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DEAF CULTURALLY AFFIRMATIVE PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

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Abstract

Walden House is a 365-day-a-year comprehensive program for Deaf Children. More than 50% of the staff is Deaf; ASL is considered the dominant language, and a central goal for all students is the establishment of a strong cultural and personal identity as a Deaf person. This paper will explore how providing this culturally affirmative Deaf environment impacts upon all aspects of programming.

confidence, while reducing the frequency of socially unacceptable behaviors.

The goal of Walden House is to enable children to function in less restrictive home and school environments. Therefore, comprehensive family services and the development of independent living skills are essential elements of the program. Educationally, Walden House provides a self-contained program offering a wide-range of academic and enrichment courses. In addition, the program benefits from being a part of The Learning Center for Deaf Children. Identifying with a larger school community of Deaf Children aids in the development of a healthy identity for all Walden House children. In addition, as children progress, they can gradually mainstream into the Learning Center Middle School program while still receiving the support and structure of Walden House.

Introduction

Walden House is a program for Deaf children who exhibit serious emotional and behavioral problems. We believe that to be effective, services must be provided in the language of the children and with an understanding and respect for their culture. Thus, ASL is the language used in Walden House and it is considered essential that at least 50% of the staff be Deaf at all times. With full linguistic access and a culturally affirmative environment, a highly structured program offering group support, therapy, positive reinforcement, consistent limits, and logical consequences for behaviors can be implemented. Such a program helps children build self-esteem and self-

Behavioral Program

Students are referred to Walden House exhibiting a variety of behavioral problems such as aggression, impulsive behaviors, resistance to authority, short attention span, and inappropriate social behaviors.

Prior to Walden House, our students are often placed in a predominantly hearing setting that

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lacks knowledge, understanding, and respect for Deaf culture and its language, American Sign Language. Usually there are few, if any, Deaf adult role models, and, thus, a lack of full linguistic accessibility.

Walden House provides a strong therapeutic, and highly structured environment with group and individual behavioral management programs. This section of the paper will focus on group processing and how a culturally Deaf environment is essential for it to be effective.

One of the most important parts of the Walden House program is the use of group process. The students themselves address each other's behaviors in the group and give feedback and support. The goal is to support positive behaviors and modify disruptive behaviors. An example of group process would be a "huddle," when the group is gathered together in a circle with staff involved. In a huddle, announcements, information sharing and praise to a student or the group take place. Problem-solving skills are factored through the group. Since each student's communications and language skills vary, the group emphasizes the importance of communication, and students learn to adapt their language to the needs of others. Students' language skills and social-interaction skills are developed through exposure to Deaf staff and the strong ASL environment of Walden House.

Huddles can be used to address interpersonal problems which arise, and can be called by a staff member or a student. Staff help with the confrontation and guide students in their problem-solving techniques. As the group develops and students become comfortable, they can often operate a "huddle" with minimal staff supervision.

Another example of group process is the "POW WOW" ritual that takes place before bedtime. In the POW WOW huddle, one student or staff begins by picking another student or staff who is given the opportunity to share something

or offer feedback. This goes on until everyone has had their turn. This provides a good ending before bedtime. Again the importance of fluent communication via ASL cannot be underestimated. Without it, the focus of a huddle often becomes the struggle to understand, rather than the actual content and process.

The development of language and social skills is the goal of numerous informal group situations, as well as the more formal huddle. Being a part of the Learning Center for Deaf Children provides social opportunities and language stimulation through interaction with Deaf peers and Deaf staff. Involvement in the Deaf community events, as well as frequent group trips from local camping excursions to a week at Gallaudet University offer further opportunities for growth through group experiences.

Here are positive outcomes for Group Processing:

1. The student develops and improves upon his/her language skills, expressively and receptively.
2. The student develops confidence in dealing with confrontation with staff and peers using newly acquired problem-solving strategies.
3. The student develops a strong sense of Deaf identity and pride by being in a strong culturally Deaf environment.

As a result of group processing, it is clear that as their language skills and self-esteem increase, their behavior problems decrease.

Educational Program

The Walden House educational program is currently staffed by four staff, two hearing and two Deaf. (Walden House makes it a priority to seek out qualified Deaf persons for all available staff positions.) Instruction as well as behavioral intervention is approached from a team perspective

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whenever possible. Two academic courses, Reading and English/ASL, in particular, emphasize this Deaf/hearing team approach.

