

Brief Solution-Focused Work: A Strength-Based Method for Juvenile Justice Practice

By Michael D. Clark, M.S.W.

Introduction

Across the juvenile justice field, we hear the call to focus on the strengths of the offender and family while working for behavior change. Many delinquency workers would acknowledge that using a juvenile's strengths has value for their work. In their missions statements or code of ethics, professional associations and bureaucracies serving our field speak of strengths and of raising competencies. In the steady stream of publications that pour from our nation's universities, criminal justice scholars often mention using offender strengths as an aspect of "what works" in offender rehabilitation.

In reality, focusing on offender and family strengths does not make the leap from statement to field work. Actual methods and interventions that utilize offender strengths in the juvenile justice field appear as a desert-like mirage: They seem visible and available from afar, only to disappear as one moves closer to them for daily field work. Upon close examination, we lack practice methods that are truly strength-based. This review is necessary as Competency-Based Brief Therapy models, originating in the family therapy field, are now being applied to abuse and neglect services (Berg, 1994) and juvenile probation services (Clark, 1994). Solution-Focused work now makes alternative, strength-based interventions available that may not have been readily available before. Field workers, policy makers and

the judiciary need to know there may be a better way for helping a teen and family exit our system by focusing on their strengths and healthy patterns instead of by identifying and treating their deficits and failures.

Brief Solution-Focused Work

This approach for juvenile justice practice originated from the Brief Solution-Focused Therapy model as developed by Steve De Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. (De Shazer, 1985, De Shazer, et al., 1986, Berg and Miller, 1992). This model is one of the many Competency-Based Brief Therapy approaches that have become a new movement of such significance as to be called the "Third Wave" in psychotherapy (O'Hanlon, 1994). This Third Wave follows the earlier "waves" of Freudian psychology and the behavioral-based Problem Solving approaches. A discussion of several guiding principles begins a review of this Strength-Based method.

Focus on Strengths

The dramatic departure of Solution-Focused work from current interventions is its focus on strengths and mental health. All offenders and families have some resources such as skills, capabilities, interests, positive character traits, even perseverance and hope, that can be brought

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to bear for exiting our system. It is a simple yet profound truth that solutions are not reached through offender's weaknesses and failures but through offender's strengths and healthy patterns. As reports and case plans are completed across our field, the identification and listing of strengths take a "back seat." They are added to reports (if at all) as an afterthought or as a weak attempt to counterbalance the large "laundry list" of failures and problems that have been reported. With a solution-focus, they become instead the primary information and central force that drives assessments and interventions.

Focusing on strengths is not a Pollyanna approach of "looking for the good" or believing that "things will turn out for the best." It is not the same as ignoring or condoning the problems and the pain. It is a sophisticated approach that many believe can move juveniles and families to dismissal with greater efficiency than working from their failed side (Clark, 1995).

Solving problems only returns a person to a previous balance or equilibrium, whereas promoting and enhancing strengths leads to growth that will continue long after a juvenile and family leave our court system.

We must believe that strengths are present before we can find them. The famous physicist, Albert Einstein, believed that our theories and beliefs determine what we can see. The familiar adage, "seeing is believing" could really be restated as, "believing is seeing." If we believe our offenders have strengths, this will allow us to look for and find them for utilization.

Utilization

We utilize for change all that the offender and family bring with them. Their unique words and phrases to denote both the problem and solutions are noted and used rather than favoring our own. Interests, proficiencies, and talents are forwarded. Problem solving abilities are culled from the past to be utilized in the present. Solutions in this approach are never ready-made or "canned," but are unique and personal to our families. Although teaching

and skill building will always have a place in our field, consider that it is far easier to utilize what is already present or has been successful than to import vocabulary, methods, or strategies foreign to those we work with. Finding and capitalizing on what is already present is one aspect of what makes brief work brief.

