CIRCLE OF COURAGE: INVOLVE TO EVOLVE

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Abstract: The philosophy of care at the Methodist Children's Home weaves scripture on faith and the components of the Circle of Courage to address the needs of at risk youth. All programming for youth is based on the four principles of the Circle of Courage: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. This paper describes some program components in the milieu, religious education and recreation.

Introduction

Methodist Children's Home (MCH) serves approximately 500 children and youth every day through residential group homes, foster care, family preservation services and a college/vocational program. Although these children range in age from birth to 25 years of age, the services they receive are grounded in the same philosophy of care. That philosophy is the “Circle of Courage” (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990). The Circle has four elements: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity.

Belonging – A basic need of all people is to feel that they belong, that they are connected to some group. In stronger terms Ortberg (2001) declares, “The yearning to attach and connect, to love and be loved, is the fiercest longing of the soul. Our need for community with people and the God who made us is to the human spirit what food and
air and water are to the human body” (p.221). When youth do not connect with family or culture, they may feel isolated in the world, fearful or angry. Some youth create their own groups to feel accepted and this may lead to additional problems if the group’s values are not healthy. Adults play a key role in youth developing a sense of belonging in most settings, and that is emphasized at MCH.

*Mastery* – Each of us wants to be successful at something, if not many things. Young children actively explore their environment and clearly accomplish one developmental task after another: from holding their own bottle, to rolling over, to crawling, to walking, etc. Older children and youth achieve milestones in the same way although they may be less noticeable. Success builds success. People are not successful all the time; therefore, failure is inevitable. If success builds success, what does failure build? That depends on many factors. Two key factors are resilience and the influence of the adults around the youth when they fail. At MCH the adults teach, challenge, encourage and support the youth in their efforts towards mastery.

*Independence* – Personal power is also vital to a sense of self-worth. Many youth, and even adults, do not recognize how much power (control) they actually do have over their lives. Our goal is to involve youth in decisions about their lives at a level that is appropriate for their age, knowledge, and skill level. It is important that they practice independence while adults are close by to monitor them and to help them learn from their mistakes. True independence requires an understanding and appreciation of interdependence with others in our lives. The adults at MCH stress responsibility and accountability with youth of all ages.

*Generosity* – Giving of yourself makes you feel worthy, and life is not spiritually
fulfilling if you do not feel worthy. Initially, this may be a difficult concept to teach at risk youth. Our experience has been that once youth give of themselves to others and others value their contributions, their feelings of value increase and they embrace future opportunities for generosity.

The Circle of Courage philosophy is the foundation of all aspects of our program planning and the four cornerstones of implementation are relationship, empowerment, teaching and accountability. Spirituality is the binding agent that unites these elements and delivers them uniquely to each youth. This paper illustrates how our model of care is applied in the milieu, religious education and recreation. Each section, authored by respective department directors, reveals some differences in focus although the commonalities in philosophy and programming are apparent.

Circle of Courage: Practical Application in the Milieu

Beginning with the admission of a youth to the MCH program, the goal is for everyone to feel welcomed. Youth and families must feel welcomed and accepted by staff working with them, as well as by the peer group in the home unit. Welcoming youth into a home unit brings with it an expectation that students are accepted for who they are and from where they come in spite of the brokenness in their Circle of Courage. Youth are viewed as resilient and capable of success. Brendtro and Shahbazian (2003) find that all humans have potential for resilience because we are all descendents of survivors. They suggest that we each have a brain-based genetic code that motivates us to form attachments with others, the motivation to strive to achieve and to be generous to others by fulfilling our altruistic tendencies. Identified problems are seen as opportunities for change. A peer mentor is paired with each new youth to “show them
around,” to introduce them to peers in the home unit to explain the behavioral level system and incentive programs, and to offer the gift of welcoming. Each youth attends religious education, recreation and home unit activities to assess and explore hobbies, strengths and areas of resiliency across programs and disciplines.

