity, exploration, risk, and experience. On the last day of my consultation, the teacher, Mr. B, worked with four of the students on a small scale rocket building project. He attempted to do this same math and science lesson the previous day, but it devolved in to the chaos of students talking over the teacher, engaging with each other in provocative ways, and wandering out of the room. Convinced that his students would really learn from this and have fun, he presented it again. Much of the afternoon was spent preparing the materials and constructing the rockets. Three of the four students, including Jimmy, built rockets according to the specifications. The materials were cardboard and paper, and the propellant was compressed air. Once built, they headed out to a

field behind the school to launch and measure. On the way to the field one of the students left the group and was trailed by an accompanying staff member. Another student stayed with the group but threw his rocket in the bushes. Jimmy and one other student remained. As his rocket lifted off successfully and sailed nearly 100 feet, Jimmy jumped up and yelled, “Holy shit!” and ran to measure his distance. His classmate’s rocket sailed a bit farther than Jimmy’s, and I observed him congratulating his classmate. Back in the classroom, Jimmy and his classmate eagerly told another staff member about the rocketry adventure. He was excited for the success of building a rocket that actually flew. “In growing up, a child should know some joy in each day and look forward to some joyous event for the morrow” (Hobbs, 1994, p. 285).

In the eventful week much was learned about Jimmy. It was determined that Jimmy would be able to not only survive but also, hopefully, thrive in this alternative classroom setting. Two months after implementing the new plan, Jimmy is showing progress in every area. The Model of Leadership and Service provides an effective and comprehensive lens for assessment and a template for planning for the young people we serve.

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