

Let's Talk About It:

Youth Development Is Possible in School-Based Mental Health

Let's Talk About It, an adolescent group therapy program utilizing the social therapeutic approach developed at the Institute, celebrated its tenth anniversary this past May. Ten years is a long time for a very unorthodox youth development program located in a traditional inner-city public high school not only to survive but to thrive. It seems an apt moment for us at the East Side Institute to write about this showcase program, initiated by Barbara Silverman, the Institute's training coordinator.

In the language of the mental health and social work professions, Let's Talk About It can be described by some terms currently in use. First, it is an indicated (secondary) prevention program for young people experiencing a high level of stress, who are still functioning well in their school, home, and community environments. Second, it is a tertiary program for young people experiencing considerable social, emotional and/or academic difficulties. Third, it is an enhancement model that operates from the assumption that as young people become more competent and capable, their social and emotional well-being improves and they are better able to deal with the stressors in their lives. Finally, it is a protective factor in the lives of youth who are bombarded with the impact of racism, poverty and community and family violence.

However, the process of creating "prevention," "enhancement" and "a protective factor" — and what meaning that has for young people — is the interesting story. Moreover, we believe that Let's Talk About It is a new method of practice that goes well beyond the borders of the conceptions currently in use in the profession, providing a fresh perspective on adolescent mental health.

For a more in-depth discussion of the history, methodology and outcomes of Let's Talk About It, see "The 'Let's Talk About It' Model: Engaging Young People as Partners in Creating Their Own Mental Health Program," by Nancy Feldman and Barbara Silverman, a chapter in the 2004 book, Advances in School-Based Mental Health, Best Practices and Program Models, edited by K.E. Robinson.

When social therapist Barbara Silverman, a social worker for more than three decades, walked into the Teen Health Center at Erasmus Hall High School ten years ago to assume responsibility for its mental health program, she knew she was in for a challenge. This once legendary high school, whose alumni include singers Barbra Streisand, Beverly Sills and Neil Diamond, had fallen on hard times. Flatbush, the area of Brooklyn, New York in which the school is located, had become very poor, and was known for high levels of crime, drug activity and gangs. The student population of more than 3,000, many of them recent immigrants from the Caribbean and South America, included young people living with the emotional pain and stress of pervasive poverty, family abuse, crime, racism, tension (and occasional bloodshed) between ethnic groups and nationalities, drugs, AIDS, language difficulties as non-native English speakers, and educational failure. This

was a student population that for the most part would not seek help for these problems from the Health Center social worker because to do so would mean they were "crazy."

Silverman was hired by the Director of Adolescent Medicine at Brooklyn Hospital, a colleague impressed by her lifelong passion for helping young people and familiar with her unique approach to group work called social therapy. She was asked to develop a mental health program that could make a difference in the lives of these young people — a mental health program that could go beyond the traditional medical model, with its stigmatizing emphasis on diagnosis and treatment of pathology, that many young people, particularly young people of color, reject. What Silverman brought to Erasmus was many years' experience in creating innovative youth development programs, training at the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term

Psychotherapy (www.eastsideinstitute.org) in the social therapeutic approach, and a 20-year practice with children and families at the Social Therapy Group (www.socialtherapygroup.com).

One decade later, mental health visits at the Teen Health Center have risen from fewer than 100 students per year to a reported 2,963 in 2003, most of them voluntary self-referrals.

How did this rather remarkable turnaround happen? Well, let's talk about it.

Let's Talk About It is the name of the drop-in, open-ended group mental health program Silverman initiated at Erasmus. From the beginning, she was eager to do group work with young people in such a way that they were involved as active partners in the process of creating their ongoing emotional growth. To social therapists, emotional growth involves creating new kinds of social environments, in which growing is not just the desired outcome, but also the very process. It entails learning to live in groups—and building groups that support living in developmental ways. “Like so many social workers, I was committed to supporting young people to grow,” Silverman recalls. “I wanted to create something beyond the traditional mental health understandings and approaches that try to fit young people into their models, and that relate to them individualistically. Social therapy’s focus on the collective creative process helped me do that.” (For more on collective creativity see *Psychological Investigations: A Clinician’s Guide to Social Therapy*, edited by Lois Holzman and Rafael Mendez and published in 2003 by Brunner-Routledge, New York.)

