

# Understanding and Preventing Teenage Delinquency

By David Cimborra, Ph.D.

Katie was reserved and shy as a child in elementary school. In spite of her quiet temperament, she received good grades and was able to develop several friendships. When she experienced typical problems for her age, like arguments with her sister, loneliness over her parents' divorce, and the alienation of moving to a different state, she seemed to handle them well. However, as Katie grew older, her anger became increasingly difficult for her parents to manage. She argued constantly with her mother and stepfather, became generally aggressive, and her hostility toward her sister escalated into physical fights. To make matters worse, she began "hanging out" with a "tough" crowd. By the time Katie was in high school, she was running away from home, often truant from school, and shoplifting expensive merchandise, which ultimately led to her arrest and being placed on probation.

No consequence seemed enough to stop the rebellion. Finally, Katie left home and ultimately, the state. Unable to support herself in a new city, she began to prostitute herself at the age of sixteen. Eventually Katie was apprehended by the police, and is now serving time in a juvenile detention facility.

Lucas' handsome appearance and gregarious personality charmed many a teacher and peer during his first two years at a suburban high school. Athletically built and intellectually gifted, Lucas seemingly had the "tools" to succeed both academically and socially. He was a leader; many of his peers looked up to him, followed him, and even revered him. But most of those who revered him, eventually ended up fearing him.

By the age of fourteen, Lucas had begun a secret side life of small petty crimes – a stolen pack of cigarettes, a push or shove against someone who displeased him. Before long, his crimes became more frequent and more serious. Most of his friends, and certainly his family, did not know this secret side of Lucas' life. Soon his "extracurricular" activities included charges of assault, theft, robbery, and statutory rape. Through manipulation, outright lying, and various plea bargains, Lucas initially managed to avoid jail time. That is, until he murdered a girl from his high school for which he is now serving a 42-year sentence in maximum security.

Katie and Lucas represent a growing number of teenagers who exhibit severe delinquent behavior. Yet while teenage violence and delinquency is a major sign of our age, few of us think it will touch our families. *After all, we think, delinquent adolescents come from abusive backgrounds. Or these young people must have received little or no support or care from their parents.* That is often true, but not always.

Katie and Lucas came from relatively stable, financially secure, and well-intentioned families. Their parents thought they had every reason to believe their children would become productive members of society. Now they grieve and wonder what went wrong.

Fortunately, we don't have to wait for tragedy to blindside us and strike our families before we act. There are seven main factors that predispose children toward various types of antisocial behavior. And there are steps we can take to minimize their risk of delinquency and to put our children on the road to healthy and productive lives. But before we look at these causes and preventative steps, let's take a look at just what we mean by teenage delinquency.

## **Defining Delinquency**

Delinquent behavior is actually a legal term referring to acts committed by children or adolescents which are in violation of law. This legal definition is so broad, however, that if we used it, most teenagers would be described as delinquent at one time or another, even if it was for breaking a municipal curfew or consuming a small amount of alcohol. So to communicate more meaningfully, the mental health community has developed a psychiatric diagnosis called Conduct Disorder (CD).

Conduct Disorder applies to individual – typically adolescents – who consistently act in ways that violate the rights of others’ or society’s rules. This includes physical aggression and intimidation, destruction of property, deceitfulness, forced sexual activity, theft, truancy, and running away from home. To qualify for a diagnosis of Conduct Disorder, teenagers must show a repetitive and persistent pattern of these behaviors as opposed to isolated incidents of inappropriate behavior.

It is estimated that six to sixteen percent of teenage males and about half that many teenage females qualify for a diagnosis of Conduct Disorder. These teenagers disappoint, aggravate, and frustrate parents, teachers, and other authority figures with their persistent destructive, deceitful, manipulative and/or illegal activities.

Unfortunately, counseling – even Christian counseling – is not always as successful as we would hope. That is because conduct-disordered adolescents tend to resist treatment. They tend to blame everyone else for their problems while they rationalize their own behavior. They are not especially self-observant. They are typically manipulative. And they have difficulty forming meaningful attachments with their counselors. Even when they appear to be cooperating with a counselor or authority figure, they often have no true intent to change. Consequently, many of these youths end up in our legal system, either on probation with legal restrictions, or in detention centers or correctional facilities.

