

May 15, 2008

My name is Stephanie Hayes and I am a teacher aide at Tompkins Seneca Tioga BOCES where I have been employed in some capacity for the past 10 years. For the majority of those years I have worked with adolescents classified as Emotionally Disturbed. It has been through my work with these students that I have come to fully realize and embrace the issues encompassing their lives and the limitations of our governmental, judicial, social, and educational systems that fail to meet the needs of many of our youth, not just classified students, who may otherwise succeed with the proper support systems in place.

Every behavior has meaning. Finding the meaning behind the behavior is the key to helping a person change the behavior. Larry Brendtro, licensed psychologist and founder of Reclaiming Youth International, writes in *Kids Who Outwit Adults*, "Children who do not bond to a caring adult come to believe that they are unwanted and unlovable." He goes on to state that "they target their rage at adults, who failed to meet their need for love, and at themselves for not deserving that love." Troubled behavior such as drug use stem from a person's deprivation of key components needed for positive development.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse, as well as many other agencies, and schools have identified a list of factors that are either "protective" or "risk." Risk factors are those that make drug abuse and other behaviors such as violence more likely and protective factors are those that have been shown to reduce the likelihood of those same behaviors. Risk Factors include: chaotic home environments, especially in which parents abuse substances or suffer from mental illnesses; Ineffective parenting; lack of parent-child attachments and nurturing; failure in school; poor social coping skills; and the perception of the approval of drug-using behavior in family, work, school, and by peers. Protective factors include strong and positive family bonds; parental involvement and monitoring of activities; success in school; strong bonds with school and other organizations; and strong, positive peer relationships.

Children of incarcerated parents tend to have more risk factors than protective factors and become indirect victims of their parent's crimes and many are deprived emotionally, socially, and financially. These children are

five to six times more likely to be incarcerated than their peers according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

I spoke with a 14 year old student whose mother was imprisoned when she was only 8 for having an ounce of heroin and being under the influence while driving. Leaning on my shoulder this student said, “my mom has been gone and my dad is not loving. I hardly ever get hugged. I want to be hugged.” This student went on to talk about how her life has been since her mom’s arrest. She has changed school districts, been suspended from school on several occasions for fighting, and was doing poorly academically. She started at the TST BOCES Community School this year and is becoming more and more successful. She stated that she felt like people cared and that she could do better.

Many students have similar life stories that begin with a lack of Family Privilege or a lack of strong, positive family support and social and educational skills that allow children to solve problems, follow rules, and communicate. Their life story continues with fighting, suspensions, some entering the juvenile justice system, and the use of drugs and alcohol. If there is no intervention for these at risk youth, the cycle of incarceration and drug and alcohol use most often continues.

Studies have shown that children who have lost a parent due to incarceration exhibit problems such as anxiety, withdrawal, hypervigilance, depression, shame, and guilt. They may also exhibit noticeable problems such as aggression, hostility, increased delinquency, and poor school performance.

Our current social attitudes towards children with behavioral problems are ones of anger, disappointment, frustration, and even disgust. These attitudes are reflected in our current laws and educational system. Three Strikes, mandatory sentencing, and Zero Tolerance schools are examples of the institutional support for these social attitudes and are counterproductive.

The implementation of laws and programs that punish in the attempt to rehabilitate are archaic and do not achieve the desired result. How can one be rehabilitated when they were never habilitated? A press release from the Unified Court System in November of 2003 stated that the since the implementation of the drug courts the recidivism rate across the United States has been reduced by an average of 32 percent. The release also stated

that taxpayer savings in New York State totaled just over \$254 million. Drug court is just one of the ways to address the complexities of drug use.

In my experience, one of the best approaches is being proactive. Being able to connect with at risk youth before they become a part of the judicial system is the best preventative measure. Meeting youth where they are at, rather than judging and promoting zero tolerance policies allows them to begin to grow and develop strong positive relationships.

In the short life of a seventeen year old boy I work with, he has experienced more pessimism, ridicule, and abandonment from adults in his life than most people experience in a lifetime. At his home school he was repeatedly suspended for fighting, being disruptive, being disrespectful, and drug use. The school psychologist wanted him labeled as a sociopath. He started in the classroom that I work in at the start of the 2006-2007 school year. He was disruptive and hard to get to know. Implementing the Circle of Courage Philosophy in the classroom we focus on belonging, generosity, mastery and independence. First and foremost is belonging. Students do not perform well in school when they feel like they don't belong. Focusing on his many attributes, rather than his weaknesses, we began to see a change. He began to feel like he belonged. "I belong here" he stated one day in class. That day he began to open up. His life story heartbreaking. He had never had a strong, positive family life. In fact, just this year, he told the teacher I work with and me that he loved us and knew that we cared so deeply. He thanked us for telling him to put on his coat when it was cold. He has never been taken care of on some of the most elementary levels. He was never told to put a coat on when it's cold, never taught how to communicate, or how to succeed. His behavior reflected this, but the meaning was not found at his previous school. He is not a sociopath and is now serving as a leader in the school, speaks on a panel that discusses issues and solutions faced by youth in his situation at conferences, has not been suspended in over a year, is no longer disruptive, and no longer uses drugs or alcohol.

By implementing the Circle of Courage model, holding peer group counseling three times a week, and offering continuous training for staff, our program has proven successful. Students feel supported, they are able to create strong, positive relationships with adults as well as peers. For many this is the first time they have had these types of relationships. With the support of these relationships, they begin to believe that they can succeed.

When they begin to believe they can succeed, they do. Many former students still keep in touch, letting us know how college is going, what work is like, how their new families are, and just to say thanks. These are the students that were at one point in the system, using drugs and alcohol to escape, and held the belief that they would never amount to anything. Some stating that they were only good enough for prison.

As successful as our program is, there are so many kids in need. We have a waiting list and some of those students may never enter the program. Budget cuts to education limit the amount of services districts can provide. Many at risk youth never get the support they need and are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes. Spending millions of dollars on non violent drug offenses through incarceration, rather than investing in preventative educational programs that meet the social, emotional, and mental health needs of our youth is wasteful at best. The prison system does not meet these needs and these needs do not go away as our youth become adults. The current system, with mandatory sentencing and lack of understanding supports the cycle of incarceration and addiction. This can be changed. I am asking you to take into consideration changing the laws to reflect what is best for the future of our state and invest in our children.