

Practice Enhancer

Words of Wisdom on Supporting Street Entrenched Young Adults



The following was written by a young man formerly in MCFD care who once lived on the streets and has kindly agreed to share his experiences and insights so that we can all learn from them.

1. The first, most important thing to remember is that every youth is different, every story is different, every struggle is different, and the ways in which we interact with people vary from individual to individual. Do not assume that what works for one youth will always work for others because in reality there is no "one size fits all" solution to this kind of situation.

Youth become street entrenched in many different ways such as drug addiction, drug dealing, prostitution, various criminal activities, homelessness, or just being very poor. Some youth don't do any of these things and simply choose to be on the streets where they feel more comfortable with the people they choose to surround themselves with. Clearly the term "Street Entrenched" can encompass multiple types of people or situations. This is important to understand because how you approach them, what their triggers are, and the types of services they need can be drastically different.

2. To the eyes of many street kids, social workers are not seen in a very positive light. They are often looked at as "the enemy" who are either paid to care, pretend to care, or are outright trying to hurt them. A lot of times this can stem from negative experiences surrounding social workers growing up and there are a lot of triggers that can come with a "social worker" label. Triggers like stereotypical middle class casual work clothes, tidy boring offices, talking about nothing other than business, or the classic forced happy matter-of-fact tone of voice. These things might seem funny to you but I can tell you in 15 years in the ministry, over 7-8 social workers, moving over 40 times, and my impenetrable stubborn demeanor, there has only ever been one social worker and foster parent that was ever able to connect on a positive level with me and it was because they were so unconventional and unique in how they spoke, looked, and operated..

So how do you replicate this? Some ideas are if you are going to interact with street kids it's better to do it in either their environment or a neutral place rather than an office. Wear clothes with lots of colors, that are mismatched, or seem more unique because dressing in that casual social worker office attire, you might as well be wearing a badge and a police uniform. Also, be mindful of how you speak. Don't be scared to swear. Don't use fancy words because a lot of times street people feel offended by that. I was a street kid and a lot of my friends don't like it when I do it. "What, you think you're better than us? Why don't you go to school or church with that?" If they are like me and enjoy using fancier words or learning words then that is different but a lot of times it is seen in a negative way.



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3. **THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT.** Try to have entire conversations with your youth that begin and end with nothing but funny, positive, or interesting things. A social worker is too often seen as a bearer of bad news, and a reality check that many street kids are trying to run away from. If you are always about the business, about the incidents, about the paperwork, and the stuff they need to be doing, then they will associate that negativity or seriousness with you. You want to be seen as a friend or at the very least an asset, not a governmental grim reaper. Try hanging out with youth or talking with them from time to time and not bringing up ANYTHING important. I know it's hard - haha - but well worth it in the long run!
4. Offer your own pain and vulnerability. This may be an especially hard one for some of you but in my opinion it is one of the most effective methods. Street youth look at themselves as different from the rest of society because of their negative experiences, both past and present. Some of us feel shame because of this, and some of us walk around with our scars like a medal of honor. Regardless, we adopt a sort of thinking that makes us purposefully segregate ourselves from even middle class types or individuals we see as "normal" people. That pain, that lack of privilege, is what separates "us" from "them". Social workers are the antithesis of "us" in our minds. Working for the government means you had to go to school, get good grades, not have a criminal record, which means you probably had stability, which means you probably had a great family, and so on... You might as well be aliens to us from how different we perceive you to be. I know enough now to say that we all have problems and suffer from our own pain and obstacles. Maybe you lost someone to cancer? or used to drink a lot? maybe you were abused? or had a poor/rough childhood? Of course this is not for everyone and maybe some of you might not feel comfortable divulging that information, but I can promise you doing so will help destroy the ivory towers we see around you and help you come to the same plane of existence as us... at least you will in our minds. The more we can relate to you the more we can trust you. The more we can trust you the more we will listen and be open to the things/advice you have to offer us.
5. Keep your ears open and wait for the inevitable moments of vulnerability. Everyone has a break down every once in awhile. If you are a street kid, come from trauma, or are going through some stuff in life then you are even more likely to have them. A break down can actually be a very beautiful thing. It's basically like hitting rock bottom on an emotional level and I have found in my life it is in those moments when the drastic kinds of thinking and decisions I needed to make to change my life actually took place. Of course they can be very dangerous as well if people are left without any help, but that is where you come in. You are there to listen and you are there to help and if you have already established those lines of communication as I have previously suggested, or let them know they can always reach out to you then it is only a matter of time until street youth will reach back. The problem arises when those welcoming lines of communication aren't already established or if you have tried to force it too many times and stopped trying because you felt frustrated then you may have stopped this process before it



