

offending against juvenile girls

The Collective of THE ADELAIDE KIDS' SHELTER --
A therapeutic Commune at
176 Archer St. North Adelaide, S.A. 5006

Kids who are problem kids, kids who will eventually turn out to be delinquents lead a cyclic, sad existence. Australian capitalism through the family, school, social welfare and legal systems teaches these kids nothing except how to clam up personally, how to become cunning and to like pain. By the time self destructive patterns become evident, parents already believe their child is a genetic freak, because to think in terms of conditioning means that they must share responsibility for how their kid turns out. In school, they rebel, get sent to the headmaster, get caned, are shunted back to class again and then the whole process repeats itself. School does little to stop this because although the potential for communication exists there, most middle class teachers are too concerned as to whether a kid swears to actually listen for the content of any communication. The legal system and the police complete this process by helping the working class kid to jail and a slow psychological death.

The product of all this is a "criminal." Imagine! A mini-criminal at 13, 14, 15, 16 years of age! And what does our legal and "welfare" System do about it? We pinpoint the "crime", investigate, try, sentence and punish it. We try to condition the kid back to "normal" by punishment. Like a rat or a dog! What a primitive way to handle young humanity. Once a kid comes to the notice of the state authoritarians, the really "bad" one ends up in a lock-up state institution under the care and control of the Minister. The "reclaimable" one ends up in a variety of religious, cottage, or foster homes run by rightwing respectable citizens. Others are released back into their former way of life with a series of warnings, fines, bonds etc. This first entanglement by

the kid with the state is just one more scream for help, there having been many along the line and at this stage the welfare people are still deaf.

All these agencies give lip service to the idea of rehabilitation otherwise they would not get funded by the government if they are private or religious places, or if they are state institutions their basic function as teenage jails becomes too evident. All these places claim to have "programmes" to aid in the rehabilitation of juveniles. In reality what happens is that while the kids are sent to school (and we know what happens there) the only form of rehabilitation that is practised (with very few exceptions) is a series of punishments and clever coercions administered by an unprofessional staff.

We would like to see only people with some sort of professional qualifications working with disturbed youths and juvenile delinquents. Degrees and diplomas are not absolutely essential, but certain attitudes and skills are. A professional youth worker must have a basic belief that the disturbed kid is basically "O.K."; that the capitalist society is bad and not that the kid has been born genetically "bad". A professional should believe that all kids are potentially unconditionally loveable and that there is such a thing as motivation. A professional must also to some extent willingly share the cultural and political values of the kids, for example in dress, swearing, jargon and basic class identification. We would also like a professional youth worker to have therapeutic and teaching skills, gained either through personal problem solving therapeutic experiences or through attendance at some human centred therapeutic courses. It is very difficult to gain therapeutic skills by doing a formal psychology course at a university. Universities churn out behaviourist psychologists who blithely apply animal reinforcement techniques to young human beings. One rehabilitation place we know about uses the "token economy" system -- they award marks for desired behaviour, and subtract marks for bad behaviour.

At the moment delinquents in institutions don't get to inter-act very often with skilled people, with the exception of two fairly innovatory project centres in N.S.W. and S.A.

No one would dream of putting an unqualified teacher in charge of a classroom nowadays, yet look at what happens to delinquents and disturbed kids. They are lucky if they see a professional person once a week and the rest of the time the "treatment" they get could best be described as babysitting. Add to this the inevitable cheap food, accommodation, and punishment and we still have what is essentially a nineteenth century charitable approach to juvenile rehabilitation.

What is needed if there is to be real change in the lives of the kids is a coherent therapeutic programme in a community environment, run by professional people. That is while we are working for the revolution to come!

In 1976 in Adelaide four of us started up such a place. It's known at the moment as the Adelaide Kids' Shelter and it is a therapeutic commune for such "juvenile delinquent" girls. We are a commune, which means that four of us adults with various qualifications and experiences live with five girls who come to live with us for as long as they want to and contract with us to change this destructive, cyclic existence of theirs. The sort of kids that come to us are the sort that no-one wants and the sort that institutional authorities have come to their wits' end about (and that isn't very hard)!

