

The Courage To Grow Giving Confidence To A Ghetto Kid

By JOSEPH W. GAULD

Mr. G: "How does a parent help a teenager who has a poor self-image?"



LET ME TELL you about Cal, a little kid who was simply drained of confidence. Cal walked with a slump, with his eyes looking down. He talked with a mumble, always looking away. I never saw him smile.

Cal came from the ghetto. Not many people understand how the ghetto can hold a kid down. The American dream tells a kid he can be anything he sets his mind to. But, first, he must really believe in it. In the ghetto, there are too many losers and too much despair for a kid to believe that dreams can come true.

Cal's other problem was his dad, who was so determined that Cal was going to break out of the ghetto that he physically tried to knock every shortcoming out of Cal. In the process, of course, he knocked out Cal's spirit too.

Yet I still admired Cal's dad. Many ghetto homes are fatherless because pressures on the father are intense. His own opportunities are so limited he often feels like a failure. But ghettos are where I find my strongest families. It takes real guts and concern to face failure and eke out a living that will provide your kids with a better opportunity than you had. Cal's dad kept his son in my school with money he couldn't afford.

CAL WAS IN TROUBLE at my school right from the start. To top it off, he was caught stealing. Most of what Cal stole was of no use to him. It was as if he believed some object would magically give him confidence in himself.

After Cal was disciplined, he was brought into my office. "Why, Cal?" His eyes continually looked at the floor. "Well, Tommy, he say... and I try... but if I doan..." Cal was a master at making himself so hard to understand that most people gave up trying. I jumped to the couch and positioned my face a foot away from his petrified eyes, holding the bottom of his chin.

"The first rule of this talk is you don't let your chin fall lower than this." I'm sure I looked like Ghengis Khan in his worst moments to Cal. It was an amusing picture; Cal continued to mumble away, but with his jaw stuck out as if he were going to punch somebody.

"Stop mumbling," I said sharply. "Say anything, but say it tough." Scared to death, Cal tried, but it just didn't come off. "Go practice in the bathroom mirror, but you better learn to make me feel like I'm getting bawled out." When he came back, I think he surprised himself by barking at me.

"Cal, that's not too bad." He looked at me

blankly. "When somebody compliments you, Cal, you're supposed to smile." Cal moved his mouth in a position that made it look as if he had eaten something that didn't agree with him. "Cal, you go practice that smile in the mirror and you continue to practice it every night and every morning. And when I see you, you better show me a real smile."

Cal's attitude changed and he was accepted as a member of the community again. But then he found some new ways to get into trouble and again was brought into my office.

"Cal, what do you really want out of life?" The question baffled Cal. After a long pause, he answered, "To stay out of trouble."

"Well, doesn't trying to stay out of trouble get you into trouble?" The discussion drastically pointed up Cal's outlook on life. He had seen nothing in himself except the ability to get into trouble.

"Cal, by tomorrow you are to do six things you have never done before and don't come into my office without having them done." I gave him one of my most terrible looks. He got the message, for he came in the next day with a written list: he helped another boy set his table, he studied half an hour at an odd time, and so on. The following day he found eight things on his own. After a week, Cal had a lift in his voice as he described his deeds.

CAL'S PARENTS came to the school to take their turn on the hot seat. It was a hard lesson for both of them, but typical of parents strongly committed to see their child grow up well, they learned it well. "I know you both fear for Cal's future if he doesn't straighten out, but you must believe Cal's best will take care of his worst."

Not surprisingly, the following week I caught Cal whistling in the hall. And I must say he was almost a wise guy when he retorted to my kidding. Oh well, at least I could enjoy his growth until his "next stop" would get us all in the soup again.

So I'm saying the key to a kid's confidence is accomplishment. Cal changed his self-image by actually performing deeds — even simple ones like smiling.

But Cal's problem is not why most kids today lack confidence. Cal's home and neighborhood knocked him down, but also gave him the hard knocks needed to make the most of his chances once he had them. Most kids today have the opportunities to accomplish something; they don't know how to make the most of them. They just haven't learned the value of the blood, sweat and tears that a ghetto or discipline at home — however hard — can teach.

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