



Reading, Writing, Enrichment

My family's life turned down new paths as a result of our son's mental illness. Ways we used to spend leisure time didn't work out any more. It was difficult for me as a mother who had taken her son to soccer, to piano lessons, and to Scouts to realize he wasn't going to be comfortable in those activities any more. Hopes to join a church youth group or an after school club vanished for him. In fact, he made it clear he would get himself kicked out of groups if we tried to push the issue. Since he had managed to get himself kicked out of a therapy group already, we believed he would be true to his word.

My search for possible activities has led me back to some basic but meaningful and rewarding activities for both children and parents. Instead of joining an athletic booster club, my husband and I joined a parent support group for people dealing with kids like ours. We went to the group for information and guidance; it was a pleasant surprise to find camaraderie and friendship with people who understood what we were going through (see Julie Berry's article on family support, also in this issue). In a similar vein, reading and writing take on new meaning when they become enrichment and bonding activities for children with serious emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud can bring two people together in ways that extend beyond simple physical proximity. Reading takes people away from their current situations and involves them in new settings with new problems to solve. Readers live vicariously through the characters as they experience courage, bravery, curiosity, friendship, and happiness. Role models abound within the pages of a good book.

Considering that it is often difficult to maintain close communication with children and youth with emotional and behavior difficulties, reading together can be even more beneficial for these children than for their

more neurotypical counterparts. When a parent and child read aloud they have an opportunity to spend time together with minimal stress and confrontation. They are practicing peaceful coexistence while sharing a fun activity together. Children who don't handle the stress of public situations or group classes can still find recreation and respite in having someone read to them. They can return to their books often, even if time and money are in short supply.

Adolescents can enjoy this activity just as much as younger children. They may find additional comfort in the memories it evokes of earlier, less complicated times in their lives if reading was a ritual as they were growing up. Many adolescents who have spent their school days in less-than-optimal special education settings have missed out on some of the good literature and great stories students read in general education classes. They can enjoy some of the same books outside of school as they build their vocabulary and cultural background.

Reading aloud together shouldn't be viewed as an enrichment activity just for a parent and child. It is a great way for any person to spend quality time with another. Mentors, grandparents, friends, and volunteers can sit with a child or youth and read, building a bond of trust along with their journey together through a book.

At least in the beginning stages, books should be high interest, fast moving stories or intriguing nonfiction publications with lots of details and illustrations. Librarians and booksellers can help with book selection. A well-known reference book in this area, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (<http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/rah.html>) by Jim Trelease, features lists of book titles as well as rationales about how, when, and why to read to children.

We have used reading as a tranquilizer in our house many times when our son with emotional difficulties has gotten himself so stirred up that he can't think his way through his situation. He will agree to sit and let himself be drawn into an adventure-filled chapter book while he gives himself time to settle down and distance himself from the episode. We have also added

reading to the list of ways he can earn spending money because he finds it difficult to stay employed outside the home on a continuous basis. Though he initially sits beside me on the couch because I have offered to pay him \$5 an hour to listen to a book, he is soon making predictions about the outcome of the story or comments about a character.

Like the girl next door who escapes notice precisely because she is so familiar, reading is often overlooked as an enrichment activity. Closer inspection reveals reading to be an ideal enrichment activity not just for children and youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties, but for anyone.

Writing from the Heart

I am investigating a theory about the value of holding writing classes for children and youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties. At this point I cannot show enough data to prove my theory, but I can tell you what I have been doing with seven youth writers from the Dawn Project in Indianapolis.

As a fifth grade teacher, I have recently learned new ways to help students write about subjects close to their hearts, subjects that have meaning in their individual lives. As the mother of a youth with serious emotional and behavioral difficulties, I have some sense of how much frustration, anxiety, anger and other strong emotion seems to reside in the heads and hearts of many adolescents. In June 2001, I decided to launch a writing project with youth from the Dawn Project.

During the summer I worked with a total of seven adolescent writers and the seven adults who brought them to the class (service coordinators in six cases, a mother in the other case), though all seven never showed up at the same time. Although the writers received more individualized attention when only one or two came to the class, all of them seemed to prefer classes with more than two students. All of the youth writers were in middle school or high school, and all of them seemed to enjoy having the adults write along with them.

I began by explaining that this class would probably not resemble writing they had done in school with lots of rules and formulas to follow. I asked them if they ever had thoughts and feelings that no one knew they had, opinions that no one had ever asked them to share, and ideas about all the things they had been through. Every young writer readily acknowledged having had

such thoughts, feelings, opinions, and ideas. I told them this would be a chance to write about some of those things.

Students selected pens and writers' notebooks from a selection I put before them, and we all began writing. Occasionally I would suggest a topic if they didn't have something to write about. (Do you remember a favorite toy from your childhood? Do you remember a time when you were really happy? Or really angry?) Often the topics I suggested caused them to remember particular incidents. Their lives had been filled with incidents, and from the beginning they chose to write about things that had happened to them or feelings they had.

