

Reclaiming the Unreclaimable

John Seita and Larry Brendtro

John Seita is a former youth at risk who beat the odds to turn his life around. In a previous issue of this journal, he authored the article "Resilience from the Other Side of the Desk" (Seita, 1994) which described his development from a ward of the court to Dr. John Seita, a consultant to programs for youth at risk. In this article he joins Larry Brendtro in examining how adults can build attachments to "unclaimed kids." Note that John's personal reflections are italicized.

I first met my coauthor for this article, Larry Brendtro, in 1967 when I was twelve. The Cleveland juvenile court told me that I could no longer stay in my home community, and would probably never be allowed to see my mother again. I was sent, against my will, to Starr Commonwealth, an alternative residential school for troubled youth in Michigan. Since Dr. Brendtro then headed that program, I saw him as one of the enemy in my battle against the world.

My case file was thick with failed interventions. I never knew my real father and was removed from my alcoholic mother and various step-siblings at eight years of age. Hurt and hating, I distrusted teachers and counselors, fought a string of foster parents, and repeatedly truanted from the court shelter to roam the Hough section of inner-city Cleveland. Four years and a dozen placements later, the court in desperation sent me out of state.

My court worker transported me to Michigan where Dr. Brendtro tried to interview me for possible admission to Starr Commonwealth. I gave him the stony silent treatment. In a game of "therapeutic chicken," I repelled his attempts at rapport-building. My only vocalization that day was a stubborn declaration that "I won't talk with you and I won't stay in this goddam place!" Starr was not a locked facility, so I was returned to Cleveland. My court worker coerced me to return to Michigan where I was enrolled at Starr Commonwealth.

Being taken from my home made me believe I was shamefully different. My pitiful self concept was rooted in feelings that I was "damaged goods." It would be years before I would quit hating and fighting adults.

Unclaimed Kids

Unattached children typically develop internal models of themselves as unworthy, and unlovable (Bowlby, 1982). The result is depression, often mixed with rage and aggression. They target their anger at adults who fail to meet their needs for love, and at themselves for not deserving it. Angry and distrustful, they are society's unclaimed kids who are forever biting the hand that

didn't feed them.

The stresses of modern society and the decline of extended kinship support is producing a horde of poorly socialized children. Adults struggling with stressors of single parenting, poverty, racism, and alcohol or other drugs have inadequate resources for positively rearing their children. "Home Alone" is not just the title of a funny film but the trademark of today's unclaimed kids.

Contrary to popular belief, it is not "broken families" that cause delinquency, but rather broken bonds between youth and adult. Describing these "psychological orphans," Merton Strommen (1979) notes that distrust between parent and child is 14 times more negative in impact than divorce. Similarly, Hawkins and Weis (1985) found attachment to parents to be a more important predictor of delinquency than family structure. The quality of bonding in the family influences how the child will bond to school and to peers. Children with poor parental attachments typically have trouble with teachers and prosocial peers. As a result, many seek substitute belongings with gangs of antisocial peers.

Children with histories of rejection are caught in an approach-avoidance conflict. They crave affection but fear they will be spurned again, so they guard against close relationships. Children who have not bonded to adults do not accept adult authority or internalize prosocial values. "Nobody tells me what to do!" they shout, masking their belief that nobody really cares. Often they don't care either, plunging into antisocial lifestyles which defy and outrage adults.

Angry and rebellious youth regularly draw adults into conflicts and evoke rejection. The untrained response is to punish or avoid such. Suspend, expel, exclude, condemn, lock up -- these are feel-good approaches for a public angered by anti-social behavior. But a punish and control mentality only drives troubled youth further from social bonds.

How I Kept Adults at Bay

Adults who tried to bond to me as a youth encountered resistance akin to trying to sandpaper the butt of a bobcat in a phone booth. My barbed words and nonverbal messages said "I am hurt and pissed off at the world and ready to fight about it." By keeping adults at bay, I developed a safe space, or comfort zone.

My adaptive strategy, developed over years of feeling rejected, was this: I would rebuff most overtures by staff and teachers, except when I really felt myself to be in a crisis. Then I would let them close enough for us to sort out the crisis, only to reject further relationship building on their part at a future date following the crisis. I would do this by being aloof, cold, and distant. If that did not work, I would back them off with a verbal barrage of insults and swearing usually heard only on a dock or from a prisoner. And that is what I felt like, a prisoner

inside walls of my own making, defending against adult enemies I had concocted.

In the short run, this survival strategy made sense. Fritz Redl (1966) showed that some of what might be labeled as deviant behavior by troubled youth, may not only be adaptive, it may also be a healthy response to an unhealthy personal ecology. Redl notes that the body rejects poison when it is ingested, a normal bodily function to a harmful foreign agent. Similarly, youths who have been abused, mistreated or neglected are responding in a normal way when they reject the attempts of well-meaning adult caregivers to relate. Such was my belief as a youth in care.

