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ABSTRACT

Educators have a responsibility to learn more about at-risk youth. This paper examines such youths' family systems and dynamics, their identifying characteristics, and explores possible interventions. If a family perceives many situations as crises, that family usually possesses inadequate coping skills. Children in such families develop their own dysfunctional coping strategies such as acting out, substance abuse, withdrawal, and over compensation. The roles that such children adopt include: the hero, the scapegoat, the lost child, and the mascot. A child may adopt several roles or switch roles when necessary since dysfunctional families revolve around the pathology which creates the disturbance. Dysfunctional families also tend to be shame-based and have implicit rules, such as don't talk, don't trust, and don't feel, which serve to isolate the child from others. Teachers may intervene in this dysfunction by developing an understanding of the child's adopted role. Identification methods include record keeping of problematic school behavior, faculty observations and referrals, friend and student referrals, parents, and the legal system. Once the at-risk student is identified, the teacher and counselor can begin to develop specific intervention strategies. (An appendix characterizes family roles and lists role-specific interventions for teachers.) (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

TROUBLED YOUTH:

IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

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TROUBLED YOUTH: IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION

Educators have a responsibility to learn more about at-risk youth. The education entails understanding the: (a) family systems and dynamics that produce at-risk children, (b) identifying characteristics of at-risk children, and (c) possible intervention and helping strategies.

At-risk or troubled youth can be classified by many variables: socio-economic status, single parent, abused, alcohol/drug involved, and experiencing a crisis (e.g. death, divorce). Troubled students can be acting out or withdrawn. Students that are experiencing transition and change are at-risk for beginning inappropriate behaviors (Silvestri, Dantonio & Eason, 1994).

Troubled youth encompass a high percentage of our students enrolled in public schools. Statistics reveal that approximately 15% of the United States population is addicted to alcohol, illegal drugs or legal medication (Whitfield, 1988). These individuals in turn directly effect family members. The percentage of dysfunctional and/or substance abuse effected families in our culture has been estimated to be 60 - 80% (Whitfield). If troubled or at risk youth are identified by some additional criteria such as: overachievment and perfectionism, withdrawn and hesitant, rebellious and angry, or class clown and funny person, then a great many more of our students can be called troubled or at risk.

Family dynamics and early childhood messages all play important roles in the developing child's ego boundaries (Kritsberg, 1988). It appears that if the family unit is cohesive, supportive and encouraging in self growth, the child develops a security that can be seen in the reduction of at-risk social, school and health related behaviors (Jessor, 1993).

However, if the family perceives many situations as crises, and continues in a crisis state, it is usually because the family does not have adequate coping skills (Carlson & Lewis, 1991). Children in these families begin to develop coping strategies for personal survival. These strategies can include: acting out behaviors, abusing alcohol/drugs, withdrawing, and over-compensating (Whitfield, 1988). Research indicates that children growing up in dysfunctional situations develop childhood survival roles that are themselves dysfunctional (Jenkins, Fischer & Harrison, 1993).

With an understanding of coping roles that children adopt while growing up in a dysfunctional environment, teachers can better meet the needs of these students. Roles that children adopt while growing up in a dysfunctional environment have been identified and utilized for years (Jenkins et al., 1993). However, validation of these roles has only occurred recently. Jenkins et al. (1993) confirmed that 60% of adult children from dysfunctional families adopted one or more of the identified roles more frequently than individuals from non-dysfunctional

and/or non-alcoholic families.

According to Wegscheider (1981) these roles can include: hero, scapegoat, lost child and mascot. Each role has identifiable characteristics. The hero is the family success story: succeeding in sports, academics or work while making the family "look good" to the outside world. The scapegoat provides the family with an outlet for attention focusing. The child brings attention to him/herself by acting out or being in trouble at school or with the legal system.

The mascot is the family clown: creating humor and making light of serious events that occur within the family. The lost child is withdrawn and absent from the family and outside world. Other family members will take care of this child making him/her the center of attention. These roles move attention away from the issue creating the dysfunction (Wegscheider, 1981; Kritsberg, 1988).

