

Interviewing for Solutions

A Strength-based Method for Juvenile Justice

By Michael D. Clark

Editor's Note: The first article in this series appeared in the April 1997 issue of Corrections Today and focused on the philosophy behind the strength-based practice model of juvenile rehabilitation. This second article will detail the use of the strength-based model in a juvenile justice setting.

Changing the behavior of offenders is a central premise of the criminal justice field. Motivational research spanning over 40 years has identified several factors that can influence or prompt human behavior change: desire, optimism, resiliency factors and a focus on the future. With these findings so readily available to our field, why then do we continue to use problem-solving models that often bypass or ignore these important ingredients?

A growing number of juvenile workers are turning away from the problem-focused models with their emphasis on deficits and failure and toward the encouraging approach of strength-based practice. More often than not, they do so for practical reasons, as the strength-based approach offers more ways to build offender motivation and cooperation.

Questioning

Family therapist Scott Miller says that "over time, we have learned that asking the right question often has more impact on the client than having the correct answer." In other words, getting a client to say he will change, as if it were the client's original idea, often will prompt action by the client. With this in mind, the primary strategy is to get the offender to talk, or to "question for change." Strength-based

questions actually can promote more active conversation. However, if getting offenders to talk is important, then influencing what they talk about is even more important.

The following strength-based questions are intended to foster productive conversation, that which European therapists Ben Furman and Tapani Ahola call "solution talk." Solution talk is productive dialogue that can bring into awareness what efforts or behavior changes should be initiated. These solution-focused questions arouse a "can do" attitude that can help initiate first steps.

Solution-focused therapist Insoo Berg posits five useful questions for interviewing that orient our families toward solutions. I have adapted these questions for juvenile court application.

Pre-session Change Questions

- After being arrested and petitioned, many people notice good changes already have started before their first appointment here at the court. What changes have you noticed in your situation?
- How is this different than before?
- How did you get these changes to happen?

Numerous studies from the family therapy field have found that a majority of mental health clients made significant changes in their problem patterns between the time they set up the initial therapy appointment and the time they actually entered treatment. These studies suggest that just telephoning or making the effort to begin treatment is

enough to start positive changes. This also is true of our criminal justice populations. In single subject research, I found similar responses from teens and families newly assigned to my juvenile probation caseload.

Exception Questions

The family therapy studies also found that almost 80 percent of clients reported positive changes when asked specifically, but only 20 percent reported these changes spontaneously. This finding suggests that positive changes can remain obscure unless workers know to ask specific questions. For instance, the following "exception questions" often are helpful in getting families to recognize positive behavioral changes:

- Have there been times recently when the problem did not occur?
- When was the most recent time when you were able to (perform the desired behavior)?
- What is different about those times?
- When did this happen?
- Who was involved?
- How did this happen?

This approach holds to the adage that "nothing always happens" to convey there are always times when the problem does not happen or is not considered a problem by the family. Offenders and their families typically view the complaints that they bring into our courts as constant in nature and therefore any or all exceptions usually go unnoticed. My experience with this model has shown there are times when the truant attends school, the angry/assaultive child walks away from a fight, the follower says "No" to

Continued on page 100

STRENGTH-BASED METHOD

Continued from page 98

the group, or the parent does not berate or harp on the negative.

The idea is simple: Look for what teens and families do when the problem is not occurring and get them to repeat those same strategies in the future. It is here that the profound difference between solution-focused work and problem-focused models is obvious. Problem-focused models ask the questions, "When does the problem

happen?" and "When does it get worse?" Solution-focused work focuses on amplifying the offender's actions when the problem is not occurring. Exceptions need to be purposeful. To find out that during a certain period of time, a substance-abusing teen abstained from using drugs only because the local dealer was out of town is certainly an exception that is of no use.

The 'Miracle Question'

Consider the following: "What if you went to sleep tonight and a miracle

happened and the problem(s) that brought you into the court/detention center were solved? But because you were asleep, you didn't know the miracle had happened. When you woke up, what would you notice as you went about your day that would tell you a miracle had happened and things were different?"

Another approach to solicit this information is the following: "Imagine, for a moment, that you are now six months or more in the future, after we have worked together and the problems that brought you to court jurisdiction have been solved. What would be different in your life, six months from now, that would tell you the problem has been solved?"