We have determined to keep numbers of girls strictly at five despite pressure to increase numbers and to churn kids through for statistical and economical reasons. It is disgusting that there are places still operating which house 40-50 kids under one roof. There have been moves by schools to cut class sizes of relatively normal kids down, yet institutions which deal with very much more disturbed kids jam them in and process them like so many chickens in a modern poultry farm.

We at the Shelter do have a systematic treatment programme, based on Gestalt and Transactional analysis. We see our function to act as professional parents, to love the kids, and to act to psychologically reparent them with a number of therapeutic techniques. We are radical in our social and political beliefs and philosophies, and are non-religious. We see the need for creating an extended family structure, artificially, if necessary, for those without a family. Our aim is to break the old crime and punishment cycle. And

we and the kids succeed.

In our therapeutic programme, our overall goals are:

1. To teach girls that they are responsible for, and can control their own thoughts, feelings and actions, and to make them aware of the economic and political sources of their oppression.
2. To provide a nurturing, limit setting environment in which girls can experiment with decision making, new and appropriate ways of solving problems, and alternative lifestyles to those of their families and peer groups.
3. To give the girls the advantages of an environment where they can realise their own self-worth and so stop self-destructive and socially unacceptable behaviour.
4. To enable the girls to increase their communication, employment, creative and recreation skills so they will be able to lead a more fulfilling life.

To achieve the above goals we believe we must help the girls change on two levels. We use different methods for each level.

1. They need to increase their personal motivation and self-worth in order to work through their individual emotional problems.
2. They need to be aware of the social limits and conditioning which affect their behaviour and learn new ways of coping with or changing these.

We use a combination of methods to achieve the first change. Our basic therapeutic framework is, as has been mentioned, T. A. Gestalt with some use of guided group interaction, bodywork, regressive work and other counselling skills.

We believe that children respond to parental influence at a very early age by making decisions about the sort of person they are and how to live their life. The decisions we are most concerned with are those which create problems now. Our goal is for the girls to become aware of early life decisions, and the reasons they made them. Then they need to decide if they are appropriate now, and learn alternative ways of responding. To achieve this we include:

- Much positive attention, both physical and verbal, for appropriate behaviour.

- Providing protection and permission for the girls to express their feelings, talk about problems and ask for what they want without fear of rejection.
- Confrontation of destructive or inappropriate behaviour by pointing it out, laughter, mimicry, limit setting and information giving, cuddling or any feeling reaction.

Secondly, we use many techniques to increase the girls' awareness of the ways in which they respond to social, economic and political pressures. These include:

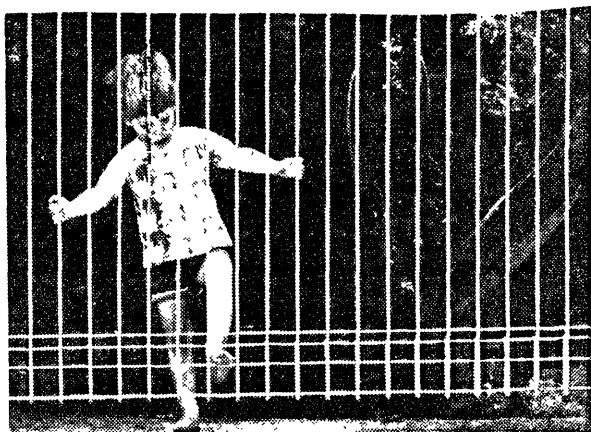
- Talking to the kids about feminism, class structure and politics generally as issues come up in the papers etc.
- Encouraging alternative recreation, for example going to plays, concerts, movies and then discussing them.
- Talking about the significance of media presentations of women.
- Encouraging non-traditional uses of make-up, clothing etc.
- Encouraging discussion of sexual experiences, values and inhibitions, emphasising that we are not ashamed of our bodies and that nothing is "dirty" and not to be mentioned.
- Encouraging the girls to buy and cook new foods.
- New job skills learned at home and at school.
- Camping, bike trips, gardening, painting, poetry writing, sculpture, and craft skills are encouraged.
- Modelling by the adults who share a wide range of skills which do not fit into the traditional male/female stereo-typed roles. We always emphasize experimenting with new behaviour in a way which is safe and gives the girls more choices.

