MENTORING TEENS

Since coming to La Jolla, I have been focusing on adolescents. I describe my work as testing, treating and mentoring teens. Whereas testing and therapeutic treatment seem clear to those who question me about my work, mentoring is an area that apparently requires deeper explanation. I consider mentoring the most important of the three services I attempt to provide.

The mentoring I do generally centers on four areas: (1) school and learning issues, (2) parental relationships, (3) social/ sexual matters, and (4) personal positive development.

Mentoring teens with regard to school and learning issues is especially satisfying to me. There is tremendous pressure felt by teens to meet high achievement standards and many have difficulty because their unique neurology and learning style do not coincide with the one-way methodology characteristic of most high school classes. Teens need to develop awareness of the most effective ways for them to attend to lessons, organize their work, and encode information into their long-term memories. Even the time schedule and pattern for doing homework are important considerations. A few examples of this are (1) John can "get into his head" what he needs to in half the time if he reads his notes and text underlining into a tape recorder, and then listens, and (2) Barbara is less frustrated doing her homework if she works in twenty minute blocks and works down from the hardest tasks to the easiest. The diversity in our student population brings together youngsters whose cultural heritage and unique experiences have resulted in differing learning styles that teachers cannot explore or attend to because of the group-standard emphasis of the present time. However, I have found that most teachers are eager to receive suggestions as to how to minimally adjust procedures to facilitate selected students. Such mentoring helps all teens, and it is especially significant for those who have attention deficit, learning disability, or cognitive disturbances.

Adolescents are often having difficulties with parents. Family conferences are useful in developing better communication skills and deeper empathy for all involved. I mentor teens with regard to mastering what we term "parental politics." Often this involves their requesting formal or informal contracts. Teens want many things, materialistic things like more gas money, or, sometimes, greater privileges like later curfews. What teens want are wonderful levers with which to enable crucial compromises between what parents demand and what teens will willingly do.

Social and sexual concerns are probably the most important problems for adolescents. Academic achievement, even for the best of students, pales before the desire to connect equally and effectively with peers. Teens, once they are comfortable with their therapist, reveal tornado-like confusion and struggle about these social matters. There are many things they need to know, many problems they do not know how to think about, and they are ravenous for advice so long as it is in the form of suggestion and not dictate. Some need to consider strategies that might be useful, others need to be helped and encouraged to confront situations rather than withdraw from them. All are deeply appreciative of the assistance you provide them.

If you have read my other offerings in the <u>San Diego Psychologist,</u> you know that I advocate a positive approach to mental health, especially in fostering feelings of *empowerment,* equal and appropriate *connection* to others, and *perspective* that

results in (1) an establishing of priorities, (2) an establishing of personal goals, and (3) a determination of the steps in sequence needed for personal goals to be achieved. At no point in development are these positives more important than in adolescence. A proper use of contracting is to help teens realize that they are empowered to do more difficult things. Climbing social behavioral hierarchies facilitate the goal of connection. Therapeutic brainstorming and group sessions that consider the pros and cons of alternatives contribute to improved perspective.

Emily, 15, once told me that to be an adolescent means "at one moment you are the happiest person alive and ten minutes later you want to jump off a roof and just die. And," she then added, "The strange thing is that nothing's even happened." Trevor, 17, told his group, "My mother treats me like a baby and my father treats me like an adult," Then, he laughingly added, "They're both wrong." Among the greatest compliments I have ever received was one group's decision to come together with me on a day when classes had been cancelled. "We want to come," I was told. "You're not school."

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