The single most useful issue to be discussed with offenders and family members is how they view the future without the problem.

Both of the above approaches — one traditional, the other contemporary — are examples of the "miracle question," the hallmark of solution-focused therapy. A miracle in this context is simply the present or future without the problem and is used to orient the teen and his or her family toward the desired outcome by constructing a different future. Contracting about offender/family goals needs to be preceded by an understanding of what the offender and family want to happen. When (if) a worker finds there are no past successes to build on, the family can help form a different future by imagining a "miracle."

As many criminal justice workers have experienced, families have difficulty abandoning the "problem talk" and beginning the search for solutions. The miracle question was designed to allow the offender and family to "put down the problem" and begin to look

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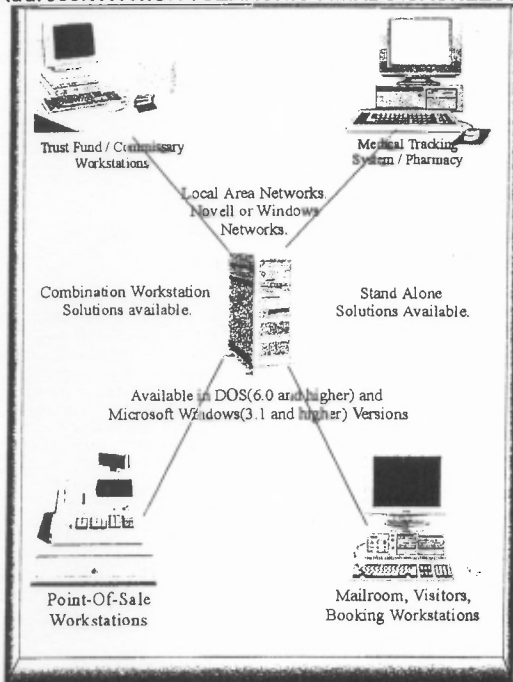
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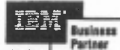
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at what will occur when the problem is not present. The single most useful issue to be discussed with offenders and family members is how they view the future without the problem. If offenders are prompted to imagine what a positive future might look like for themselves, they automatically begin to view their present difficulties as transitory, rather than perpetual. This question is used to identify the client's goals for court jurisdiction to end. If the teen begins with a fantasy response of "a new car" or "winning the lottery," the worker can return the conversation with humor or by normalizing these wishes. Teens and family members will quickly settle in to describing a more realistic miracle.

The miracle question can be followed by other questions that shape the evolving description into specific behavioral goals.

- What would be the smallest sign that this (outcome) is happening?
- If you were no longer (skipping school, breaking the law, etc.), what would you be doing instead?
- What would be the first sign this is happening?
- What do you know about (yourself, your family, your past) that tells you this could happen for you?

Scaling Questions

"On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the day after the miracle and 1 is when you were arrested (petitioned, problem was at its worst), where are you today?" "If, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is your problem solved and 1 is when it was the worst, where are you now?"

How do you know that offenders under your supervision are getting better or moving in more productive ways? Scaling questions help us establish a baseline against which future progress may be measured. These questions are used at the end of the initial session and all subsequent meetings. They also help us know when someone is satisfied without having to define vague terms such as "communicating better" or "feeling better."

Once a baseline is established, fol-

low-up questions can be used to identify what first steps or small efforts the offender and family believe are important to initiate. The brilliance and practicality of this model can be found in this line of follow-up questions:

- You said a moment ago you were at 3, what would have to happen for you to move to a 4 — just up one step?
- Gee, that answer sounded more like when you'd be a 10 and the problem was solved, think again to what just a 4 would be like?

- What would you be doing when you were at a 4?
- What would your friends say you were doing different when you were at a 4?
- What would be the smallest (first) sign that you were moving to a 4?

Coping Questions

Finally, coping questions can gather subjective appraisals quickly and easily.

