



Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

August 2009

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

Relationship Bridge

Anyone familiar with female responsive programming is aware of the importance placed on relationship formation. Relationships tend to be automatic for professionals who work with young women involved in or at risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system. The quality of that relationship can be moved in a positive (or negative) direction depending largely on the adult. It can also have more of an impact on a young woman than any 5 star curriculum out there so program design should include intentional relationship building.

When it comes to policy and procedure regarding relationships between “clients and staff” the focus is generally on what NOT to do. This appears to stem from a desire to guard against the abuse of staff/client relationships that can result in harm to all involved as well as liability for the agency. Programs have rightly attempted to set standards for staff/client boundaries. Unfortunately, with ever increasing layers of policy, staff and clients often find themselves with so many barriers erected between them that it is difficult to form a genuine relationship.

Should a positive staff/client relationship develop, a common policy misstep is to forbid kids to contact staff after they have exited the program. The motivation behind this policy is generally to help kids “move on.” They need to progress. But, imagine how you would feel if you formed a meaningful and helpful relationship with someone and one day you were told it was time to move on. No looking back. No asking your opinion on the matter. You may not have even had the chance to say good-bye. You may have simply been informed that it was time. Would there be a sense of hurt, betrayal, fear or perhaps anger?

Why should we expect kids to feel any different?

Females of every age tend to prioritize their relationships above everything else. This is why an influential relationship with a professional can be such a powerful tool and one that should not be jettisoned lightly. By providing some continuity between existing relationships and new ones they will form, the likelihood that a young woman will be successful is increased. This is particularly true for residential programs. Staff have substantial contact with young women in these settings based on sheer volume of contact. It is inevitable that young women get attached to them.

In my experience, the kids that want to call or come back and visit the adults who worked with them in programs eventually move on of their own accord if allowed to do so naturally. Rarely does one see an unhealthy or extended attachment. Having witnessed both settings requiring strict adherence to the “no contact” rule as well as settings with a looser interpretation, I can confidently say that the young women in programs with less rigidity fared better. In settings with more flexibility, limits regarding contact should of course be in place but an unequivocal “don’t let the door hit you on the way out” is simply adding to the young woman’s burden. They’ve likely experienced that sort of cold disconnect from other significant adults in their life and a continuation of that cycle is not advantageous.

Young women tend to be cyclical in how they process feelings and information. Generally, they can best “move on” when they are allowed to maintain contact if they choose rather than on some predetermined time table. Think of their disengaging as an ever-widening spiral. At first, they may want more contact, but inevitably they will move away and want less contact. It is an opportunity to teach them valuable life lessons about ending relationships.

Finally, this bridge between old and new has the added benefit of providing young women with a potential resource should they begin to falter during the transition. A secondary benefit might be allowing staff, who often don’t see the fruits of their labor, to be privy to what might be a wonderful success story.

“Characteristics of a Strong Staff”

from *Providing Gender-Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources*,
a publication of the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women.

“...staff persons who work with girls should be: aware of their own values and be willing to make them explicit, when appropriate. Most importantly, their values should be consistent with those of gender-specific programming; open to mutual relationships with those girls whom they serve. They should be emotionally available and involved, yet able to avoid “super-mom” roles that foster over-dependency rather than encourage self-growth; willing to work on themselves as models for growth and change. Staff should not see themselves as finished products, but understand that they are also in life’s ongoing process of learning and personal development. They must be willing to acknowledge this to the girls; willing to work toward optimal functioning in their own lives; politically aware and oriented toward social action for the issues which are critical for women and girls; willing to model this awareness to girls and teach them how to reach a similar state; and sensitive to gender distinctions in risk factors, aggressive motivators, self-concept concerns, and individual treatment needs.”

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The Girl Connection

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