Cooperation

Traditional Problem-Focused work views cooperation as a characteristic of the offender and family. We often view our responsibility to building cooperation as being limited to showing "respect" or using empathy as we approach. Solution-Focused work requires us to view cooperation as emanating from the process and interaction between worker and offender. Our attention to this interaction must be increased.

Cooperation and motivation are raised as we allow more juvenile and family involvement in our case planning process. Recent research findings in family therapy are both interesting and thought-provoking. Miller, et al., (1995) studied 30 years of clinical outcome research. This study found that no theory, model, or package of techniques proved reliably better than any other. A second finding thought provoking for our field is reported by the researchers:

The most influential contributor to change is the client, not the therapy, not the technique, not the therapist -- *but the client*. The sheer impact of their contribution when compared to other factors serves as a powerful reminder that . . . no change is likely to occur without the client's involvement.

Selekman (1993) echoes this idea:

When clients think they have even modest personal control over their destinies, they will persist at mastering tasks, do better at managing them, and become more committed to the change process.

These findings seem lost on the juvenile justice field and many problems that beset our field begin here. We rarely incorporate and use the view of our teens and families regarding what problems need solving and how best to solve them. Saleeby (1992) notes, "an agency

designed to serve social control functions . . . is likely to develop a negative atmosphere about clients who are apt to be seen as outsiders rife with problems and deficits." If we assume clients are basically flawed or "damaged goods," this assumption leads to certain ends. A negative view directly or indirectly establishes the juvenile worker as the "expert." This expert status also stems from the paternalism generated by our field's legal doctrine of *parens patriae*. This paternalism and pessimistic view give rise to workers naming the problem and then telling our offenders what should be done and how to do it. Cooperation is lost right from the start as we often force our ideas on families without consensus. We do not give credence to their understanding and definition of the problem if they differ from ours. In many cases, our delineation of the problem may be correct. However, using only our delineation of the problem raises a central question regarding change: Do we want to be right, or do we want to be successful?

If we cooperate with what the offender and family believe is urgent to start with, they are more likely to cooperate with us later. We try to "join" with the offender as much as possible. Most juveniles want something, even if it is to be left alone. Although we might hope the goals for behavioral change would be established for more appropriate reasons, "getting the court off your back" is an acceptable point to begin your work. Berg (1994) states, "in negotiating the definition of the problem to be solved with the client, it is important, wherever possible, to stay close to the client's own definition, since he is the one who will have to make the necessary changes." This author also warns, "do not argue or debate with the client. You are not likely to change her mind through reasoning. If this approach was going to work, it would have worked by now." We have more latitude to agree with their designation of the problem and their ideas for solutions than one might think.

We often end up being the only "customer" for our services. When the juvenile does not agree with our view, we assume the added task of persuading or "cheerleading" for cooperation. Failing that, we then turn to enumerate the many consequences that may befall the teen

and family for further failure to follow our lead. Although we know that turning to negative sanctions and punishment is neither cost-effective or efficient, workers have little else to employ with Problem-Focused approaches.

Task vs. Insight Orientation

Solution-Focused work is behavioral-based and is not predicated on attainment of insight or awareness into the problem. A Solution-Focused approach does not belabor the past nor does it need to fully understand the problem before solution work can begin. It does not develop lengthy problem assessments where we go beyond the presenting problem(s) with the shotgun inquiry of "what else is wrong?" The juvenile and family's frame of reference is used to ascertain what brought court contact. Movement quickly begins to discover the offender's answer to the problem, setting small behavioral and achievable goals for that end.

A present and future orientation is another facet of what makes brief work brief as dismissal from court jurisdiction is in mind *from the beginning*. Termination is being negotiated while the delinquency worker is still trying to get to know the teen and family. Responsibility and accountability are not sacrificed with this approach because families are expected to *do something* in relation to the mutually defined problems that brought them into court contact.

It would be a mistake to believe that greater offender participation and developing a cooperative relationship is enough to bring about behavior change. For real change to happen, the offender and family need to change the way they think about and perceive the problem(s) and to do something that is behaviorally different than before. To accomplish this shift involves a model of questions.