## **What Causes Conduct Disorder**

The central feature of Conduct Disorder – violating the rights of others and the rules of society – is not a new phenomenon to the human race. It goes back as early as the Garden of Eden when God set up a rule for Adam and Eve – “Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Yet Adam and Eve disobeyed. To top it off, they failed to take responsibility, blaming each other and Satan. In time, their son, Cain, took their disobedience even further. He violated his brother’s right to life by murdering him. Then he denied his responsibility by asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

## **Personal and Social Sins**

Such violations unfold throughout the Bible, and not surprisingly, they still take place today. The ultimate root of these problems lies in the sinfulness of the human race. All human beings, and particularly teenagers, struggle to some degree with the tendency to be selfish, rebellious, and insensitive to others. Teenagers who lack a serious personal spiritual commitment are more likely to give in to their selfish and self-centered desires and act in irresponsible ways.

A given teenager, however, does not “just happen” to become delinquent or suddenly choose to act in antisocial ways. There are reasons some teenagers turn to delinquency and others do not. And since teenagers grow and live in a world that is impacted by sin, we need to look at both the social as well as the personal causes of delinquency.

## **Like Father, Like Son**

One of the most common predictors of teenage delinquency is having a relative who is consistently engaged in antisocial behavior.

The Bible says, “the sins of the fathers are visited to the third and fourth generations,” and this is clearly true. Children whose parents and significant relatives or adult friends of the family model antisocial behavior are much more likely to develop conduct disorders than those with law-abiding relatives.

A good example of this is Josh, a teenager, who has abused a variety of different drugs, including marijuana, alcohol, and LSD. He has been expelled from school and in trouble with the police, not only for using these drugs, but for trying to sell them to his friends. Where did Josh first learn about using drugs and selling them? He learned from his father who had used drugs in front of him since Josh was a few years old. Worse yet, just as his father is in denial, Josh himself denies that he has any problem with drugs.

## **Everybody’s Doing It**

Associating with teenagers who exhibit delinquent behavior is the next major risk factor. A high percentage of children with conduct disorders act out their delinquent behaviors with their peers. The pressure to rebel in order to be accepted by one’s peers can be incredibly strong. In fact, this is one of the core dynamics of delinquent gang membership. Teenagers looking for a place to belong will do almost anything to be accepted. Some gang initiation rites even require a potential new member to commit a crime in order to join the gang!

## **Physical Factors**

Physiological factors are another major contributor to conduct disorders. Neuropsychological factors (brain structure and function) have been shown to be related to some types of delinquent and antisocial behavioral patterns. Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), for example, are more likely to develop conduct disorders. These children often have difficulty concentrating and paying attention, and tend to be impulsive. Such traits can undercut academic performance and cause children to behave disruptively at school and at home, leaving them frustrated and feeling badly about themselves.

As they develop into teenagers, these same individuals often struggle increasingly with impulsivity. This makes it all the more likely that they will engage in risky, foolish, or illegal activities. The end result is an increasingly low self-image and a revolving cycle of bad behavior.

## **Other Psychological Problems**

An additional risk factor for delinquency is the presence of other mental disorders. Children with depression, for example, are more likely to engage in conduct disordered behavior. This makes sense since sad, depressed teenagers will be looking for something to bring excitement into their lives. Antisocial actions can bring a temporary feeling of excitement or a thrill from “beating the system” or “outsmarting” people in authority. In addition, we know that boys in particular are not encouraged in today’s world to express feelings of sadness. They are often ridiculed and made fun of if they cry. This sometimes drives boys into “burying” their sadness, ultimately letting it surface as anger. Researchers agree that teenagers with masked depression often act out in delinquent ways.

Children with severe mental disorders that distort reality like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or paranoia are also more likely to engage in delinquent acts.

