

Hello Everyone and Happy New Year!

by Dr. Scott Sells

We at Savannah Family Institute are so excited about the upcoming year! I have spoken in the past about the importance of making paradigm shifts. Now we are not talking about it, but actually doing it! For years during my workshops, we have spoken of our need to change the systems that are treating our problem families, and not just the individual family. The reason is that if our agencies look less healthy than the families we are treating, there are huge problems.

Welcome 2005

Here are some of the main problems:

- Both mental health and probation service workers complain that parents are not actively involved in the treatment of their child or teen.
- Service providers describe parents as "resistant," "unmotivated," "untreatable" and having a "lack of good parenting skills."
- A large percentage of mental health workers are not equipped to break through this parental resistance, and therefore they primarily treat the individual youth.
- Without parental engagement, children and teens often remained chronically stuck on the mental health workers' caseloads for months, or even years at a time, resulting in long waiting lists, drains on Medicaid funds, low counselor morale and burnout.

To address these key problems, SFI is working with mental health agencies to "retool" those agencies using the *Parenting with Love and Limits*® system of care. (Continued on page #4)

Case Study: How to Help Solve School Problems

by Dr. Scott Sells

You can stop a teen from ditching school and improve his or her failing grades, but to do so, you must work in close collaboration with school personnel. Traditionally, the problem has been that the teachers, guidance counselors or principals blame you or you blame them for the problem. One parent told me, "It's like this. My son's teacher thinks that I am to blame for his acting out in class. She doesn't tell me to my face, but I can see it in her eyes." Similarly, you may also blame the teacher. As one teacher told me, "With so many kids in the classroom, it's all I can do to keep order. I know that a lot of these parents blame me, but I am really doing the best job that I can. I need the parent's involvement. I need the parents to back me up."

Without a united front that includes the parent and the teachers, the teen will divide and conquer.

When you meet with your parents at school, ask the teen to wait outside the room while you initially go over the written plan (see example below). Pass a copy out to each teacher or school counselor present.

Do not let the teen see the plan beforehand. If a teen witnesses any disagreements between the parents and the school personnel, it only provides the teen with more ammunition to successfully divide and conquer. Because teachers usually only have

"the teen will divide and conquer"

between 15 and 20 minutes to spare, you must help the parents get to the point quickly. Your plan must clarify the teachers' roles and explain how it will benefit the teachers and make their jobs easier.

Teachers are just like you and me. They often have to see "what's in it for them" before they are motivated to change. If you sell them on this point, unmotivated teachers will likely become energized and motivated. (Continued on page #2)

Case Study: How to Help Solve School Problems

(Cont. from front)

Remember that the teen's teacher sits through hundreds of parent-teacher conferences a year. Usually, they are all the same...dismal and nonproductive. They begin with the teacher taking out his grade book and going around the room to report how badly the teen is doing academically, and/or how disruptive he is in class. The child or teen looks down and slumps in his chair as the parents look more and more defeated. The same meeting repeats itself all over again at the next Required Parent Teacher Conference (RPC).

It does not have to be this way! A meeting run as suggested by us above will have teachers curious and energized. As the parents' counselor, you will be presenting something unique and different. You are presenting concrete solutions in a written format! Teachers can relate to this written stuff. All their teacher plans must be written. You are speaking their language.

Below is a copy of the plan from the father of 13-year-old Jason. It is reproduced to help you create your own plan. As you read it, look for three key things: (1) Notice how the first two sentences tell each teacher how this plan will make his or her job easier; (2) Notice how the theme is that we are looking at solutions, not strictly problems; and (3) Notice how Mr. Smith clarifies everyone's role.

September 20, 2001

John Smith
55 Anywhere Road
Savannah, GA. 31415

Office Number 555-5555
Home Number 555-4444

4th Grade Teachers of Jason

Ms. Watkins
Ms. Gordon

Ms. Bixler
Ms. Rucker

Dear Teachers,

We do not expect you to perform a baby-sitting service for our child. We want to support you and make your job easier. The plans contained within this letter are designed to do just that.

