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heal blog

Friday, May 5, 2017

Fix Your Family, Help Your Teen

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By Angela Smith, HEAL National Coordinator

HEAL is a well established children's rights and consumer advocacy network that has been organizing to stop fraud and institutionalized abuse for over 15 years. We have a network of families and individuals who volunteer to help in these efforts. And, because of our time working in this field, we have identified what the segregated congregate care (a.k.a. behavior modification, troubled teen or teen help) industry uses to define and often demonize youth while encouraging parents to avoid accountability and responsibility by writing large checks often to fraudulent and abusive providers that spirit away their youth to labor camps and pharmaceutical testing facilities masquerading as boarding schools and treatment programs.

We shall examine the common caricatures these modern day orphanages^[1] use to identify and define youth. In addition, we will provide suggested conversations between parents/caregivers and their teens that can assist with addressing the identified problems at home with some basic communication skill building so you can avoid the high cost, abuse, and untimely death often associated with institutional care and private, unlawful imprisonment.

There are three common caricatures used by the industry to demonize youth. They go by many names and descriptions, but, HEAL has simplified it to "the brat", "the escape artist", and "the rebel". (HEAL would never define any youth by a single characterization, nor any human being for that matter. The terms here are our understanding of how the industry defines, labels, and dehumanizes youth.) "The Brat" is often defined as a do-nothing, entitled, demanding youth who respects no one and values nothing. "The Escape Artist" is often defined as a poorly focused dreamer that is "addicted" to drugs, electronics, gaming, or fantasy. And,

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About Me



HEAL

HEAL is an egalitarian network of activists self-empowered to plan events, create change, and make the world a better place for all life. Our goals include the liberation of humans, nonhuman animals, and the earth! We work in cooperation with like-minded organizations that put compassion in action!

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"The Rebel" is often defined as defiant, obstinate, full of potential and always angry. Sometimes youth exhibit mixtures of all three, but, the industry often treats them as nothing more than animals that need to be broken[2] and programmed with no regard for the youth or the life experiences that may have resulted in questionable behavior and acting out.

Children learn what they live and live what they learn.[3] So, if a child or youth on the surface appears to be a "brat", "escape artist", or "rebel", often they have learned this way of life from their primary caregivers/parents. And, this is one of the main selling points of the segregated congregate care industry. They point out that parents have failed in every respect and are left with hiring someone to break and program their teen to fix the identified problems since the parents clearly have not and will not invest the time and patience to address the issues with empathy, compassion, and acceptance of their own responsibility. It is easier to blame the kid and send them to "brat camp".[4] But, doing so is wrong and will hurt not just the family coffers, but, those subjected to being orphaned and abused as well. It simply is too costly in every way to be reasonably considered an option. So, what do you do?

(P=Problem S=Solution C=Conversation Starter)

P: HELP! MY CHILD IS A BRAT!

S: So, it seems your teen is entitled, demanding, appreciates no one, and is both ungrateful and unwilling to be bothered with the expectations of others. First, we need to examine each of the characteristics above and determine to what extent they are truly present. If they do not feel any sense of responsibility for themselves, their belongings, the family home, or their own room, that is a problem. Responsibility is a learned skill or behavior. Is it possible you have not raised them to be responsible? Or, are you expecting them to be responsible before they are developmentally ready for that life lesson? One article suggests that personal responsibility is learned in college[5], so, it may be unreasonable to demand a teen be as responsible as you may expect at their age and stage of development. There is no fast-forward to responsible adulthood and segregated congregate care results in infantilization and regression, not maturity and responsibility.

Someone who acts entitled is immature and may be suffering from infantilization in the home. Have you spent time teaching your child basic life skills from the time they were born and appropriate to their developmental stage? By the time a youth reaches high school age, they should be able to basically take care of themselves.[6] But, they won't if they don't know how and if doing so has been used to degrade or punish rather than include and uplift.

In working class households, there is no hired help and chores are a part of everyday life for every family member. Parents are often working 40+ hours per week at fairly demanding jobs often where labor laws are regularly violated. This means they work without breaks or through breaks, sometimes off the clock, and under duress that they will be replaced if they demand better from their employers. When these parents get home they are usually tired, irritable, and would love to relax. But, often that is not an option and they must spend 2 to 6 hours cleaning the home, doing minor repairs, fixing dinner, and helping children with homework or any other activities. Their children see this from the time they come home from the hospital as infants. Children in these families often follow their parents around and ask if they can help or try to copy their parents because children live what they learn and learn what they live. If your teen rejects personal responsibility as "beneath them", it is likely a class issue and involves neglect or unreasonable expectations on the part of the parent(s)/primary caregiver(s).

