

## The Resistant Parents and the Boy Who Didn't Care *by Dr. Scott Sells*

### Case Summary

John (not his real name) is a 15-year-old boy who has not been to school in 5 months, has had no desire to have any personal contact with his friends, doesn't wish to leave the house, and who seemingly has none of the common "desires" of other kids (i.e., having rewards and privileges for good behavior, caring about punishments, going to the movies, etc.).

### Presenting Problems

- 1) John does not want to leave the house and has not been to school in the last 5 months. He spends most of his time in the house, in bed or watching television. The therapist has tried some traditional consequences to get John unstuck and off to school. This included removing the television, computer, and stereo from John's room (all appliances were locked in Mom's office for use by other family members). Although John got a bit tearful when the items were removed, and initially asked to get on the computer, he has since expressed ambivalence as to whether he ever gets these items back. He has responded by saying, "I don't care. I can lie in bed and do nothing for a long, long time."
- 2) John has refused all contact with friends and is by himself all the time.

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## Savannah Family Institute Retreat 2004 Energizes, Mobilizes & Rejuvenates Us...Again

We just returned from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Savannah Family Institute Retreat, held at Wild Dunes Resort near Charleston, SC. From the feedback we have received from those who attended, it certainly appears that we exceeded our goals of energizing, mobilizing, and rejuvenating our guests, both professionally and personally!

Dr. Sells' led powerful morning sessions dealing with the impact of old emotional wounds, and the lies we construct around them. Many who attended have reported that this concept has already been a valuable adjunct to their work with individuals and families.

Dr. Sells' live family therapy session allowed us to see the healing that can occur when parents closely examine their old, unhealed wounds, wounds which can hinder their parenting ability. We also saw the incredible power that forgiveness can have in a family system.

In the breakout sessions, retreat attendees were

**Planning is already under way for the 2005 Retreat. We expect it will also be held in March. For up-to-date information, please e-mail us at [susan@difficult.net](mailto:susan@difficult.net) or call 1-800-735-9525.**



*"The live family session was incredibly powerful ..... critical to have in this kind of workshop.....[we had to] view the model in action in order to apply it in our own settings."*  
**Dawn Roy**

## Savannah Family Institute Retreat 2004 Energizes, Mobilizes & Rejuvenates Us...Again

(Cont. from front)

showered with new concepts and perspectives. Karla Hillen, vivacious as always, led a panel discussion on new applications and innovations in the *Parenting with Love and Limits*® program. Those who attended were excited and anxious to implement the new ideas they received.

Kingsley Grant, from Life Impact in Miami, FL, led sessions on "Engaging the Difficult Teen" and "Reaching the Teen from another Planet."



Dr. Sells kicks off Karaoke night with a stirring rendition of "Pour Some Sugar On Me,"

Kingsley's use of humor, music and movie clips, combined with heavy audience involvement, inspired participants to be able to laugh and play in order to reach difficult teens.

Jeffrey Rodman's session on "Finding Funding for Your Programs" provided much encouragement that funding for programs is available, if you know how and where to search. Jeffrey also gave basic instruction in grant writing.



Karaoke night was fun, but Friday night's band, Main Street, was easier on the ears.

Gail Groy and Virginia Smith, Ph.D. gave an overview of their groundbreaking work in applying the *Parenting with Love and Limits*® program to families with younger children who are beginning to act out. They unveiled parts of the PLL curriculum which are being re-written to apply to younger children. (The curriculum for younger children will soon be available in its entirety through Savannah Family Institute.)

*Dr. Sells, as always, is an inspirational and thought-provoking speaker and demonstrator of live family intervention. His incorporation of spirituality as a tool in addressing family undercurrents was a healing process for the family and therapy observers, alike.*

*Elisa Fadum*

Tod Lynch-Stanley once again did his popular presentation on treatment of juvenile sex offenders, as well as concepts and theories he implements from his work with Virginia Satir. This year, Tod presented on the work he has done with Dr. Sells and Greg Lindsey on combining elements of his sex offender treatment model, with concepts from the SFI parenting and family therapy models.

The SFI Regional Centers held valuable meetings on how to assist those in their areas through trainings and presentations. There was a lot of energy and excitement as the Regional Center Directors considered new ideas for reaching those in their regions.