I developed what I now call a "variable permeability." I could be porous as I chose and let the small bits of caring in at my discretion, or I could seal out adults with a hard shell of invulnerability. This paradoxical strategy reflected my need to be close, coupled with my unrelenting belief, based upon countless experiences, that letting adults close was a ticket to pain and rejection. Being hurt again was not a risk worth taking. Adults seldom knew what was going on, since I camouflaged my behavior to hide my true feelings and needs. Typically, I would reject adults' efforts to connect with me even though it was what I most wanted. This process of inviting and then rejecting relationships, caused many adults to be unwilling themselves to risk being hurt by me. I protected myself to the point of total alienation; I was on the road to relationship hell.

My journey through multiple movements in and out of schools, foster homes and institutions taught me that nothing was stable and I should hurt others before I could be hurt. I was an expert at relationship refusal and learned how to avoid being "figured out." Fortunately, some adults were able to "decode" my behavior and understand the reasons for my contradictory "come close, stay away" manner. I could not scare away these adults, and they would eventually help me change the trajectory of my life. Slowly, I trusted enough to connect with caring teachers and adults.

As an adult, I have spent several years of my professional life working with youth with backgrounds similar to mine. I have had abundant opportunities to reflect on how to foster the turnaround of troubled youth. Successful programs require staff who see beyond troubled behavior, who restore broken belongings, and who mentor youth in their journey from risk to resilience.

Rebellion or Resilience?

Hemingway once said "life breaks everybody, and then some become strong at the broken places." Many unclaimed kids become strong by developing inner resources and securing the support of substitute significant others. We call these youth "resilient" because they spring back from adversity and survive in spite of the odds.

Although unclaimed youth may become survivors, they are also scarred by the experience. Many youths develop a type of negative resilience. Trusting no adults, they conclude that they have to "go it alone." Their opposition to authority can become a raging battle as they struggle to gain some recognition and control over their world. They survive, but are wounded by lifestyles of conflict and alienation.

Developmental research has shown that extreme rebellion is often a strong signal that adults have not met the child's basic needs for secure attachment and autonomy (Newman & Newman, 1986). Overt, hostile acts of rejection are not the child's preferred strategy.

Fighting against adult care-givers is an extreme form of coping only used when all other means of legitimately meeting needs are blocked (Balswick & Macrides, 1975.) From this perspective, rebellious, anti-social behavior can be seen as resilience, a valiant attempt to meet normal human needs, albeit using flawed coping strategies.

Among the youth most alienated from adults are those who live by the law of the streets. Anderson (1994) describes how some urban youths adopt an "oppositional culture" which enables them to survive in highly violent neighborhoods. These street youths have a profound lack of faith in any adult authority figure. Buffeted by forces beyond his control, he believes he will only be safe by proving his autonomy and competence at "taking care of himself."

In the code of the street, survival means gaining "respect" by being treated with deference by others. This youth has a menacing demeanor, and fights back at the slightest provocation or put-down. Winning some semblance of respect is immensely important when so little respect is to be had. Tragically, these youth seldom gain respect from important adults in their lives.

To be respected, to have some power over one's life, to find attachment, autonomy, and achievement --all are honorable goals. The fact that youths are pursuing worthy ends with the wrong means, is an encouraging sign, for these young persons haven't given up but are still struggling to redress untenable situations. Teachers and other adult mentors are potentially powerful resources for helping young persons reconstruct their lives.

Reclaiming Unclaimed Kids

There are two diametrically opposed paradigms for intervention with troubled youth. One is *deficit-based*, a preoccupation with treating pathology and controlling deviance. The other is *strength-based*, the search for potentials and the development of resilience (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and VanBockern, 1990; Jacobs, 1995).

We have found strength-based interventions to be particularly powerful with youth who present patterns of severe difficulties with attachment and rebellious authority relationships. Many strength-based interventions might seem counter-intuitive:

rather than demanding respect and seeking to overpower defiant youth, adults become mentors in the youth's private campaign for respect and power. Following are practical intervention strategies for reclaiming these "unreclaimable" youth:

1. Recast All Problems as Learning Opportunities -- We need to shift from "crisis management" to "crisis teaching." To the maximum extent, we try to reframe any problems as opportunities for growth. If a bully intimidates a victim while other students laugh, we have a whole curriculum of opportunities for learning: we teach the bully to develop positive leadership skills, the victim to be assertive, and the onlookers to be responsible citizens of a caring community. Even when students must experience negative consequences for their behavior, there is always some potential for learning and growth. When students botch things up, we become like coaches after a losing game, figuring out what went wrong so they can win next time. This is social skill training *in situ* as we teach them to disengage from conflict cycles, to assert instead of aggress, and to respect alternate points of view.

