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 emotions seem 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 Broken Heart and Shattered Dreams
By Amber Helpingstine

A broken heart and shattered dreams,
Things are not really as they seem,
Years of abandonment and pain,
Things just seem like they will never be the same.
Searching for answers
But really not knowing the questions to ask,
A lot of times children will put on these invisible masks.
They put on the masks to hide their hurt,
Afraid that if someone knows
They will get stepped on like a piece of dirt,
Scared and confused, these kids really don’t know
What to say or do,
They have little ways of reaching out
For help and advice,
But because of their masks,
Sometimes people can’t hear their cries
—And they just go on about their daily lives,
As if everything is okay.
But what these children really need
Is to release their anger, hurt, and pain.
They need a helping hand and a person,
Or rather a mentor, who will understand.
Who will take the time to listen and help remove
Their masks to see what’s behind the disguise,
And see beyond their lies.
A person who will show them that life is not really
What it seems and that they truly can overcome
Their problems and achieve their dreams.
—December 17, 2001
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

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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