A Model of Questions

The all-important technique to make this shift is questioning. Miller (1994) states: "Over time, we have learned that asking the right question often has more impact on the client than having the correct answer." Nowhere is this point more applicable than with adoles-

cents who resist lectures, "being told what to do," or any approach that puts them in a "one down" position.

Berg and Miller (1992) posit "five useful questions" for interviewing that orient our families toward solutions. I have adapted these questions for juvenile court application.

1. Pre-Session Change Questions. "After being arrested and petitioned, many people notice good changes have already started before their first appointment here at the court. What changes have you noticed in your situation?" "How is this different than before?" "How did you get these changes to happen?" Numerous studies (Wiener-Davis, et al., 1987, Talmon, 1990, Bloom, 1981) found a majority of clients make significant changes in their problem patterns from the time of setting up of the initial appointment to actually entering treatment. In single subject research, this author found similar responses from juveniles and families newly assigned to my juvenile probation caseload. The important point is that teens and families rarely report these changes spontaneously. Juvenile workers must ask to elicit and amplify these changes or they remain obscure. When problems are ignored by those that experience them, they are thought to move underground where they grow and fester and return even stronger. However, when solutions are ignored, they simply fade away unnoticed, and more importantly, unused.

2. Exception Questions. "Have there been times recently when the problem did not occur?" "When was the most recent time when you were able to (perform the desired behavior)?" "What is different about those times?" "When did this happen?" "Who was involved?" "How did this happen?" Teens and their families typically view the complaints they bring into our courts as constant in nature, and therefore any or all exceptions usually go unnoticed. This approach holds to the adage "nothing always happens" (De Shazer, 1988) to convey there are always times when the problem does not happen or is not considered a problem by the family. Experience with this model (Clark, 1994) has shown times when the truant attends school, the angry/assaultive child walks away from a fight, the follower has said "No" to the

group, or the parent did not berate or harp on the negative. The idea is simple: Look for how teens and families found success in the past and get them to repeat those same strategies in the future. It is here that the contrast between Solution-Focused work and the Problem-Focused model can be found. In the latter we are asking, "when *does* the problem happen?" "When does it get *worse*?"

Problem-Focused work is based on the idea that "if we can name the problem, the treatment will follow." However, when we selectively attend to the *problem*, many difficulties arise. Insoo Berg (1994) gives a good account of what juvenile workers often experience:

Focusing on a problem usually implies that there is a direct cause. Someone is responsible for the problem and someone is at fault. Whenever families concentrate on problems, the conversation in the family session rapidly deteriorates into arguments, defensiveness and blaming.

Solution-Focused work finds greater utility in amplifying what is occurring during times when the problem does not happen than when it does. It is very important to note that exceptions need to be *purposeful*. To find out that during a certain period of time a substance abusing juvenile abstained from using drugs only because the local "dealer" was out of town is certainly an exception that is of no use!

3. Miracle (Outcome) Questions. "What if you went to sleep tonight and a miracle happens and the problem(s) that brought you into the court (detention center) are *solved*. But because you were asleep, you don't know the miracle happened. When you wake up tomorrow, what would you notice as you go about your day that tells you a miracle has happened and things are different?" "What else?" "Imagine yourself, for a moment, that we are now six months or more in the future, after we have worked together and the problems that brought you (this family) to court jurisdiction have been solved. What will be different in your life, six months from now, that will tell you the problem is solved?" "What else?"

The miracle question is the hallmark of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. A miracle in

this context is simply the present or future without the problem. It is used to orient the juvenile and family toward their desired outcome by helping construct a different future. Contracting about offender/family goals needs to be preceded by an understanding of what they want to happen. When (if) a worker finds no past successes to build on, the family can be helped to form a different future by imagining a "miracle." As many delinquency workers have experienced, it is often difficult to stop a family from "problem talk" and start the search for solutions. This question was designed to allow the offender and family to "put down the problem" and begin to look at what will occur when the problem is not present. Furman and Ahola (1994) report, "in our view, the single most useful issue to be talked about with clients is how they view the future without the problem. . . . When people are helped to foresee a good future for themselves, they automatically begin to view their present difficulties as a transitory phase, rather than an everlasting predicament." This question is used to identify the client's goals for court jurisdiction to end. If the juvenile begins with a fantasy response of "a new car" or "winning the lottery," the worker can return the conversation to a more productive track by using humor or normalizing these wishes. Juveniles and family members will quickly settle in to describing a more realistic miracle.

