OVERVIEW

The "troubled teen" is, first of all, in rebellion (to the extent of alienation) against home, school, and religion—the institutions designed to aid his or her growth and transition him or her to the adult world. Secondly, "troubled teenagers" are a threat to self and others. Finally, troubled teens are endangering their own future, society, and the stability of their country. Experts estimate more than 20% of America’s 25 million teenagers (some 5 million youth) are troubled and need intervention before serious harm is done.

The various categories of troubled youth make this a difficult topic to describe. Some of these young people are emotionally disturbed (schizophrenic, clinically depressed, etc.) and some are suicidal. Others are runaways (subject to prostitution, drugs, and death), delinquent (in gangs or isolation), slipping into extreme and dangerous cults, or have become drug addicts. Others are on the borderline of trouble—rebelling against parents and teachers, befriending anti-social kids, turning to dangerous drugs, and willing to mock the law.

If parents are to help their troubled teenager, they must be willing to admit their own responsibility in the matter. Families have influenced young people more than any other factor. Though it is true that troubled youth can come from stable homes and among happy siblings, the family system has contributed to the alienation of one of its members in some way. As seen in a movie like "The Breakfast Club," a young person may feel unduly pressured or ignored by parents. If parents are willing to accept some complicity in the problem, without undue guilt and with a willingness to examine and change that behavior, they may help their troubled teenager.

Society shares a great deal of responsibility for the pain of a troubled young person. To listen to young people who have found solace and relief in punk rock is to hear a great deal of anger toward family and society. Double messages facilitate much confusion and rebellion: "We care but don’t have time for you," "You are important—but mostly for what you can do for us," (as parents or as society) "Watch TV, but don’t really see and act on it," "BUY, BUY, BUY pills—but don’t use drugs; BUY BUY BUY alcohol—but don’t drink; have sex—but don’t get pregnant," "Grow up, but act your age," "Observe sex and violence and excessive materialism, but don’t act that way," "Believe in American ideals, but find success any way you can." It seems to many young people that politicians, other leaders, parents, and adults generally are using double standards—talking one way and acting another.

Schools have also failed many sensitive young people. We tell young people that their personal worth and future success are to be measured by academic achievement. Their main task in high school is to get into the right college. Those who come to high school with cultural disadvantages, poor writing or testing skills, learning disabilities, or undetected seeing or hearing disabilities, and are surrounded by uncooperative homes and negative peer influence face a tremendous handicap. Failure in society’s number one adolescent test demands self-justification and breeds anti-social thinking and behavior.

Historically, this "one nation under God" was culturally influenced by its religious institutions. Home, schools, and at least the influence of the church, gave youth a foundation and support for a moral world-and-life view. The erosion of a positive sense of self-worth, of a clear value system, and hope calls these institutions to cooperate in finding ways to reach troubled young folks.
Of course, the troubled teenager is not thinking all of this. These young folks are looking for a world in which to find acceptance and significance. Home, which has to be left sooner or later, feels more and more intolerable. The worlds of school, sports, work, social events, religious organizations, and cohorts headed for social success are just not present. The troubled young person must find him or herself a world—a home away from home.

Different kinds of anti-social activities characterize the groups in which troubled youth find a home. Kids in gangs care for one another as family and colleagues. Vandals have found one thing to give them essential status in their eyes. Drug users welcome joiners with an intense tolerance and superficial camaraderie. Alienated sub-cultures share a common world and common suffering.

Once a young person finds a comfortable world that offers something for which he has longed, there is little parents or others can do. Until this young person gets into some kind of trouble and needs help, parents and others may be ineffective. Committed and realistic parent support groups (like Tough Love) can work when there is still some respect for parents and the home.

Many troubled teenagers have been helped by caring adults who enter the world or subculture of their rebellion. This is a costly and time-consuming process, but the rewards are obviously rich. Parents, schools and religious organizations should appreciate and support leaders and street workers who enter into the world of a troubled young life at a crucial point.

A more practical and cost-effective approach to helping troubled teens in many situations is through positive peer influence and counseling. Where parents care enough to cooperate and learn, where schools can train staff and peer counselors, then communities can change attitudes toward drinking, drugs, and even careless sex. Illinois’ Homewood-Flossmoor High School (35 miles south of Chicago) runs a program which trains students and adults to run small groups on topics such as stress, suicide, AIDS, race relations, alcoholism, sexuality, self-esteem, and life-planning. Wyoming’s Natrona County High School and San Antonio’s Magnet School are creatively helping kids find their way. Quest National Center in Columbus, Ohio, has excellent material for training school staff and peer counselors. So does Youth Investment Foundation (Minnetonka, MN), a creative organization developing camping, work, and counseling programs.

The approach to troubled youth must reflect an interest in the life and future of the individual even beyond what the person may have for himself: "I care about where you’re coming from, where you’re at, and where you’re headed...I want to help you help yourself get there." The other responsibility of one helping a troubled youth is to teach the young person that certain behavior is not acceptable. A balance of care and discipline can regain lost kids and promote positive growth.

IMPLICATIONS

1. The increase of troubled young people drain the resources of a country in need of higher productivity and full employment.
2. Churches, homes, and schools must cooperate in addressing youth’s social crises. Youth leaders, teachers, counselors, and parents must be willing to work together. The models listed above show how such strategy can be carried out.
3. Troubled youth usually find havens in anti-social groups. These groups can be infiltrated by street workers or a concerned adult when parents are having difficulty in reaching their children. Programs like those noted above can help in many cases.
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