There are a number of specific treatment steps we use to achieve our aims:

1. LOVING -- all the adults go through a slow process of learning to love each of our permanent girls. This is an inevitable process and the most valuable in achieving our aims.
2. No Suicide Contract -- each girl must agree that she will not kill herself, accidentally or on purpose (for

as long as she is prepared to agree; the contract is negotiable). If the girl refuses, she will not be admitted, or will be asked to leave. We do this because in the past girls have used threatened suicide as a blackmail or pressure tactic, but mainly we do this because we value their lives.

3. Life script -- a diagnostic tool designed to give some ideas of the early life decisions which may be problems.
4. Weekly house meetings -- at these any personal or household problems are discussed. At these group meetings contracts are made about future behaviour.
5. Family therapy sessions -- these have been six two-hourly sessions with Robin Maslen, a social worker, to look at some of the dysfunctional patterns within the shelter.
6. Regressive work -- some girls are aware that their problems



stem from a very early age. When regressive work, for example, being a young baby, and being looked after, was suggested to one girl, she immediately suggested that we bottle feed her at times. We have done this twice and have already noticed that the length and intensity of her periods of depression have already decreased, and she seems more capable of organising herself.

7. Workshops and marathons -- girls have done T.A. educational workshops and have attended weekend T.A. marathons to sort out specific personal problems.

There are a number of criteria for leaving the shelter by which we evaluate the success of treatment:

- the girl has stopped offending.
- she no longer is self destructive, looks after her body e.g. does not get tattoos; goes to doctors regularly etc.
- the girl is aware of personal problems and knows how she can solve them. This involves an awareness of personal behaviour choices as well as community resources.
- the girl has sampled alternative lifestyles and is able to choose and organise her own style of dress, room decoration, movies, food, books, creative activities, sex life, leisure and employment or study.
- she can show feelings when appropriate and communicate in depth with others.
- the girl is choosing friends who don't put her down abuse her, or limit her personal freedom.
- she is capable of surviving in the community by organizing employment, rent, marketing and who she will live with.
- the girl will be becoming increasingly self-confident and certain of her own value.

We've often wondered at how intelligent these kids are when they come to us from a history of institutionalization despite the fact that they have been labelled "slow" by the establishment psychologists, and often conditioned to dumbness by them. We are amazed at how they have survived with their wonderful rebellious instincts intact after all the years of bludgeoning by various members of the community. We've concluded that the girls that we get are generally instinctive rebels, potential working class leaders whose damaging family backgrounds and persecution by teachers and welfare people have thwarted refreshing individuality and non-conformism. We at the Shelter seek to encourage this rebelliousness and develop an awareness of psychological, political and economic processes which led to incarceration and self-destructive behaviours.

While we've been involved in the Shelter, we've made a study of the girls and their backgrounds. The offences the kids have been charged with are minor ones: simple larceny, offensive language, hindering a police officer, assaulting civilians and police, wilful damage, illegal use of a car, drunkenness, carrying offensive weapons like a knife and chain, and the ridiculous offence of being a neglected child. Of course, police and welfare authorities always charge the kids

and not parents. Being charged with these offences always leads to a whole courtroom procedure, just like for adult criminals. If the police want to get nasty, they fingerprint, photograph and body search. Police also enjoy provoking kids to swear and react; there is also ample evidence that they also physically mistreat them. Legal and police people are already treating the kids as criminals, reinforcing their



negative self image, playing the games of "cops and robbers" on a grand scale.

All this behaviour on the part of authoritarians is so much posturing. The real source of the farce is forgotten. Every one of our girls has experienced serious offences against their persons, by their families and relatives. There is usually a history of incest where the girls have been fucked for an extended period of time by their fathers or relatives of family friends. The incest has in two cases occurred at an early age -- 8 years in one case, 10 years in another and has gone on continuously for two years or more, with the child being threatened and frightened into submission. There is also usually an accompanying history of physical violence -- one girl being beaten by her father every time he detected an infringement, another regularly as much as three times a week for a number of years. There is also a history of serious psychological abuse, where the child's very existence has been negated by the parents, in the case of a child's being an accident at birth and hence basically unwanted. One girl's mother tried to drown her when she

