

# Thriving

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## The Virtues of Delinquent Children<sup>1</sup>

*Fritz Redl*

Fritz Redl (1902-1988) was born in Austria where he received his early training in psychology and education from August Aichhorn and Anna Freud. He came to the United States before World War II and conducted pioneering research with aggressive children while on the faculty of Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. A half century before the strength-based revolution, Redl made this impassioned call for finding and developing the positive qualities in troubled children and youth.

**I**t 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 or sentimental coddling with outbursts of punitive righteousness. And even then, you are liable to fail unless destiny comes to your rescue and also, exposes the youngster in question to wrong handling by other people, to undesirable influences through prestige-loaded age mates, criminal adults, or the boredom of insufficient and inadequate recreational facilities. And still you may be licked unless you happen to put your child into a neighborhood with a high degree of delinquency lure and unless the school complies by refusing to give your youngster personal guidance in his first great conflicts with life or bores him into truancy.

This is not a joke. I mean every word of it. I have seen plenty of normal, as well as delinquent, children, and I have seen their case histories unfold before my eyes with more specificity than the average observer is allowed to watch. The results of all this can be embodied in two statements.

First, most children have such an astounding resistance to wrong handling and wrong settings, that only elaborate efforts to do everything wrong consistently and have them live in the wrong emotional "climate" altogether can make them "good and delinquent."

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. The confusion comes from the habit of wrong name-calling: Instead of talking about "the delinquent," we should talk about "youngsters who have developed delinquent trends." Except for these trends, they are still "youngsters" like any others, and, although much is wrong with them, some thing is always also in good repair.

If even part of this is true, then it may pay to modify temporarily our approach to those suspected of delinquency: Instead of asking, "What is wrong with them"? let us ask, for a change, "What is right with them?"

To safeguard myself against misunderstanding by the righteous and indignant, I had better say it in so many words: Of course, we want to know what is wrong with them, in order to be able to do a good repair job when it is needed. However, let us not stop there. Too often we are satisfied with asking this one question and then shooting "against" a youngster's wrong traits, not quite realizing what this does to the kid himself. All I suggest is: Add to this study of what is wrong with your youngster another, equally careful, study of just what is dead right with him. And support your findings with adequate action. You will be surprised.

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. This is not the report of such a study but an invitation to start one. The following are chance impressions gained from professional contact with delinquent adolescents in school work, clinical work, and camping.

### **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. However, the Johnny I am thinking about will only steal from people who are group-psychologically meaningless to him. 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, under group-psychologically favorable conditions, he is the best sport, the most reliable friend, the most unselfish pal under the sun.

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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.

***Healthy Independence of Growth***

Growing up means moving away from secure and safe paths of childhood and experimenting with the puzzling and mysterious forces of the "world outside." Growing up for a healthy kid means trial and error, experimentation, experience. A yearning for the insecurity of the new life situation is as normal to an adolescent as is the oft-quoted need for "emotional security." Here is George. Who the heck gives him a chance to "grow and try out new things?" The slightest deviations from his childhood submissiveness are fought at home as though they were the makings of a jail bird. Social experimentation with other kids in school makes noise, leads to trouble, and gets him the reputation of being a "bad kid."

Many a youngster before George has turned coward and chucked the fight, has become a model child, has chosen the easy way out, and has refused to grow up in fear of the punishments put upon such attempts. Not so with George. He feels he's got to do things, to find out what others do, if, to learn what it feels like to be in bad with everybody, to see if he can manage this or that task alone without the "guidance" of an over-dominating adult. To fulfill this task, he finds little challenge at school or at home. So off he wanders into the unknown, and how can he find out whether or not he is brave unless he takes a chance? How can he be brave unless it is against somebody? So George becomes brave against the adult, trespasses against whatever symbol of infantile restrictions he can discover or invent, and soon is one of those

silly truants with petty thievery, mischief, robberies, and escapades that are so well known to juvenile courts and detention homes.

