

FROM A FATHER’S PERSPECTIVE

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The Importance of Self-Image

During the course of my career in the social services profession, primarily in juvenile justice, I have spent much time attempting to “drill down” to the core issues which affect the behaviors that youth display that may lead them to the attention of a social services system. These behaviors are not necessarily delinquent but do bring to light issues, which if not properly addressed, could negatively impact their life in a manner similar to a criminal record. Unmet needs and resulting negative self-image can lead to academic failure, mental health issues, teen pregnancy or other behaviors which could negatively impact their lives. These issues are often present in addition to a host of delinquent offenses which result in legal, emotional and financial ramifications.

During a review of a recent series of arrests, two “drill down” issues came to light; feelings of invincibility and at the other extreme, hopelessness. These two emotions are not necessarily that far apart and are often seen in the same youth interchangeably. I speak of these two issues as observations of a peace officer rather than a mental-health professional. Nevertheless, based on the observed behaviors and other issues identified through the assessment process, one cannot help but consider the perception these youth have of themselves.

While the behaviors of high-risk youth in our various systems may be more pronounced, it behooves us to remain cognizant of these extremes in all youth, including our children. Invincibility or “it’s not going to happen to me” may surface in gang-related, other delinquent or sexual activity. Hopelessness may have more devastating effects. A youth who has given up his/her dreams may begin to think very negatively of himself/herself which could result in a corresponding attitude that leads to actions with negative lifelong consequences. The principle of “what you expect is what you get” would seem to apply. Therefore, we must work to change the mental picture these youth have of themselves. Education can be helpful, but as one conference speaker once stated, “If education alone could bring out long term behavioral change, we would not have a DUI problem.” We must address the manner in which youth think through the problems they face and the resulting decisions they make. For this reason, programs such as Thinking for a Change, which provides cognitive-behavioral intervention lessons to its participants, are so effective.

While a trained mental-health professional can elaborate more eloquently on these points, I offer these observations from a peace officer’s point of view to stress the importance of looking beyond the actions or behaviors of a youth and making every effort to identify the source of a minor’s self-image, either positive or negative, which will eventually surface, through his/her actions.

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