The goal of the reading program is to give Deaf children the confidence and basic skills necessary to enjoy and feel successful at reading. This is first accomplished by giving the students the background of the story via captioned video tapes. In addition to captioning, the stories are also made accessible to the students using a Learning Center staff interpreter, a native user of ASL, reading the captions and interpreting the story in ASL, or a hearing staff member approved by Deaf staff. Video tapes with stories told in ASL with Deaf actors are used when available. Such stories as Cinderella, Pinocchio, A Christmas Carol, and Peter Pan have been used. The students watch 15 to 20 minutes of the story on videotape and are then asked to take turns summarizing that much of the story in ASL. This process continues until the entire story has been watched and each student can tell the story in ASL. The students are each videotaped telling the story which serves to motivate them to continue the long process of watching and retelling the story.

The next phase of the reading program focuses on vocabulary development. Target words from the story are chosen by the teacher and are presented to the students using a comparison format. For example, the word flag would first be signed by the Deaf staff person and then written in English. Thus, the students are developing vocabulary books by writing the written form of the chosen word on paper and then drawing a picture to represent the meaning of that word. Various vocabulary games, puzzles, etc., are developed by the teacher to reinforce learning.

The students then caption pictures of the story and make their own books. The students will look at a picture and tell the staff what is happening in the picture. A representation of the student's ASL

sentence is then written on the board. The students then work as a team with the hearing and Deaf staff members to modify the sentence on the board until it is a correct English sentence. The students have their language validated by the Deaf staff member and are involved in the process of transforming their ASL into written English. This process also enhances the student's self-esteem and makes the English language less of a scary monster.

The last phase of the program involves the students in a videotaped production of the story where they are the actors. Scenery, costumes, props, etc., are put together by the staff and students and a great deal of enjoyment is derived from creating a "movie" of the story. The length of this program for any given story varies according to the difficulty of the story.

The English/American Sign Language program is similar in structure to the reading program. A topic of interest is chosen by the teacher and videotapes on the topic are presented to the students to give them the contextual information and background. Once the students can converse on the topic in their native language of ASL, they are then ready to work on English vocabulary, sentences, etc. This class is also team taught by Deaf and hearing staff. In this way, both the student's ASL and English are enriched by native users of the respective languages.

In addition to these two classes, Deaf and hearing staff members strive to work as a team in all situations whether they be behavioral, therapeutic, or academic. Both cultures are modeled by native members and respect for both cultures is sought. The emphasis, however, is on Deaf culture following the philosophy that Walden House is part of a school for the Deaf for Deaf students. Therefore, the norms, values, etc., of that culture are strongly reinforced. This is perhaps more evident in Walden House due to the fact that the majority of the staff are Deaf (Walden

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House has the highest percentage of Deaf staff in any one department of The Learning Center.) More specifics about the way in which Deaf culture is valued in general will be outlined in other sections of this article.

Family Services

The families who enter Walden House often have a history of complex and longstanding difficulties, both on an individual and a systemic level. Many have had social service agencies label them as inadequate parents, neglectful, or abusive. They may possess rudimentary sign language skills at best and thus have a very strained and distant relationship with their Deaf child. Under such circumstances, it is very easy for advocates for that child to view the parents with disdain and blame them for the child's emotional and behavioral problems. Not only is such a view myopic, it is harmful to the child. When parents and school are viewed as adversaries, it creates a loyalty conflict for the child which can impede his/her growth.

Realistically, not all families are capable of caring for their children. We are talking here about those for whom reunification is an appropriate goal, and our experience at Walden House tells us that this is by far the majority.

Much has been said here about the value of a Deaf culturally affirmative program for Deaf children in terms of increased self-esteem and empowerment. It is a model that also has a positive impact on families. This section of the paper will first provide a brief summary of family services within this model. A case presentation will then follow, highlighting some of the services and demonstrating how one family has benefitted from them.

Walden House employs a full-time family liaison as a part of its clinical team. The role of the liaison is to serve as an advocate and support to

the parents, as well as to coordinate the various family services. Given the ease with which we can fall into the trap of blaming parents, it is essential to have someone who is able to emphasize parents' abilities and advocate for their rights.

The following are specific services which are provided or coordinated by the family liaison:

Monthly "Family Nights"

The primary purpose of these events are social, though they may at times also serve an informational or educational purpose. They have included such things as a cookout, a games night, a presentation of a videotape made by the students, and an "Italian Restaurant," in which students made menus and worked as cooks and waiters. Interpreters are provided for all events. Through these social gatherings, parents are given the opportunity to see their child as competent and capable of communicating in a rich and complex language. Keeping in mind that the majority of staff at Walden House are also Deaf, this immersion in a Deaf environment helps to normalize deafness for these families. Over time, we have observed that parents also become less fearful of communicating with Deaf staff and are more inclined to utilize their own skills for social conversation rather than seek out an interpreter. The fact that these events are always well attended suggests that families consider them valuable and enjoyable.

