

Why young people destroy the very things they need most

Good experiences can be impossibly painful reminders

We know that young people have to rage, to test their strength against the powers that be, to knock things down in order to build them up again.... What's dispiriting is when we've worked so hard, putting in huge amounts of work to make new opportunities available to young people, and they go and sabotage everything by failing to turn up, by being rude, by sabotaging or spurning the very opportunities we've worked so hard to provide. Why?

Winnicott (1986) argues that, having originally been deprived as children, young people are confounded and upset when they're finally offered – tantalizingly - the very experience they originally needed. To be offered something so precious – love, safety, recognition, protection – is a terrible reminder. It hurts too much. So they set about trying to destroy it, even though they know, and even though we know, that it's precisely what they've always needed. The prospect of finally being loved becomes too awful to bear. The prospect – at last! - of living with safe and reliable authority-figures becomes impossible to countenance.

Over the years, I've sat with teachers struggling to understand why the boy who's never had any stability in his life is being so disruptive. Now that he has so many teachers around who genuinely care about him, teachers who enforce the rules firmly and reliably, why does he chose to behave so badly? I've sat with therapists offering young people those same qualities only to find that some of their young clients are intent on destroying the one relationship where they're treated with kindness and respect. I've worked with boys and girls who no sooner meet a really nice girlfriend or boyfriend than they start to sabotage the relationship, as if they can't believe their luck, as if they can't trust anyone to be straightforwardly good. And there are young people who are offered worthwhile jobs alongside truly supportive, encouraging adults; young people who, a few days into the job, seem to be doing their best to get themselves sacked.

Of course there are plenty of young people who are given new opportunities and thrive. But there are others who don't; others for whom all that kindness is too painful. These young people are often the most difficult to work with because they spurn our best efforts to support and love them. They take out their earliest disappointments on us, constantly provoking us to reject them, to fulfill their prophesy that no one cares, that no one in their lives has ever really cared.

It also happens with some adults.... "It's as if I'm trying to destroy the very thing I've always wanted!" says Marcus the teacher, delighted with his first proper romantic relationship yet unable to stop being sarcastic whenever he's with his lover. "I can't quite believe this day has come!" says Sue the social worker, finally given the responsibility that she's always craved but suddenly unsure about whether she really wants it.

The way forward for professionals is to understand that these behaviours aren't as personal as they feel. Of course they're illogical and self-defeating, but our job remains the same: to be relentlessly reliable, withstanding the setbacks and the sabotaging of our best efforts. The more vehement the young person's behaviour, the more hurt it probably protects.

REFERENCE

Winnicott, D.W. (1986) 'Delinquency as a Sign of Hope' in *Home is Where We Start From*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.