This is what is wrong with him. What is right with the George I am talking about is this: He sure has guts. Compared with him, many nice children are cowardly in their childhoods. He knows how to rough it. He has gone without the amenities of life many children are spoiled into needing for quite a while in order to stick with his silly plans. He also has weathered many a storm of guilt feelings, of homesickness, of the awful sense of being in the wrong and being alone at the same time, without going neurotic over it. This is far more than many more pleasing kids can say about themselves.

Your task is to cure George of the silliness of his revolts, of the inadequacy and futility of his adolescent attempts at self-assertion. Your other task is to do this without breaking his spirit, without making a boring conformist and a moral coward of him, to challenge his spirit of emotional and social pioneering in a constructive way.

***Justice and Fairness for All***

All youngsters make the discovery of inequalities and injustices, of meanness and misunderstanding, of undeserved rewards and unwarranted punishments at some time in their lives. Some of them are lucky. They make it in an atmosphere of acceptance and friendly guidance that helps them to intellectualize. It makes them searchers for solutions, eager students of what schools have or do not have to offer on the ways of human nature. Others are egotists to begin with, so what do they care? They take this discovery as just one of those things, make the complacent "adjustment" they see their elders making, and stop thinking. There is a third group, though. It develops a sharpened sense of injustice and unfairness and a hankering to discover and fight it tooth and nail. In times of revolutions or wars, such youngsters furnish a goodly number of the heroes to be written up in history books later. In times of peace or before they are old enough to be granted the right to fight for what they believe in, they are bound to become delinquents.

For their criticism is taken as revolt, and it soon becomes revolt for revolt's sake. The futility of anything they can do lures them into matching it with an equally silly futility of action. So they soon develop the habit of attacking, not wrongdoers, but the symbols of such (other colored kids,

other white kids, other Jews, other teachers than the ones they really have gripes against). From there on, the way into a search for chances for combat is wide open. The misinterpretation of their first referrals stamps them as violent characters, as bad men, and from there on the ideal of the lone wolf and the big shot has an easy way to grow.

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Here is Bob. This is exactly what he is doing. He is the wildest one in his "neighborhood gang." This neighborhood gang originally developed out of the rejection of the lower-income-and-relief group by the more ambitious and goody-goody middle-class youngsters. This sociological origin of the fight has long been forgotten. Now it is the tough boy against the "nice kids from better families."

This is what is wrong with Bob: He is a gang leader, brutal, with a love of violence that is highly disturbing, cruel, and thoughtless to those who don't belong to his gang. Enticed into gang leadership at an early age, he has also developed all the negative traits of a boss, bully, and big shot. This is what is right with him: He doesn't do all this just for egotistical gain. It is the event of the fight he is after, not so much the damage that is done. He is proud and would rather die than give in or admit that he is wrong. He sticks to what he thinks is right, however distorted his thoughts may be about that. Your task is to cure him of his violent character, his lack of sympathy with anyone who doesn't happen to belong to his crowd, his big-shot bossiness and lack of civilian standards of manners and decency. Your other task is to give him a chance to be a strong guy in other ways, to organize, to fight for something, to stick up for his way of life instead of having to submit to adult standards of evaluation. Give him a chance to be *against* something that is worthwhile and *for* something that is worthwhile, and forget about the language he uses in the process.

This is but a glimpse of what I mean. There are a couple of hundred different combinations of positive and negative traits found in "delinquent" youngsters. I am as far from wanting to sentimentalize the delinquent as anybody can be, and I also want it understood that the "good traits" in delinquent children do not excuse their bad ones. It isn't a question of "excusing" or even "justifying" anything; it is a question of doing a good repair job. The only contentions I make are that, for a good repair job, it is important to discover and support the already existing "good traits" in a youngster, instead of trying to force him into virtues that don't fit his size or shape; and that we don't, at the moment, use up half as much typewriter ribbon to describe and discover the less visible positive traits in delinquent youngsters as we use on their sore spots. As it only means to open our eyes and strain them in the right direction, there is no reason why we couldn't all begin doing just this—and doing it right now.

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#### Endnotes

1 "The Virtues of Delinquent Children" is based on an article of the same title that appeared in *Understanding the Child* (April 1963) and is reprinted here by permission of the National Association for Mental Health, Inc.