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A Dialogue on Reclaiming Troubled Youth

August Aichhorn & Fritz Redl

This discussion is drawn from the writings of two eminent founders of the reclaiming movement for troubled children and adolescents. August Aichhorn is best known for his classic book, *Wayward Youth*, and Fritz Redl as co-author of *Children Who Hate*.

August Aichhorn [1878-1949] was born in Austria and at age twenty became a teacher in an urban elementary school. When military camps for boys were introduced in Vienna in 1907, he led a successful fight against this authoritarian approach. Aichhorn later developed schools and guidance clinics for troubled students and authored the book *Wayward Youth* in 1925, translated into English a decade later. He was a colleague of Anna Freud who wrote his obituary in 1951.

August Aichhorn and Anna Freud mentored a young educational psychologist, Fritz Redl [1902-1988]. As Hitler came to power, Redl immigrated to Michigan in the U.S. For nearly a half century, Redl was the preeminent expert on the aggressive child. Fritz Redl and David Wineman wrote the classic books *Children Who Hate* (1951) and *Controls from Within* (1952). They also worked with William C. Morse to develop the University of Michigan Fresh Air Camp, where across four decades from 1941 thousands of professionals were trained in reclaiming children and youth (Brendtro, 2008; James, 2008; Morse, 2008). The following hypothetical dialogue includes original citations from writings by Aichhorn and Redl.

Aichhorn: Wayward Youth

By “wayward youth” I do not mean merely delinquent and dissocial children but also so-called problem children and others suffering from neurotic symptoms. A strict definition or delimitation of these groups is difficult because they tend to merge into each other. You are familiar with these cases from everyday observation, in social work, in the child-guidance clinic, in the Juvenile Court, and in similar contacts.¹

At a time when the English hanged a beggar without process of law, after his first relapse ... there existed no special code of law for the wayward.... They were ignored and allowed to drift until they caused too much damage to be overlooked.... Then the wayward person was arrested and thrown into prison.... The idea was to bring the prisoner the greatest amount of suffering ... through brutal

treatment in word and deed.... Still in the year 1832, a nine-year-old child was condemned to death in England because he had broken a store window and stolen two pennies worth of paint.²

One cannot prevent society from seeking protection against the youthful transgressor. But one must concede that *the juvenile delinquent is entitled to hold society responsible for letting him grow up as a lawbreaker*.³ Beginning with the nineteenth century...improper conditions were to be corrected both in institutions and foster homes, and educational organizations were founded to pursue this goal.⁴ But the student of history will also recognize that welfare work was born out of deeply felt religious obligation, out of a charitable impulse which developed into social insight and understanding that *the troubled child has the right to be helped*.⁵

Anyone who has occasion to visit reformatories of the old type is struck first of all by the sullen, reserved appearance of the pupils ... everywhere a cautious, suspicious attitude, with mistrustful glances full of hatred. Nobody looks you straight in the eye. That happy overflow of good cheer, which one expects in normal children, is entirely lacking.... Real spirits, real joy of life, find a quite different expression. One shudders at the amount of hate pent up in these young people. Far from finding a release in the reformatory, this burden of hate seems only to grow heavier as if stored for later explosion within society.⁶

Redl: The Children Nobody Wants

The original inspiration [*for Children who Hate*,] comes from August Aichhorn. His inimitable skill in handling wayward and aggressive youngsters remains unforgettable. His search into the motivation of their behavior and his effort to design new treatment channels for them are, by now, recognized as a classic contribution to the field.⁷

We have learned much about hatred during the past fifty years.... There is a great difference between the child who breaks out into some minor aggressive rebellion from time to time ... and the child whose aggression seems to flow uninhibited ... into flare-ups of blind and murderous rage.... The *children who hate* very soon become the *children nobody wants*.... Even though we know the reasons [for their rage] are none of their fault, by and large, neither the homes which originally produced them, nor the schools to which they go, nor the neighborhoods in which they play, nor the communities in which they live, are willing or able to put up with what they put out.⁸