If your teen has grown up watching you go to socials, parties, and fun activities like golf or tennis and has never seen you do a single household chore, then expecting they act differently is completely unreasonable. If your child remembers you saying you are off to work and sees you grab your golf clubs and give them a wink, they don't think your work is serious and don't associate your work with their life of luxury. They don't think you work at all, most likely. Or, that you only work when you feel like it. So, why would you expect them to act any different? How do you fix this?

C: Sit down with your teen and start your conversation with this: "It seems I may have given you the wrong impression about my work and our family lifestyle. (If you had a luxurious upbringing as well, explain that here by saying: As you may already know, I was also raised in the lap of luxury and did not have many expectations placed on me regarding household chores or taking care of my belongings... If you did not have a luxurious upbringing, let your child know about your own developmental years and acknowledge that you did not want them to have the same hardships you had as a child and may have failed to teach them basic life skills as a result.) You are almost an adult and will be off to college or some other independent adventure very soon. Regardless of where I have failed you to this point, I want to take time to help you prepare now for independent living. (Acknowledge things your teen has done well or currently does well here, maybe by saying something like: I'm impressed that every morning you shower, dress yourself, and put yourself together to go to school. I'm so pleased with the good grades you have earned. And, you are very talented when it comes to (singing, tennis, science, etc.). Before you are off to independence, I want you to have some additional skills such as balancing a checkbook, preparing your own meals, navigating strange/unfamiliar towns/places, doing laundry, organizing your

schedule and basic housekeeping. I can personally help you learn all of these things or any that you do not already know and I'd like to invite you to accompany me to my work, chores, and activities so you can get a better idea of the big picture and how we maintain our current lifestyle. (If you bring your teen to your work, they will see you in action and understand that you have responsibilities and do actually work, not just play golf all day. Ask them to help you with a minor work project (preparing presentation folders, answering phones, or any task they could reasonably handle.) If you gather up old/used clothes from your closet for donation to Goodwill, then make a day of it and have your teen do it with you. This will teach them a sense of work ethic and charity which appear to be your major complaints at the moment. If they need help with life skills you don't have, consider learning these skills together. Take a cooking class together if you both don't cook. There are many easy and fun solutions if you just take a breath, stop hating your teen, and start parenting with patience and love.

P: HELP! MY CHILD IS AN ESCAPE ARTIST!

S: So, your child is a poorly focused dreamer, spends too much time with games/electronics, abuses drugs, and/or lives in a "fantasy world". Your teen may be too smart for his school. Depending on your economic class, if you are not comfortably middle class or higher in the economic chain, your child's school may be using the same disgusting behavior modification techniques as are engaged in at most segregated congregate care schools and programs. One school behavior modification procedural manual states: "In response to a question regarding what public schools should do with intelligent, highly motivated, and/or efficient children, Sulzer and Mayer suggested: [emphasis added] "Certainly it would be possible to slow response ratio in other ways: yell at the student when he hurries [commit verbal abuse], ignore him altogether [neglect], flunk him, keep reminding him to slow down, feed him tranquilizing drugs and all kinds of other possibilities."¹²[7] So, if most schools are treating intelligent children from working class backgrounds like this, then it is no wonder that a youth in that situation would want to escape.

The other possibility is that some other form of abuse, besides institutional abuse, is involved. Most people, including children and youth, divert their attention and seek to escape when reality has traumatized them and they don't know how to cope.[8] [9]

There is yet one other possibility, and that is that they are again learning what they live and living what they learn. If the parent(s) or primary caregiver(s) get home from work and turn on the television (computer, handheld device, or game system) where they remain ignoring and avoiding their own household duties and responsibilities every night, then it is unreasonable to expect

children in that home to do otherwise. In fact, in such homes, it is often that the parent/caregiver(s) will tell a child from an early age to go watch television and leave the adults alone. And, when children obey this into their teen years to their own developmental detriment, it is truly unfair and unjust to punish them for doing as they've been both told and taught.

