

Adolescent Failure at School: Checkmate

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Adolescence. A Systemic Perspective .

Within the framework of the research carried out through the Hippokrates Program, we are treating the families of several adolescents in our center who have been referred to us by secondary schools. The request for intervention, both from families and from school usually has to do with resolving problems of failure in school and modifying the behavior of the adolescent both at school and at home. This means that the adolescent has been labeled as problematic and even as an “identified patient” in some of these contexts.

The first step we take in our approach to therapy is to broaden the family’s definition of the problem to include other family members in the search for solutions. The basis for this intervention has to do with our view of adolescence not only as part of each person’s life cycle, but also part of the family’s life cycle. In his book *Tratamiento de adolescentes con problemas*, Fishman states:

For a long time, the problems of adolescents have been seen as inherent to this stage of life, and the approach to them has been through individual or peer therapy. Family only served as the stage on which the child developed. Just as there are biological considerations, that is, there are physical changes that have psychological consequences, it is also necessary to include and take into consideration the adolescent in his or her most intimate contexts. This contextual approach points out that it is not possible to consider adolescence independently (as a stage of development subject to a series of predictable problems) but rather as part of a well-defined social context. A part should not be separated from the whole (nor a dancer separated from the dance ...).

Thus, we start with the idea that adolescence is a complex stage of the family’s life cycle which is closely related to the different evolutionary moments of its members. During this stage, the family has to resolve issues such as allowing differentiation between the children (by promoting their gradual independence and definition as distinct individuals

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without relinquishing the control needed to ensure their healthy development. This depends, in part, on the parents own sense of differentiation as regards their families of origin.

Unlike some traditional concepts in which adolescence was seen as a period during which the parent-child bond was broken, the process of identity building based on promoting inter-generational negotiation in an atmosphere of mutual respect ...

The idea is to achieve a gradual renegotiation of the parent-child bond, moving from the asymmetrical authority of early childhood and the school years, to reciprocity as peers in adulthood ... (Fishman, 1990).

In addition to the complexities involved in resolving "family tasks," we must remember that adolescents in this stage of personal development tend to challenge the authority of parent figures in their families and in other contexts. At times, this can uncover parental dysfunction and inconsistencies in the division of power both in family and school contexts.

What is true is that in adolescence, family tensions increase greatly and the system enters a crisis phase. This crisis, which should be seen as a positive opportunity for change, is often seen as a "problem." Sometimes this feeling can be objectified if the family tries to reestablish an equilibrium by employing mechanisms that are not completely functional and which bring about the onset of symptoms in one or several family members. When this happens, family therapy might be necessary to restore family equilibrium so that each member can continue to develop without having to abandon the family. At this point, the entire family has an "adolescent problem."

School Failure in Society

Beyond family life, the future of adolescents is defined within a social context. The messages that we receive from that context show that there is a general sense of concern about adolescents. Schools report "behavior problems" in students, causing general alarm among the teachers. Channels of social communication emit messages related to classroom violence and school failure. Parents complain of "generational nightmares" as if they had to pass some kind of parenting test.

Some of these problematic behaviors make us question the different systems with which the student interacts:

Parents speak of changing their children's behavior. They question the importance of education and exactly what is being achieved at school since their children are not meeting the expectations set for them.

Schools talk about adapting their methods to the needs of future adults, but many of the teachers with whom we work tell us that they don't think that this is enough.

Adolescents talk ... with their families, at school and among themselves. Their behavior at school is one of the many ways they communicate.

School failure as a myriad of behaviors that goes beyond the adolescent, has become a school, family and social problem. This is something that we can see when we work with adolescents and their families in our Center. We see that in each case, **school failure is more than simply failing classes**. It includes a sensation of failing in a complex set of relationships between teachers, students, families and the social environment.

When there are school failure problems, families and schools are in "checkmate." Parents and teachers often feel unable to do anything, paralyzed by the academic and behavioral problems of their children and/or students. But, what do these adolescents, who in the eyes of adults are failing, think?

Adolescents and School Failure

In the therapy we carry out with both families and groups of adolescents, we see that the kids we work with usually think that someone else has the problem, not them. They have their own sense of justice and tend not to respect people who "don't respect them". The young people we see in our Center or at schools often say this. Many of them have been labeled by their families and teachers as "difficult," and many times, the problem is reported to be failure at school, which is not always related to insufficient performance at school as the adult's main concern. Perhaps we need to think about **what we mean when we say school failure**.