I really think that ... we have drifted into a stage of development that encourages ... a highly ambivalent or even a downright hateful attitude toward the "youth of our time."... Obviously we all still love kids, and I am sure we would happily admit that "some of our best friends are teen-agers." But as soon as we talk as members of a committee, as part of a profession, including that of psychiatry, I find an uncanny amount of negative attitudes and stereotypes smuggling themselves into our discussion.... Even the term "teen-ager," by the way, which was not current when I came to this country in 1936, reflects that inclination toward hostile stereotyping.⁹ As professionals, we must first squarely face this problem of a negative stereotype and a basically hostile component of dangerous proportions in our attitudes to youth of our time.... I find people who quite obviously love the kids entrusted to their care (as teachers or parents, or to their treatment, as therapists) who are caught in the trap of negative stereotypes when they talk as representatives of their professions.¹⁰

Aichhorn: Looking Beyond Diagnosis

We call on science for assistance in our work. What has science given us so far? The diagnosis, which justifies commitment to institutional care; yet this diagnosis circumscribes the limits of our work often quite narrowly. Though the diagnosis gives us valuable information, it sometimes shakes our confidence, because it may undermine our positive attitude, our faith in the success of our work.¹¹

The treatment of [wayward] youth is a matter of re-education.¹² Our work as remedial educators begins when an educational emergency arises, that is, when the usual educational methods have not succeeded in developing in the child the social capacity normal for his age level.¹³ Educational work is an art, in which intuition is of primary importance. This holds true in greater measure for remedial training than for general education. The more intuitively the worker grasps the difficulties of his charge, the more successfully he works.¹⁴

Let us start out with a very simple reflection. Whenever institutional education of the wayward is discussed, one hears that the very best organization, the most generous funds, the most lavishly furnished rooms are of no avail if the right educators are lacking.

The children who hate very soon become the children nobody wants.

Experience has taught us that there are personalities capable of rehabilitating the wayward. In fact, such people have always existed, long before science ever concerned itself with the wayward, and such people will always exist, even without the benefit of science.... Scrutiny of the personalities of those talented in this field reveals that *all of them have the capacity to win the trust and affection of their charges quickly and easily*, and thus the first step toward rehabilitation is taken. Why are some people capable of establishing this contact and others not?



... Whoever wants to work successfully with young delinquents has to be capable of stepping out of his own secure position in the social community, to identify himself with the offender, and thereby to become receptive to, and understanding of, the intricacies of the delinquent's character structure.¹⁵

Redl: The Strengths of Troubled Kids

No matter how close to psychopathic our children may sometimes look, we haven't found one of them yet who didn't have lots of potential areas of value appeal lying within him.¹⁶ A really good study of the good traits in delinquent children has not been made. It might also be hard to find a publisher for it.¹⁷

It is a real art to produce a delinquent. It requires persistence and perseverance in making the same fatal mistakes all over again, in piling injury upon insult, in combining personal rejection with wrong handling. And even then you are likely to fail.... First, most children have such an astounding resistance to wrong handling and wrong settings, that only elaborate efforts to do every-thing wrong consistently, and having them live in the wrong emotional "climate" altogether, can make them "good and delinquent."

The spirit that permeates the training school...must flow from a philosophy that irradiates cheerfulness and joy.

Second, even then your success in making a delinquent is limited. I have not seen any "delinquent" yet who quite deserves this name. What you get at best is a personality with certain areas of delinquent behavior trends or character malformations. In many other aspects, this same child is entirely intact, healthy, or even virtuous indeed.... Instead of asking, "What is wrong with them?" let us ask, for a change, "What is right with them?"... [One example is] *Group Loyalty*. Oddly enough, the so-called "antisocial" youngster often shows the desirable characteristic of group loyalty most emphatically. Of course, it depends on which group you are talking about. Johnny may refuse to "cooperate" with his teacher's request to keep his mouth shut, sit quiet, and hand in assignments on time in class. He may even pinch the wallet of another kid in the same classroom.... Toward people who belong to "his gang" he sometimes displays more

courageous self-sacrifice, good-natured helpfulness, and enthusiastic support than does many a goody-goody boy who wouldn't condescend to do anything wrong ever.