## Hidden Causes

These first five causes of delinquency are relatively obvious. We all know that children imitate their parents and that their peers can have negative influences on each other. We know that spiritual commitment is a great enhancer of healthy living, and that its absence leaves a serious void. We know that some children are born psychologically different. And it is relatively obvious that teenagers with other emotional problems may turn to delinquent behavior as well.

Surprisingly, however, quite a number of youth with conduct disorders show few, if any, of these first five risk factors. Why? Because there are two other emotional factors that lie at the very core of the personalities of nearly all people who consistently engage in antisocial behavior. These are the capacity to care for others and the ability to experience healthy guilt.

## The Capacity to Care

The deepest human emotion and the one that will most likely ward off potential delinquency if it is fully developed is empathy. Empathy is simply the ability to understand and experience the feelings of another person. It is the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. Empathy has two components: a cognitive component (*understanding* what another feels) and an emotional component (*experiencing* what another feels). For example, John sees Anna crying and distraught after her husband left her. In order to have empathy for Anna, John would first need to understand intellectually that Anna is sad and distraught, and then he would need to experience sadness along with Anna. In real life, these usually happen at the same time.

When we care for people and suffer when they suffer, we won't want to cause them pain. But when caring is lacking, people can be vulnerable to everything from inaction to actual destructive behavior. Teenagers, in particular, who don't feel for other people, can become prone to delinquent actions. Since they don't love or feel for others they may think, *Why not rebel, steal, hurt or violate their rights?*

Because Jesus Christ epitomized love and compassion, He did not rebel, steal or hurt others. In fact, the word most often used to discuss Jesus' emotional life was compassion! To the core of His being, He was caring. Jesus cared so much that He was willing to leave Heaven taking on human form, suffering humiliation and death so that He could redeem us. In so doing, He also identified completely with us. Since He knew suffering first hand, He doesn't want to cause anyone unnecessary pain.

Because we are less loving than Christ, however, we humans are always susceptible to ignoring other when we see something we want for ourselves. Conduct-disordered adolescents have a huge capacity to ignore the hurt their actions bring to others.

But don't be misled. When psychologists talk about empathy, we are not talking about an adolescent's ability to be outwardly friendly – or even very engaging! Many delinquents have a terrific ability to appear caring, sensitive, and remorseful. But under the surface, they don't care deeply for others. Their love is manipulative and aimed at satisfying their own needs. Yet, if the truth were known, they don't care much for themselves either. For true self-acceptance includes the ability to forgo selfishness and love one's neighbor as oneself. In contrast, conduct-disordered adolescents are insecure and focused almost entirely on themselves and their own immediate gratification. They are friendly in order to get people to give them what they want.

## **Healthy Guilt**

The other psychological resource that drastically affects the development of Conduct Disorder grows out of a child's capacity for love and empathy. It is the guilt that children experience following a transgression or a violation of a rule. Guilt is the feeling that comes when we violate a norm or when we hurt or violate another person. The emotional discomfort, tension, and unpleasantness that make up feelings of guilt decrease the likelihood that we will commit that violation again.

Spiritually and emotionally healthy people feel bad when they hurt others. Even if our violation was temporarily enjoyable (as in striking back verbally when we have been attacked), our negative experience of guilt "outweighs" the enjoyment of committing the act, so we choose not to repeat the act.

This type of constructive guilt grows out of love and concern for others. It helps children become more socially sensitive and aware of the rights, needs and feelings of others as they are growing up. It is a deterrent to unacceptable behavior.

This constructive guilt differs radically from the angry self-hated and self-condemnation of neurotic guilt. Positive guilt feelings, or godly sorrow, are what Christians experience when we see our sinfulness and failures. As the Holy Spirit brings our sins and failures to our awareness, we respond with feelings of concern, sorrow, or remorse. We want to be different sometimes because we care for the other person, and because we care about God; not because we have been caught! These positive guilt feelings help us grow in God's likeness.