2. Provide Opportunities for Fail-Safe Relationships -- Bronfenbrenner often notes that every child needs at least one adult irrationally crazy about him. But one may not be enough with an extremely guarded youth since the risk is high that a singular relationship may disintegrate in a time of crisis. Airplane pilots always have redundant navigation systems in case one instrument fails. Likewise, we must have a fail-safe against relationship crashes by establishing "redundant" attachments. Form a "fan club" of advocates for this youth. This small team of persons (including perhaps family members, court worker, school counselor, employer, lawyer) can provide multiple possible sources of support. Youth should not just be recipients of adult relationships, but need opportunities to show friendship to others. Programs that nurture peer and cross-age helping provide experience in the empowering role of nurturing others.

3. Increase Dosages of Nurturance -- Adult-wary youth will not assume you care about them in the absence of some concrete evidence. As students become older, teachers are usually less comfortable in expressing affection. Although teens can't be physically nurtured like small children, the advent of zits doesn't mean they are disinterested in adult warmth. "All I want is some kind of noticing" wrote an angry youth in conflict with his teachers. When conversing, project a genuine interest and avoid a "casework" type of concern. Giving the young person time is the best proof of one's genuine concern. While public displays of attachment would be threatening and suggest favoritism to peers, unattached youth are highly alert to subtle symbols of special interest. Most positive interactions take only an instant of time such as humor, high-fives, or other spontaneous gestures of friendliness. A passing comment such as "Wow!, that's a classy shirt!" will register with students unaccustomed to

positive "noticement."

4. Don't Crowd -- Most of us, no matter how comfortable we are with ourselves and others, have a personal space that we do not want violated. Relationship-wary youth may have a larger personal space that they do not want violated. Not surprisingly, teachers and caregivers of troubled youth earnestly try to fashion relationships with these youth. Their enthusiastic attempts often fail, not because they do not try hard enough, but because they try too hard. Respect the air space of troubled youth. Sometimes at the very time when a strong positive relationship is emerging, a youth will need a little time to back off a bit. The adult should not interpret this as failure but a temporary adaptive distancing.

5. Use the Back Door - Direct attempts to build relationships often backfire with adult-wary youth. But when an adult meets some other less threatening need (such as safety needs or needs for power or competence) the youth will end up attaching to that adult.

Mr. Luther, who was a recent graduate of college when he first met me, had no training in bonding with relationship-resistant youth. Few of us do. But he reached me through the back door. He doggedly attempted to find a special interest of mine, namely my dreams of being a sports hero. Although I did not trust other adult, he connected with me through a common interest. Initially he would engage in good-natured debates about whether my prized Cleveland Indians were as good as his Detroit Tigers. I could be argumentative while building a trusting relationship. A "you-can-trust-me-John" approach would have failed.

Most kids, no matter how troubled, have a special interest that may be the key to the back door.

6. Decode the Meaning of Behavior. In effect, we take a "life ecology scan" by making a mental inventory of possible reasons why a student may be having rocky relationships. Examples of questions we could ask ourselves include: Is this some temporary situational stress, or is this a pervasive problem? Is the problem school-based or is it a "carry in" from home? Are there problems with peer relationships, boyfriends, or girlfriends? Is the student fearing failure in school? Is the youth being intimidated or abused? Unless we think causally, we are vulnerable to naive diagnoses such as "he is just being a jerk." By reflecting on why a youth rejects attempts to relate, we avoid personalizing the problem and we develop a framework for understanding the troubling behavior. A life ecology scan, whether a formal check list or a more intuitive mental model, helps generate hypotheses which may help decode puzzling problem behavior.

7. Be Authoritative but Not Authoritarian -- Authoritative adults respect the autonomy of youth while not abdicating their own role as an influential role model. Permissive and dictatorial adults are equally inept with conduct problem youth. Adults who place no demands are seen as pushovers, in Redl's terms "friends without influence." And, while dictators can demand obedience, they fail at the crucial task of teaching inner discipline. Authoritative adults demands responsibility instead of obedience. Gold and Osgood (1992) found that adults who both hold delinquent youths accountable while providing them some autonomy neutralize the delinquent counterculture and become more attractive models for identification.

8. Model Respect to Disrespectful Youth. Even if their behavior is immature, we must guard against treating youth as if they were small children. They do not respond to preaching, moralizing, and criticizing. Approaching a youth with respect is a model for reciprocal respect. If we inadvertently offended a youth, we can offer an apology; a genuine apology is a rarity for youth who are accustomed to being blamed by adults for everything. When relationships became turbulent, the distrustful youth believes he or she will be rejected. Threats to remove a youth from a program only feeds into a belief that when the going gets rough, adults will abandon them. Often students who say they don't care any more are really asking whether we think there is any reason to care. We become a mirror as they search our words and actions to discover whether we have lost hope as well. The Russian youth work pioneer, Makarenko, once told a teacher who had given up on a youth "Well if you have no hope, you should not be allowed in contact with this student!"