These students were much more eager to share what they had written, even when their topics involved painful emotions, than students in my regular classroom. Admittedly, the ones who came to the writing class came voluntarily while my students at school must write, but the sharing in the summer writing class became almost as important as the writing itself.

Our class met for an hour once a week. Sometimes the students still wanted to keep writing and sharing even though it was time for the class to end. Two of the students brought in writing they had done before coming to the class. In both cases, they brought in things they had written during a time of crisis.

By the end of the summer I knew I had not fully explored the idea of having a writing class or writing club for youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties. I had read enough of their poignant reflections to know all of them had more to write. Several of them liked the idea of writing to let people know what it was like to walk in their shoes when it came to issues like therapy, school, and upheavals at home. This was important writing both for them and for the people who would read what they had written. I knew we needed to continue the writing.

I still have more questions than answers, but each Monday afternoon from 5:00 to 6:00 P.M., I take my bag of notebooks and fancy pens to a conference room at the Dawn Project offices. I write and confer with those who can make it to class. We are working to bring the group up to 10 or 12 youth who attend on a regular basis. I plan to listen to their ideas about whether we should make it more of a club than a class. I will help them revise and edit their pieces so many of them will be ready to publish.

My theory is that writing workshops can be important enrichment activities that bring rewards to the writers and better understanding to their audiences. I encourage others to experiment with writers' notebooks and classes where students can find the encouragement and mentoring they need to write from their hearts about things that are important to them.

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Youth Poetry

Violence Needs to Stop

By Ryan Blount

I sit and wonder how we can get peace on this earth.
All I know it's been opposite of that since my birth.
All the violence we have to experience each day.
It makes me wonder
if I can make a difference in any kind of way.
A year ago my friend got popped.
I really think the violence needs to be stopped.
It makes hearts feel alone when their loved one's gone.
I really think that violence is wrong.
It makes me feel sad when you go to a funeral home.
I can't believe people even make me have to write this poem.
It's bad that when I go home and I turn around,
All I hear is a gun shot sound.
As the earth turns round and round,
More dead bodies are getting buried in the ground.
As I say again the violence needs to be stopped.
I'm sick and tired of souls being dropped.

I Don't Know Why

By Ryan Blount

Dedicated to Romond Slaughter, my boy Romond who was too young
for the game.

I don't know why you had to run with the wrong crew.
I don't know why you made me, constantly made me, think of you.
I don't know why you had to gang bang and deal drugs.
I hate to say it, but I have no love for thugs.
You always was like a best friend to me.
You always was like a big brother to me.
But all I know, I'm glad there was a reason for what happened to you.
And
I'm glad you opened your eyes and started to see
Because you know main thugging ain't the way to be.
Stay cool.
Stay true.
And always love to the new you.

I don't know why you had to run with the wrong crew.
I don't know why you used to do the things that you used to do.
I don't know why you used to want to brag.
But I'm glad you know
Something for sure.

My step dad Wayne fixed my bike for me

By Phillip Shepherd

My step dad Wayne fixed my bike for me. Normally this would have been just an everyday normal thing. I broke my bike by running over a stick. I have lied in the past about other broken bike incidents, but Wayne believed me this time. That really meant a lot to me. It's really hard for my step dad to forget about the past. Sometimes I wonder why he believes that I'm telling the truth, 'cause at first he wasn't going to believe me. I wonder what made him change his mind so quickly like that.

My step dad has really changed in the past year. He has changed in many ways. He's very forgiving. He stops and thinks about what he says, and he catches himself before saying something he knows would hurt me.

July 24, 2001

Dear Jeremy

George Andre Small Yarbrough

Dear Jeremy,
I wish that you could come back in my heart
I really miss you
Really bad
You are making me mad
Just come back and do your time
You had no right running
I told you when I got here
I haven't run in 6 or 7 years
And I won't be running
You made choices
And I'm here to say
You just turn yourself in
It is not helping you to keep running
What was you thinkin'?
I was helping you
Letting you wear my stuff
And giving you my snack
And this how you do Miss Pat and Mr. Billy?
And we just got done talking
About going home at the end of the month
Why was you mad?
Now you know what you done
Now I lost you and you lost me
And I'm mad
You did all your time
Now you're going to do it all over
And that's bad
So what do you want now?
A million dollars?
They tried everything to help you
But you took over
Now can't nobody help you
You are on your own
And I can't help you
Because I ain't got nowhere to go
But to R.T.C. and home
And going home for good
I'm sorry to say I can't help you
Because you running
But I'm sorry
I will still love you as a brother
But you are not right for doing these things
I don't know what to do with you, Jeremy,
By the way,
Come to me and I will turn you in
Well, meet me somewhere
And I will turn you in, Jeremy Stewart

July 8, 2001