

Behaviour Management

Just before his eighteenth birthday,
my son, in juvenile detention,
was transferred to a Group Home situation;
a "home away from home" for boys
newly on probation.
A place to learn life skills and social skills,
time management and self control,
with help to finish high school,
prepare a resume,
and eventually get a job.

The Group Home
had a kind, supportive staff,
geared to the concept of,
and firm believers in
Behaviour Management.

My son had social presence
and extensive popularity,
an ability to get along with everyone he met,
and life skills
to survive four months
of living on the streets
before his first arrest.
But he was born without judgment
or reasoning ability,
without a sense of consequence,
with no impulse control at all,
and no responsibility;
abstracts
which could not be learned
even after sixteen years
of careful training, here at home.
How could anybody "reinforce"
something that was never there?
But these were concepts
the new Group Home
now intended to impart
during eight intensive months,
using Behaviour Management.

They started with a curfew...
but what my son really needed
was somebody official
close beside him all the time
to enforce his nightly curfew
and all the other rules as well.
The "consequence" of being late,
and therefore locked out for the night,
brought freedom that delighted him,
especially as the city streets
offered greater opportunities
than he enjoyed at home.

But...
who would be responsible
if he was found dead in a ditch?
Not Social Services.
(He had been placed by Probation.)
Not Corrections.
(His parents had asked for help.)
And how could parents be accountable
for someone in a different town?
"He must be responsible for himself,"
said all the authorities in our lives.
But he was only seventeen
and, although it didn't show,
quite severely handicapped
by Fetal Alcohol Effect.

Being grounded,
the "consequence" of making
sudden unofficial visits
to familiar turf,
was, in my son's opinion,
his best time ever with the staff.
On those days they paid attention,
listened to his future plans,
(of which he had a multitude,)
and supervised his time
without any expectations.

Being grounded
never taught him
to stay within the program.
As soon as he was on the loose,
in spite of other people's hopes,
in spite of understanding
that a breach would mean a jail term,
he'd vanish;
always showing up with very valid explanations
just in time
for warrants to be cancelled.

Sometimes I'm positive this son
is truly out to self-destruct.

"His mother must not rescue him..."
But some nights, when he came home late
with no arrangement or permission,
I found a sneaky satisfaction
in phoning Group,
to tell them where he was.
They weren't ready to admit it
but their program wasn't working,
and of course they blamed the child
and "poor parenting" by Mom and Dad
for anything that didn't fly.

But soon my son's behaviours
were more difficult to manage.
He just got tired of being good
is all that really changed,
and he'd never liked the Group Home rules
regarding visits with his friends,
...so when some girls were found in corners
late at night,
hiding alcohol behind them,
there was a "consequence."
The whole group was evicted
until morning.

And we weathered that.
But still he hadn't learned
to use judgment in his choices,
to control a wild impulse
or accept responsibility.
His next decision sank him.
He went out and stole a truck;
a brand new shiny vehicle,
belonging to a member of the staff.

The group home didn't want him
to come back and try again;
they said that half the program
was quite enough for them.
But no one said,
"How did his parents handle it
for sixteen years
when all these trained professionals
could only manage him
for sixteen weeks?"

Leon's Mom.