In contrast, destructive guilt feelings are rooted in self-contempt. Sometimes the result is that we feel guilty when we really haven't done anything wrong. The child who feels guilty over receiving a "C" on a test, even though he studied hard is a good example of this. Those times when we hate ourselves disproportionately for something we have done wrong, we really aren't feeling bad out of our concern for others. We are simply mad at ourselves for falling short of our own glorified image of ourselves! Healthy guilt feelings are just the opposite. They indicate a person who is comfortable enough with him or herself to focus on the other person and on God Himself, and are expressions of loving concern.

In this way, empathy and constructive guilt feelings work together in preventing delinquency. Empathy is the building block of helpful guilt feelings. It means caring for others. Constructive guilt is a reminder that we have failed to act lovingly. Taken together, empathy and constructive guilt help us tune into the needs and feelings of others, and motivate us to live by the laws that are created for others' welfare – as well as our own.

## **Steering Children Away From Delinquency**

The absolutely crucial foundation for rearing a responsible, loving, morally mature child is for the parent to be loving and available to the child at every stage of his or her development.

Every child is created in the image of a loving, sensitive God who is moved by our needs and our spiritual and emotional state. We are "wired" from birth to be able to respond to the love and empathy of others. But while we are "wired" to develop sensitivity to others, we must have certain childhood experiences that allow this capacity to mature and to teach us to make good moral choices.

We initially learn to love and to care in the first few years of life. While television, videos, books, and peers can play a role, parents and other caregivers are the primary models of loving social interaction for their children. But it is not enough to simply live our children. We also need to be consistently emotionally connected with our sons and daughters. As God deals with us, we too need to be "touched with the feelings of our children's infirmities." We are to love our children as we have been loved by God (John 13:34).

Every time we lovingly respond to our infants or young children's hunger, hurt or sadness, they experience love in action. Being the recipient of our love helps them build their love for others. Without this core caring, children, have difficulty developing morally. They may act morally because they fear being caught and punished, or because it is socially acceptable. But it will take outside intervention and much help from God if they are to care for others out of a truly loving motive. The Bible speaks to all of us, regardless of our back-ground, when it says, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." Loving acts flow out of a loving inner life.

In the economic and social pressures of our times, many parents leave their children to supervision that is inadequate or non-existent. Children are left home alone, or are parented by an older brother or sister, who themselves are not mature and loving, and who are probably still unable to discern between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Poorly supervised and cared-for children are less likely to internalize appropriate values, morals, and rules, and are less likely to have the experiences needed to fully develop empathy and constructive feelings of guilt.

## **Discipline That Works**

A vital key to rearing children with a capacity for empathy and constructive guilt is the type of discipline they receive. Discipline could be viewed as the "glue" which helps make all of this work.

Martin Hoffman, a researcher from the University of Michigan, discussed what he calls the "discipline encounter." The discipline encounter is essentially a two-step process between parent and child occurring after a child has violated the rights of another.

Consider Sharon, a five-year-old, who inappropriately takes a doll from her playmate, Cindy. When Sharon begins playing with the doll, Cindy bursts into tears. This incident calls for some training or discipline.

The first step is for the parent to communicate to Sharon the consequences of her mistreatment of her playmate. They should explain or demonstrate the specific effects of Sharon's action, including drawing attention to how Cindy feels. The goal is to encourage Sharon to have empathy at both a *thinking* level (cognitive understanding) and a *feeling* level (emotional).

Sharon's parents might say, "Sharon, do you see how Cindy is crying? She is crying because she is sad and upset that she does not have her doll. Remember when you were upset because your sister wouldn't let you play Candyland? This is how Cindy feels right now." Sometimes it is helpful to reference back to a time when the child felt a similar way. This first step is designated to help Sharon have an empathic reaction to her friend.

If the final step of the discipline encounter is to get the child in touch with how the other person must feel, the second step is to help the child acknowledge his or her appropriate responsibility. To help Sharon do this, her parent could gently say, "Cindy is crying and hurt because you took the doll away from her." After the parent says this, it is important that the child then admit his or her responsibility. Helping the child accept responsibility helps to trigger the appropriate guilt feelings that will lead Sharon to be different the next time.

