

Conference paper from Teacher Christian Fellowship of NSW : Are today's young people different?

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(A summary incorporating the power point presentation of Ken Buttrum's talk at the Managing difficult students behaviour conference dinner 5 April 2002. The summary was prepared by John Gore, Chairperson, TCFNSW.)

Whether or not young people are different today than before I don't know, but I do know that the world they live in has changed. How many face this world, especially those who come into the justice system is expressed in a poem from Christine who is sixteen and in Yasmar for serious assault on her mother.

OVERLOAD

Continual darkness on the road to nowhere,
The isolating experience, the unbearable despair.
Exploding sensation inside my head;
Wanting to die; in a way, already dead.

Relying on drugs for some kind of high;
Afraid to live and afraid to die!
Guts knotted up and mind still a mess
I continue to fight but it seems so useless.

Try to be the right person and do the right thing ...
What are the consequences, what does dawn bring?
Get rid of the cut up feeling inside;
If I can't stay cool, I'll just run and hide.

I look in the mirror at the ugliness staring back;
Got to keep running; here's a person you can't back!
Avoiding myself, hiding away ...
It's so hard to do, day after day.
I can't afford to stop and think ...
I black it out, have another drink.
If I keep doing this, where will it end -
In an asylum around the bend?

Achieving that doesn't have much gain
I just want someone to take away my pain !!!

Our behaviour is mostly governed by the depth of feelings we have about ourselves and others. What sort of things happened to bring about these feelings of despair in young people?

Statistics from the Department of Juvenile Justice reveal the following common factors in the background of many young people falling through various safety nets into the Juvenile Justice System.

- Disruption to family relationships
Many of those young people experience a great sense of loss when their parents' marriage breaks down, a parent departs or there is ongoing discord and hostility. Homelessness is often the outcome, as living at home becomes unbearable.
- Abuse
Many of these young people experience neglect from parents who really don't care. Emotional abuse is usually accompanied by either physical or sexual abuse or both. A survey of around 100 detainees at Reiby indicated that 87% had been subjected to abuse.

- School failure
Many of these young people have learning difficulties that have not been addressed in school. Conflict with authority, truancy and failing to complete Year 8 characterise their school experience.
- Poor skills development and employment opportunities
As well as poor academic skills, poor social and interpersonal skills also characterise this group of young people. These deficiencies make employment difficult.
- Disadvantage
Alienation, social inadequacy and spiralling disadvantage create an environment that overwhelms the strongest spirit to bring about personal growth.
Loss of self worth
Depression, drugs, alcohol abuse and the inclination to suicide characterise the loss of personal worth.

It is to these young people that God speaks: "He (Jesus) will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the dimly burning flame. He will encourage the faint-hearted and those tempted to despair." Isaiah 42:3

For Christians, those young people represent a very special group, a group that might only respond to the love of God.

Reconnecting with troubled young people

When we look in a mirror at the beginning of a day we see two eyes, two ears and one mouth. To reconnect with troubled young people we need to do twice as much observation and listening as we do talking.

As modified from the work of Larry K Brendtro, some key things these young people want to hear from us are:

- *I often try to hide what I'm really thinking.*
Adults need to decode behaviour and words (obscenities) that are often used. What are the feelings that generate these actions and words?
- *If you give me a hand, I'll give you a go.*
There is a need to give support even when it is seemingly thrown back at you or you believe it mightn't work. Trust and respect need to be earned.

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Ken Buttrum

- *Don't crowd or stress me.*

Giving emotional space, not moving a relationship forward too quickly helps make our expectations more realistic and less demanding.

Your respect helps me to build mine.

Respect needs to be modelled through active listening, encouragement and making use of their skills.

- *I look to you to see if there's any hope.*
Keeping alive positive expectations in these young people is vital and the beginning of trust.
- *I watch what you do to discover who you are and what you really think about me.*
These young people need to relate to real people who are what they say they are. They are not plastic or simply professionals playing a role, they act on their word and are credible.
- *Why are you sitting on that side of the desk rather than beside me? I need to believe you really care about me.*
Behaviours need to demonstrate genuine care and nurturing which is increased progressively.
Don't boss me. Help me to learn self-control.
Authoritarian approaches will not succeed. Adults need to be authoritative not authoritarian.
- *Listen, I'm not perfect but I'm trying to do better.*
Patience, combined with realistic expectations are needed to nurture growth.
- *I really need a number one fan.*
A fail-safe working relationship needs to be established on the basis of their worth not what they can or might be able to do..

For Christian teachers the imperative is even greater. If Jesus is our mentor, then each Christian should reflect his character to those around them. His love, acceptance and forgiveness were bought at great cost - his life. In knowing this same Jesus, we ought to make him known to others, not only by our words but by who we are and how we relate to others.

Paul captures this well when he says, *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*
Ephesians 5:1

In this way God's intention for these young people will be fulfilled: *He will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the dimly burning flame. He will encourage the faint-hearted and those tempted to despair.*

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