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had a chance to begin. If your resources, help, and advice were your seeds and these street youth's minds were the soil then you need to know that in their hearts it's almost always winter. You must wait for those moments of passion and emotion where the frigid, cocky, indifferent, angry behavior is thawed and plant your seeds then. Please do not be deterred by the harsh exterior and do not dismiss a youth as unreachable because what didn't work Monday to Friday may work on a Saturday. Just saying.

6. Try to find ways of helping street youth that clearly and obviously surpass the parameters of what you are supposed to do for them. One thing I can say about us street individuals is we put a whole lot into solidarity and loyalty. We often measure the strength of our relationship with someone by the "solids" they have done for us. You might offer me twenty dollars and my friend might offer me ten dollars. However, I know you will probably be reimbursed whereas my friend only has twenty to his name and has given me half of all he has. See the difference? There are many things like this that the foster parent, and social worker I previously talked about did for me that helped earn my trust, such as coming after hours to pick me up, or going out of their way to get me something out of their own pockets that they knew I really liked.
7. Street youth can also be very mean if they want to be. This usually comes from a lifetime of hardship, so don't personalize things ever. Do not take things onto your own ego or emotional load because many times it's coming from a deep place of hurt that at its core has nothing to do with you. Sometimes it can even be a sign of them starting to feel close to you and push you away and it's important to let it happen and to not be deterred. If you get upset with difficult youth, then for many of us you have fallen into our trap and have done what we expect you to do. We expect you to not like us, we already know we are scum, so we are going to speed up this process by making you see it as quickly as possible.
8. Give lots of compliments, GENUINE ones, and help build self esteem. A lot of street youth have low self esteem which can possibly be a big component of why they're street entrenched in the first place. When we do not feel good about ourselves then we do not take good care of ourselves. I personally used to think I was very dumb until I came to a safe house where the couple that ran it showered me in constant and genuine praise on how insanely intelligent they thought I was. They were like "dude like you have no clue how crazy smart you are" over and over again until I started to believe it. That was a very important seed they planted that in later years would actually help save my life and something I never forgot. I was literally at that safe house for about a week or two, so do not underestimate the power of your kind and encouraging words no matter how long or brief they are. When we feel better about ourselves we will take better care of ourselves!



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9. A lot of us know the big things we are doing wrong, and the main things that society wants us to do to get it "right". Get a job, go to school, get a place, don't do drugs, don't do crime, on and on. It's not that a lot of us don't understand that, it's more of what we see at the end of the tunnel type of deal. OK so I get a job and a place then what? I still am alone. I still am suffering from my trauma. I still feel sad. At least on the streets I know I'm a misfit P.O.S. I have a bunch of other people who come from the same stuff, and I have these different poisons to numb myself with. Trust me, we get it, but we don't see a realistic long term plan for us that is going to make us feel fulfilled. No, what we need is a reason. We need a reason to go to school, a reason to get a job, something that is long term, that will get us out of bed every morning and push us to excel. For some, it's their kid, others find a good group of positive people that support/motivate them and make them feel wanted, for others it's their passion or art, some find it through religion, others through their culture, and others somehow figure out a goal of something they want and then just go for it... but we need that reason. Help us find that reason, that goal, and we will begin to help ourselves.
10. You may have noticed that a lot of these points fall under a relationship building kind of pattern. Communication, trust, relatability, compassion, patience, and going above and beyond. I have had many conversations with many social workers about this. Some totally believe in this style of practice, others feel like it's the job of the caretaker, and others feel like it is unethical or frowned upon. In my respectful opinion it is the only correct way to be a front line social worker. That may come off as audacious but I've just seen it done the other way for too long to believe that you can work with children/youth as such important authorities in their lives while keeping them 50 feet away emotionally. Especially youth who come from trauma and even more so street entrenched youth. We are the abused, we are the forgotten, and the streets only harden our shells. The only thing that can penetrate that is love. It doesn't always have to be an ocean's worth from just one person. Sometimes little drops of it here and there will be enough to get us through a day. Sometimes a single day is the difference between left or right.

Thank you.

