

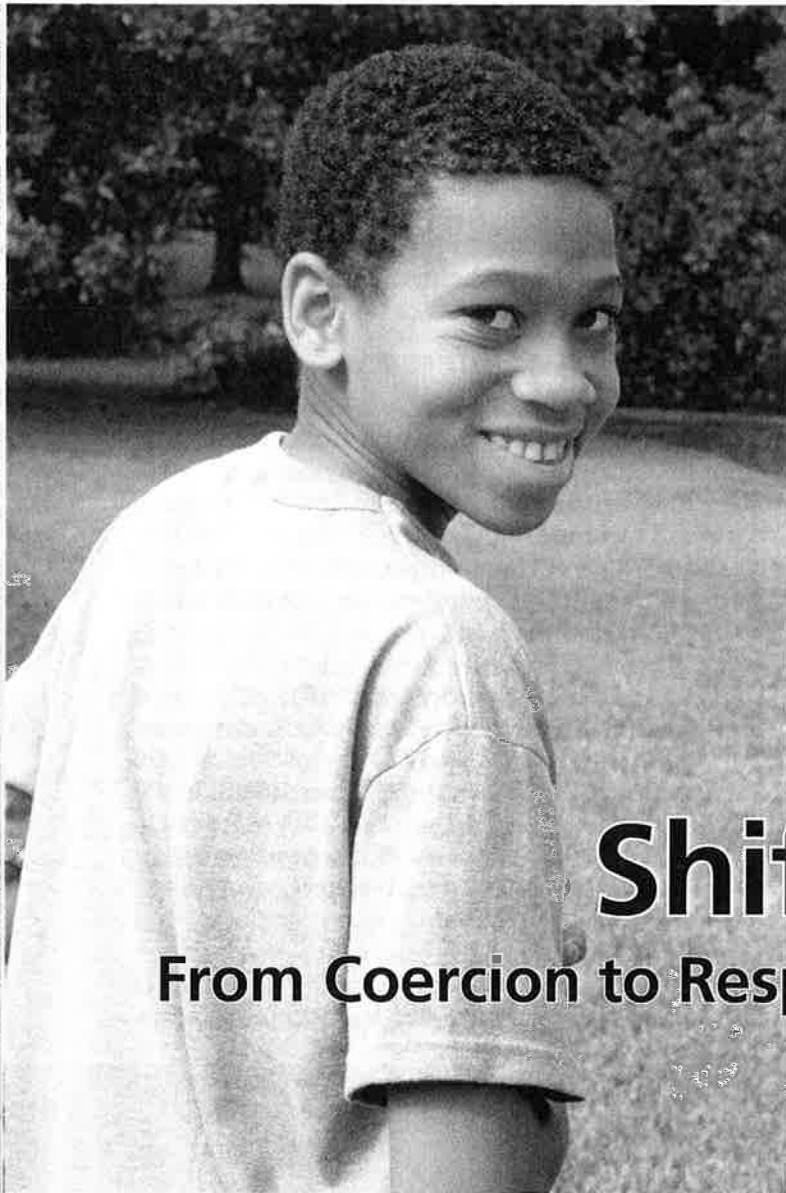
reclaiming

children and youth

**Positive
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A curriculum for building social, emotional, and moral competence transformed the staff and youth culture. Staff responded to the youth with respect and empathy and young people gained in responsibility and self-worth.

Shifting Gears: From Coercion to Respect in Residential Care

Leslie T. Dunn

Charles Hall Youth Services (CHYS) in Bismarck, North Dakota, desired to move from an adult-centered, punitive program model to a strength-based model with an emphasis on teaching critical life skills and behaviors to young clients. Through a partnership with the Teel Institute of Kansas City, Missouri, the primary focus was on developing the capacity of staff to help youth take responsibility for correcting their own behavior.