Silverman initially invited young people to come into counseling with her on a one-to-one basis. She told them they could bring a friend if they liked. Some did. She told them that many of them seemed to need more support than they had at home or at school to deal with the kinds of stresses they were under: family and school pressures, moving here from another country, gangs, community violence, feeling unloved, and not being taken seriously by the adults in their lives. She told them about her desire to start a group where they could get that support. Everyone, without exception, said they were not interested in being part of a group. They didn’t want to talk in front of other kids, feeling that if they did, people would “gossip their business” in

the halls or think that there was something wrong with them. These fears and concerns were an ongoing topic of conversation with the young people who came to her for counseling in the first few months.

When Silverman once again told them she wanted them to start a group, the students once again refused. She then presented them with a contradiction. “By their own account, talking with me was helpful,” she recalls. “So I asked them why they thought I would refer them to a situation, in particular one that I would be leading and believed to be of value, that would be harmful to them?” Silverman urged them to join her in creating a group in support of their relationship with her and her desire to pilot this program. If, after trying it at least a few times, they really didn’t like it, they didn’t have to come back. About 20 young people began attending on that basis, participating in groups during their lunch periods, four to five people at a time. Silverman supported them to take responsibility for engaging each other around confidentiality, an issue that has continued to be addressed throughout the program’s history.

The groups grew as Silverman talked about them with everyone who came into the clinic, including students who were there waiting for their friends. One young man responded to Silverman’s invitation to join the program by asking, “Oh, you’re a shrink?” Silverman replied, “Well, I’m not your typical shrink, but yes.” He countered with, “I’m not interested in that. People come to *me*. All my friends come to me for advice.” They spoke a little more and Silverman invited him to become her assistant. He accepted and began learning how to lead groups. As he and others began to bring friends to the groups, the program began to take off.

When school reopened the following September, several students who participated during the prior year eagerly approached Silverman in the hall to ask when the group was starting up again. Everyone who was still in school that year returned to the group and a few weeks into it they gave their program a name—*Let’s Talk About It*. Students were invited to recruit and orient new members and to learn how to co-lead groups if they wanted.

Over the years, *Let’s Talk About It* has gained a reputation for being a place where an unusually diverse array of young people, most of whom never interact outside the

clinic (at least in a friendly or supportive way) can come together to talk. The group’s diversity is reflected in its cultural and ethnic make-up and in the inclusion of other groups which rarely associate with one another: “nerds,” popular kids, shy kids, jocks, bullies, former gang members, and straight, gay and bisexual students. The program is also known as a place where young people can talk about “adult issues” such as sexual preferences, violence, being incarcerated, abuse, drugs, dating, parents and politics.

From year to year, the issues of most concern to the young people change. As new people come into the program, they are supported to join in shaping and reshaping the totality of what the group is doing. Different people step out to provide leadership at different times. In addition to what’s going on in the young people’s personal and family lives, events in the school community and the broader community contribute to shaping the work. One year it was violence in the school; for another extended period it was rape at home; the issue of confidentiality was precipitated by a breach by a group member; many hard conversations were had about pervasive homophobia and, of course, 9/11.

Silverman is very demanding of the young people as she consistently urges and supports them to work hard, to think and act in new ways, and to go beyond themselves. Since the earliest days of the program, she has insisted that the group be a place for them to learn how to take their differences and disagreements and use them to foster the creation of a helping environment for everyone in the group.

While this insistence that students take continuous responsibility for creating the group isn’t a guarantee of success, it does seem to make a difference, at least at Erasmus. As one young woman put it, “We consider this room in the school ‘our’ room. I had a fight with this girl and we came down here and worked it out. We did it for the sake of the group — not because she wanted to be my friend or I wanted to be her friend. We did it because we value this group more than we value our stupid arguments.”

Valuing the group more than “stupid arguments” has enabled the young people to create new conversational environments, develop new skills for dealing with

difference and disagreement without hurting each other, and create new choices in their lives — in and out of school. Of course, the conversations are never easy and almost always rife with conflicts (which the group is supported to work with rather than try to reconcile), especially when group members share their often knee-jerk responses to being “disrespected” by each other and by those in authority, a major topic throughout the program’s history.

What *Let’s Talk About It* participants — many of whom have been officially labeled as “trouble-makers” — have begun to realize is that, if they want to stay alive and out of jail (not to mention grow and succeed) they need to learn non-aggressive ways of conveying that they will not tolerate disrespect, even as they openly express the “rush” they feel whenever a fight does break out. As the exploration continues, some have begun to influence fellow students to respond in less violent ways to being “dissed.” Others credit the program for keeping them in school.