9. Enlist Troubled Youth as Team Members: While traditional programs do things to troubled youth, strength-based models view youth as partners in their own healing. Young persons have rich insights into the problems of peers, and they are our only real experts on themselves. Professionals now have the technology to involve youth in educational and treatment planning (Brendtro and Bacon, 1995) and in the provision of treatment to their peers (Giacobbe, et al., 1994). We have offered youth access to progress reports we write about them and even asked for their help in writing reports and suggesting changes. Students who are invited to join in meetings with parents and professionals, often handle this responsibility with surprising maturity, although the young persons's agenda may not be our own. Adults who don't respect the views of young persons should not expect to be taken seriously by them.

10. Touch in Small Ways - Sometimes "less is more." Intermittent and smaller contacts with troubled youth may make a cumulative impression that is far more lasting than intensive frontal efforts to establish a relationship.

Many of my more memorable interactions with teachers and caregivers are incidents they have long forgotten.

When Larry Brendtro was president of Starr, he encountered me in a waiting room outside my counselor's office. I sat there with pants too short, wearing what we boys called "ankle busters", cheap, institutional sox that barely reached the ankles on my size 13 feet.

Larry quipped that perhaps the clothing store should issue these socks to staff. Then, as if to join me in a solidarity society of the poorly dressed, he sat down and lowered his sox to ankle mast also. There we were, the bad sox twins as if posed for a fashion photo for the Gentlemen's Quarterly. Larry had used humor to treat me with dignity. He doesn't even recall the incident, but I have preserved this memory as part of my life narrative for 25 years. I was touched in a small way.

11. Give Seeds Time to Grow -- The most pernicious thinking error of professionals is to assume that present problems predict future behavior. In the midst of a crisis, youths may act like nothing we say makes sense or is even heard. Some time later, we may be surprised to discover that they remembered and were able to benefit from the interaction. We are often surprised at the serious reflection a young person may give to a problem, although outwardly they communicate indifference or antagonism. The human animal has an inbuilt self-righting tendency; we are born problem solvers.

In fact, the human brain is programmed to keep pondering unsolved problems (even when we sleep!) and thus our therapeutic seeds often bear belated fruit. We also know that brain constructs our life narrative by selecting and remembering certain pivotal incidents which have major influence in defining the trajectory of life. A colleague recounts of being a poor African-American child who asked her principal if she thought she could someday be a teacher. "Young lady, you could even be a *principal*" was the self fulfilling prophecy. Today she has her doctorate in school administration.

12. Keep Positive Expectations Alive -- Against the greatest of odds, rebellious youth refuse to give up. We should not try to break their spirit, but kindle the belief that great things can happen in their lives. Some psychologists see such ideation as pathological "grandiose thinking." Instead of challenging seemingly unrealistic dreams, we found it more useful to see these hopes of success as a measure of his resilience. If a youth says he is going to become an actor or athlete, we used this as a chance to talk about college and career challenges, rather than seek to give our version of "realistic" expectations. We give writings by persons who have surmounted great personal hardships to achieve success and happiness. We show them how they have many of the qualities of these resilient persons. We try to redefine their stubbornness as persistence in the face of adversity. When they are loyal to delinquent friends, we know they have the

capacity for generosity. And, if they are negative leaders, they already have leadership ability, and need only alter the valence. The essence of strength-based education was articulated by Johann Goethe two centuries ago: we must search for the kernel of virtue hidden in every flaw.

Nothing in this listing should suggest that relating to reluctant youth is a simple matter. Dr. Waln Brown, director of the William Gladden Foundation, has also written about his experiences as a youth sent to special schools and treatment programs (Brown, 1994). We recall when he once was asked by a teacher at a conference, "When nothing works, how long should we keep trying?" His response was Churchillian: "Never give up. Never. Never."

Never giving up means heroic efforts at restoring troubled families rather than removing troubled children. Never giving up means inclusion rather than expulsion of troublesome students. Then, if safety dictates that some children should not stay in their own families, or do not belong in a regular class, these children absolutely need to belong somewhere.

The life story for angry, adult-wary youth is acted out to a script of "you don't care" and "you can't control me." These belief systems are not signs of pathology, or "thinking errors," since this is a logical way of constructing theories about a world that has been hostile and coercive. Rage and rebellion can even be seen as promising signs of health and strength. These youth have not yet succumbed, but they battle back as best they can to find belongings and independence. They haven't given up on themselves yet, and neither can we.

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