Over the past two decades, the Teel Institute in Kansas City has developed and tested a classroom-based, age-appropriate spiral curriculum in Grades K-12 designed to develop social, moral, and emotional competencies in youth and to prevent problems such as underachievement, substance abuse, bullying, hopelessness, and depression. Program content includes what are believed to be the skills and behaviors that are critical for emotional stability, psychological well-being, and the prevention of mental illness. Students study topics such as admitting and correcting mistakes, handling failure,

understanding and dealing with emotions, taking responsibility, respecting one's own rights and the rights of others, setting and working toward goals, understanding oneself and others, empathizing, appreciating individual differences, applying effort and perseverance, managing conflict, and solving moral dilemmas (Kohlberg, 1981). Most importantly, students are taught that these are the behaviors, skills, values, and attitudes that allow each one of them to earn and maintain genuine self-respect—one of the most crucial components of psychological wellness (Branden, 1969, 1994).

Martin Seligman, in his book *Authentic Happiness* (2002), focuses on psychological wellness from a disease-prevention perspective rather than from a disease-remediation perspective. Seligman's premise is that mental illness may be prevented, especially early in the life of children, by recognizing and nurturing their strengths, competencies, and virtues—things that children need to cope effectively with both the joys and the tribulations that

will inevitably be part of their lives. Professionals' efforts to remedy disease are often "too little, too late." Focusing on prevention allows them to avoid the disease state in the first place. They can teach children important skills needed to handle the life difficulties that can result in serious psychological problems. To this end, the Institute's programs were designed to teach young people to understand and capitalize on their strengths and goodness. Studying the concepts and practicing the associated skills of the program will create purpose and meaning; promote a legitimate sense of capability, worthiness, and self-regard; provide the keys to weathering life's inevitable challenges; and act as a psychological intervention to prevent mental and emotional problems.

The program has benefited from 12 years of formal, extensive research for effectiveness, with over 1500 students in controlled studies in grades K-5 in schools serving highly diverse populations of students (Dunn, 2001). Results identified significant positive changes in students' behavior. These changes included increased willingness to admit mistakes and work on corrections, ability to stand up appropriately for one's rights, respect for others' property, persistence and effort to complete tasks, self-control, empathy for others, willingness to accept responsibilities, and ability to work without disrupting others. Study results also demonstrated significant decreases in inappropriate attention-seeking behaviors, submissiveness with peers, exaggerated or inappropriate self-blaming, bossiness, bullying, and physical aggression. In some schools, suspensions and other disciplinary actions were reduced by over 85% in as little as one year. Finally, by grade 5, students in the program reported a higher level of self-valuing based on their social and emotional competencies as compared to controls. Interviews with students revealed not only an enthusiasm for the program, but a surprising level of meaningfulness articulated by even very young students:

"This program can change your life." Second-Grader

"I learn from all the principles every time I hear them. They help me through life. Without them I'd be lost." Third-Grader

"It taught me that no matter how hard things get, I'll always pull through." Fifth-Grader

Three years ago, the Institute was presented with a unique challenge: to modify its classroom programs to fit the needs of Charles Hall Youth Services (CHYS), a residential foster-care provider in

Bismarck, North Dakota, that serves approximately 100 boys and girls each year, ages 12 to 17, and includes a significant number (45%) of Native American youth. Youth at CHYS have been adjudicated into the foster care system for a variety of reasons. Many come from families who are unable or unwilling to provide adequate care for their teenagers. Others are court-ordered due to drug or alcohol abuse, truancies, running away, delinquency, or unruliness. Some experience post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, or attention deficit disorder. Many struggle with thoughts of suicide, eating disorders, and/or self-mutilation. The three most common reasons for youth placement at CHYS are unruly behaviors (45%), delinquencies (20%), and drug/alcohol use (15%). Youth reside at CHYS from a few weeks to a year.

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CHYS and The Teel Institute designed and initiated an ongoing effort in order to change the way that youth workers interact with youth in residential foster care. CHYS desired to move from an adult-centered, punitive program model to a preventive, strength-based model with an emphasis on teaching critical life skills and behaviors to youth. The Teel Institute provided consultation, training, program components, and evaluation for two years of formal implementation of the project, while CHYS staff did the ultimate hard work of changing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

The two-year study began with these questions to CHYS staff: if they could have everything they wanted in terms of the interactions between staff and youth, what would it look like? What behaviors would they see exhibited by both adults and youth? What would it sound like and feel like, for both youth and staff?