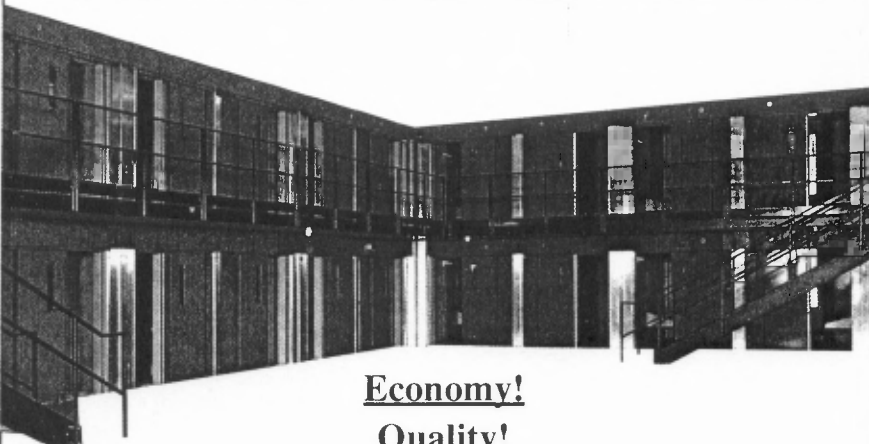
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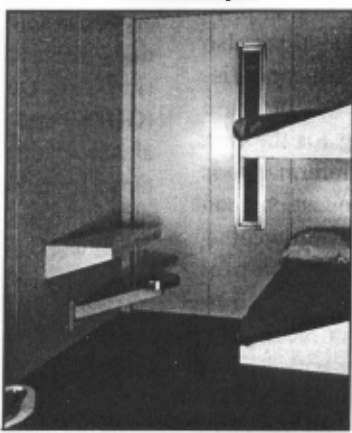
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- How have you managed to cope?
- Given how bad things are, how come they're not worse?
- This problem could certainly get worse — how have you (others) stopped this from getting worse?

Coping questions are used with a small percentage of persons who present a hopeless view of situation. They often resist any comfort or reassurance that the situation will improve. I used to cringe when this type of person began to belabor the negative. Now I think of the metaphor of jumping out of an airplane with them, only I have a parachute to use with the coping question. The key is to free-fall long enough with them, allowing them to vent and exhaust their hopelessness. I stay with them, agreeing constantly if at all possible, before I spring this question. Once asked, the coping question often can stop or slow the fall and begin to buoy the conversation back up to a more productive track.

My past efforts with hopeless family members rested with encouraging pep talks of "You can do it" or "It's not that bad," which never seemed to work. Rather than picking up on my optimism, the persons invariably became even more entrenched in their feelings of hopelessness and the sessions spiraled downward. Real encouragement and hope is summoned when workers help an offender look inward for this honest self-appraisal of accomplishments they know to be true about themselves. Coping questions can begin this self-appraisal and amplify what is found. Coping questions also are important to use if someone discloses a past traumatic event of abuse that they may be sharing for the first time. When very painful information is shared with us, coping questions can help victims look at their resourcefulness and strengths, not the painful event. People who have been victimized don't need to relive or recount the pain; they've been living with it. It is far better to foster a sense that they have survived in the face of such adversity.

Offense Profile of Delinquency Cases, 1985, 1990 and 1994

Offense	1985	1990	1994
Person	16%	19%	22%
Property	60	58	52
Drugs	7	5	8
Public Order	18	18	19
Total	100%	100%	100%

Offense Profile of Delinquency Cases by Race, 1994

Offense	White	Black	Other
Person	19%	27%	19%
Property	55	45	59
Drugs	7	9	4
Public Order	19	19	18
Total	100%	100%	100%

Percent of Petitioned Delinquency cases Transferred to Criminal Court, 1985, 1990 and 1994

Offenses	1985	1990	1994
Delinquency	1.4%	1.3%	1.4%
Person	2.5	2.0	2.7
Property	1.3	1.1	1.1
Drugs	1.0	2.7	1.8
Public Order	0.7	0.6	0.6

Percent of Delinquency Cases Involving Youth 15 or Younger by Offense, 1985, 1990 and 1994

Offense	1985	1990	1994
Delinquency	60%	60%	61%
Person	61	63	64
Property	64	64	64
Drugs	42	40	42
Public Order	53	53	55

Juvenile Court Statistics 1994. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Conclusion

With caseload numbers rising, workers searching for effective methods will be pleased to find an approach that can build offender motivation and cooperation. Using a strength-based approach with solution-focused techniques can decrease the intensity of problems while increasing the sense that they can be solved. It is important for our field to know that a true choice now exists in how best to move offenders out of our court systems. Organizations such as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the American Correctional Association (ACA) can render assistance by helping to disseminate information regarding strength-based work to aid workers in the process of choice.

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