ASL Classes

The Learning Center for Deaf Children provides ASL classes taught by Deaf instructors for all family members free of charge. Parents of Walden House students are encouraged to attend whenever possible. This is not always feasible, however, given that some families are not within commuting distance. When there are enough families able to attend weekly classes, Walden House provides its own ASL class, which then

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serves a dual function of bringing families into the program on a weekly basis. For families unable to attend classes at the school, we provide them with information about classes in their community, give them ASL texts and, in some cases, help to arrange tutorial services.

Family Therapy

The family liaison provides family therapy to many Walden House families, though the nature and length of that service varies from family to family. The determination of need is dependent upon many factors including family motivation, the individual needs of the child's home visits, and the nature of existing outside services. Interpreters are used for family therapy sessions and, in some instances, other staff are involved as well. For example, a Deaf Latino staff member works as an advocate/co-therapist in sessions with a Latino family. This inclusion communicates a respect for cultural differences to both the parents and the Deaf child and helps the therapist to be aware when such differences interfere with communication and understanding.

Consultations on Behavior Management

Walden House parents are provided with concrete suggestions for managing problematic behaviors at home. This may sometimes occur within a family therapy session, but more frequently involves educational or residential staff meetings with parents, either in the home or at Walden House. It may also involve group presentations in which staff roleplay interventions to problems presented by parents.

Provision of Interpreters

The importance of providing professional interpreting services to parents cannot be underestimated. The Learning Center employs 2 full-time certified interpreters who are used school-wide for a variety of meetings and events. These

interpreters are used for all Walden House parent meetings and parents always have the option of meeting alone with their child with an interpreter. In this way, parent and child can communicate freely without their usual language barriers. The provision of this opportunity shows respect for the parent/child relationship while teaching by example about the role and importance of professional interpreters.

Case Presentation

Alex is a 13-year-old male student who entered the Walden House program a year-and-a-half ago. He and his 15-year-old hearing sister (who is also in a residential treatment program) have been in the custody of the State Department of Social Services for 2 years. Alex was sexually abused as a young child by a family friend, though this did not become known until after he entered Walden House. His behaviors include physical aggression toward peers and adults and attempts to coerce peers into sexual activity. Parents live together and are both employed. They are extremely angry at the system for having taken their children away and want custody returned.

The parents' anger is a common experience and further emphasizes the importance of the family liaison position. The following example will illustrate that point. Alex visits his family two weekends a month. One Thursday evening prior to a scheduled visit, Alex threatened suicide. Following an emergency evaluation, Walden House and DSS decide to cancel the visit. The director of Walden House informed the parents of this decision by phone. They had made special plans for the weekend and were furious about the cancellation. Their strong relationship with the family liaison, however, was not effected by this decision. She was able to contact them on Friday afternoon and discuss alternative plans for them to

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see Alex. She invited them to come that evening, which they did. An interpreter was provided and the parents met with Alex and the evening supervisor, who is Deaf. They expressed their concerns and were supported by the supervisor. They were then given the opportunity to meet alone with Alex using the interpreter. Following that meeting, they were permitted to take Alex out to dinner. When they returned, they brought dessert for all staff and children. In this way, a situation which may have alienated parents from the program was used to strengthen the bond between parents and staff and communicate with Alex that Walden House and parents were working together on his behalf.

A major concern expressed by the Department of Social Services regarding his family was their inability to set limits. When at home, the children were permitted to do as they pleased. Though parents repeatedly expressed their frustration, no attempts were made to control the children's behaviors. During a meeting with the family liaison, the parents were expressing their dismay regarding Alex's personal hygiene. He refused to bathe or wash his hair whenever he was home. The liaison knew that Alex showered nightly and washed his hair when at Walden House and felt that this might be an easily achievable goal for the parents to tackle. She was also aware that the parents were planning to take him shopping that weekend for a much-wanted Red Sox jacket. She thus took the opportunity to propose the development of a behavioral plan at home, similar

to the point system used within Walden House, through which Alex could earn the jacket. Once the parents were sold on the idea, the liaison involved residential staff, the identified experts in the development and execution of such a plan, to work with parents. The plan was developed and Alex earned the jacket. The parents were pleased with their success, and Alex viewed them as capable of setting limits.

Summary

A Deaf culturally affirmative program does not only benefit the Deaf children involved. It is a philosophical approach based on respect and empowerment and is thus an effective model for working with families as well. Families also have the opportunity to interact with Deaf adult role models. This helps parents to see that Deaf people are capable and competent and to realize the potential in their own children. Through a wide range of formal services offered to families, the utilization of professional interpreters, and the constant exposure to a predominantly Deaf staff, parents gain skills, insight, and increased self confidence.

In conclusion, Walden House of The Learning Center for Deaf Children strives to instill a sense of pride and strong cultural identity in its students. This is facilitated by affirming Deaf culture and American Sign Language in all aspects of programming.