The answers to these questions directed the development of a blueprint for re-framing youth work in the organization. It also served as a template against which goal accomplishment could be measured. The blueprint, or Program Configuration Checklist (PCC), was constructed using a model developed by Gene Hall and Shirley Hord (1987). The PCC was divided into 11 components that focused on

relationships between staff and youth, relationships among staff, what staff teach and model with youth, youth behavior, relationships between management and staff, and alignment with the best practices in the field of residential foster care. Each component had several specific behavioral indicators associated with it, a combined total of 68 different items. Each behavioral indicator was then categorized as (a) being completely integrated into the culture of CHYS, (b) being implemented with selected emphasis or only partially integrated, or (c) being completely absent in the culture or existing in completely the opposite way of the desired state (antithetical behaviors or attitudes). Pre- and post-intervention analysis of the PCC allowed the relative success of training efforts to be determined.

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From the PCC components were devised to build the change model. For staff, these included a series of trainings in the psychology of self-esteem, discipline and behavior management techniques, moral development in children and youth, processing mistakes and failures with youth, effective teaching techniques, and facilitating self-reflection in youth. For the youth at CHYS, programming was developed to teach the critical skills that foster psychological health and heal emotional wounds. These skills include admitting mistakes and coping with failure, formulating and implementing corrections for errors, separating one's own responsibilities from those of others, understanding and coping appropriately with emotions, identifying and standing up for one's own rights and the rights of others, expressing and responding to empathy, and setting goals and working to achieve them.

Finally, one of the most important tasks of the project was to radically overhaul the points and levels system used by many residential foster care agencies to track behavioral progress of youth. At CHYS, youth accumulated points according to their behavior; points were deducted for "bad" behaviors and regained for "good" behaviors. Accumulation of points allowed them to move up to different "levels" with associated privileges. Point deductions meant that staff removed privileges and required

youth to start again at lower levels. In the new program, points were abandoned and a process was created by which youth applied for more freedoms, privileges, and responsibilities in a phased system of five different "Gears" ranging from Orientation to Honor Gear. The applications that youth filled out to apply for the next "Gear" were revised to be much more self-reflective, to require collaborative work with a supervising adult or youth coach, and to address youths' self-evaluation of fundamental skills. The Gear applications became a teaching strategy in their own right as well as a lesson in introspection. Staff became youth coaches, helping youth to be successful in moving forward as the result of their behavior and their ability to self-reflect and self-analyze.

The success of the program was evaluated using pre-post assessment criteria of staff and students: a) changes in the staff self-evaluations of the PCC; b) changes in youth behavior as rated by staff; and c) changes in self-esteem based upon a self-assessment of their social, moral, and emotional competence.

Staff Self-Evaluation

Staff evaluated all 68 elements of the PCC both before and after the intervention. Results indicated that there was significant improvement in almost all components. The pre-post scores on items that had to do with respectful, supportive, and healthy staff interactions with youth improved by an average of almost 51% (i.e., 51% more of staff reported in the post evaluation that the desirable items were present "usually" or "almost always"). The items contributing most to this change, increasing by 60% or greater from pre-test to post-test, included items that had to do with expectations for youth, with discipline and consequences, and with the quality of interactions between staff and youth during daily life in the residence houses. The greatest improvement (72% from pre-test to post-test) was in staff expectations for youth ("staff expectations of each individual youth are realistic and take into account that youth's history, circumstances, abilities, and needs"). Other items with a 60% or greater degree of improvement included: "staff respond to youth with respect, encouragement, and empathy" (68%); "guidelines for behavior are reasonable, fair, and consistent" (60%); "consequences are designed to help youth learn and to take responsibility for correcting their own behavior in the future" (71%); "youth and staff discuss issues that affect the daily lives of youth" (60%); and "staff provide opportunities to allow youth to contribute positively to house life" (61%).