Regardless of which of the above three are most likely occurring, institutionalization in segregated congregate care is the same as taking someone from the proverbial frying pan and throwing them in the fire. If you take a trauma victim and force them into a situation where they are constantly triggered, they will not improve or recover and actually regress deeper into fantasy. The same is true for individuals suffering milder forms of these abuses in their current school. We've met many victims of institutional abuse who were "escape artists" that have manufactured grandiose fantasy worlds to explain their compounded trauma including some who believe they are the second coming of Christ, some who believe they are the anti-Christ, and even some who believe they are both Christ and anti-Christ in one. One victim believed every song written by Bob Dylan was about them, even though they weren't even born when those songs were written. One victim believed they could control the brightness of electric lights with their mind. You might say they must have always been "crazy" or clearly "schizo". But, the reality is that they were not making such claims nor believing such things before being institutionalized. If you speak to them, they will tell you that they believe the suffering they endured while institutionalized is proof that they are specially chosen by God, Satan, the Universe, or Bob Dylan's lyrics to expose the suffering of the world and bring about transformative destruction or peace, depending on their interpretation and fantasy development. But, given their lack of skill or knowledge of politics and society at large, they introduce themselves as specially chosen ones and wander the world trying to convince everyone that their fantasy is the true reality. This is not a future any parent would choose for their child. And, it can be avoided in most cases by avoiding institutionalization and focusing on getting the family and teen back on track.

C: First, you'll need to determine which reality you are dealing with here. Is your teen escaping because they attend a school that is not respecting their intelligence? This is something you may be able to determine simply by asking your teen if they feel school is stupid, pointless, or bullsh*t? If they feel school is stupid, it is likely because the school is not respecting nor nurturing your child's natural talent and intelligence. You may want to consider home-schooling or enrolling your teen in high school courses at the local community college.^[10] Your teen can earn high school and college credits from the same coursework which will jumpstart their college education and put them in an environment that is both challenging and rewarding. This may be enough to get them excited about

learning again and with some support will help them choose to achieve rather than avoid education/education goals. This is less expensive and far more valuable and rewarding than any segregated congregate care, including most boarding schools.

But, if your child has been traumatized and is using escape to avoid trauma triggers, you may need to do a bit more than simple positive redirection as is suggested in the paragraph preceding this one. Trauma can include normal trauma/stress like the death of a loved one, divorce, moving, big changes to school or home, and extraordinary trauma like targeted and excessive bullying, abuse, and rape.^[11] Children and teens feel helpless when traumatized and this helplessness can result in a virtual shutdown or closing off from a "reality" which is too traumatic and overwhelming for them to handle. The worst thing anyone could do to a traumatized youth is create more trauma by marking them as damaged, sending them away to live with abusive strangers in strange and unfamiliar places, and exposing them to constant new stimuli which will increase the feeling of helplessness likely leading them to feel suicidal or risking their life to physically escape the institution/program/etc. This is the exact opposite of what a true professional would advise who specializes in treating trauma. No legitimate mental health professional engaging in ethical treatment practices (that do not involve receiving kickbacks for institution referrals from the institution (common problem)) would ever recommend taking a trauma victim and compounding their trauma by spiriting them away as a damaged animal to be broken and programmed by any institution. Many victims of institutional abuse become self-medicating or fantasy-focused (large movie/fiction collections, constant gamers, etc.) and spend their lives retreating and avoiding a world that tortured instead of nurtured them when it was most needed. Institutionalizing trauma victims makes them victims for life and does not help them learn positive coping skills.

If your teen has experienced overwhelming trauma (overwhelming to them, not necessarily objectively overwhelming), they may have Post Traumatic Stress which is common when children experience many forms of trauma or chronic trauma like neglect and poverty. You are going to need to help your teen overcome their trauma or at least learn to manage their Post Traumatic Stress. You are going to need to let your teen, in this case, be the decision-maker when it comes to any treatment or treatment providers. And, you will have to be patient and wait for them to be ready for it. Forcing treatment on a trauma victim who already feels helpless just makes them feel more helpless. To heal, they must feel that they matter and that they have the power and responsibility to manage their own affairs with your support. One guide we recommend at HEAL for helping a loved one cope with Post Traumatic Stress is available here:

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/ptsd-in-the-family.htm>. You are going to need all of these skills and tips to

gently help your teen heal from trauma. Once they learn to manage their triggers, then encourage and support them to get "back on track". If they have been traumatized at school, but, feel safe at home, ask them if they want to switch to a home-school option and take a break from the pressures of the social demands of school life. When they are ready, find out if they have any extracurricular interests and let them know they can take guitar, swimming, or any other lessons when they are ready. If they tell you they want to go back to a school environment, consider the community college option mentioned above and ask them what they think would be best. The most important thing with a trauma victim is that they feel empowered and supported, not helpless, useless, and judged. If you treat your traumatized teen with patience, kindness, empathy, love, and support, then they will be okay in the long run. If you send them away, expect a lifetime of pain and regret.