This miracle question is followed by other questions that shape the evolving description into small, specific, and behavioral goals. "What will be the smallest sign that this (outcome) is happening?" "When you are no longer (skipping school, breaking the law, etc.), what will you be doing instead?" "What will be the first sign this is happening?" "What do you know about (yourself, your family, your past) that tells you this could happen for you?"

4. Scaling Questions. "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the day after the miracle and 1 is when you were arrested (petitioned -- problem was at its worst), where are you today?" "Numbers help me understand better, if on a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 is your problem solved and 1 is when it was at the worst, where are you now?"

Scaling questions help us establish a baseline against which future progress may be measured. They are used at the end of the initial session and all subsequent meetings. Scaling also helps us know when a client is satisfied without having to define vague terms such as "communicating better" or "feeling better."

Once a baseline is established, they can be used to identify small, specific and behavioral actions for the juvenile. "You said a moment ago you were at 3. What would have to happen for you to move to a 4?" "What will you be doing when you are at a 4?" "What will others be doing?" "What would be the smallest (first) sign if you were moving to a 4?"

Finally, scaling questions can assess a juvenile's confidence and willingness to work. "On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you that you can reach this goal?" "Mother/Father you gave John a 7 but John only rated himself a 6. What do you know about John that makes you more confident?" Using scaling questions and exploring the differences in the answers can give a richness of information about assets and strengths that can be used for reaching goals.

5. Coping Questions. "How have you managed to cope?" "Given how bad things are, how come they're not worse?" "This problem could certainly get worse - how have you (others) stopped this from getting worse?" Coping questions are used with a small percentage of persons who present a hopeless view of the situation. They often resist any comfort or reassurance that the situation will improve.

Encouraging "pep talks" of "you can do it" or "it's not that bad" to hopeless family members never seem to work. Rather, the person becomes even more entrenched in their feelings of hopelessness and the session spirals downward. Raising self-esteem can never come from pep talks. Self-esteem can only be raised by accomplishing tasks or by honest self-appraisal of past or current accomplishments. Real encouragement and hope is summoned when individuals look inward for this honest self-appraisal of accomplishments that they know to be true about themselves. Coping questions can begin this self-appraisal and amplify what is found. Coping questions are

also important to use if juveniles disclose a past traumatic event that they may be sharing for the first time.

Goal Setting

There is a difference in goals that are oriented to facilitating a client's sense of success. Out of many considerations regarding the negotiation of goals, three guidelines are important for review:

1. Goals must be meaningful to the client. If we first cooperate with the family's agenda *if at all possible*, it is easier for them to cooperate with us later. Common sense must prevail. A juvenile who is a danger to self or others may need an alternative placement regardless of the juvenile's preference. However, a majority of our cases do not pose immediate at-risk situations, and one will find it is far easier to start where the interest and energy are, rather than trying to create it where it is not. Restitution to victims, community service work, and other requirements for dismissal can be included in mutual goal setting after juveniles believe we will pay attention to what they find important to start with.

2. Goals must be small and interactional. Goals and objectives in many delinquency case plans are far too large, encompassing numerous behaviors to reach a goal for dismissal *months* in the future. If the goal cannot be accomplished within two to three weeks, it must be pared down. In case plans we enter, most importantly the subsection on goals should not be static but should remain open to negotiation and revision as we work with juveniles and families. The most important task of an assessment is to motivate the client to do something about the situation that brought court contact, so the "first step," the "smallest sign" begins behavioral changes. These small behavioral changes can begin the systemic "ripple effect" (Spiegel and Linn, 1969) that can realize even more changes from a first step.