The purpose of today's meeting is to coordinate our actions and set up guidelines for Jason. During this trimester, Jason's mother has been kind enough to allow Jason to live with me, so I can concentrate my full attention on helping him improve at school.

I will not stand by while Jason is being disruptive in your classes or failing to turn in his assignments like he did last trimester. I am therefore requesting your help as follows:

I am giving each teacher two post cards with my return address. If you have any behavior problems with Jason, or if he misses any assignments, please drop these cards into the mail and I will respond immediately.

Place any comments about Jason's behavior, lack of attentiveness, or missed assignments in his daily planner. I will review this planner with him on a daily basis. **(Continued on page #3)**

Case Study: How to Help Solve School Problems

(Cont. from page #2)

This planner will serve as a way for us [teachers and me] to communicate with one another.

If Jason will not settle down, call me at either of the numbers listed above and I will come to school the next day. I will sit with Jason in class to assure that he does not disrupt your teaching.

Jason knows ahead of time that there will be consequences at home for receiving any negative comments in his planner or on the post cards. I have asked Jason to have each of you initial his planner every day to assure that he writes down the assignments correctly. It also allows you to make any comments about his behavior in the classroom.

I thank you in advance for your extra efforts. I want to work collaboratively with you to make this Jason's most productive trimester. I would like to meet again in a month to discuss his progress and review this plan.

After you present your plan, there will be questions from the teachers. Try not to get defensive. If a teacher asks a question, ask her what she thinks before you answer. If possible, add her input into the plan. Teachers are like everyone else. They like to take an active part in a team effort. It gives them a sense of pride and co-ownership. Co-ownership breeds cooperation, and it will cost you nothing in return.

After the details have been worked out, ask your teenager to come back into the room. You should read the contract to the teenager, explain everyone's role, and outline how it will be monitored. Ask your teen to repeat back what she just heard. It will help keep both you and the school on track and focused on the bigger picture.

Before this meeting, Jason's teachers had been negative and uncooperative. At the conclusion of this meeting, there was a noticeable change. The teachers were energized, cooperative and helpful. They stopped looking at their watches and gave the father an extra fifteen minutes. The letter kept the meeting focused and everyone on track.

With a well-organized plan, Jason suddenly became accountable for his actions on a day-to-day basis. Problems could now be identified and immediately addressed before they became chronic, or resulted in suspensions or expulsions.

Suspensions have become like a reward system for many teenagers. Teens tell me, "I like to act out in class because I get suspended. I can stay home, watch television and raid the refrigerator. Even an in-

school suspension is better than sitting in class all day." Plans like the one John Smith created can prevent suspensions or expulsions.

A written plan forces both you and the teachers to get more involved in your teen's schooling. If this happens, the odds will skyrocket that your teen will improve. It is a straightforward approach with one central philosophy: ■

*"straightforward approach with
one central philosophy:"*

Hello Everyone and Happy New Year!

(Cont. from front)

Welcome 2005

We are finding that PLL significantly reduces their recidivism rates and increases parent engagement. These outcomes are the result of increasing the agency's quality of care and service delivery capacity, while the embedded weekly supervision dramatically improves the clinical skills and expertise of their staff. More and more, SFI is becoming a valuable technical advisor to help change the systems that are serving our families.

In this issue, we will demonstrate this kind of retooling. We will show you how we work with agencies to provide better coordination, communication, and interface between the individual mental health counselor and systems like probation, community, and school systems. You will see how we do this within a school system.

Have a great year!

Scott P. Sells, Ph.D.
CEO, Savannah Family Institute



Savannah Family Institute

P.O. Box 30381 , Savannah, GA 31410-0381

Tel. (800) 735-9525

Fax (912) 727-2847 www.difficult.net