In addition to the professional presentations the weather was beautiful, allowing for afternoons and evenings of recreation and site-seeing. Barry Lee and his band, Main Street, hosted the oyster bake and dinner on the second night of the retreat. It was a fun family event, with lots of good food, laughter, dancing, and singing.

We will soon begin planning for the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual SFI Retreat. Soon we will send you information on dates and locations so you can mark your calendars. ■



OK, we did get some work done, too!



## Counselor Dilemma

- 3) John refuses to communicate verbally with the therapist. John hid under a blanket during the first session and refused to speak to the therapist except to mock her and mumble a few one syllable answers.
- 4) The parents were separated for two years and officially divorced last Fall. The parents are exhibiting communication problems that indicate they are not on the same page. The parents have different definitions of the problem. The father is an MD and believes in insight therapy, underlying medical causes, or deep seated unresolved anger. The mother, however, believes that John is stuck in a rut and needs parental guidance.
- 5) Last Christmas, the extreme noncompliance and disrespectful behaviors were exacerbated by a brief hospitalization for a violent reaction to Zoloft. John had actually asked for counseling in the Fall, telling his mother he was "feeling overwhelmed." However, the depression has seemed to have lifted and his behaviors are increasingly oppositional.

## Counselor's Dilemmas

- ? How do I engage the father? He is a physician, and his interactions with me often come across as distrusting and challenging. I have remained calm and professional, but have been very direct in what this type of intervention [my 15-Step Model] would entail: He would need to be brave enough to truly take on a new perspective to help his son.
- ? How do I engage the son? He refuses to talk to me and only mocks me when we are together.

? Is this case beyond my area of expertise and should I refer it to someone else? Several other professionals in the area are completely unwilling to work with the family (who has already fired several therapists). They had previously pursued only insight-oriented approaches, which Dad is more comfortable with.

? What do I do to help the parents come together as a united front and get their son to school and to engage in outdoor activities with friends?

## Dr. Sells' Suggestions

### Engage the Father Through A Readiness For Change Strategy:

I think the problem the therapist has run into is that she is "not starting where the client is." The father is telling the therapist, through both verbal and nonverbal language that (a) his son has a problem, but that he cannot personally do anything to fix it; (b) he does not see himself as part of the solution — Instead, the fixing of his son needs to be done by outside medical experts; and (c) the father feels that the situation is hopeless. The father is in what is called the pre-contemplative stage of readiness. He still has to go through the stages of contemplation and preparation before he is even ready for action.

Therefore, when the therapist pushes for action prematurely, the father resists. It is the only way he knows how to tell her that she is moving too fast and not speaking his language. To combat these problems, I suggest the following step-by-step interventions.



Call the father and ask to meet with him alone, because you think that you have misunderstood him and that you need to tap into his expertise to solve the son's problem. Your sole goal for this session is to stop pushing for action. Instead, help the father become aware that he is part of the solution through solid rationale and back-up evidence custom-fit to his particular teenager.



During the session, take a one-down position throughout. Apologize for moving so fast and

for lecturing him on the need to “take on a new perspective in order to help his son.” You can even show him the handout from my workshop that illustrates the stages of readiness, and how you moved too quickly to push him into the Action Stage.



Ask for the father's theories as to why John has a problem, and what stressors occurred around the time the problem got really bad (you want to lead him to the parallel connection between the final divorce hearings and his refusal to go to school).



After you have softened the father, redefine the problem in the following manner using your own style and language:

Is it ok if I tell you something tough to hear (always put velvet around your hammer)? I think you were right the whole time, and I couldn't see it. Your son has some deep underlying issues. That is why he refuses to go out or even talk to me. He is paralyzed...paralyzed with fear. He cannot move until we help move him together. An injured dog will snap at you, even though it needs and wants your help. The dog is just too scared to move. In the same way, John needs our help. He is worried about you and your ex-wife. As long as you were separated, there was still the slimmest of hopes. When the divorce was final, the bubble burst and reality set in. Now he wonders if he was in part to blame, and if you are still going to come together and agree as parents even though the marriage ended. This is why outsider influences, like hospitals and drugs, only made things worse. When you are lonely and depressed, you don't ask a stranger for help. You ask for your flesh and blood — your parents. John gave us signs, but we missed them. Early on, he asked for counseling and told his mother he was “overwhelmed.” What he was really saying was that he needed someone in his family to take action. He was tired of talk and insight therapy. He wanted his parents to come together and speak as one voice. John was begging us to help him act his way into a new way of thinking. The medical research clearly shows that people who are overwhelmed do not wake up one day and magically feel better. They need to “fake it till they make it” by being gently, but

