

# ED400472 1995-00-00 Career Counseling with Street Youth. ERIC Digest.

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## Career Counseling with Street Youth. ERIC Digest.

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A variety of programs have attempted to address the career development needs of street youth (i.e., 16-24 year olds who generally have no fixed address, minimal or no formal social support, and who usually support themselves through street activities such as prostitution, theft, drug dealing, and the like). However, in our review of the literature, it became apparent that no single program addressed the varied needs of these young people. In response to this gap in services, we designed a model for a relatively unstructured "program," flexible enough to adjust to meet the changing needs of youth. This model was the basis for "Skills Plus," a pre-employability program for street youth. The core features of the model and program are described below.

## HIERARCHY OF SELF-DIRECTED ADAPTATION

Career development programs are designed to help individuals make transitions from one context to another (e.g., school to work, one job to another job, street to work). It is generally assumed that clients' inability to adapt to a new environment prompts them to enter transition programs. In general terms, the desired outcome of these programs is client adaptability within the new environment.

As clients move from very low adaptability to very high adaptability, the interventions used to assist them need to change. The "hierarchy of self-directed adaptation" (Magnusson, Day, & Redekopp, 1988), partially illustrated in Figure 1 and described below, is our attempt to show the continuum of these interventions.

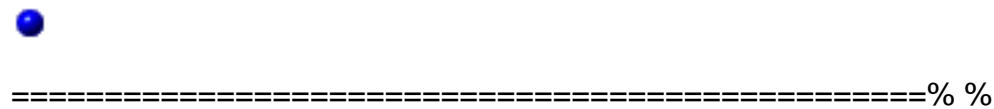


FIGURE 1: HIERARCHY OF SELF-DIRECTED ADAPTATION



A DAPTABILITY LEVEL --- INTERVENTION Exceedingly High --- Personal Innovation

Very High --- Self-Help

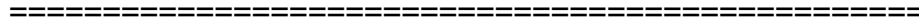
High --- Consulting

Moderate --- Formal Instruction

Low --- Coaching

Very Low --- Advising/Guiding

Exceedingly Low --- Intensive Support



1. Intensive Support. At the beginning of a transition, individuals may lack the resources or capability to take independent action, and often need someone to serve as a direct advocate on their behalf. Such intensive support is usually directive, and involves doing things for the clients (e.g., attending to safety concerns, making phone calls). Intensive support is usually conducted on a one-to-one basis and helps to develop trust between the client and the intervenor. It allows the client to become more comfortable with the transition process. With some clients, this phases lasts only a few minutes; with street kids, 3-5 weeks is the norm.



2. Advising/Guiding. As clients become acquainted with the demands of the transition, one-to-one assistance continues but becomes more non-directive and less advocacy-based. This "advising/guiding" is what most people think of as the typical function of the career/personal counselor. Clients begin to work on self-management skills, the prerequisites for any transition.



3. Coaching. As the client becomes more adaptable, particularly with regard to the essentials of self-management, coaching (small group facilitation) is introduced. The coaching intervention allows the client to interact with others (the context in which most self-management skills are necessary) while still having the luxury of personal assistance when necessary. Coaching develops the client's self-management capabilities, and begins to work on personal/career development issues. The above three levels of intervention attend to the development of skills and attitudes that are prerequisites for formal instructional settings.



4. Formal Instruction. Formal instruction enhances specific transition skills and usually occurs in large group settings. It becomes an appropriate and cost-effective intervention when the client's self-management skills are relatively strong, thus enabling the intervenor to focus on specific skills needed for the transition (e.g., job-specific skills).

5. Consulting. Clients who have acquired specific skills during "formal instruction" will occasionally stumble or hesitate as they implement these skills in real life. The consulting intervention recognizes for this by encouraging the client to return to the intervenor for check-ups, encouragement, or validation. For example, someone who learns risumi writing skills may return after drafting a new risumi to have it checked by the intervenor.

6. Self-Help. As the client becomes comfortable applying his or her skills in the transition environment (e.g., a job, academic upgrading as a post-secondary student), the role of the intervenor changes markedly. Clients help themselves by reading, talking with colleagues, going to seminars, and the like. The role of the intervenor becomes one of providing access to, or information about, resources for clients.

7. Personal Innovation. As individuals "master" their new environments, they begin to create their own learning mechanisms. This may include experimenting with new strategies/tactics, teaching others, or mentoring others. This requires extremely high adaptability--here individuals create new practices and concepts to alter their environment. The role of the intervenor at this level is one of providing encouragement, support, and feedback.

## SKILLS PLUS

The 16-week "Skills Plus" program for street youth follows the above hierarchy from intensive support to coaching, with only the occasional formal instruction. Our intention was to help street youth develop the prerequisite skills for formal instruction in other locations (e.g., back to school, post-secondary, job-specific training) or for immediate entry-level employment.

The first several weeks of the program were devoted to intensive support. Youth met the counselors individually on roughly a daily basis. The counselors' primary goals at this stage were to develop trust and encourage motivation for the transition. Although intensive support is costly, it paid off in client commitment and a very low drop-out rate.

The amount of time devoted to intensive support was different for each young person. Some required only an hour, whereas some needed daily meetings for 5 weeks. Those who were ready, immediately moved to advising/guiding; those who were not, received intensive support as long as they needed it. On average, most street clients were ready for advising/guiding by the third or fourth week.

Coaching began as soon as two or more clients were ready for this intervention; the coaching was entirely client-driven. For example, during a session the clients spoke of the difficulty in cashing checks without proper identification. They felt like non-entities without a driver's license. The counselors took this as an opportunity to build self-esteem, explore learning strategies and meet immediate needs. They began teaching driver skills so that clients could get their "beginner's permits" and have identification. Similarly, if clients expressed anger during a session, the session would focus on "anger management."

Complementing the counselors was a group of "advocates" who had been trained to work part-time with the street youth in "Skills Plus." Advocates were individuals familiar with street life due to prior experiences, but who had worked through their own personal issues. The advocates assisted at all three intervention levels, helped recruit clients, participated in a "triadic counseling" method (a method for increasing communication which uses either two clients and one counselor or advocate, or an advocate, client and counselor) and helped clients develop Self-Portraits (see Redekopp, Day, & Magnusson, 1995).

## OUTCOMES

The ability of "Skills Plus" to meet client needs as they emerged resulted in high commitment to the program. Clients who stayed with the program past the first one or two intensive support sessions generally completed the program. These clients had far more needs than we anticipated (and we were anticipating the worst; therefore, 16 weeks often afforded only enough time to deal with basic living needs. For example, one young prostitute with an infant effectively made the transition from prostitute to "talking dirty over the phone." This may not seem like a big leap, but it helped reach a number of goals: safety for her baby; improved care for her baby; reasonable cash flow; improved safety for the mother (i.e., avoiding abusive pimps); and stable living environment with a support network.

This woman obviously did not make the transition to a "normal" working environment, but at least she could more easily effect that transition when ready.

## CONCLUSION

Many of the "Skills Plus" successes were similar to the above. Although a majority of the youth returned to school, obtained further training, or found employment, these seemed to be less significant than the transitions to better support systems, better living conditions, better communities, and better self-care.

## REFERENCES

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