Be very careful at this point, however. Do not try to help your child feel healthy remorse by shaming, condemning, embarrassing, or threatening. These parental techniques actually cause children to miss the real point – concern for the other – because they end up feeling so horrible about themselves. For example, if Sharon's parents angrily said to her, "What's the matter with you? You are such a selfish child." Sharon would feel terrible about herself, but she wouldn't be learning to be sensitive to Cindy. She would be focused on how bad she was instead of how sad Cindy was feeling. What follows below are several important suggestions to help in giving discipline that works.

**First**, discipline-encounter messages should be simply and gently stated in a warm, yet direct, manner. A mild, yet firm, tone of voice is sufficient to help a child see his or her responsibility. Yelling in an angry manner induces fear or self-punitive guilt rather than constructive remorse. While fear and self-punitive guilt may temporarily get young children to comply, they lose their effectiveness as children grow older. In fact, they can plant seeds of great hostility and delayed rebellion.

**Second**, discipline needs to be consistent and followed through to completion. When you begin to discipline and fail to follow through, you teach your children that rules and standards do not have fixed consequences. You also teach them that parents and authority need not be taken seriously.

You only need to spend fifteen minutes in your local grocery store to see this in action. In Aisle Eight, Mom or Dad threatens, “Jeremy, don’t touch that or you won’t get an ice cream cone!” Jeremy continues to touch the forbidden object – an action which elicits a second, even stronger, threat. Each time Jeremy violates his parent’s instruction, the volume of the threat increases. Finally, both Jeremy and his parents are at wit’s end.

At the end of the shopping trip, as they walk past the ice cream counter, Jeremy begins to throw a tantrum. To silence him, his parents “give in” and buys the ice cream cone. Not only has Jeremy successfully violated the norm, “Don’t touch that!”, but he has avoided the consequence, “You won’t get an ice cream cone.” Jeremy is learning *You can get away with things if you work it right*. He is learning he doesn’t have to take responsibility for his actions. And he is learning not to care about what others think and feel. In short, Jeremy is developing some of the most basic attitudes of teenagers who eventually become delinquent.

**Third**, discipline needs to be developmentally appropriate. Our discipline needs to take into account the age and maturity of the child. Younger children tend to need rewards and discipline that comes immediately after their behavior. The more time that elapses between the behavior and the consequence (either positive or negative), the less likely it is that a young child remembers the connection between the two.

On the other hand, older children are able to make the connection between behaviors and consequences when significant time has elapsed. A teenager can understand that not getting to use the car on the weekend is a consequence for not doing his chores at the beginning of the week.

Our choice of rewards, privileges and discipline also need to coincide with our child’s interests and desires. A few minutes spent in “time-out” are more appropriate for younger children, while older children can tolerate longer periods. Not getting dessert may be effective for a five-year-old, but loses its “sting” when used as a consequence for most fifteen-year-olds.

Keeping these simple steps and principles in mind can help you help your children grow into responsible, loving adults.

Marcus, for example, periodically gave his parents fits when he was a young child. He was disruptive in early grade school, and often oppositional at home. His parents fearfully wondered, *If Marcus is behaving like this now, will he be worse as time goes on?* But they persevered through the tough times, remaining loving and available. Marcus’ dad set aside regular times to do fun things alone with his son. Both parents worked at becoming good listeners and paying attention to Marcus’ feelings, both positive and negative. They got involved in a church with a good children’s ministry, and they held Marcus responsible for his behavior, and helped him see the consequences for his actions.

Over time, Marcus began to internalize his parents’ concern for him. As he did, he developed a sense of empathy for others, and he began to experience healthy guilt more deeply. His parents’ balance of love and limits and their positive training helped Marcus avoid a potentially dangerous path toward delinquent behavior.

Like Marcus' parents, you can steer your children away from that "delinquent path." It is ironic that millions of dollars have been spent on prevention programs to do this, when, in fact, the best prevention strategies begin at home.

### **Author Bio**

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