What is wrong with the Johnny I am speaking of is that he steals. What is dead right with him is that ... he is the best sport, the most reliable friend, the most unselfish pal under the sun. Your task is to cure him of stealing. Your other task is to give his marvelous qualities a climate in which they can unfold. Look at the temperature in your classroom. Then look at the human closeness of his gang. You can learn something.¹⁸

Aichhorn: A Practical Psychology of Reconciliation

Most juvenile delinquents meet us at first with utter distrust, and their suspicions must be swiftly overcome before we can win them over. Such suspiciousness is not in any way pathological ... we are strangers and he is convinced that we will harm him. In keeping with the unpleasant experiences he has had so far with adults, he is entitled to expect something distasteful. He therefore feels immediately compelled to consider the personality of the counselor carefully.... We too try to discern who it is we are dealing with and we both strive for ascendancy.¹⁹

The child should experience within the shortest possible time that the personality which now impinges on his life is absolutely competent to make decisions, is self-assured, and proceeds toward the goal with a firm will.²⁰

Although he now expects the attack to come from us, this attack does not come. Our words sound much friendlier than anything he had anticipated.... On the other hand, we do not show ourselves too engaging, too friendly, too gracious, for he would grow distrustful or he would regard us as the weaker party, and immediately try to behave brutally. He now observes that we are not the obnoxious adult who is called upon to castigate him; neither are we a teen-age comrade, prone to admire his courage or his smartness; in fact we now seem to him a quite undecipherable being, of a species previously unknown, a person who indeed understands him, even with a slight undertone of appreciation, and who must be superior in some inconceivable but not necessarily unpleasant manner.²¹

The spirit that permeates the training school must proceed from the educators themselves, from their own positive attitude toward life; it must flow from a philosophy that irradiates cheerfulness and joy. Only thus will the counselor be able to approach their wards closely enough to attract them throughout the various stages of training and make them feel always that they are being understood. Among these juvenile delinquents, the need for tenderness, which is inherent in childhood has very seldom been satisfied.... Many of them have skipped an entire phase of development; the early years of their childhood have been followed by a ruthless struggle for life.... To such young people, much should be given.... If delinquency is to be cured and the the asocial youth made fit again for life in society, *the training school must provide him with new ties and induce him to attach himself to persons of his environment.*²²

Rehabilitating the wayward means uncovering the causes that brought about the latent condition, and removal of these causes.

Waywardness begins at a very young age, sometimes in earliest childhood, long before it becomes noticeable to the outside world.... Rehabilitating the wayward means uncovering the causes that brought about the latent condition, and removal of these causes. When this task is accomplished, then the total chaos that waywardness presents to us today will be disentangled.... [We will no longer] be confronted with an endless confusion of damaged juveniles, and in desperation yield to the temptation to join with society and the law in condemning them.... The rehabilitation of the wayward will no longer be limited to the accidental success of gifted educators, but will be the predictable result of systematic scientific work.²³

It is because of privation suffered in family and social life that these young people seek satisfaction in delinquency. It is our task to let our charges learn, through actual experience, that one may gain a much higher total amount of enjoyment in a life, which is socially oriented. Thus we worked out ... what may now be called a *practical psychology of reconciliation.*²⁴

August Aichhorn (1878-1949) and Fritz Redl (1902-1988) put theory into practice to form the foundations of the reclaiming youth movement. Contents of this hypothetical dialogue were selected from their writings by Larry K. Brendtro, Resiliences Resources.

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Endnotes

- 1 Aichhorn, 1925, pp. 2-3.
- 2 Aichhorn, 1948, pp. 220-221.
- 3 Aichhorn, 1928, p. 77.
- 4 Aichhorn, 1948, p. 224.
- 5 Aichhorn, 1948, p. 226.
- 6 Aichhorn, 1922, p. 19.
- 7 Redl & Wineman, 1951, p. 11.
- 8 Redl & Wineman, 1951, pp. 22-23.
- 9 Redl, 1966, p. 10.
- 10 Redl, 1966, p. 10.
- 11 Aichhorn, 1948, p. 228.
- 12 Aichhorn, 1925, p. 2.
- 13 Aichhorn, 1925, pp. 4-5.
- 14 Aichhorn, 1925, p. 7.
- 15 Aichhorn, 1948, p. 229.
- 16 Redl, 1966, p. 45.
- 17 Redl, 1966, pp. 461-462.
- 18 Redl, 1966, pp. 462-463.
- 19 Aichhorn, 1936, p. 158.
- 20 Aichhorn, 1936, p. 170.
- 21 Aichhorn, 1936, p. 182.
- 22 Aichhorn, 1922, pp. 28-29.
- 23 Aichhorn, 1948, pp. 234-235.
- 24 Aichhorn, 1922, p. 20.