was 8 years old; another's parents farmed her out to be looked after by friends less than one mile from where they lived when she was five years old. All the kids know that they were unwanted; it is a very sad thing to see. There is a history of economic and physical deprivation -- lack of proper food and physical care because of poverty or because foster parents have been stingy. Most of the kids from our experience come from large working class families of 5-10 children and are mostly middle children in their families and hence often forgotten. In all the girls' families there is serious marital discord, divorce and alcoholism. Three of the kids we've had have had an unbelievable history of institutionalized "care". One girl has lived in 7 departmental homes in 10 years; another has lived in 8 homes in 11 years and another an incredible 7 homes in two years. So that the offences committed against the girls by their families and their society have been added to, not lessened by the welfare authorities.

All the girls we've had, except one, have been gang-raped more than once. Violent beatings have accompanied the rapes in some cases. As a result of all these offences committed against their persons from the moment of conception, the girls have attempted suicide -- more than once in some cases. And when they get depressed about their lives, they get drunk or stoned on readily available valium and make sure that they place themselves in a dangerous situation where some damage to their own bodies and psyches will result. Also they may pay a visit to the local tattooist and endure the pain of yet one more tattoo, one more mark of self hate on their bodies. And a tattooist will oblige and tattoo a drunk 13 year old without any qualms. And why shouldn't the kids try to destroy themselves? No one has taught them to love themselves by loving them.

Girls turn the offences of society in on themselves. Boys tend to turn the offences outwards. Girls will attempt suicide -- some will succeed at it. They will smoke heavily, stone themselves into irresponsible oblivion, get drunk, get tattooed and get into cars alone with 4 heavy guys. Boys will tend to attack other people -- rape, rob and bash. Girls turn their anger at how they've been treated onto themselves. Typical, isn't it of the way women have been

conditioned to be self-sacrificing? Obliging, they turn their anger, neatly and destroy themselves.

It's very hard for the kids to get legal redress. Because they have tattoos, dress in jeans and ripples and speak crudely (by middle class standards) police and lawyers think they are molls and tarts and treat them accordingly. We have been told countless numbers of times by obliging policemen and lawyers to tell the girls to stay away from having too many boyfriends and to stick to "one only"; and also that they shouldn't go out alone at night. A "sympathetic" doctor told this to one of our kids after she'd reported a gang-bang where force at knifepoint was involved. We generally experience disdain and distrust at the hands of the police.

It is very difficult to get a lawyer who will consistently and with passion and integrity fight a case for a child in the juvenile courts. Juvenile courts have all the outward trappings of a proper court of law. Yet their inner workings are different. In South Australia the judges nearly always take the recommendations of the Department for Community Welfare as to what should be done with the child if the plea is "guilty". If the plea is "not guilty" then there occurs a legal battle similar to the one for an adult. Lawyers don't tend to find juvenile law a very challenging field and hence getting a lawyer to fight a case is difficult. Juvenile law is a grey in-between area. Neither a place where a sound decision is made about a child by a panel of experts putting the child's psychological development first, nor a place where the law is applied purely and simply.



Police think that girls provoke rape and treat their evidence with suspicion. Even now, with the slight changes in South Australia's rape laws, police and doctors look for evidence of struggle to prove genuineness of the rape complaint, and try to find out whether the girl is a virgin and when they do they treat the girl accordingly. Two sisters involved in an incestuous situation with their father couldn't get their father charged because their corroborating evidence was insufficient to carry a conviction. Police needed "evidence" which the father destroyed (whip, photographs) after he was alerted by a kindly community welfare worker that the girls had charged him. This reluctance to charge parents is due to the policy on the part of the Community Welfare Department and the Police to preserve the sacred nuclear family at all costs.

We have also experienced detectives warning kids off from pressing charges by exaggerating the painful aspects of courtroom procedure and needless to say, kids are put off from proceeding time and time again.

So that the kids are trapped. There is little legal redress for the crimes committed against their persons and little hope for escape from the cycle of petty offences they commit. Just punishment and incarceration in teenage jails with unprofessional youth workers is not enough. It is primitive and inhumane. It turns kids into criminals who will in the future fill up our jails. The self destructive cycle must be broken through a constructive and revolutionary therapeutic solution.

