
Title	Reaching out to children in need
Author(s)	M.J. Chelliah
Source	<i>Singapore Journal of Education</i> , 2(2), 57-60
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

Reaching Out to Children In Need

Every teacher will at some time or other encounter children with emotional and behavioural problems. They may not always be easily perceived but the teacher with imagination and sensitivity should be able to recognise children in need.

Apart from material needs, children and young people need to be loved, respected and esteemed. They need to feel safe. They need to experience the joy of accomplishment and the fulfillment of altruism. A support system of values and beliefs will enable them to live more purposefully, with a sense of inner peace and happiness.

In the following case histories, all names are fictitious and some circumstances have been summarised and disguised. When children are quoted, they are quoted verbatim.

The first time I saw him he was sitting on the grass sketching the school building. I stopped and watched him. He continued to sketch, ignoring me for about ten minutes. He then looked up. I smiled and he looked warily at me. I admired his sketch. He said nothing and I walked away. He was at the same place sketching for the next few days and the pattern of interaction was the same each time. He would look at me and say nothing when I commented on the progress of his sketch. One day as I stood there watching him, he looked at me uncertainly and said, "Would you like to have it?" That was how I came to know Fred.

I was working during the summer vacation at an Approved School and had taken a job as an assistant to the cook in the kitchen. Fred had been sent to the school because he was "beyond parental control". When I met him he was a hurt and miserable boy of eleven. An illegitimate child who had been kept a secret from the man his mother had married on the rebound, he had known nothing but rejection from the very start of his life. He had now been at the school for several months and his attitude to staff and students was consistently uncooperative and aggressive. He would not bathe, brush his teeth or comb his hair unless he was forced to. He was particularly aggressive with the women staff members.

The headmaster, noticing my interest in Fred, discussed him with me. He discovered that I was training to be a teacher and suggested that I should work with the boys for part of the day. He was a Quaker, completely committed to the principle of non-violence, and the school, which was a residential one, was run on this principle. All the members of his staff accepted this approach. The rehabilitation success rate of the school was high.

I worked on a one-to-one basis with Fred, who was backward in all areas of his class work and could hardly read. However, he was good with his hands and with encouragement he began to draw and carve wood beautifully.

His success in creative work had a positive effect on him. He would label his carvings with his name and present them to me. He began to show signs of interest in his other work. His personal appearance began to improve and he would occasionally voluntarily brush his teeth and comb his hair.

My duties in the kitchen included the preparation of vegetables for cooking and some washing up and general cleaning. The boys were sometimes allowed to assist in the kitchen. One day Fred asked if he could help and was told that he could, provided he had a proper bath, cut his finger nails and combed his hair. The next day he turned up in class, washed and clean, his nails cut and every hair slicked into place.

Fred continued to help in the kitchen for the rest of my stay and I helped him with his class work. While we peeled potatoes, we would talk about many things. He began to talk about himself, what he thought about and what he hoped for and wanted. He asked many questions and I began to understand more fully his fears and his needs. As he felt cared for and respected, he gained confidence. His peer relationships were more harmonious and he became co-operative with his teachers and the rest of the staff.

Fred had been crying out for help.

This was my first experience of working with troubled children (I taught other boys beside

Fred), and I was deeply influenced by the spirit and philosophy of the establishment. This influence has remained with me, and the conviction that the way of love and non-violence is the best way has grown stronger with each succeeding experience I had had over the years.

"I wanted to be somebody," Richard said. He had passed all his examinations without much effort until he took his Lower Certificate in Education (LCE Malaysia). He failed for the first time. This failure resulted in feelings of deep shame and "loss of face".

Richard's father was not interested in Richard or any other members of his family. He was constantly busy with his business problems. His mother and grandmother pampered Richard and gave in to his demands, but were "not able to listen" to him.

Richard was deeply impressed by two young uncles who frequently visited his home. He accompanied them to bars and nightclubs. There was no clear set of standards in this home. Instead there was a lack of normal controls and most of the young adults had a "couldn't care less" approach to life.

Although it was against the school rules, Richard grew his hair. He smoked and broke any number of school rules. His school work deteriorated and he had no wish to learn. He was constantly criticised by his teachers and regularly sent to the principal for punishment. He was caned in public and on one occasion during "hair inspection", the principal himself attempted to cut his hair.

"He grabbed me by the hair and I wanted to hit him."

School had "become a hell" and he truanted from school frequently. He felt that everyone was against him.

"I was made to feel that I was a nothing."

While truanting from school one day, he came across a gang of boys.

"I was welcomed. They made me feel good. I roamed around with them." He was offered a spiked cigarette.

He was picked up in a police round up, arrested, charged in court and sent for treatment. When he was discharged, he was sent back to school. No one wanted to have anything to do with him.

"I felt an emptiness inside me."

Only one teacher cared. She was a Christian social worker and worked patiently with Richard. He gradually regained his faith in himself. He learnt new values. When Richard left school he came down to Singapore. At present he is working

with ex-drug addicts on a full-time basis.

Very often the anti-social individual lacks emotional support and reward from his family and derives little satisfaction from his school work. Failure to achieve leads to a rejection of the learning situation. To meet his need for self-esteem he resorts to anti-social behaviour in class. The consequence of this in most cases is rejection by his teachers and this in turn leads to a further reinforcement of his feelings of rejection and misery.

Kian Chye was fifteen. He had lived in a lonely and loveless world. His parents had given him away to his childless uncle and aunt when he was two. When he was six years old, his step-mother gave birth to a baby boy. He was no longer necessary, and he was slowly pushed away. As he grew older he had to assume all the tasks of looking after his step-brother.

"I had to clean his shoes and wash his clothes. If I didn't do it properly my step-father would hit me."