Resiliencies

Wolin (2003) studied strengths and defines “resiliency” as strengths that youth develop and hone in the struggle with hardship. In Table 1 (see next page) Wolin outlines seven resiliencies, examples of behaviors youth demonstrate as evidence of the strength, and the function of each strength. At MCH we strive to identify youth’s strengths and look for ways to operationalize them in the goals negotiated by students, their families and staff.

Treatment Planning/Plans of Development

Soon after admission, each youth is assessed and a treatment plan is negotiated among the youth, their family and staff, outlining incoming issues and concerns. A strength-based treatment plan is designed that encompasses all principles of the Circle of Courage, i.e., belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. Youth’s relationship and communication with family become the primary focus in the intervention. A youth’s family may include their parents, grandparents, an aunt or uncle. Each family constellation is unique and may include a variety of “significant others” in a student’s life. To operationalize a “belonging” goal, youth may simply be expected to communicate with their families regularly, either through telephone calls, or by writing cards and letters to keep them informed of their goals, progress on goals and activities. As home visits are part of treatment planning, home visit goals are identified and
Table 1.
Seven Resiliencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resiliency</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Function</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insight</td>
<td>Asking tough questions and giving honest answers about yourself and the</td>
<td>Dispels denial and confusion, generates clarity, and serves as a springboard for taking the necessary action to solve problems.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>difficult situations in which you find yourself.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Distancing emotionally and physically from trouble; for example, the</td>
<td>Provides physical and emotional safety.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>pressures of family, friends, and circumstances.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Connecting with people who matter.</td>
<td>Provides friendship, understanding, material and emotional support, and sometimes even love.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>Meeting challenges by taking charge of problems and looking for solutions.</td>
<td>Solves problems, generates a sense of competence and mastery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Using imagination.</td>
<td>Helps express difficult feelings in a positive, satisfying way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Laughing at yourself, finding what’s funny, even in sadness or pain.</td>
<td>Introduces liveliness and light-heartedness in somber situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Doing the right thing, using your conscience, thinking of others as</td>
<td>Generates a sense of being a good person even when surrounded by badness.</td>
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<td>well as yourself.</td>
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negotiated as students go home to practice their new skills. A “mastery” goal may be generated to include school goals. For example, students may be expected to work diligently in school to reach their academic goals to the best of their ability, i.e., by attending school regularly, completing all assigned tasks, and by being respectful to teachers and school staff. An “independence” goal often includes expecting students to make responsible decisions by considering the consequences of their choices. Students demonstrating personal accountability are evidence that they are attending to the goal of becoming independent. Lastly, all students are expected to participate in community service projects as one avenue to experience “generosity.” Emphasis is on “service above self.” Youth are taught that there is value in giving of themselves to others. By teaching students the value of helping other people, this broadens their ability to look outside themselves. One of the best ways to feel better about oneself is to do for others. Students participate in a variety of community service projects including playing board games and participating in outdoor activities with children in after-school programs, and writing letters and participating in arts and craft projects with residents in retirement homes.

