

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 – arguments with her sister, loneliness after her parents’ divorce, and alienation after 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 and became more and more aggressive. 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 often truant from school, running away from home, and shoplifting expensive merchandise, which ultimately led to her arrest and being placed on probation.

No consequence seemed enough to stop the rebellious behavior. 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 the police apprehended Katie and she is now serving time in a juvenile detention facility.

Lucas’s 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 everything needed 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, including stealing a pack of cigarettes and defacing public property with graffiti. 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 his life. Soon Lucas’s “extracurricular” activities included charges of assault, theft, robbery, and statutory rape. Through manipulation, outright lying, and various plea bargains, he 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 that these young people must have received little or no support and care from their parents. That may often be true, but not always.

Katie and Lucas came from relatively stable, financially secure, and well-intentioned families. Their parents seemed to have 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 to various types of antisocial behavior. And there are steps we can take to minimize their risk of delinquency and 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 that 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 Disorder¹.

Conduct Disorder applies to individuals, 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, a teenager 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 persistently 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 the 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 to the Garden of Eden when God set up a rule for Adam and Eve: "...you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil..." (Genesis 2:17, New International Version). 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 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" (Genesis 4:9)?

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 and personal spiritual commitment are more likely to give in to their selfish and self-centered desires and act in irresponsible ways.

A 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. 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 that the sins of the fathers are visited to the third and fourth generations (Exodus 20:5), 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 drugs, but also 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 openly 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 another 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. Gang initiation rites may even require a prospective new member to commit a crime in order to join the gang.

Physical Factors

Physiological and neuropsychological factors are also major contributors to conduct disorders. Brain structure and function have been shown to relate 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 and emotional disorders. Children with depression, for example, are more likely to engage in conduct disorder behavior. This makes sense since sad, depressed teenagers may look for ways to bring excitement into their lives. Antisocial actions can bring a temporary feeling of excitement and a thrill from "beating the system" or outsmarting people in authority. In addition, we know that in today's world, boys in particular are not encouraged to express feelings of sadness. They are often ridiculed and made fun of if they cry. This sometimes drives boys to bury 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, such as 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 peers can have negative influences on one another. 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

Empathy is the deepest human emotion and the one, if it is fully developed, that will most likely ward off potential delinquency. Empathy is simply the ability to understand and experience the feelings of another person. It is the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes.

Empathy has two components. There is 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 simultaneously.

When we care for people and suffer when they suffer, we won't want to cause them pain. But when caring is lacking, the response may range from inaction to actual destructive behavior. In particular, teenagers, who don't feel for other people may be prone to delinquent actions. Since they don't love or feel for others, they may think, *Why not rebel, steal, hurt them, 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 in Scripture to describe Jesus' emotional life is compassion. To the core of his being, he was caring. Jesus cared so much that he was willing to leave heaven, take on human form, and suffer 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 does not want to cause anyone unnecessary pain.

Because we humans are less loving than Christ, however, we are always susceptible to ignoring others 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 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. True self-acceptance includes the ability to forgo selfishness and to 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 is, feeling guilt following a transgression or a violation of a rule, grows out of a child's capacity for love and empathy and drastically affects the development of Conduct Disorder. 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 badly when they hurt others. Even if a violation was temporarily enjoyable, as in striking back verbally when attacked, the negative experience of guilt outweighs the enjoyment of committing the act. A healthy individual chooses not to repeat it. This type of constructive guilt grows out of love and concern for others. As children grow up, it helps them become more socially sensitive and aware of the rights, needs, and feelings of others. It is a deterrent to unacceptable behavior.

Constructive guilt differs radically from the angry self-hatred and self-condemnation of neurotic guilt. Positive guilt feelings, or godly sorrow, are what we as 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 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 Christ-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. In those times when we hate ourselves disproportionately for something we have done wrong, we really aren't feeling bad out of a 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 reflect a person who is comfortable enough with himself or herself to focus on the other person and on God. They 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 in to 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 toward others, we must have certain childhood experiences that allow this capacity to mature and that 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 children. But it is not enough to simply love our children. We also need to be consistently emotionally connected with our sons and daughters. Just as God deals with us, we too need to be "touched with the feeling of our [children's] infirmities" (Hebrews 4:15, King James Version). We are to love our children as we have been loved by God (John 13:34, NIV).

Every time we lovingly respond to the hunger, hurt, or sadness of our infant or young child, he or she experiences love in action. Being the recipient of our love helps the child build 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 background, when it says, “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34, New King James Version). 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. Children may be left home alone, or they may be parented by older siblings who themselves are not mature and loving, and 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.”² The discipline encounter is essentially a two-step process between parent and child occurring after a child has violated the rights of another.

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

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

Emma’s parent might say, “Emma, do you see how Abby 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 Abby feels right now.” The reference back to a time when Emma felt a similar way can be very helpful. This first step is designed to help her have an empathic reaction to her friend.

If the goal of the discipline encounter is to get the child in touch with how another person must feel, the second step is to help the child acknowledge his or her appropriate responsibility. To help Emma do this, her parent could gently say, “Abby is crying and hurt because you took the doll away from her.” After the parent says this, it is important that the child then admits his or her responsibility. Helping Emma accept responsibility helps to trigger the appropriate guilt feelings that will lead her 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! They will only end up feeling horrible about themselves. For example, if Emma’s parents angrily said to her, “What’s the matter with you? You are such a selfish child”, Emma would feel terrible about herself, but she wouldn’t be learning to be sensitive to Abby. She would be focused on how bad she was instead of how sad Abby 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, these lose their effectiveness as children grow older. In fact, they may 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 inconsistent discipline in action. In aisle eight, a young father threatens, “Jeremy, if you touch that, you won’t get an ice cream cone!” Jeremy continues to touch the forbidden object, an action that 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 parent are at wits’ ends.

At the end of the shopping trip, as Jeremy and his parents walk past the ice cream counter, Jeremy begins to throw a tantrum. To silence him, his dad and mom “give in” and buy the ice cream cone. Not only has Jeremy successfully violated the rule, “Don’t touch that!” but he has also avoided the consequence, “You won’t get an ice cream cone.” Jeremy is learning that *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. Parental discipline needs to take into account the age and maturity of the child. Younger children tend to need rewards and discipline that come 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 the assigned chores at the beginning of the week.

Rewards, privileges, and discipline also need to coincide with our children’s interests and desires. A “time-out” for only a few minutes is appropriate for younger children, while older children can tolerate longer periods. Not getting dessert may be effective for a five-year-old, but does not have much “sting” when used as a consequence for a fifteen-year-old.

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’s 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’s feelings, both positive and negative. They got involved in a church with a good children’s ministry. They held Marcus responsible for his behavior, and helped him see the consequences of 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.

The best strategy for preventing teenage delinquency begins at home. You can steer your children away from a delinquent path and toward healthy relationships and emotions by consistent, loving parenting, seasoned with appropriate discipline.

References

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