

Miniwakan Waonspekiye News



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August 2006



Teaching Children with Severe Behavior Disorders

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I recently read Bruno Bettelheim's book, *Truants from Life*, about his work with extremely disturbed young children. Most of the children he described were students at a special school during World War II. Like Bettelheim, I worked with young people who were at the very extreme age of childhood behavior and emotional problems. By age ten or twelve, these children had attempted suicide, attacked other children with knives, baseball bats or lead pipes, and had serious breaks with reality. For example, they believed that the Captain Crunch on the cereal box was glaring at them, that people they had never met hated them or that parents who had abandoned them shortly after birth were going to come back to 'rescue' them from the school. Treatments and theories about mental illness have changed greatly from that time until when I was working at a special school for disturbed children in the 1980's. Still, some of his descriptions fit exactly what I had observed forty years later.

1. Most children who are very disturbed have had severe trauma in their early years. At both special schools, not having had any functional parent available due to death, mental illness or substance abuse was more common than not. The child may have been raised in a series of one foster home or institution after another. Some children lived with a parent but due to mental illness or substance abuse, the child was not cared for in any way that most of us would recognize as normal. The children often went hungry, as their parents were too depressed or high to remember to feed them. Their needs were unmet by people who were supposed to take care of them.

"I have never known a hopeful kid who joined a gang."

Another common experience of children with severe emotional and behavioral disorders is inconsistency in parenting. Often due to alcohol, drug use or their own mental illness, the parents would be punishing at one point and then, usually on rare occasions, caring toward the child. What children learn is that, even if an adult acts like they care about you, you can't trust them not to hurt you later. Sometimes the inconsistency came from being moved from one foster home to another. Again, the child learns that, the adult may say she really cares about you, but then next week when they get a better job, or decide to move or just don't like something you did, you are in another placement with a different group of people with new rules, new kids, and the same old lines all over again, "I just care about you and want to help you." Yeah, right.

2. Speaking of one of the children, Bettelheim said, "Paul could not visualize any future for himself beyond expecting that nothing good would ever happen to him." This described exactly most of the students at the school where I taught. They had learned that no one in the world could be trusted to take care of them, that no matter what they did, there would not be enough to eat, they would still get hit, slapped, burned with cigarettes and pushed down stairs. Last year, at the keynote address for the Educating Bilingual Students conference, Father Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries, said, "I have never known a hopeful kid who joined a gang." Like Bettelheim's, the severely disturbed children whom I taught were all devoid of hope. No experience in their life had given them a reason to have hope. This is such a key point for staff members or adoptive parents to understand. Children who have been so severely abused and neglected to enter early childhood emotionally damaged have no reason to trust anyone. Why should you be different from every other person they have ever known? Another child in Bettelheim's school noted this, "When she was given a new doll, she asked if it was 'for keeps'. Her counselor told her, 'of course' and Mary wondered, 'How come I'm always afraid it won't be true when something nice happens to me?'"

3. You would think that, after having been denied the opportunity for good experiences for so long, when a child had the chance to have friends, go to a birthday party, receive Christmas presents, have a loving family or other things that he has wished for his whole life, he would appreciate it and be happy. What Bettelheim observed was the same thing I saw over and over, also. Having been disappointed so many times, the first Christmas with presents, the first honestly caring adult that intended to stay in the child's life was just too good to enjoy. These children didn't dare enjoy the good things that happened to them. They needed to defend themselves against feeling too good because it would hurt that much more when they were disappointed again, when it turned out that this adult was like all the rest of them and would leave at the end of six months or a year, or when the child did something else bad. These first good experiences can actually make the child feel worse. He has finally accepted that life is hard, he will not have enough to eat, toys to play with, a mother to hug him or hold him on her lap, and then he is in a foster home, adoptive home or special school. It all reminds him of what he hasn't had for years, and makes the past hurt all the more. On top of that, it seems like a cruel joke, too good to be true, and as soon as he starts to enjoy it, the presents, the food, the love, won't be there any more. So, he may as well strike out at those people now, tell them he hates them, hit them, and get the disappointment over with. Almost a third of the children at the school where I worked were adopted, and it was painful and bewildering for their adoptive parents this hostile, hateful reaction from children that the parents really, truly wanted to love.
4. When, after months of therapy, children with severely disturbed behavior were able to stop hitting other children and began to want to make friends, they had no idea how to do it. They didn't know how to start a conversation with another child. They were interested in the idea of calling another child on the phone but had absolutely no idea what they would say. For their entire lives, their speech with other children had been limited to threats and arguments. Never having had any friends, at age twelve or thirteen, they often didn't know how to play even the simplest games. If, the first time you fall behind, you pick up the board and slam it down on another child's head, you never learn to play board games or any other games because no one will play with you.

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5. Playing with other children, they had to win. These students with severe emotional disorders had been so powerless in their relationships with adults; they could not take the frustration of losing to another child. If they began to lose in any game they would swear, slap or throw things at the child who was winning.
6. Like Bettelheim's students, all of the severely disturbed students who I taught were hypersensitive about insults to themselves, reacting with screaming, swearing and physical attacks, sometimes even to the mildest criticism. However, they very often teased, threatened or insulted other people, both other children and adults, and seemed genuinely surprised when others were hurt or angered by them. By definition, these students were not normal in their emotional responses. By the end of elementary school, if not sooner, most people automatically understand how others are likely to react emotionally. If you call me up and tell me how much you hate this article on behavior disorders, that you think it is completely stupid and I should have to pay a fine to the government for writing something so idiotic funded by a federal grant, you would not be completely surprised if my feelings were hurt, or if I said something unkind to you in return. You have the ability to put yourself in another person's place and imagine how she would feel. Empathy is very poorly developed in children who are emotionally disturbed. They cannot control their own emotions; much less imagine how other people feel.
7. Nothing changes overnight. If you are going to work with children who are severely disturbed you need lots and lots of patience. There is no magic pill you can give them or therapy that works dramatically. It is coming in every day, keeping your word to the child, being a consistent person in his life, not hurting him, being a person he can trust. All the little things add up. It takes years. Most textbooks will tell you that the prognosis is very poor for children with extreme behavior problems in childhood. Risks of incarceration, substance abuse and mental illness are high. One high school for emotionally disturbed children I studied as part of a graduate research project had found in a follow up of former students that by age 30, 10% of them had died, usually of drug overdoses, accident, suicide or homicide. Yet, there is the possibility for change, with years of patience and understanding from the staff and a huge amount of work. I know because I graduated from a high school just like that, thirty-one years ago.

Spirit Lake
Consulting



Upcoming Workshop

CARING FOR OUR PEOPLE TRAINING - Early Childhood

Location: Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation

Date/Time: October 19-20, 11am-5pm

Trainers: AnnMaria DeMars and Evelyn Klimpel

There will be a \$50 stipend for all participants!

This workshop is perfect for tribal employees, as well as vocational rehabilitation, educational and health professionals, or any other agency working with youth with disabilities or special needs. You will learn important concepts in early intervention, such as what beginning staff members should know, and the communication and role of the staff. Other topics include developmental stimulation, behavioral disorders in young children and how to deal with them, personal and social issues for school age children with disabilities, adolescent identity and disability, preventive health, and substance abuse by students with disabilities.

For more information on attending, contact:

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