*Crisis as Opportunity*

The staff at MCH becomes accustomed to talking students through crises. Inherent in the milieu is the expectation that staff “process” issues and problems with students as they arise. Staff becomes accustomed to talking, conversing and processing with students using life space interventions. In *Life Space Intervention: Talking with children and youth in crisis*, Wood and Long (1991) define a crisis as a time for learning. Wood and Long (1991) outline six steps in *life space interventions*. In step one, staff
Initially helps students focus on the incident by acknowledging the emotional intensity that the students are experiencing. This allows the students to experience staff’s empathy in helping them identify the problem. In step two, staff encourages students to “tell their story” or to “tell it like it is.” Staff may ask open-ended questions to encourage students to explain, tell and describe all aspects of the incident, i.e., who was involved, what was said and done. Staff reflects the students’ ideas and concerns to the students as a way to align with them, and to show the students they are listening and reaching for understanding of the incident as well as the students’ feelings. Staff may also seek to interpret or decode the students’ description of the incident by connecting the students’ meaning and feeling to the students’ stated words and behaviors. In step three, staff helps the students to identify the central issue and select a therapeutic goal. Staff’s role in this step is to help students realize underlying fears and anxieties that may be “hidden” or “embedded” in the incidents. Staff also assesses the students’ perceptions of the incidents, their level of insight as well as their motivation to change. After the central issue is identified, staff uses one of five general types of therapeutic goals. Wood and Long (1991) have relabeled the five types of life space interventions originally described by Fritz Redl (1959). These are as follows: 1) organize reality (Reality Rub-In); 2) confront unacceptable behavior (Symptom Estrangement); 3) build values to strengthen self-control (Massaging Numb Values); 4) teach new social skills (New Tools Salesmanship); and 5) expose exploitation (Manipulation of the Boundaries of the Self). The goal chosen by staff depends on the students’ perception of the incident and staff’s assessment of students’ motivation to change. Staff repeatedly uses life space interventions to help students process and learn from the problems they encounter.
Students learn that their problems provide them with opportunities to learn and to change.

Creating a Positive Peer Culture

Inherent in the milieu is the expectation that staff “process” issues and problems with students as they arise. Also inherent in the milieu is the expectation that students help one another. In the book, *The Equip Program*, Gibbs, Potter, and Goldstein (1995) introduce and describe a treatment program to address youths’ behavior problems. Treatment focuses on a peer-helping approach. Deficits in skills are identified in the areas of social skills, problem solving and youths’ ability to manage their anger. For staff working with youth, emphasis is placed on creating a climate of change. At MCH we have combined and adapted the group processes described by William Wasmund and Thomas Tate in the book *Partners In Empowerment* (1996) and Harry Vorrath and Larry Brendtro in the book *Positive Peer Culture* (1985) to formulate a group process we call Youth Empowerment Groups (YEGs). In our strength-based model of care, the YEGs are seen as the main change agent in our reclaiming environment. YEGs build community and the community expects accountability. This is the vehicle through which the milieu is created and through which students learn to describe, confront, disclose and seek to solve issues and concerns. In the YEGs, students learn to identify problems and to seek assistance from their peers to solve their problems. They hold each other accountable for their actions and decisions, and they also learn to challenge thinking errors of individual members during the YEGs.

Peer Mediation

An important part of our program also includes a specific process for students to resolve conflicts among themselves. We call this *peer mediation*. Students are selected from each home unit to participate in training that is student led. Training involves didactic training and experiential exercises. Nominees are trained in every aspect of the process and they learn the importance of building relationships based on truth and trust. They are taught how to help their peers identify problems, generate solutions and help peers decide on a resolution and contract. Inherent in this process is the understanding that peer mediators are selected because they are viewed as positive leaders in their home unit. They demonstrate responsible behavior and they learn the importance of confidentiality in the mediations they facilitate. Students learn to help others identify feelings, listen, ask questions, and hold their peers accountable. Staff is trained to refer students to peer mediation when conflicts arise. After students are trained they serve as “on call” peer mediators on a rotating basis to every home unit on our campus.

A Spiritual Program for At-Risk Youth

Spirituality is at the heart and soul of the healthy, holistic development of a human being. When the human being is understood as a child of God, it necessarily begs the question, “How is a child of God related to the created?” Spirituality then encompasses this relationship with God or a higher power that affects how the person understands one’s self and a relationship with the world and others. A by-product of such a relationship is a sense of meaning, purpose, and place in the world. The central feature of this relationship is faith and trust. In our work with “at-risk” young people something has happened in their lives that has affected the development of this trusting relationship with God or a higher power. At MCH we have an inclusive approach to religious
education that accepts youth from a variety of beliefs such as Buddhism, Muslim and Judaism. The Search Institute (1993) studied the effects that being at-risk has on young people and discovered in their research that whatever has put youth at risk makes spiritual or faith development even more difficult.

