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Shortridge Academy

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Visit by Judith E. Bessette, EdD, March 30 & 31, 2011

About nine years ago, before I could spell consultant, my son was in trouble. I stumbled on a new parent choice, private pay school, Shortridge Academy and my son became their fourth student. As I learned more about this industry, I came to think of Shortridge as a "son of CEDU" program — more accurately described as an emotional growth school. Adam Rainer, the founder, had graduated years earlier from Rocky Mountain Academy, a CEDU program, and he had a vision for a kinder, gentler and better place to help troubled teens.

After my son graduated and I became an educational consultant, I visited the school several times. Each time, there were a few new things and the school seemed stronger and better, but the program still clung primarily to an emotional growth model.

Like my son, Shortridge has changed and matured...and while they are still refining who they are and what they do best, the school has made a significant paradigm shift, having embraced an evidence-based philosophy called Positive Youth Development (PYD). Simply put, PYD is an approach to working with young people that is focused on building up the strengths and positive characteristics of youth versus a focus solely on attempting to prevent, change or diffuse negative behavior. The approach utilizes a partnership model with students, authoritative parenting techniques, and structured activities that support healthy brain development.

So what are the origins of PYD and how did this approach come to Shortridge? Here is an overview of adolescence since it was defined as a developmental stage in the early 20th century. Until the early 1970s, so-called adolescent deviance was "treated" after the fact by correcting bad behaviors. In the late 70s, prevention theory emerged and efforts turned to anticipating problems in order to prevent them. In the 80s, resiliency theory looked at why some teens overcame or bounced back from problems while others did not. While prevention and resiliency are both proactive, especially as compared to merely reacting to deviance, they are both still rooted in "fixing" deficiencies in teens.

As the 21st century opened, the new movement of positive psychology emerged as did developmental systems theory. Espousing the notion that problem free is not fully prepared...meaning that removing deviance and risk factors does not insure success, PYD has identified 5 areas of strengths that need to be developed in order to insure that success. Known as The Five Cs, they are competence; confidence; connection; character, and caring. A sixth C, contribution emerges as the other C's are developed.

Rainer, searching for ways to improve Shortridge, developed relationships with Richard Lerner, PhD, and Kristine Baber, PhD. Lerner is the Bergstrom Chair in Applied Developmental Science at Tufts University and the author of The Good Teen. The book is an easy read for parents and professionals and describes PYD and what it means to see children as resources to be developed, not problems to be fixed. Lerner also offers practical advice on child rearing. Baber, now Emeritus Professor in Family Studies and former Director of the Center on Adolescence at University of New Hampshire, whose area of expertise is adolescent development. Like Lerner, Baber talks about the importance of authoritative parenting (versus hands-off permissive parenting, helicopter or authoritarian parenting) to the success of PYD. Baber has also written about how PYD makes sense in the context of the current research on the teen brain. Each of these professionals is part of Rainer's effort to engage in on-going outcomes research with Baber involved in a formal program evaluation and Lerner a member of Shortridge's Research Advisory Board.

So the six Cs at Shortridge — competence; confidence; connection; character; caring and contribution — now define all that happens there. Students are active in creating and updating their own individualized Positive Development Plans that incorporate PYD techniques and premises into their therapeutic, academic and family work. These plans serve as the framework for a student's programming while at Shortridge and function as a "treatment plan."

Speaking of therapeutic work, this too has evolved at Shortridge. Early on, the emotional growth activities were largely group process work, shored up by individual writing assignments and weekly family calls. While there is still weekly group work — including specialty groups for trauma, divorce and adoption — there is now a team of Master's Level and Licensed Counselors who see students weekly, facilitate the group sessions including specialty counseling groups, and work with families. With a caseload of about 10 students, counselors facilitate phone calls weekly with students their families, and consultants. The counselors are also involved in the New Parent Orientation Sessions held every other month as well as the more formal Parent Workshops held twice each year. Helping parents understand PYD and how to adopt an authoritative parenting style is an important aspect of this work.

The Clinical Director, who also serves as the school's medical director is a psychiatric nurse practitioner who manages the health center on campus in addition to supervising the work of the counselors. There is always a nurse on call if there is not one on campus and the health center is licensed separately by the state of New Hampshire. This allows Shortridge Academy to be hands-on in medication management and deal with the upset stomachs, colds and bumps and bruises that occur.

Academics have always been important at Shortridge and the school seems better than ever. Students, bright underachievers who've experienced challenges in their schooling, will find an intellectually stimulating environment that is flexible and sensitive to individual needs. Faculty is experienced, skilled teachers who are passionate about their work. Shortridge can handle gifted students as well as supporting a range of needs from ADHD to mild learning disabilities. Each student gets a new laptop for use in the