STRENGTH-Based Practice:

Tips and Techniques for Line Staff & Managers

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Asset-building is an approach that is gaining fast in popularity. This work has recently made the transition to Juvenile Services. It proposes to line staff and administrators many respectful ways to bring the offender and family into solution-building efforts and offers effective techniques to raise their motivation and cooperation. Here are more techniques (see Triad Communicator, January 1999) for increasing cooperation and relying less on ineffective and costly consequences to motivate.

1. "SPLIT-BRAIN" - PLACE BETS ON MATURITY. A great technique for older children and teens is the "split brain" approach. When you find some improvement that a youth has been able to accomplish, one that you would like for them to continue, Selekman (1993) suggests that it is helpful to utilize what all teens want: to be more mature. Challenge and bet them that "No 15 year old" (or whatever age they may be) "can keep this up." Kids love a challenge, especially when winning the bet means they will be viewed as more mature. If the improvement is recent and "shaky" I'll place a bet on their maturity by stating, "I've thought about this for awhile and I just can't decide, **I'm really split**. Part of me thinks you'll be able to keep this up since you are already doing it; another part of me thinks you are only 15, and no 15 year old can keep this up for very long." I find it really helpful to end with some statement similar to, "I'm not sure, but it seems like you are up to something really big!" This open-ended statement seems to inspire and convey movement or progress.

2. EXPERT CONSULTANT. Oh, how I love this one! When I find progress and improvement in either a teen or parent, I'll often comment, "You really have a handle on this. So many of my other probationers (or parents) don't have a clue about how to do this (or start this, or stop this) yet you do. I sure wish you would talk to them and tell them how to do it." Watch them smile and even squirm in their seat. They love the large compliment that's implicit in this technique. It is a simple idea that you cannot pass on to others what you do not have yourself. This technique of treating them like a consultant conveys ownership of the skill or behavior change. A second variation is to ask, "I'm real impressed that you've found a way to do this (or start this, or stop this). If I worked with someone else like you, what do you think I should tell them to do so they could do this (or start this, or stop this) also?" I've never used this technique that the teen/parent didn't smile in self-satisfaction. You convey mastery of task with one statement.

3. REFER TO THE PROBLEM AS THE "OUTSIDE ENEMY." This is a technique borrowed from the Narrative Therapy approach. The problem is referred to as an entity outside of the person who experiences it. "Sarah, when the voice of shyness tells you not to go to the party, how will you refuse to listen to this voice next time?" "John, when that 'hassle' of hitting/assaulting starts to take control, how will you fight it?" The utility of externalizing the problem is that it avoids any defensiveness that's found in the statements of "**you** are too shy Sarah" or "John, **you** fight too much" and lets the "problem be the problem" – not the person be the problem." It is important to remember not to externalize *feelings*. Feelings should always be accepted and validated.

   This strength-technique differs from problem-focused models which do not encourage workers to separate the offender from his problems. "He is a thief" is a very different view than "He steals things." "He is a thief" points to a deeper understanding, an *underlying* aspect of that person, and one that would require a change in personality to correct. "He steals things" suggests that problem would have a solution if he *stopped* stealing items, a much more achievable goal for field work. It is not the person who is the problem; it is the person's *behavior* that is truly the problem and the externalizing technique helps keep the focus on the problem behavior rather than labeling the person.

4. HOW DID YOU GET INTO THIS? After I have explored "the problem" with the family and have gone further to search for past successes and strengths, asking the question, "How did you get into this?" or "How did you end up here?" conveys a tacit opinion to the family members that they are better than whatever current state of trouble might seem to infer about them. It is vitally important that this question only be asked **after** several strengths or past successes have been brought up and reviewed. It needs to be asked with a voice tone and facial expression that belies your complete feeling of disbelief that someone who has "all these strengths" could

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have ended up in experiencing this trouble or found themselves on this specific "hot seat". The greater the incredulous tone you can summon, the greater the benefit of this technique. What I have also found is that the parents' shoulders will drop in resignation and what they say immediately after this question is posed will generally be the most accurate "snapshot" of what they believe has caused the current trouble. It also allows them to acknowledge this trouble and begins a search for the solution without shaming or blaming them - both of which will push the solution back from anyone's immediate reach as this generally prompts the family members to defend and argue.

5. RE-DESCRIBE AND BLAME FOR SUCCESS. When someone makes mistakes, we often "call them on the carpet" and review the error or failing at great length. When they do well and see success, we often quickly acknowledge it and go on, seldom lingering to review the success. This technique calls us to linger and review the success to build the family's confidence and self-esteem. White (1988) developed these questions to allow family members to look further into positive changes. "How" questions compliment the teen or family member for their resourcefulness: "How did you do this?" "How did you know that would work?" "How did you manage to take this important step to turn things around?" "What does this say about you?" These questions appear to "blame" the teen or family member for the success and cause us to linger and look further at what is helpful. ■

Look for more techniques in the next issue.

Bureau of Justice Websites

For the most up-to-date information about updates and additions to the BJS website, check What's New (http://www.ncjrs.org/justinfo/index.html).

If you do not have Internet access, these materials can be obtained by request from the Bureau of Justice Statistics Clearinghouse at the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (1.800.732.3277). Some are available only in electronic forms since they are intended for use on computers.

The BJS website presents information in multiple ways: topically, chronologically, and alphabetically. A web tour of the BJS website is available under the Site Guide located on the left-hand corner of the home page (BJS also supports the dissemination of crime and justice information by other organizations as listed under Related Sites (http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/sites.htm). ■