**Methodist Children’s Home’s Mission Statement**

At MCH we strive to “express God’s love by providing superior services that protect, support, and enhance the lives of children, youth, and their families.” We believe that the source of healing is God. We seek to express God’s love through a variety of ways and in such an integrated and consistent way that the spirituality of these young people is restored and reclaimed. For example, in John: 8, the story of the adulteress woman who Jesus redeemed, restored and reclaimed – we believe that this reclamtion is done in the context of a spiritual community grounded in a sense of God and God’s love. It is in such an environment that we seek to restore wholeness to that which has been put at-risk.

**Faith Development**

Using the work of John Westerhoff (1976) and James Fowler (1981), our goal is to help youth re-establish trust and a faith connection with God. Westerhoff (1976) outlines the progression of the development of faith on the following continuum: faith develops beginning with experience, moving to affiliation, then to individual searching, and lastly to the ownership of faith. Each stage in faith development is predicated on the previous stage. Youth move from ”experiencing” God, to becoming affiliated with the faith of someone whom they trust who helps them interpret their experience of God. As youth continue to grow and develop new life experiences, they begin to question the answers and interpretations given to them by the person they trusted. Through questioning, they begin a search for their own answers to the questions of life and faith. The hope is that through searching, they come to their own interpretation of faith and what faith means to them. The goal of faith development is for youth to gain ownership for what they believe and trust about God.

**Spiritual Assessment**

At MCH we seek to express God’s love in such a way so as to create a safe environment free from the at-risk factors of the communities from which the youth come. In our community we then seek to create for them the opportunity for an experience of God. Some of the information that is helpful to us in our work with these students is a profile of their previous spiritual experience. We do this through a spiritual assessment that is given to each student when they arrive as a new resident of the Home. Through the spiritual assessment we begin to formulate a spiritual profile not only of that individual student but also that of our faith community as a whole. For example, some of the prominent themes identified through the spiritual assessments of our students are: loneliness, issues of forgiveness, not being in control of their choices and their life, and a general sense of hopelessness. By administering the assessment, we continue to monitor the progress or regression of each student’s spiritual growth and track the spiritual issues of our faith community. Our ministry planning is grounded and rooted in that which is spiritually relevant to our students individually and as a community. This process is essential if our ministry is to be relevant and responsible to those we serve.
**Spiritual Programming: Practical Application**

Using Westerhoff (1976) and Fowler’s (1981) work to guide us, we seek to create a reclaiming, redemptive community that is responsive to the unique spiritual needs of the students in our care. Even from the day of admission to MCH, we seek at every level of care to repetitively communicate God’s love in a way that is safe and non-threatening. Youth are provided with their own Bibles and they participate in daily devotionals in Sunday and Wednesday evening worship and Sunday school. Our goal is to lead our students into a vital, faith relationship with God. We seek to redeem and reclaim them through our strength-based philosophy of care, the Circle of Courage. This philosophy is spiritually rooted (John 10:10). The philosophy seeks to foster in youth four primary principles that are characteristic to the lives of healthy human beings. Belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity are the hallmark values of our reclaiming community. We work with students to discover strengths in each of these areas. We help students practice these strengths in their day-to-day living. Like faith development, we seek to empower students in our community to move to a sense of ownership for these principles and their practice in their lives. When our students are broken in relationship to these principles we seek to identify that brokenness and then move them to healing in their journey to wholeness.

The integration of spirituality into the philosophy of care and the day-to-day work of our staff with our students is crucial to our faithfulness and success. We believe that the essential vehicle through which we convey this philosophy is interpersonal relationships. Our work is relational at all levels of our ministry. From the president of the Home to the direct care staff, we all strive to be on the same page in terms of what it is we are seeking to do in the lives of all students. For spirituality to revive or live, it is critical to live that persistence and for it to be at work throughout the organization. We begin this relationship where God begins with us: right where we are. Seeking to genuinely know each of our students is significant. As we gradually learn who they are, and where they are in relationship to faith and life, we then begin to develop a ministry that will empower them to heal and grow from where they are. We believe that each student is a child of God and a person of ultimate value and worth. First, we seek to understand the strengths and potential of each student. Jesus always began his work with people where they were. Whether it was Nicodemus, the Pharisees, or Zaccheaus the chief tax collector, Jesus started where they were and accepted them for who they were. Through our work and relationships with youth, we will also begin to uncover those characteristics and issues that need to be healed and developed. We believe that this work must begin where the student is in order to be effective.

