

THE ART OF WORKING WITH MANIPULATORS

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Children and youth in residential care often become experts at "manipulating" or confounding efforts to help them. Usually frightened by the thought of additional failure, they will avoid, circumvent, or prolong initial involvement in the very experiences and interactions which are designed to improve their self concepts and help them succeed in society. Some child care and youth care workers are adept in using approaches which help these children. Others, however, seem to choose approaches that "feed into" manipulators. In this brief article, an attempt will be made to open a discussion about manipulators and to share a few thoughts about what I consider to be the art of working with manipulators.

Manipulator Defined

A manipulator is a youth who is able to avoid being significantly affected by the helping system and at the same time neutralize the consequences of such avoidance. Three examples come to mind:

Kevin

Kevin stated to his child care worker that he had been able to get doses of medication by telling his therapist that he was hearing his mother's voice coming out of a crack in the wall of his bedroom. Even though there was no indication that he was hallucinatory or suffering from a serious psychological disorder, somehow he was able to get drugs while being in treatment for drug problems.

Sue

Sue was placed in a private residential facility because the correctional center in which she was previously placed was unable to help her with sensitive emotional problems which she was avoiding. However, when the treatment staff at the center tried to confront her on these issues, she became extremely violent. Unable to handle her violence, the residential facility sent her back to the correctional facility. She once again had successfully avoided dealing with the real problem.

Joey

Joey was sent to special day classes because of repeated trancies. At the day school, when asked to participate, he'd make sexual comments to the teacher for which he'd be repeatedly removed from the class.

In each of these cases the youths succeeded at reversing efforts to help them and subsequently perpetuated their own further failure. In each instance, if the workers had reacted differently, as we shall see later, the results might have been more positive.

Ineffective Responses to Manipulators

Ineffective responses to manipulators can be depicted as falling on a continuum with “saviors” on one extreme and “technicians” on the other. The saviors are typical of many people who come into human services with big hearts, good intentions and few practical skills for working with difficult-to-manage youth. They have a tendency to feel sorry for the youth and to avoid holding them accountable for their behavior. Youths usually like the saviors but do not respect their authority nor do they feel very secure in their care. Consequently, saviors tend to spend a great deal of time reacting to behavior and being disappointed with their failures.

For example, in “Sue’s” case, a savior would tend to encourage bringing Sue to the treatment program even though he/she didn’t have the management skills or the fortitude to be able to hold Sue responsible for her violent behavior. Then, if the savior’s attempts to be sympathetic were met with violent behavior, he/she would be left in a helpless reactive position which wouldn’t do Sue or the rest of the youth in the program any good.

Technicians analyze structures and attempt to develop strategies often to the point where their “bag of tricks” becomes more important than building relationships. They tend to spend an enormous amount of time trying to out-manuever the youth; creating win/lose situations in which they inevitably lose both the battle and sight of the human side of working with children. Then, when they fail, they are quick to say, “Well, he never should have been here in the first place.”

For example, in “Joey’s” case, a technician would tend to place emphasis on controlling Joey’s manipulative behavior with techniques and to miss relationship cues which showed that Joey was afraid of the learning process, and that he was reluctant to invest in another adult who he thought would only kick him out again anyhow. So each “technique” would be viewed by Joey as simply an attempt to get him involved in something he’d rather avoid in the first place.

These are, of course, extremes. My purpose is merely to present general examples of how we often fail with manipulators. In reality many workers tend to slide back and forth on the continuum or get pulled in one direction more often than another. The objective is to avoid these extremes, to find a comfortable balance in between where the worker can be both empathetic and technically competent in approaching the

problems. Following are a few general guidelines which seem to help achieve this balance.

Guidelines

Know the Total Youth as Best You Can: The reasons one youth is a manipulator are completely different from the reasons for another youth. Therefore, it is impossible to work with a manipulator unless you have a good grasp of the total youth. In most cases, this means having a clear understanding of his specific treatment plan. Workers who work in agencies without individual plans are working at a tremendous handicap.

Worker and Team Awareness: It almost goes without saying that workers have to have good self-awareness. Do I tend to be a savior or a technician, is the question workers might want to frequently ask themselves and their teammates.

Place the Youth's Needs First: With a good awareness of one's own needs, it is easier to place the youth's needs first. It is difficult sometimes to put aside personal feelings and ambitions to do what is best for the youth, but it is essential if you want to succeed with manipulators.

Assume Manipulators Want to Change: It is much more productive to make the assumption that youth would choose a more productive course if they knew one than it is to assume they want to continue to ruin their lives and "get" the adults. This makes the main goal one of supporting, teaching and showing the youth alternatives as opposed to reprimanding them for intentionally manipulating.

Effective Intervention

With these basic guidelines in mind, the task then becomes finding the right balance. Manipulators, like most youth, require sensitive empathetic (not sympathetic) workers. Empathy is a process in which the worker attempts to understand the youth, to place him or herself in the youth's shoes, but it is also a process in which the worker continues to hold the youth accountable or responsible for his actions in a firm, consistent manner. Empathetic workers convey the message that they can't and won't accept certain behavior, but that they will always try to accept the youth.

Technical skills are also needed. In recent years there have been a number of practical, reality-based approaches developed which are effective with manipulators (Vorrath and Brendtro, 1974; Brendtro and Ness, 1983). Workers should attempt to learn as many of these approaches and specific techniques as possible. The objective is to select techniques which are best suited to the needs of the youth and then use

those techniques in an empathetic manner. With this type of blending, workers could have prepared for Sue and Joey in the following way.

Sue

Sensing that Sue needed a change of environment, the workers agreed to bring her to their residential facility. However, before she arrived, they sat down together and talked about how important it would be to hold her accountable for her behavior and they shared various strategies for doing this. They also cautioned one another not to expect immediate results. Even if they were able to use some of the new group techniques they had learned about, they knew it would not be easy. The goals would be to repeatedly show her that they accepted her but not her violent behavior and to get her to begin to talk about her problems.

Joey

Knowing that Joey would be there any day, the supervisor helped the workers talk about their feelings about profanity and sexual innuendo. They knew this would be Joey's way of trying to turn them off or get a negative reaction, and they wanted to be prepared for it. They would tell him from the beginning that they didn't like that kind of language, but under no circumstances would he be suspended from school because he swore. If he had to be isolated from class, he'd have to make it up after school. The goal would be to give him the message that they wanted him in school.

Summary

The purpose here has been to open a discussion of manipulators and approaches to working with them. You may want to discuss the above examples and guidelines with your colleagues. Then take this information and apply it to manipulators in your own setting by plugging in additional techniques and strategies which will encourage these youth to choose a more productive course of action.

REFERENCES

- Vorrath, H. and Brendtro, L. (1974) Positive peer culture. Chicago: Aldine.
- Brendtro, L. and Ness, A. (1983) Reeducating troubled youth. New York: Aldine.