P: HELP! MY CHILD IS A REBEL!

S: So, your child is defiant, obstinate, full of potential, and always angry. Well, the problem may be you. Offended? Then, the problem is most likely you. But, it all depends on what you mean by defiant and "always angry". For one, your teen may be angry with you and that's why you perceive them as being angry all the time. But, it is highly unlikely that they are "always angry". Find out why they seem angry and if they are angry with you, find out why by asking them. If you find yourself cutting them off, refusing to listen, and becoming defensive, consider yourself the obstinate one. And, remember that children live what they learn and learn what they live. If you shutdown communication with your teen whenever they say anything you don't agree with or like, then you are the problem. You need to learn some basic communication skills. Here are some resources you can check out and practice for better communication with your teen: <https://www.thebalance.com/communication-skills-list-2063779> and <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/communication-parents.aspx>.

When a parent claims a teen is defiant, it usually indicates that the parent feels disrespected by the teen's disobedience. Are your expectations reasonable? Do you show your teen respect? With rebellion, the issue is usually with ignorant and arrogant parenting styles coupled with frustrated and sometimes angry teen responses. Obedience should not be the goal of parenting, period. The goal is to prepare children for responsible independent living when they reach the age of majority. Obedience to authority figures is not a legitimate life skill. Certainly, it isn't when you are talking about blind or unquestioning obedience to questionable authority figures. A father who raped his daughter enrolled her in a residential treatment program after she reported the rape to the authorities to avoid being prosecuted. It took more than 2 years of her story never changing through three different institutional settings

before a therapist actually made the effort to ask the authority the teen reported the rape to years ago whether the statements were true. The law enforcement authorities said they had been trying to find the teen for years and had no idea where she had been sent. But, they confirmed everything and the teen was released and her father rightfully prosecuted and sent to prison. But, certainly the father in this situation should not be obeyed. And, only unreasonable people would believe otherwise. This article is not for the unreasonable parent. We know there are bad parents out there, we've met many of them. But, for those who we believe can and will do what is best for their children, we believe this article will be helpful.

So, assuming you are a reasonable parent who is experiencing unusual levels of defiance and anger from your youth, what do you do?

C: Many articles on the subject of rebellion and defiance suggest most youth do not exhibit extreme rebellion or defiance. In fact, it usually only becomes a problem when the parent is confused about how best to support their child as they mature into independent adulthood.

"[T]he primary goal of the teen years is to achieve independence. To do this, teens must start pulling away from their parents — especially the parent whom they're the closest to. This can feel like teens are always at odds with parents or don't want to be around them the way they used to.

As teens mature, they start to think more abstractly and rationally. They're forming their moral code. And parents of teens may find that kids who previously had been willing to conform to please them will suddenly begin asserting themselves — and their opinions — strongly and rebelling against parental control.

You may need to look closely at how much room you give your teen to be an individual and ask yourself questions such as: "Am I a controlling parent?," "Do I listen to my child?," and "Do I allow my teen's opinions and tastes to differ from my own?" [\[12\]](#)

The above excerpt is from <http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/adolescence.html#> and the entire article offers great tips for parents and parenting teens. Of course, the solutions offered include learning about teens/development, better communication, empathy (remember your own teen years?), picking your battles, respect your kid's privacy, and make appropriate rules.

HEAL has received calls from parents who considered shipping their kids off to institutions for the following reasons:

1. Parents taking extended European trip and wanted a "kennel" they could place their kid(s) because they didn't want to leave them at home alone and didn't want to bother extended family (i.e. grandparents) to care for the kids while the parents are on an extended 3 month vacation.
2. Parents upset that 17 1/2 year old daughter spoke on the telephone with a boy her own age from school. Daughter went to a co-ed school. Parents did not ask daughter why she was on the phone with a boy nor whether it involved any school projects or tasks. The younger sibling had tattled that the older sister broke the house rule of no contact with boys outside of school/church until college. And, without any communication or inquiry as to why the call occurred in the first place, the parents were looking at institutionalizing their nearly grown daughter.
3. Catholic parents upset that son brought home Torah (Jewish Bible/5 Books of Moses) from the library. Jewish literature was not allowed in the home. The youth was doing a class assignment that required he bring home that book. This rule violation was enough, even with the reasonable explanation, for the parents to consider shipping their son off to an institution.