Accepting where students are, we then begin the work of creating a ministry around them that will lead them into developing both faith and the principles of the Circle of Courage. The religious education staff becomes the stewards of the spiritual life we seek to provide throughout the ministry. They are the ones who hold the community accountable for what it is we say we believe. They also are the ones that lead by example a spirituality that is faithful to where God is leading. The religious education staff models spirituality in their daily life for both students and staff. They are represented in all areas of our campus. For example, staff is present in the team meetings where youth’s intervention plans are designed and discussed, in the home unit meetings where staff gather to discuss youth in their houses, as well as in the program committee meetings.
where programming is planned and scheduled. These weekly meetings with childcare staff become the chief means through which communication takes place regarding the spiritual needs of students. Another key element in this work is the training of staff in regard to what we believe about spiritual growth and the acceptable methods we utilize in being faithful to the work. Therefore, the chaplain does not only train new staff in regard to this issue, but is also actively involved in the ongoing training of staff in relationship to the work of spirituality in the community. This is essential in helping to ensure consistency both in theory and practice around the issue of spirituality in the community.

The blessing that our ministry has is that we receive all of our support and funding from the church. Due to that support, students commit at the time of their admission to the Home that they will participate in all basic religious services. We have the freedom to provide on-going training to a diverse and dedicated group of staff to lead our youth in their spiritual exploration and growth. This is a tremendous benefit and one that gives our ministry primary importance in the nature of the services we seek to provide all students. Religious services include weekly Sunday school and worship on Sundays as well as our Wednesday Night Live program. The Wednesday Night Live program consists of a menu of activities, i.e., various community service projects, faith education classes, “seniors” classes, an abstinence-based sexuality curriculum, and a confirmation and baptism class. We also provide a choir program that is designed to impact our worship services, as well as to travel to churches to allow our youth to minister to other congregations. These services provide a foundation upon which to build the framework of a spiritual life ministry.

In terms of what we believe about the redemptive, reclaiming community we continuously seek to provide, we hope to create an environment at MCH that is ripe with the opportunity for students to experience God. Our faith development theory directs us to provide an environment whereby students can build meaningful relationships with their peers, staff and other adults. By utilizing childcare counselors, home parents, and volunteers in the Sunday school setting and in the Wednesday night small groups, adults are used as a tool to provide a source of strength to our students and to take the walk with them in their spiritual journey. It also means that we must create the opportunity to be real, to search, to ask honest questions, to doubt, to struggle, to be vulnerable, to share, to grow, to confess, and to learn. We believe that as human beings we are always in process. The work of growth and learning never takes a break, so we must be vigilant in what it is we seek to do. As students begin to feel they belong in our redemptive, reclaiming community, we must also provide them with a laboratory in which to experiment with their newfound knowledge. Our ultimate goal then is to set them free to live a faithful, productive life in the world. In all that we do, we want to prepare them to leave and to explore and journey to wherever it may be that God is calling them. Using the tools of relationship, experience, scripture, reason, and tradition, we seek to empower them to become the people God has intended them to become all along.

Spirituality, the foundation of our ministry, is integrated throughout the ministry at the MCH. Again, our purpose and mission to each young person is to “express God’s love by providing superior services that protect, support, and enhance the lives of children, youth, and their families.” To that end we do so dedicate our work.

