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Breaking through to teens

Lori L. Ellison

Marshall University, ellisonl@marshall.edu

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Book Review of *Breaking Through to Teens*

Lori L. Ellison

This book seeks to propose a program for working with teens that addresses the special challenges of the 21st century adolescent. Taffel begins his discussion describing the different struggles that contemporary adolescents face. He suggests that current methods of therapy are no longer as effective to this treatment savvy generation. As he moves further in his discussion of initial interviews and treatment modalities, he continues to explain the importance of developing trust in a relationship with adolescents. Of particular importance, Taffel believes, is the ability of the therapist to switch the perspective from being problem-focused to developing a “three-dimensional relationship” with the teen. This requires looking at what the therapist can do to understand the adolescent on three separate dimensions before ever speaking about a problem or issue that brings them in for therapy. He delineates these dimensions as addressing the adolescent’s personal interests, their relationships with their network of peers, which Taffel terms the “second family”, and how the teen sees him or herself in their world. The premise behind this three-dimensional relationship is that adolescents need to feel confident that the therapeutic relationship will be a safe one that respects their abilities, strengths, and choices. He discusses a different way in which to set up this relationship to be one of trust rather than just another adult nosing into the adolescent’s business. He stresses a specific approach to confidentiality that attempts to foster a deeper sense of trust between the adolescent and therapist while still protecting the safety of the client.

In later chapters, Taffel talks about the importance of establishing rules and rituals important to understanding today’s adolescents and how these can be used more effectively in the therapeutic environment. He suggests it is important to use the superficial details of the

teen's life to help them move to the meatier issues instead of delving too quickly into the problems; a tactic often met with hindered process and stifled progress in adolescent work. He discusses three challenges that he makes to teen clients of talking to their parents about important issues, to learn how to be more empathic toward those around them, and to develop a passion for something they enjoy. He explains the impact that these three behaviors can have on an adolescent's experience and gives some practical suggestions on how to help the teen develop these skills.

Taffel goes on to discuss the use of advice with teens and how he has found this to be an effective tool when used well. It seems that this would also go against traditional therapeutic training, but the examples given in the chapter help to make a good case for when advice-giving can be an appropriate technique. Taffel's discussion on fostering an honest relationship with teens appears to be a particularly compelling argument. To suggest the degree of flexibility in confidentiality with teens, Taffel states, is controversial, but may be necessary to foster the type of honesty in a therapeutic relationship with a teen that will encourage strong therapeutic work. He explains that how you present the constraints of confidentiality to an adolescent will go a long way in how much they will tell you about the real issues. He also includes a section on how to talk to parents without revealing more to them than is necessary. Though some of the ideas expressed seem a little unorthodox, Taffel is very clear about protecting the client from potential risk. His approach goes back to encouraging the teen to tell the parents about risky behaviors or struggle so the therapist will not be required to tell.

Taffel then describes the primary conundrum that parents of teens face: namely, how to set, consistently manage, and enforce appropriate limits and consequences on their child. He gives some practical suggestions for helping parents learn to respect the teens' developmental

needs while maintaining clear boundaries and expectations for their behavior. He introduces the process of what he calls “focused family sessions” into his repertoire of techniques with troubled adolescents and their families. The primary aim of such sessions is maintaining enough structure and control of the session so that all family members feel heard and respected. Care is taken in these sessions to avoid sacrificing the trust established with the teen or with the parents. These sessions are usually targeted at issues that keep the family stuck in the same patterns with little hope for change. He gives numerous accounts of how he has used the technique and the resulting effects which appear to be positive.

His final chapters are devoted to helping understand the value of context and community in raising a well-balanced teen. He emphasizes behaviors that the therapist exhibits with the adolescent client and how those behaviors influence and are influenced by this young person. His overall focus for this book appears to be aimed squarely at the professional and how they can develop better ways to work more effectively with the adolescents in their practice.

Taffel’s book is written with a very readable style. He uses many examples from his own practice and others’ to illustrate his points and help solidify the concept in the mind of the practitioner who is reading it. He is quite candid with the types of discussions he has had with teens, many of which may be shocking to the practitioner and the parent. He also discusses how therapists can be real with the adolescent at that point and how such reactions can be used to enhance the relationship with the teen; breaking down the barriers to communication and helping the teen feel valued in spite of whatever outrageous behaviors they may have participated in or may be considering.

This book appears to have highly useful ideas in adolescent therapy though there are many suggestions that appear to challenge some standards of practice in the counseling

profession. Taffel insists that these controversial methods can be quite helpful. Practitioners must assess for themselves the potential value of such techniques against the possible violations to the ethical codes of their professional license and/or their liability coverage prior to engaging any of these techniques with their clients.