

Troubled Youth: Early Identification

“Children of today now love luxury, have bad manners and contempt for authority. They show disrespect for their elders. They are now the tyrants not the servants of their household. They contradict their parents and tyrannize their teachers.”



This statement may sound familiar. It is attributed to the great philosopher, Socrates circa 469-399 B.C. Apparently we have always been concerned about the lack of respect for traditions, values, and people shown by young people. However the level of acting out, disrespect for rules and laws, and disregard for authority in the 21st century has become increasingly concerning. Hard data is difficult to find therefore it is uncertain if there are more troubled youth or if the behavior just seems to be more intense and dangerous. School shootings that began at Columbine schools 15 years ago may have marked the beginning of young alienated students using violence to express their feelings of injustice and mistreatment. The behavior of most troubled youth is not as extreme as this but more likely to take the form of anger and acting out against people and destruction of property in the home, schools, and community. Teachers at all levels will attest to the fact that they are spending increasing amounts of classroom time addressing the behavior of students who are disruptive and not following the rules of the school and classroom.

While much of the focus and research has been on troubled teens the seeds for problems have been sown when children are young. Children can begin struggling mentally and emotionally with issues involving identity, gender, friendships, school performance, self-confidence and family relationships by the time they reach elementary school. This can be a normal part of growth and development and most young people will work through these issues without long-lasting problems. Other children begin to have difficulties very early in life and continue this throughout their lifetimes.

Troubled children are often a product of an unstable environment in the home, school, or community. Children living in homes where there is substance abuse by adults, unpredictable and inconsistent rules and standards, violence, harsh discipline, an absent parent, and lack of parental supervision and guidance are much more likely to start showing behavior and emotional problems very early in life. Early life trauma in the form of abuse and neglect can increase the stress response of children and their emotional reactivity. Most parents try their best to provide support and supervision to children but some become overwhelmed with the stress of limited finances, needing to work when children are at home, and few other resources. These parents may have experienced the same conditions themselves when they were children.

Children need anchors and predictability at many points in their lives even though they may sometimes resist and protest rules and limits. They need firm but fair discipline. Troubled children are often without such anchors and therefore make up their own rules and standards or adopt the standards of the peer group or local gang. They become lost and alienated from themselves, their family, and the community. They may struggle even more if there are personal factors such as lower cognitive ability, difficult temperament, poor social skills, or poor emotional regulation.

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The goal in helping these troubled children is *early identification and treatment*. Some are easily identified due to the extent and frequency of their acting out behavior. These children resist the structure of classrooms and rules and often have difficulty getting along with peers. They may impulsively show rage, throw objects, hit and push other children and even hit the teacher. It is not unusual for them to steal from the other children. The teacher is drawn into trying to deal with these children who are creating chaos in the school and classroom and who seem to be dedicated to getting into a power struggle with all authority figures. These children often see themselves as victims of an unjust system.

Other troubled children are more difficult to identify. They are isolated, withdrawn and quiet; cause no problems for teachers or parents; and have become nearly invisible. On the surface they appear to be just quiet or shy but some are masking their inability to fit in, emotionally cope, and adjust to life. These children have few friends and tend to blend into the background. Sometimes these children “act-in” with self-harm or suicidal behavior.

Ultimately both types of children become increasingly alienated as they grow. They become the fringe of society as young adults.... unemployed and unemployable, school dropouts, and destined for future criminal activity, and incarceration. These children can be identified and helped as early as pre-school age when they begin to first show signs of difficulty.

Parents, schools, and communities don't have to wait until children grow into troubled teens to take action. Programs and services are available in many communities to help. Counseling through the school counseling programs, specialized classrooms, a spectrum of community counseling services with children and families including parent education, mentoring programs, a collaborative Family Court, and finally family support through such organizations as the local Jobs and Family Services programs and churches can all play a part in helping to rescue these children.

Tips for Parents:

1. If you are not sure of indicators that a child is experiencing excessive behavioral/emotional problems talk to a pediatrician, school counselor, the teacher or the school psychologist.
2. If problems continue get an evaluation done through a local mental health center or children's hospital.
3. Be involved and work with the teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and mental health professionals to develop and work on a plan to assist the child as soon as problems are identified.