Recreating Recreation: Student Organizations
Reconceptualizing MCH traditional recreation program to be in line with the Circle of Courage required staff to make a paradigm shift in their thinking and approach with youth. Staff was asked to empower youth, to align with them, to do less for them and to expect more from them. Staff was asked to have youth be responsible for as many aspects of their lives as were possible. The new challenge was not to provide a recreation program for MCH, but to provide a forum for students to create a recreation program for themselves. Out of this challenge, the student organizations program was born.

The purpose of student organizations is to develop opportunities for students to practice the four principles of the Circle of Courage: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity (Brendtro et.al., 1990). This is carried out in a three-fold manner: 1) students are empowered by acknowledging their strengths and by giving them avenues to utilize them; 2) a safe platform is provided for students to express their values, individualities, and concerns and 3) students are commissioned to build a safer and stronger community that promotes an atmosphere of growth. As shown in Table 1, students demonstrated their creative ability to formulate the mission statements describing various student organizations at MCH. Each student organization, the mission statement and a description are outlined.

The four principles of the Circle of Courage are used to guide us in creating programs. We suggest that “brokenness” in one of the four principles in the Circle results in misbehavior or lack of knowledge or skill. It is with this concept in mind that we structure our student organizations.

**Philosophy Application**

**Belonging:** Students gain a sense of pride by being associated with student organizations. Simple symbols such as member t-shirts or membership rosters in the student lobby signify the planting of seeds of attachment and belonging. Students begin to heal once they begin to feel they have a place of their own in a community. The relationship the students develop with the adult sponsor in each organization is critical in fostering the growth and sense of belonging.

**Mastery:** Student organizations provide a forum for youth to learn new skills and opportunities to practice them. Students are given endless opportunities to achieve and be successful. Staff members do not foster dependency, but do offer the amount of help youth need to achieve. Youth cannot be deceived. They will know if they truly did not achieve. If adults do too much for them, they are robbed of the joys that follow hard work. When they encounter failure, staff members urge them on toward success. This, too, is a journey youth need to experience in order to feel the natural rewards that come with persistence. Examples of the development of mastery in student organizations may include building and painting props for presentations, planning events, budgeting, creating the organization shirt designs, writing raps or skits for presentations and decorating for activities. For many students, this is their first opportunity to practice such life skills.

**Independence:** Responsibility and accountability are two primary concepts that are taught through student organizations. Whether or not students take a leadership position, they are still seen as leaders in their communities. Membership in an organization requires each student to become assertive and responsible according to his own abilities and talents. This is accomplished through tasks, weekly meetings and individual responsibilities. Adults provide the “safety net” to bolster student success.
Tenured members are solely responsible for training new and younger members. Youth in student organizations are role models at MCH. Childcare counselors expect students to be self-disciplined. Adults hold youth accountable and offer grace when they fall short.

**Generosity**: Expecting youth to give back to their own community teaches them that they have something of value to contribute. To say this to a student is one thing, to lay a concrete expectation before them and truly believe they will be successful is powerful. Through serving the smaller community at MCH and a larger community such as the city of Waco, youth are consistently asked to find something within them that they can give away. The student organizations have participated in many community and national fundraisers such as Hoops for Hearts, National Youth Service Day and Race for a Cure. Some have organized their own events, like the SWACADAS Slam, to raise money for world hunger. Peer mediators serve our campus daily and train other mediators for our campus each semester as well as provide training and mentoring to other youth agencies.

**Membership**

Student council consists of one delegate from each of the home units. Students are nominated and elected by each of the units. Each unit is required to provide a student council delegate as a responsibility to the community. In addition, student council maintains five “at-will” members to create stability, as unit delegates change each year. Staff found this to be integral to the success of this organization.

Due to the large number of students interested in membership, the three remaining organizations accept members by application. Student led interviews are conducted and the organization members, along with their sponsor decide on new members. The organization sponsor teaches students to select members based on best fit which includes: 1) current dynamics of the group; 2) strengths individual students bring to compensate for current weakness areas in the group; 3) the relevance of the group to the applicants’ own growth areas; 4) student’s interest in the particular mission of the organization. For example, a student struggling with drug usage would be a top candidate for the SWACADAS organization. Interest alone is enough to indicate a desire for growth. Although ideally, staff would like every student to be affiliated with one of the organizations, more than 12 – 14 students in each organization becomes counterproductive.