A Solution-Focus looks to interaction with others rather than centering on the individual psyche. Goals are established in context with others. Parents usually think only in terms of how their child must change. Questions in-

teractional in nature pull in "observers" to subtly challenge their idea that they have no influence in the change process. An example of this challenge can be found in this interchange:

Worker: What do you suppose will be a small (first) sign that your son is "stopping all this trouble?"

Mother: He will stop skipping school and bugging his younger sister and also he wouldn't 'cuss at me like he does.

Worker: Let's believe for a moment that he starts doing those things. What do you think he would say you are doing different when that happens?

Mother: He would probably say I'm not "on his case" all the time, that I'm not checking up on him.

Worker: What would he say you're doing instead?

Mother: He would say I'm trusting him more and maybe listening to him. Maybe not calling his friends to check on him all the time - he hates that.

Worker: When your son notices that you are more willing to trust him and to listen to him when you both speak, what would he say about how things will be different between the two of you?

The real utility of this kind of goal negotiation is that the mother may get the idea that she can start positive beginnings, rather than waiting passively for her son to change. It is helpful for the mother to begin to believe she has some influence, even indirect influence, on improving her son's behavior.

3. Goals must be a beginning not an end. Many goals currently used in the juvenile justice field call for an end of an illegal or unwanted behavior. Goals have more utility if they are framed as the presence or start of a positive behavior. It is hard to be consciously aware of the absence of something, or of "not doing" something as we go about our day. It is far easier to recognize "doing" that is action or effort. "I won't talk back to my teacher" is reframed to "counting to 10," "asking for a pass to see a counselor," or "writing down how angry I am at my desk." When juveniles or

family members suggest goals posed with never, not, don't or won't, questions are asked, "what will you do *instead*?" Vague, future conditions also need a concrete beginning. "So what do you need to *do* to start feeling better about yourself?"

Post Script on Questioning

Experience with a Solution-Focused approach (Clark, 1994) has found that despite the numerous questions asked of them, offenders and family members rarely (if ever!) refuse to answer.

The inducement stems from the realization by those we work with that we are looking for solutions rather than trying to fix blame. Questions, attending to the positives, are asked with a genuine curiosity. We are met with shoulder shrugs or stony silence when we use leading questions that adolescents and family members quickly recognize will end in their being blamed. It is important to reflect on the difference between blame and responsibility. Blame involves accusations and condemnation. Responsibility entails accountability and obligation.

Berg (1994) highlights this difference with two sets of questions:

- "The record indicates that two years ago you had your child returned to you from the foster home. What did you do right that time?"
- "What do you suppose the Social Worker thinks you did to convince him that you were ready to have your child returned?"

Compare those questions with these:

- "The record indicates that the Department placed your child in a foster home. Do you remember why that happened?"
- "What do you suppose the social worker thought was wrong with your parenting that made it necessary to take your child away from you?"

It is easy to find the difference between these two sets of questions. The first set points

out in a matter-of-fact way that there were past problems but also past successes. Heavy-handed blame is bypassed yet fact and responsibility are not. The conditions of "what has been" or "what is" can be posited with a less blaming tone.

Delinquency workers wed to the Problem-Focused approach may bristle at this contrast. There is a belief with this approach that assignment of blame is all-important. They follow a conventional criterion of mental health that an accurate view of reality, including knowing one's faults as well as one's virtues, is a necessary hallmark of good mental health.

Many rigorous new studies contradict this long-held idea. Research in health psychology (Wellness Paradigm) has found that optimism, even unrealistic optimism, is associated with better physical and mental health (Peterson and Bassio, 1991). More important, social scientists now indicate that human beings may actually have an innate predisposition to process information in an optimistic fashion. Taylor (1989) reported studies of human information processing that indicate the human mind appears to have an innate predisposition to attend to positive information and to screen out negative information.