Normally adults say that these adolescents do not obey them and that they don't respect their parents and teachers as authority figures. The kids' response to this tends to be "They are the ones who don't respect me!" They say adults "lose control" and treat them badly.

Most adolescents will not recognize authority as valid in relationships in which they are the weaker party. Thus, there is usually a sequence of **symmetrical escalation** (of power) in schools and at home. When an adult attempts to impose his will on an adolescent, the adolescent responds as if he were the adult's equal. The adult insists and so does the adolescent. Sometimes this escalation provokes the intervention of a third party which often leads to feelings of inadequacy on the adult's part. As a matter of fact, authority figures often feel robbed of their authority.

Many parents admit that up until this time, they had never felt the need to set rules at home. Others say they don't want to become as authoritarian as they remembered their parents being. Whatever their reasons, the problem is that when these parents find themselves in a situation in which they have to exert authority and control, they have trouble doing so, and this occurs at a crucial point in their children's lives.

We find similar situations in secondary schools. Some teachers tell us "When kids get to secondary school, it is too late. They are out of our control."

Another problem parents and teachers often mention is students' lack of motivation, the lack of interest in things. This directly contradicts the perceptions that adolescents have of themselves. They don't see themselves as unmotivated. The gap between these two perceptions is based on the difference between what adults and adolescents see as appropriate areas of interest.

Not obeying rules, not doing their homework or chores (set by adults and not always accepted by adolescents) and a lack of interest in studying which sometimes leads to students missing school, are usually considered the causes of school failure.

When parents and teachers complain about these things, the adolescents we work with say that they don't study because they don't like to or because it isn't worth it, and that they cause problems in class it is because they are bored. They say they talk back to teachers because the teachers treat them badly ... and many say they don't get along with their parents. Some insist that they are not the cause of all of the family's problems.

However, not all adolescents say the same thing. There are some who at this age have **strong feelings of inadequacy**, of not being good enough. In these cases, personal, family and school problems are of a different type. These kids **consider themselves to be the biggest problem** and do not usually blame outside forces for their difficulties, and they do not usually openly rebel against their families or their teachers. At most, they complain about their parents being very demanding or of always being compared to a sibling. "They never recognize the effort I am making ... it's never enough." In these cases, there is not a lack of rules and control in the family, but rather an excess of them. There are fewer cases of this kind than of the previous kind, and school failure here is usually accompanied by "disruptive" behaviors, but rather by withdrawal on the student part. The adults who deal with an adolescent of this type usually say "he never talks," "he's so shy," or "he always stays in his room." The adolescent might become depressed without presenting any clear psychopathological signs. Sometimes, he begins to show some anger that up until then he had directed at himself, and this is when he begins to behave badly. As a matter of fact, one of the girls who comes to our group sessions says: "Before I was dumb and everyone in class made fun of me. Now I don't let them get away with anything."

Last of all, there is the peer group: close friends and classmates.

Students who are not referred for their disruptive behavior usually feel that they belong to their peer group. Many of them are considered "negative" leaders by adults. They are expected to behave the way they do, to the delight of their classmates (since they are considered the strongest members of the group and challenge the authority of the adults). Their behavior confirms their parents' and teachers' opinion that they are difficult.

The other type of adolescent that we consider "problematic" often has more difficulty integrating. Usually his low self-esteem is accompanied by avoidance behaviors and thi

auto-exclusion from certain social situations reinforces the perception that he is lacking many of the social skills that others have.

Conclusions

The majority of adolescents sent to our Center due to school failure feel like failures. They have all kinds of arguments to justify their behavior. Some feel powerful in the dysfunctional hierarchy we explained earlier. Their behavior provokes change, which is often centripetal with them in the middle. The parents are “forced” to deal with them, even though it might be from a position of anger, and teachers begin to try to find out what is causing such poor academic performance in school.

We should not forget that school failure is a term that was coined by adults and defined by them in relation to the expectations that they set for students. Are negative expectations a self-fulfilling prophecy? What purpose would it serve for these students not meet these expectations?

We think that being “problematic” could serve to reconfirm the opinion of those people who are concerned about these students (both family and educational system) and who, given their concern, also care for them.

After all, what is really at risk here is the relationship, not the marks.

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