Each student organization learns and uses parliamentary procedure to conduct business meetings. Organizations elect officers specific to their function. An inclusive training for all officers is conducted each year. This has proven to be helpful to diminish
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<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Mission Statement</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Council</td>
<td>The student council of the Methodist Children’s Home seeks to fulfill the mission of the Methodist Children’s Home as it participates and leads in, “expressing God’s Love by providing superior services that protect, support and enhance the lives of children, youth and their families.” The student council will utilize all of its resources in achieving this mission. This statement defines whom the student council is not only guided by this mission, but is held accountable for its fulfillment as well.</td>
<td>This is the governing organization of the student body and youth organizations. All other organizations should work in conjunction with its purposes and goals. These students address issues that are important to the students at MCH. For example: They have changed student policies by proposing other ways to deal with the issues that are important to them. This group serves as a student voice for all aspects of living at the Methodist Children’s Home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SWACADAS</td>
<td>Help others open their eyes and see that decisions you make today affect you and your future.</td>
<td>This group began five years ago as a result of a dangerous situation on our campus. This group’s emphasis is placed on peer-to-peer education. SWACADAS gives educational programs and presentations for the MCH campus and in the Waco and surrounding community as well. A priority is placed on issues such as drugs, violence, bullying, and other issues relevant to today’s youth. Students are often selected for this group who show a need to improve their behavior in various drug or safety issues. At the same time it is considered an honor to be in this group because of the group culture and its vast influence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Mission Statement</td>
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<td>Peace, Love and Culture – (P.L.C.)</td>
<td>Working to create an atmosphere of love and understanding, about all different cultures.</td>
<td>This group also serves as an educational organization. Their emphasis is on cultural differences, unity in our community, tolerance, openness and respect for others. They sponsor events such as “The Taste of MCH”, Black History month, Cinco De Mayo, and other culturally based events. This group is a leadership team for all peer mediators on our campus. They are responsible for training all peer mediators. They also address issues such as conflict resolution and violence in other creative ways for our students through student generated events and activities for our campus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stand 4 – Peer Mediation Leadership Team</td>
<td>As Peer Mediators we strive to create a positive environment for the community in which we live, by helping prevent and resolve conflict among our peers. We help resolve conflict by creating a safe space in which our peers can openly and honestly share their frustrations. In this space, we facilitate and direct communication so that the parties involved can come to some sort of understanding and agreement. It is our hope that through this sharing and understanding, our peers will learn to resolve conflict in a peaceful manner, thereby making a significant change in the way they handle conflict in the future.</td>
<td>Students have the opportunity to come up with business ideas with the knowledge that a recreation staff is available to them to serve as their sponsor to help them with this process. This process immolates the real process of starting a business. Applying for and borrowing a loan, fiscal accountability and management, payroll procedures, inventory, and profit sharing are a few areas they must handle.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth Enterprise$</td>
<td>To provide an opportunity for students to work together to create, and manage a small business, which facilitates entrepreneurial learning along with an abundance of other life skills.</td>
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division among organizations and to promote awareness of a common mission for the MCH community.

**Traditions**

There are components that are necessarily universal across every organization at MCH. For example, each organization is involved in community service. Nevertheless, how that is carried out is placed in the hands of the students. Each organization has practices and traditions that are unique to them. For instance, the PLC organization elected a chaplain this year to enrich its spiritual component. It is imperative that students are empowered to put their own mark on their organization.