We could go on and on with examples like these. The first one was most likely narcissistic parent(s) who would rather brag they sent their kids to "boarding school" then provide nurturing in-home care that would permit their youth to stay in their own familiar community and surroundings while parents go on vacation. These parents did not want to postpone their vacation nor take their children with them even though such a trip would be invaluable to youth and look great on college applications.

The second two were what we would consider unreasonable rules and expectations. We've spoken to parents who would love their only problem to be that their child brought home a Jewish book or talked on the phone with a classmate. It is insane to consider institutionalizing a teen because they talked to a friend on the phone or brought home a book you didn't like.

So, we take the "defiant", ODD (Oppositional Defiance Disorder), obstinate, and angry allegations against teens with a grain of salt at HEAL. Generally, risky behaviors are really about poor coping mechanisms after trauma and parents who are concerned about risky behaviors should follow the advice for the Escape Artist above. Regardless, communication skills are necessary regardless of what type of problem you are dealing with and should be the focus of your efforts before you consider how you want to address the problem(s).

We often suggest parents dealing with "rebellion" sit down with their teens and negotiate a contract that both find reasonable regarding expectations and privileges. This will help prepare the teen for other negotiations in life and give them the sense that you respect them and want to support them as they transition to independent adulthood.

Institutionalization conditions youth to being institutionalized and many either stay in mental institutions or find themselves in jail because they learn helplessness and fear independence and autonomy because they have been severely punished for both while institutionalized. It is best to avoid enrolling youth in segregated congregate care whether it is labeled treatment, boarding school, group home, orphanage, boot camp, or something else. A little common sense, communication, love, and patience will solve most problems.

Or, enroll your kid in a program run by neo-nazi survivalists in Idaho or Mexican gangs in Tijuana/Baja. Maybe send them to a "Christian" program run by ex-cons in VA or a "Mormon conversion center" masquerading as a treatment program in Utah. Many of the programs Dr. Phil recommends have been closed after youth deaths, so, maybe listen to him? He lost his license after sleeping with a teen patient, but, he's trustworthy, right?[13]

Teen programs will tell you anything you want to hear because they want to exploit your children and take your money. I, Angela Smith, have been a children's rights and consumer advocate for 25 years. I have a certificate in child development from the Kent School District in Kent, WA, an AA Degree from Highline Community College, a BA from the University of Washington, and I am currently on hiatus from law school where I successfully completed my first year and passed the California "Baby Bar" exam. I have worked as an educator and youth advocate for over 20 years. And, I have never been arrested, let alone convicted, for any crime. I have been sued once in my life by an institution on the HEAL watch-list but that suit was withdrawn by the program before the court could rule in our favor. I have cared for many children in both school and home care settings and no child has ever died, been raped, been exploited, been maimed, or otherwise abused while in my care. The same cannot be said for most, if not all, segregated congregate care facilities and programs.

You may also find our parenting guide at www.heal-online.org/parent.htm useful. Good luck!

[1] http://www.bazelon.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=D5NL7igV_CA%3D&tabid=247

[2] <http://www.meredithmanor.edu/features/articles/drm/breaking.asp>

[3] http://www.empowermentresources.com/info2/childrenlearn-long_version.html

[4] <http://www.gainesville.com/news/20050713/abcs-brat-camp-has-uneasy-feel>

[5] <http://www3.tusculum.edu/for/parent-featured/2011/personal-responsibility-one-of-the-greatest-lessons-to-be-learned-in-college/>

[6] <http://www.parenting.com/child/child-development/12-basic-life-skills-every-kid-should-know-high-school>

[7] <http://www.heal-online.org/ebook.pdf> (page 9) and Sulzer, Beth and G. Roy Mayer. "Behavior Modification Procedures for School Personnel". The Dryden Press Inc. Hinsdale, IL. © 1972. (p. 132)

[8] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mind-wellness-awareness/201209/identifying-coping-mechanisms>

[9]

http://changingminds.org/explanations/behaviors/coping/avoidance_mechanisms.htm

[10] <https://www.highline.edu/what-we-offer/finish-high-school/>

[11] <http://www.nonviolenceandsocialjustice.org/FAQs/What-is-Trauma/41/>

[12] <http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/adolescence.html#>

[13] <http://forensicpsychologist.blogspot.com/2008/01/dr-phil-controversy-highlights-public.html>

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