Items having to do with staff's active teaching role with youth had the largest overall gain from pre-test to post-test. This category represented new training and new approaches comprising a program modified from the Teel Institute's classroom-based curriculum. Staff members were asked to teach new concepts by facilitating youth-centered activities that also had an introspective component ("a mistake I am making that I know I should correct is..."). No programming like this had ever been implemented at CHYS, so items in this category had very low pre-test incidences: 19 of the 23 items were scored in the pre-test as happening none of the time (a score of "0") and reflected significant changes after implementation. Data analysis revealed that an enormous shift was made on the part of staff, moving from the previous punitive model to viewing mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow, with a 71% increase from pre-test to post-test in the number of staff reporting that this happened "usually" or "almost always" in interactions between staff and youth. Staff reported that this relatively simple idea created the single-most powerful shift in their attitudes as they worked with youth. In addition, staff began to praise youth when they improved in their ability to use self-control (83% increase). Finally, staff began to encourage youth to discuss and identify their own rights and the rights of others (50% increase).

Student Behavior and Self-Esteem

A second category of evaluation focused on the staff evaluation of youth behavior.

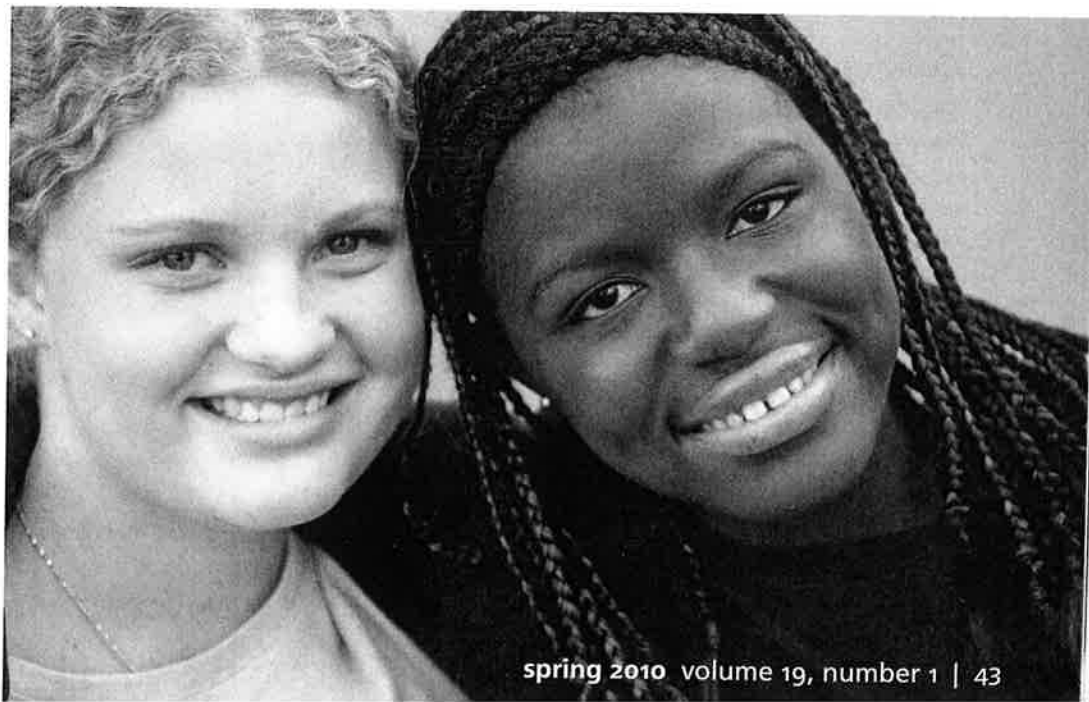
Staff were asked to rate youth behavior both pre- and post-intervention on 35 different indices. These included handling emotions (excessive worry, hope for the future, anger control, excessive guilt, and self-blame); relating to others (empathy, ridicule of others, manipulation and control, peer submission); intrapersonal skills (ability to learn from mistakes, giving up on tasks, making excuses for mistakes, taking responsibility, setting goals); and substance abuse. Sixteen girls made up the sample; no complete data were available for the small number of boys at CHYS.