These findings are surprising to say the least. Psychology has long viewed the brain as a producer of rational thought (Ornstien and Sobel, 1987). We have always thought of our brain similar to "a scientist" where it collects data, organizes it in some logical fashion, and makes decisions based on an "accurate" perception of reality. Yet, Walters and Havens (1994) state, "the actual ways in which people process information, however, do not conform to this 'brain as scientist' model. Rather, people tend to process information about themselves and their environment in ways that are not always accurate, but are consistently self-enhancing." This mild positive bias or slightly rosy filter serves as a buffer against emotional distress and is thought to be normal, inherent, and adaptive.

These findings allow us to de-emphasize the assignment of blame. Many consider it the experienced worker's hard earned virtue to be able to "tell it like it is." Getting people to

admit their faults is exhausting work. It is not difficult to see how assigning blame and then withstanding the defensiveness and resistance that follows, must certainly contribute to the high worker turnover rate suffered by our field. Problem-Focused work can create many obstacles that must first be overcome before we can move towards solutions.

Solution-Focused work, with its emphasis on strengths and successes, can still maintain responsibility and accountability, yet avoid these obstacles. We often resign ourselves to resistance and lack of cooperation, believing it "comes with the territory" due to the nature of our work. It is not, however, the nature of our work so much as the nature of a problem-focused approach to clients. We simply do not have to drag our juveniles and families "through the mud" of their own failures and defects to bring about change. With this model of questions, resistance is lowered and cooperation is raised by what we ask, how we ask it, and (very importantly) *for what purpose* the questions are asked.

Conclusion

Many believe the Strengths Perspective and Brief Competency-Based approaches could be viable alternatives for our field. In Michigan, the Department of Social Services (Office of Delinquency Services) is strongly supporting and adopting a Strength-Based Solution-Focused approach for working with juveniles and their families. This new approach is spreading across other areas of the country. In Omaha, the local office of the Nebraska Department of Social Services - Child Protective Services has recently adopted a Competency-Based Brief approach. Bob Zimmerman, Director for this local office, stated that worker and client satisfaction are up and caseload numbers are on their way down (Personal Communication, December 21, 1994).

Several advantages to this approach should be discussed. First, this new approach aids the juvenile justice worker in being culturally sensitive. Since the problems that are named and the routes to solutions come more from the offender and family, our work has more of a

natural fit. This model does not ignore or trample on the offender's personal, familial, or cultural systems, but rather operates in tandem with them. Second, we do not have to suffer the loss of committed and capable workers who leave our field due to pessimism and feeling overwhelmed by the multitude of problems. When adopting this new approach, workers will quickly notice a brighter atmosphere surrounding their work. Encouragement, hope, and optimism are afforded not only to those we work with, but also to ourselves. Third, this approach is not a cure-all. Even with the advantages of Solution-Focused Brief Approach, the full continuum of sanctions and alternative (out-of-home) placements will still be necessary in our field. We must, however, never lose sight of the fact that a majority of our juveniles do not progress to the adult correctional system. Any approach that can lessen the need for elevated (and costly) services by enhancing cooperation and motivation deserves our attention. Fourth, this approach can be joined with movements currently underway in the juvenile justice field. An example detailed in past Juvenile and Family Court Journal publications is the Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ) project that is promoted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). Those familiar with this project (and many others) will find that we do not have to "recast the die" to assimilate this approach in projects currently being implemented in many jurisdictions across our country.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a complete review of this Strength-Based method, but I hope this exercise will spark interest and further inquiry into an approach that many believe holds great promise for our field. I also hope that both policy makers and field workers will come to know that a real choice now exists in how best to move a juvenile and family toward court dismissal. To begin to operate from a Strengths Perspective using Solution-Focused Brief work, requires a "top down - bottom up" effort by policy makers and direct service staff. Organizations such as the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and the Office of juvenile justice and Delinquency

Prevention (OJJDP) can render assistance by disseminating information about this new approach to aid our field in the process of choice.

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