

# Invitations to Collaboration

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People are people. Problems are problems. That's that. This is a basic assumption of *strength-based* approaches to working with youth and families. The notion that someone *experiences* a problem and is not *defined* by a problem stands in opposition to the prevailing pathology-based terminology of the "helping" professions. Literally, some social workers, counselors, therapists, psychologists, teachers, doctors, nurses, and psychiatrists will trick us into believing that someone *is* "ADHD", rather than that someone is *struggling with* "ADHD", or that someone *is* "bi-polar", rather than that someone is *affected by* a "bi-polar disorder." People are not problems, they are people. Problems are not people, they are problems. Who wants to *be* a problem? There is another way of working with youth and families that acknowledges the problems they face and celebrates the strengths with which they are endowed. True collaboration between "professionals" and "clients" means moving away from problem-based definitions of people, and moving toward competency-based definitions.

If we locate a problem *inside* a person, then all efforts to change the effects of that problem are targeted against that person. A family will gang up on the person rather than ganging up on the problem. If we locate a problem *outside* a person, then the entire family, including the person most affected by the problem, can team up against the problem. This approach does not ignore biological circumstances a person may be facing. Rather, it recognizes an individual's struggle with a problem without *defining* them as the problem.

When we acknowledge that problems are likely to affect entire families, we can move away from the notion that a problem is located inside one specific member of the family. This immediately frees the relationship from guilt and blame, and allows for a collaborative discovery of the overall effects of a problem.

For example, "Tantrums" affect everyone in the family a different way. "Tantrums" may get a twelve-year-old boy to give up his "twelve-year-old spot" and look like a seven-year-old, get parents to feel like they aren't good parents, and unfairly give the older child spot to a younger sister. The entire family is affected by "Tantrums." Everyone wants "Tantrums" out of the house. A plan can be developed to "give Tantrums the slip." On the other hand, if the twelve-year-old boy *is* "tantrumming," or *has* tantrums, then all efforts to free the family from Tantrum's grasp are directed at the boy. No child *has* tantrums. Children *have* arms and legs, they are *tricked by* tantrums into behaving a certain way. The subtle linguistic difference between "his tantrums" and "the tantrums" permits a teamed effort against "tantrums," rather than a teamed effort against a person.

Another deficit-based description of a youth might be "truant." For example, a "professional" might say, "Deondre entered the program because he is 'chronically truant.'" When working with Deondre, a school counselor might ask him why he is truant. How can he stop being truant? A parent may very well tell the story of her truant son. Every one of these descriptions *defines* Deondre as "truant." Alternatively, a "helper" can position herself on Deondre's side *against* "truancy." Questions can be asked of Deondre and Deondre's parent(s) such as, "How has truancy affected your life," and "Does truancy lead your teachers to believe you aren't a capable learner?" The questions *externalize* the problem so Deondre is no longer faced with the dilemma of thinking about himself *as* a problem and struggling to discover ways to remedy the problem without losing his sense of self.

The world of "professional helpers" has developed a long list of problems that can be used to define people (I hear tell that there is actually a book listing several hundred pages worth of problems!). Strength-based approaches to working with youth and families do not ignore problems; to do so would be disrespectful to families whose lives have been taken over by problems. Rather, an alternative conversation style is offered, one that defines the *relationship* a "client" or "client system" has with a problem, thereby freeing youth and families from being defined by the problem.

After establishing that a person or family is *affected by* a problem, rather than *being* a problem, collaborative discussions can follow that examine the relative influence of the problem in the person or family's life, and the relative influence of the person or family in the life of the problem. This will be addressed next month.