firmly, coerced into doing things that are good for them, like going to school and being outdoors with friends. By going through the motions, they begin to work through the soreness in their muscles (the feelings of being overwhelmed) and start to feel better.



This message hits on all cylinders. It makes the father the expert, it reframes the problem from a medical one to one of being paralyzed by fear and in need of parental guidance, and it provides solid back-up evidence to support your claims, right from John's own voice. This should get the father back on track. You have now moved him into the contemplative stage. Ask him for permission to meet with him and his ex-wife in the next session. The goal is to use everyone's combined expertise to help John overcome his fears.

### *The Intervention*

- 1) Your current consequences of removing the television or computer are not working, because they do not address the underlying process issue, which is the fact that John needs his parents to come together as a united front and to guide him through his fears and concerns. It is a process issue, not a content issue. John will act out until his parents change their dance.
- 2) It is normal for a 15-year-old to sometimes not do what is in his best interests. It is normal for a teenager to be ridden or nagged by his parents until he does what is in his best interest, as in this case, Dad coming over in the morning and, together with Mom, getting John out of bed and out of the house, even if they have to pour ice water on him. It should not be optional that he either get a job or join some form of recreational activity. The parents should not take John's word for it, but make sure that he has signed up and is regularly attending these activities. The rationale is that John is overwhelmed, and will be paralyzed

with fear. Therefore, he needs their help and close monitoring until the good feelings catch up with his new actions.

- 3) Tell the parents that getting John up and out for the summer is an excellent dress rehearsal for the upcoming school year. The dance is the same. If they come together as parents and get him out of bed and off to camp or activities, it will be a breeze to get him off to school in the Fall. Make sure you openly discuss the dire consequences of John missing another year of school — ignorance, failure to get a job in a technological society, and homelessness.

## *Getting the Adolescent to Talk*

- 1) I would not worry too much at this point about not getting the adolescent to talk. He is just replicating the same process with you that he does with his parents. He uses silence as a powerful tool over both you and the parents.
- 2) Instead of playing the same game, change the rules and mix it up. Invite a sibling into the session with John. Ask the sibling to talk for John in John's presence. You can even playfully move your chair in front of John to talk to the siblings. Or you can do the same thing in a family session. Talk about John and ask everyone to answer for John while John is sitting right there in the room. This will drive John bonkers. He will want to talk but playfully restrain him from talking. This will only make want him want to talk more.
- 3) Finally, tell him that he can talk to you when he is ready. However, the downside for not talking is that everyone will then plan his life for him without his input. You do not like this but John gives you no other choice if he will not talk!!

## *You Are Not a Failure*

- 1) I would not give up on this case so soon. The parents have fired everyone else and it is a great learning opportunity for you. Instead, the next time you see the parents together, ask them this simple, yet profound question:

*You have seen other counselors and it has not gelled or worked. What about this experience would have to be different so that I can keep my job and not get fired? What did other counselors fail to do – what did they miss with you? I want to know so that I do not make the same mistakes. Please be as honest as you can with me.*

- 2) Then, after every couple of sessions, ask them how you are doing. Ask them for a grade, A through F. Whatever grade they give, ask them what you would need to say or do differently to go from a C to a B or a B to an A.
- 3) Try to find a supervisor who is strength-based and a systems thinker. You, the therapist, have a good foundation, but you tend to focus on deficits and not strengths. This is common training in graduate schools across the country. Also, you are caught up in content and have trouble seeing patterns and process. Again, this is normal and expected. It took me years to be able to see patterns. Therefore, get a supervisor who will tape you, and together freeze parts of the tape and play "guess the process." ■





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