

No Therapy Please! We're Young!

Working with young people who are very, very defended

Young people never go to therapy because they want to change. In fact, they go to therapy determined to resist any attempts to change them. They may be sensing that their abilities to withstand other people - their defence mechanisms – are less effective than they once were, but they're hoping that, rather than dissolve any of these defences, therapy will re-enforce them, doing any renovation work as quickly as possible so that, with their defences restored, the conversation can get back to the urgent issue of how to resist the awfulness of other people ("They're still picking on me.... Nobody's ever cared about me.... There's absolutely nothing I can do....").

Young people never go to therapy because they want to change. They go because they want *other people* to change. Most tell a version of the Cinderella story in which their everyday efforts go unrecognised by a ghastly, persecuting family. It's a story in which their parents do nothing whatsoever to lessen their plight and in which they're forever waiting for their prince or princess to come. The idea of a fairy godmother is very attractive. Therapists - like parents, teachers and other professionals - are expected to act as fairy godmothers, helping to transform Cinderella's misery into something exotic and special without Cinderella herself having to take any responsibility. As far as young people are concerned, whoever's been cast as fairy godmother must always protect them uncritically while making sure that their enemies are always vanquished. Anything less would be yet another example of the world's unfairness.

This presents problems for therapists, parents, teachers and other professionals. How do we help young people take more responsibility for themselves? How do we help them think about their own part in things and find the courage to do things differently?

The more defended the young person, the greater the anxiety behind the defence. We all need our defences to survive. They may have become personally or socially destructive, but still they seem like friends, keeping us safe from danger and distancing us from our fears. At the time of their deployment, they always seem to make sense. At the time, they seem to be only ways of reacting to a situation ("I had no choice but to hit him.... I point-blank refused to say anything.... I simply ran out and slammed the door...").

Some young people are very, very defended: they won't speak or they habitually turn everything into a joke; they lash out or they always change the subject; they blame everyone else.... They hang on to their defences as if their lives depend on it. An impartial observer might think that a young person's behaviour far exceeds the level of threat and is completely out of proportion. But to the young person, the behaviour makes absolute sense.

Only once these behaviours – these habitual defence mechanisms – have been understood can anything begin to change. Until then, a fairy godmother's sensible advice or common sense make no difference whatsoever because young people never change their behaviours until the causes of

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their behaviours have been understood: how those behaviours came to be, why they've become so necessary and why they've remained so necessary over the months and years.

Understanding takes time. It requires empathy and imagination and often involves suspending moral judgment. The fact that certain behaviours are counter-productive is usually obvious to everyone, including the young person: that's the easy bit. What isn't obvious is *why* the behaviour developed, why it seemed so necessary at the time, why it seemed like the only thing to do in the circumstances ("It was after the first time my dad left... My brother always used to hit me... It felt like my mum didn't care any more....").

Young people never go to therapy because they want to change. They go hoping to stay the same but hoping – secretly – that someone will understand why they don't want to change.