Today *Let’s Talk About It* is wonderfully fluid and diverse, with popular people, isolated and shy people, outcasts, bullies, former gang members, people into sports, people from different cultures (including those who traditionally have tensions between them, such as Haitians and Jamaicans), straight, gay and bisexual youth, people with bad tempers, and people at various academic levels. The challenge is using all their differences in the name of what they all have in common—the activity of building the group. It is this that is understood as the most growthful element of the program for the young people involved.

Over the years, the *Let’s Talk About It* community has broadened considerably. When the program began, it was housed in the basement and barely recognized by the school’s staff and administration. Ten years later, not only have Erasmus staff and administrators sat up and taken notice (the program moved to the first floor), but so have educators, psychologists, social workers and youth workers throughout the US and internationally, who are eager to learn more about the program’s unique approach.

As always, the young people have worked closely with Silverman to help make this happen. For the past six years, *Let’s Talk About It* participants and peer counselors

have joined Silverman as spokespeople, discussing their work in a variety of contexts, including university settings and conferences sponsored by such groups as the Association for the Advancement of Group Work in Social Work, the National Assembly of School-Based Health Care, the Center for School Mental Health and the Kansas State Children's Mental Health Conference, where Silverman delivered a keynote address last year.

When the young people are not out on speaking engagements, they are welcoming visitors — many introduced by the Institute — to the program. Dozens of psychologists, educators and other youth workers and social service professionals from all over the world have “dropped in” on this unique drop-in group when they are in New York City.

Let's Talk About It has also developed close ties to other youth development programs — its Flatbush neighbors, IMO for Youth and the Boys and Girls Club; and the Times Square-based All Stars Project and its All Stars Talent Show Network, Development School for Youth and Youth OnStage! youth programs, to name a few.

Going out on speaking engagements, collaborating with other youth programs and inviting adult strangers into their group has afforded these inner-city young people unique opportunities to learn more about the world, to meet people whose paths they might never otherwise cross, to develop new friendships and relationship-building skills, and to take responsibility and experience collective ownership of what they are creating.

These joint activities also impact on adults. Here's what three-time visitor Kitche Magak, a reproductive health activist from Kenya, says:

“I couldn't believe what I was seeing, what I was hearing, what I was experiencing. I heard the young people talking about abuse by their own parents, racism, self-hatred, violence and rape. All these ‘heavy’ issues were being hurled out with such remarkable ease. These kids were in pain, but the program has given them an environment to look their pain in the eyes as a collective experience, to go beyond their socio-emotional anguish. I was witnessing a group of young people confronting a system that is designed to destroy their social psychology — and they were winning.”

Dale Hamilton, who runs a community theatre in Ontario, Canada, speaks of how impressive the young people of the program are:

“Coming from Canada (and rural Canada at that), I felt I had taken a wrong turn at Mars and landed on another planet. I was in the middle of an American TV show, except the characters were very real and alive. I loved the honesty and intensity of the young people, as well as their sense of humor, even in the face of obstacles and challenges that are not exactly a barrel of laughs. I wish I had had a group like this to go to when I was 17 and going through a rough patch in my life. I know that just talking about it would have made a big difference.”

And from our country's capital, Olga Acosta of the DC Department of Mental Health comments, “*The Let's Talk About It* group reinforced for me that we need to trust young people and have confidence that they can and will create positive environments whenever given the opportunity.”

Barbara Silverman trusts young people, but even more, she trusts the process of young people creating together. The young people did not know how to create their program with Silverman (and neither did she). But she related to them both as who they were (young people under stress and in need of help to grow emotionally) and as who they were becoming, (partners and creators of their emotional growth) — and they became (created what it means to be) partners in creating their own mental health program and emotional growth.

The work continues. At times, Silverman asks the young people, “How come you settle for so little from each other?” “Why won't you make more demands on each other?” She continually invites them to make a contribution, to work with what others give to the process of building the group. She challenges them. “You say this group is important to you, that it has helped you a lot. It could be even more helpful. Stronger. How about growing it that way, by putting more demands on each other?” The young people grow in and into that process. If the builders and supporters of *Let's Talk About It* continue to reach out and lead, some day all young people might have opportunities such as these.