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Resolve: Independent Living Skills Begin at Home

Jacob R. Sprouse, Jr.

Just lots and lots of time, energy and resources have been invested in developing "curricula" to "teach" independent living skills to children and youth in care. True, many young folk in out of home care have "missed" a lot of the normal growing up opportunities but if we wait until Johnny or Susie are seventeen to "teach" them independence ... too late.

Here are a few ideas for your New Year's Resolution Suggestion Box:

1. Get their attention when they are young: you want to eat? Learn to cook. (Post the microwave off limits.) Teach a child how to cook . . pan, stove, raw food = meal . . and you've empowered a lifetime.

By eight or nine years old we can begin "cooking classes." Cupcakes, anyone? I'll show you how. The older the child the more elaborate the menu.

No, speed-dialing for pizza is not "cooking."

2. Everyone cleans: no one is exempt from household chores (including mom and dad); we all take turns cleaning the toilets, moping the floor and taking out the trash.

We dirty the "nest" together so we all take responsibility for cleaning. Make the tasks age\size appropriate and mom and dad, set the example.

Grow the tasks\responsibilities as the child matures - remember, a well-rounded adult **can** clean the house.

3. Colors, whites and pink underwear: think of the washer and dryer as low-tech "game-boys," kids love machines so teach them laundry basics - a ten year old can separate, measure detergent and turn the dial. By twelve or so we can handle stain removal, an iron or even hand-washing.

4. Set the example, mom and dad: do your share, clean *your* room, be neat and put away *your* toys.

This New Year's resolution: lead by doing, not by telling.



Suggestions for Social Service Agencies to Minimize Risks for Foster Parents in Fostering Sexually Abused Children



- Recognizing the stress and impact fostering sexually abused children can have on a family.
- Providing clear guidelines and role definitions relating to sexual abuse.
- Providing training for foster parents (if possible pre-placement) which encourages open communication about difficult issues (i.e., sex, personal relationships).
- Making sure that all such placements have a written agreement which makes clear statements about the procedures which will happen in the event of an abuse allegation; the aims, objectives and length of placement; the therapeutic plan and the foster parent's role in this; and, a plan for respite care.
- Ensuring the foster parents receive as much information as possible about a child's background and the precise nature of the abuse. This should include such details as to where precisely the abuse occurred - which room in the house for example, what was the sequence of events which led to the abuse and what words, actions and threats were used by the abuser. This knowledge can enable the foster parents to avoid situations which may replicate the abuse and lead to a false interpretation of a well intended action by a child who has been sexually abused.
- Offering a high level of placement support which must include regular visits by the worker. Foster parents should be encouraged to share incidents or concerns, however vague, with the worker as this may provide crucial evidence in the future. Foster parents need to feel part of the care team and to know that their feelings and opinions are valued.
- Involving foster fathers fully in placement planning, support visits and reviews. This avoids foster fathers being marginalized, strengthens the foster parent couple and reinforces the foster father's role as a father thus beginning to establish an incest taboo within the foster family.
- Providing realistic financial remuneration to cover other respite care, babysitting, etc., and to recognize the additional work and risks involved in such placements.

Helping the Youth in Care Who is Using Substances

Charles Confer

All anyone ever does is "behave." Although it may seem hard to believe, everyone's behavior is focused and purposeful and chosen. Your behavior, my behavior, everyone's behavior is selected with one aim: We believe the behavior we choose (no matter how strange or bizarre our behavior may seem to other people) will make our lives more pleasant, we will be more happy and our psychological as well as physical needs will be better satisfied.

Taking substances into one's body is a behavior that some people see as making their lives more agreeable. Who knows exactly why a youth takes drugs? The easy answers of common wisdom are: To be one of the group. To be "with it and cool."

On the other hand, I believe most youth use substances to make life more livable by reducing the psychological pains of unhappiness, anxiety, sadness, hurt, depression and loneliness. Most of the young men and women I have worked with over the years have used substances to ease the pain and hurt of broken or damaged relationships. The youth uses substances to reduce anxiety/hurt of broken or damaged relationships just as the anorexic does not eat or the "cutter" uses a knife or pin on the skin.

You, personally, can only control one person's behavior: Your own. I can only control one person's behavior: My own. You or I cannot control any other person's behavior. And that means that you as the parent and I as the counselor cannot control the youth's behavior...no matter how we try. The youth is the only person who has control over the behavioral choices he/she makes. The youth chooses if drugs will be used. The youth decides if sexual experimentation will take place. Children, youth and teens will make the behavioral choices that they think will make their lives more satisfying.

The "external controls" that we have used in attempts to control the youth's behavior (like rewards and punishments) just do not work in the long run. By using external punishments and rewards the parent may get some initial compliance. But let us not be fooled. In the end, most times the youth ends up choosing behaviors that seem to provide a more satisfying, pleasing life....for the youth! Assess the effectiveness of this "bribe": "If you don't use any drugs, we'll go to Disney World when you graduate." Do you really think this promise of a trip sometime in the future will keep the children away from using substances? Can you think of any bribe that will keep the youth in your family from using substances....if they choose to use?

