Places for Struggling Teens™

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"It is more important to get it right, than to get it first."

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New Perspectives:

Scotts Valley School 2
Intervention 2
Mercy Home for Boys & Girls 2
The Spire School 5

Extended Insights:

Cumberland Heights 5

Seen N' Heard:

Page 6

Conference Calendar:

Page 10

Aren't Parents To Blame?

By Lon Woodbury



We have come a long way in the last 30 years in programs for struggling teens. In the 1970s, a number of things happened that created the impression that if a child had behavioral problems, it was the parent's fault. Laws were passed in virtually all states to protect these children from what was considered abuse, and part of the result was that any time a child acted out, or acted in, it was generally believed that it was the fault of the parents.

This automatic "blame the parents" attitude had a long history. Long before the 1970s, a mother was blamed for being "cold" if her son turned out to be gay. There was a similar blame against the mother if a child was autistic. Increasingly, fathers became suspect as possible predators, and if there were abuse in the house, it was always blamed on the father first.

By the 1970s laws were passed in most states to punish parents if abuse could be found. It got so bad that if a child so much as made an accusation against a parent, many social workers would proclaim "A Child Would Not Lie!" and proceeded automatically to move against the parents, even using a small child's complaints against the parents. I'm not by any means indicating that all children lied or that there weren't legitimate cases of real abuses involving parents, but in so many of the cases children were trying to "get back" at their parents for following through on boundary setting or because the parent had said no to them.

As cases wound their way through the courts, and some of the most visible of the cases were thrown out because they were found to be baseless, there was a revision of the widespread "blame the parents" accusation.

By the time I started as admissions director for an emotional growth boarding school in 1984, the "blame the parents" perspective was on its way out, especially in parent-choice schools and programs for struggling teens. Blaming the parents was counterproductive in most cases and professionals were beginning to realize just how counterproductive. By being parent choice, these schools and programs began to realize that whether or not parents were the cause of the problem, they absolutely were in almost all cases part of the solution. The old maxim said parents had messed up their children and their only duty was to enroll the child, not interfere with the school or program so the child could be "fixed." The new maxim became helping the parents become better parents at the same time the children were helped to learn more positive attitudes and behaviors. This new maxim not only reduced relapse when the child returned home, but convinced more parents to flee from the mainstream education and mental health systems when these systems were not helping their children. More and more families turned to private, parent choice options for their families as they realized the mainstream systems were broken.

Parents need help; they need advice and parenting education, not a punishment that might make their children virtual orphans. I recently interviewed a radio show guest about this topic. We discussed the recognition in parent choice schools and programs, and to a lesser extent education and mental health systems, that blaming the parents is not only pointless, but even harmful to the children. When the parents are the cause of their child's troubles, isolating parents from children doesn't help to fix the problem. It is much more productive to work with the parents and family as a whole.