A child may adopt several roles or switch roles when necessary. Dysfunctional families revolve around the pathology creating the disturbance (e.g. alcoholism, terminal illness, abuse). Whatever the pathology, each family member adapts to the dysfunction and develops a role or roles (Brown, 1988). The hero and lost child appear to be the most frequently combined roles. Role combination may appear to be contradictory. However, upon further investigation this combination appears to serve a

purpose. Being responsible in the presence of the family and outside world (e.g. sports) moves the focus away from the family issue. Concurrently, the child would be closed to outside individuals because openness threatens exposure of the family secret (Jenkins, et al., 1993).

Dysfunctional families tend to be shame based and have implicit rules (Whitfield, 1988). These rules include: don't talk, don't trust, and don't feel (Black, 1988). These messages are internalized as early as five to eight years of age. The child learns not to trust because of repeated broken promises, deceit and forgotten commitments. The silent, don't talk, message is learned while guarding the family secret. Protecting oneself from feelings relieves the child of the burden of pain (e.g. disappointment, anger, fear) (Black, 1988). The child grows up isolated from others. Communication within the family is based upon a closed system: guarding the family secret (Kritzberg, 1988).

Explicit rules may also be communicated within the family. The rules include messages containing "should" and "have to". Examples are: (a) (have to) marry a (religion, job status), (b) (should) go to college, (c) (have to) get good grades, (d) (have to) be serious, and (e) (have to) love God (Black, 1988).

Helping strategies involve the teacher developing an understanding of the child's adopted role. The educator is not in a position to confront the student; but, rather to work with

the counselor and student regarding acceptable classroom behaviors. For example: the lost child needs tasks involving one-on-one or small group work. The teacher provides notice and gives attendance to the child without sympathizing (Wegscheider, 1981).

The hero, on the other hand, needs to learn to follow. Heroes lack trust and confidence in others' abilities and have difficulty watching others lead. Patience is the rule for the teacher when working with the hero.

The mascot would not be rewarded for the funny remarks and class clown acts. Attention should be focused on rewarding noncomic behaviors. A behavior contract focusing on positive behaviors would be appropriate. The scapegoat is identified by disruptive and acting out behaviors. Scapegoats need to understand that such behaviors are not acceptable and will result in consequences. A behavior contract would also be appropriate for the scapegoat. (See Appendix A for individual roles and classroom intervention suggestions).

Interventions consist of first identifying the at-risk youth. Identification methods include: record keeping of problematic behavior in school, faculty observations and referrals, friend and student referrals, parents, and the legal system. Upon identification of the at-risk student, the teacher and counselor can begin to develop specific intervention strategies. For example, the Student Assistance Program (SAP)

coordinators can confer with the student and parent(s) to discuss the problem and together develop a plan. The plan could entail referral within the school or community. SAP programs are a successful intervention tool for at-risk youth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1984).

Brief strategic interventions are an effective modality for at-risk youth (Amatea & Sherrard, 1991). The counselor identifies the crisis level of the student and develops an appropriate intervention technique. A long term crisis (e.g. physical abuse) requires a different intervention than a brief short term crisis (e.g. relocation of a friend). Learning capabilities are also evaluated. The brief strategic technique provides quick problem resolution for the child.

In summary, at-risk youth can be classified by many methods and definitions. Whatever the method, at-risk youth pose a problem for teachers. Understanding the childhood roles resulting from dysfunctional family dynamics will assist the educator in developing effective helping strategies. Successful programs and techniques that utilize a team approach for interventions are also available to the educator. The at-risk youth presents a challenge to the teacher. The challenge can be met and results can be healthy and rewarding for all concerned.

APPENDIX A - FAMILY ROLES

	STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS	TEACHER INTERVENTIONS
SCAPEGOAT	-reliance on peers -acting out -defiance, sullenness -gives up easily	-stress responsibility -apply logical consequences -nonemotional responses
HERO	-achieving, workaholic -inability to say no -anxious	-limit class responsibility -reinforce follower role
LOST CHILD	-not noticed -rarely misbehaves -picked on by others	-notice and attend to -avoid sympathizing -small group interactions
MASCOT	-cute/funny/mischievous -hyperactivity -class disruption	-attention to noncomic -require responsibility -reinforce other be
ALL		-pick up clues in speech -create invitation to talk -don't worry about not "knowing enough"

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