Results indicated that 11 of the 16 girls in the sample demonstrated positive changes in their behavior from pre- to post-test. Six of the 11 girls with positive changes in their behavior made between a 20% and a 40% gain in positive behaviors from pre- to post-test. Four girls out of 16 demonstrated a slight decrease in their behavior scores, while one girl's score stayed the same. Of those girls whose behavior was rated as worse from pre-test to post-test, the scores of 3 girls decreased only by between 2% and 10%, while for just one girl the decrease was between 10 and 20%.

Youth were also asked to fill out a self-assessment instrument that measured self-esteem. Results for 14 girls for the Self-Esteem Assessment Scale indicated that 10 of the 14 girls demonstrated an increase in self-esteem (ranging between 2% and 40% positive change), while 2 girls had lower self-esteem scores in the post-test (from 2% to 20%), and 2 girls demonstrated no change in self-esteem. For the majority of girls, self-esteem increased during the experimental period.

Change in Agency Culture

In two years, the collaborative effort between the Teel Institute and Charles Hall Youth Services resulted in meaningful changes in the culture of an agency providing residential foster care to significantly troubled youth. Not only did the staff buy into the vision and put their new knowledge to work in their own attitudes and behaviors, but youth responded to those changes. Staff increased their ability and willingness to respond to youth with respect, encouragement, and empathy. Guidelines set by staff for youth behavior became significantly more



reasonable, fair, and consistent. Staff expectations of each youth became much more realistic, taking into account that youth's history, circumstances, abilities, and needs. Consequences for wrongdoing or mistakes moved from a punitive, adult-centered, and inconsistent model to one designed to help youth learn and take responsibility for correcting their own behavior in the future. Staff provided significantly more opportunities to allow youth to contribute positively to life shared by youth and staff in the residences. Staff began to deliberately and consciously incorporate teaching of principles and skills that build self-respect in youth into their interactions and programming, and they specifically praise and positively reinforce youth for demonstration of these skills. Most importantly, staff built the bridge between internal positive feelings of "goodness" and self-respect to the demonstration of the targeted behaviors and attitudes.

Overall analysis of the youth data indicated that youth changed their behaviors and, subsequently, felt better about themselves as well. Analysis of the pre-post youth behavior demonstrates that youth improved their ability to admit and correct mistakes, to fulfill their responsibilities, to use self-control when needed, and to respect their rights as well as the rights of other youth and of staff.

Interestingly, some unexpected changes occurred in relationships between agency leadership and staff: agency leadership became better listeners and more trusting of staff in terms of decision-making consistent with agency goals and standards of best practice. Both staff and agency leaders came to view the organization as significantly more aligned with standards of best practice for youth development and residential care.

Conclusion

The Charles Hall Youth Services story is one of rapid, significant change in one small organization. That program was aimed at giving CHYS youth the opportunity to learn and practice the behaviors that they need to lead secure, productive lives after they leave residential foster care. There was real evidence of change in youth behavior. Equally important, educating the staff in new and better ways of working with their clients brought monumental change in how the staff perceived and carried out their role as youth counselors.

The lessons learned in this youth services initiative mirror those in the educational arena: both adults and children need new and improved knowledge

and understanding of what it takes to be successful in life. Adults—parents, teachers, youth workers, and childcare-givers—can and want to respond with new and better ways of working with those they serve. When adults teach, model, and practice meaningful principles, concepts, and skills in the interpersonal and intrapersonal arenas, then children and youth—even those with extraordinarily negative histories—can build strengths, nurture competencies, and develop virtues. When adults, youth, and children know and apply the behaviors that create positive feelings of self-regard, lives are forever changed.

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