**Accountability**

Youth serve in student organizations on a voluntary basis. By joining an organization, students make a commitment to be active for one year. There are situations where students may struggle over time to demonstrate continued motivation to uphold responsibilities behaviorally, not only within the organization, but also perhaps in school, or in their home unit. Students are never permanently removed as a member of a student organization. Students may choose to appropriately end their membership in any of the organizations once they have completed their commitment. Currently, MCH has one student who has been in an organization for six years. (He will graduate this spring.) He has been suspended several times but has always been motivated to meet expectations to regain active membership status within his organization. Once students buy into an organization, they always “belong” to the organization.

It is a part of each organization’s meeting agenda to hold members responsible for their behavior. Because students know there is a designated time for this, they often hold themselves accountable. Healthy and appropriate confrontation is also taught through this process. There is a fine line for adolescents in holding their peers accountable and being “uncool or a snitch”. Much emphasis is placed on how youth can help their co-members with these issues. It is through facilitation of this process that students learn that the definition of caring includes accountability.

**Incentives**

Staff has informally adopted the cliché “work hard, and then play hard.” Each semester students have responsibilities to complete to fulfill their organization’s mission. As students uphold their responsibilities they are eligible for the semester’s “training and retreat.” Very rarely have students not met the criteria for this incentive. Staff sponsors make every effort to make this event therapeutic and goal directed in nature. The adult sponsor and students jointly decide on the training and retreat at the beginning of each semester and work towards that goal. For example, SWACADAS and Student Council jointly experienced a two-night primitive backpacking experience that involved elements of teambuilding.

Each year a Student Organization Banquet is given by MCH for all students involved in this program. Each student is allowed to invite someone significant, i.e., a teacher, mentor, grandparents, parents, home parents, coach. The students and sponsors come together for a meal and this is followed by an awards presentation.

It is not realistic to expect youth to be interested in student organizations simply for altruistic purposes. Students are enticed by things such as the retreats, the t-shirts students wear, or the recognition they see others receiving. This is normal and to be expected. Youth do not yet understand that these things will not fill the void they are
trying to fill. It is through experience only that they will internalize this lesson. As students begin to experience the internal motivators, the external motivators that they originally were drawn to will fade into the background.

The relationship the adult sponsor builds with each member in the group is key to the success of the student organization. It is through relationship that teaching takes place and the students tolerate accountability. Youth need the security of the safety net in knowing staff is with them. Staff work alongside students and must play alongside them when appropriate. Staff must be prepared to meet youth “where they are”; otherwise, they are predisposed to fail.

Youth empowerment is a discipline. Staff must empower students even when it may not be the “best” decision. For example, they must be empowered to choose the font for the new t-shirt even if you think it looks bad. They must be empowered to have purple and green balloons for Valentine’s Day if they truly think this is the best decision. You must empower them to raise issues you know may not change, but the process will be a productive one. You must empower them! Do not allow them to be self destructive or inappropriate, but let their “mark” stand if at all possible. To empower them is to demonstrate that you value them.

It is consistently tempting to do things for the students of my organization. It takes at least half the time to complete responsibilities and tasks myself than it does to empower the students to complete them. It is a complete act of discipline, selflessness and love to persistently deny the enticing option of “doing it myself”. There will always be a few tasks that students would be completely frustrated by. There are some things they are not developmentally able to handle. But we, the adults, more often err on the side of expecting too little, than expecting too much.

Conclusion

The Circle of Courage is our road map to reach each youth on life’s journey. We meet the youth “where they are”, help them determine their direction, and empower them to stay the course. The four primary helping processes of relationship, empowerment, teaching and accountability constantly come into play to heal the wounds in belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. Most children and youth are very resilient, and this resiliency in a nurturing environment speeds them along their journey.

The challenge before us is to give youth opportunities for experiences that magnify their strengths and heal the brokenness in their Circles. We must create programs that help our students discover the strengths that are within them, and programs that make them aware of how good, and worthy, and spiritual they truly are. We must create programs that liberate their kindness and generosity. We must be passionate about what we know is true. Given the opportunity, the best in each of us grows.

References


Ortberg, J. (2001). *If you want to walk on water, you’ve got to get out of the boat.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.