He was constantly scolded and punished. When he was eleven an attempt was made to return him to his natural parents. But they rejected him. Their family had increased in size and, "Maybe they thought I was unlucky."

When he was in Secondary Two he joined a group of boys from the same school who met regularly and wandered around shopping complexes. Their bonds of friendship grew increasingly strong and they came to regard themselves as brothers.

At first their activities were harmless. They teased and irritated shop assistants and any girl they saw. One Saturday morning a member of the group suggested that they should try shoplifting and persuaded them all that it would be fun. It was discussed, a strategy was decided on and the first attempt was a complete success.

The one who had suggested shoplifting assumed the position of leader. They now tried more daring activities. They became well-known in the neighbourhood and then had clashes with similar gangs of boys. In school they broke school rules and they were regularly punished and even caned publicly. It was a co-educational school and the public humiliation in the presence of girls only further reinforced Kian Chye's feelings of anger and resentment. Though he failed each year, he was promoted to Secondary Three and Four. His failure led to further disillusionment and anger and reinforced his aggressive and anti-social attitudes.

Life at home had become intolerable as his step-parents felt they were wasting their money educating him. He was frequently humiliated in

the presence of relatives and family friends. He was constantly reminded that his little step-brother was doing well in school.

His "brothers" gave him the sense of belonging and the emotional support that he so desperately needed. Although Kian Chye's behaviour was rebellious and unacceptable to the school and to his family, he was well adjusted within his own brotherhood. He conformed to the rules of the brotherhood and was second in this family of brothers. Within his own group he was socialised. Kian Chye had the capacity for loyalty and cooperation. Things began to change for him in Secondary Four when he came to the special attention of one of the teachers.

It is very necessary to discover what environmental circumstances influence the behaviour of the troubled individual. Motivations vary but the main purpose for the undesirable behaviour needs to be determined. Stealing, for example, may be an act of protest.

Amy was in Secondary Three. A pretty girl with an attractive personality, she was popular with both boys and girls. Her school performance was above average and she was well liked by her teachers. Yet she stole money regularly from her father's wallet. Her parents were constantly quarrelling. Her father frequently came home very late and her mother suspected her father of infidelity. In order to retaliate, she nagged him and whenever possible went out gambling.

Each time Amy stole money from her father, there was "a terrible row". Her "father shouted" and her "mother screamed". Amy would cry, refuse to eat and go to bed hungry. Sometimes her father would go into her room, comfort her and coax her to eat. One day she stole \$50/-. She gave her friends a treat and put a down payment on a guitar. Suspicions were roused when she did not want to take the guitar home.

Counselling at school was combined with discussions with the parents and the story had a happy ending.

Rahman came from a large family. His father was a seaman and away most of the time. His mother worked long hours frequently till very late at night. Two of his older brothers had been in trouble with the law and had spent time in corrective institutions. Two other brothers had dropped out of school and were jobless, and a younger brother and younger sister were still at school. There was no one to adequately supervise or discipline him. The available models provided by his immediate family and his peers were mainly of deviant and anti-social behaviour.

Life in school was miserable for him. He had failed every subject in the mid-year examination. He played truant for longer and longer periods of time and finally left school. As there was no one to supervise him at home, he sometimes stayed out all night. One night, accompanied by three boys, he broke into a house, was caught, arrested and sent to an institution.

There are many reasons why children may rebel or resort to anti-social behaviour. Divorced or separated parents, family discord, lack of affection, bereavement, or educational failure can contribute to emotional maladjustment and conduct disorder. The majority of children and youths who have been arrested for delinquent acts or who have an anti-social record at school have a history of failure at school. Many have crossed the PSLE barrier and have started to fail only at secondary school.

Failure to achieve in school develops feelings of inadequacy, inferiority and anxiety, and unless steps are taken to enable the individual to achieve adequately in at least one area, each succeeding failure will only compound his feelings of being "useless at school". Delinquent acts may be a way of redeeming self-esteem. They often are a way of expressing anger and contempt for those who have failed to recognise their needs.

An anti-social individual may pursue his life style with enthusiasm. He may pursue it openly and with a sense of accomplishment. He feels a sense of satisfaction similar to that resulting from socially acceptable behaviour.

Children from large families in high crime incidence neighbourhoods where available models are deviant and anti-authority are especially vulnerable. Many children live in areas where delinquent behaviour is in keeping with subcultural norms. The risk of delinquency is higher where there is a strong family pattern of delinquent behaviour. The socialised delinquent is well-adjusted within the limits of his own family and friends.

The unsocialised delinquent has far greater problems. He is generally aggressive and rejecting and rejected. He is lonely.

It is not easy to work with difficult children. A troubled child or young person is often negative, aggressive, stubborn and defiant. Often the parents are hostile and resent any form of intrusion into their personal family lives.

There are no ready-made, easy, sold-in-a-bottle solutions.

To achieve any measure of success, the teacher should be able to reach out to the troubled

individual, to make contact and establish meaningful relationships. He needs to have a willingness to wait for results, compassion and a deep concern for those in trouble. He needs to know and to understand the problems of troubled children and young people, their mentality, social background and jargon. He needs to be able to see the situation from the child's point of view. He should be prepared to deal with the police and the courts if necessary. A knowledge of the conduct and procedures of official corrective and rehabilitative strategies will be useful.

He should have a clear set of values and standards which can be transmitted with sincerity. Only then will he be able to motivate and initiate acceptable social behaviour.

The way of firm and gentle persuasion and understanding is far more effective than the way of punishment, fear and suppression. ☞

Recommended Reading

Rutter, M., Helping Troubled Children, Penguin, 1975.
Wolff, S., Children Under Stress, Pelican, 1973.