

The RECOVERY ◦ RENEWAL ◦ GROWTH PHOENIX

NUMBER 4

RECOVERY • RENEWAL • GROWTH

APRIL 2003

Parents Must Prevent Raging Epidemic:

Parents are pivotal players in preventing the twin

By John Howard Prin, L.A.D.C.

As a chemical dependency counselor, I see young men with poor literacy skills enter my office every day. They tell me their stories, tales of how they started skipping classes in junior high to get drunk or high, of their dislike of sitting in school and of learning in general, of how they dropped out of high school in tenth grade and landed a low-paying job because they'd never graduated or earned a GED. Although the details vary, their stories are sadly—and consistently—similar.

I shudder when these young men list the daily disadvantages they struggle under: long stretches of unemployment or poverty wages and irksome work hours, and basement status among peers, parents, and society itself. They are the "wounded" among the "go-getters" of our information age. And a person's wounds are a defining factor when that person seeks

help for addiction. Sometimes I think to myself: "No wonder this guy gets drunk or high on drugs; he thinks he's a failure and can't keep up with educated people his age."

For parents and educators (especially parents), the challenges of getting children through school successfully are daunting, but being willing to meet them is oh so crucial. Helping your kids learn is essential for the sake of every child and for the well-being of society.

Calvin—a young man with poor literacy skills

Meet one of the men in my CD program who suffers from "ill"-literacy, meaning sub-par reading skills, low comprehension, and apathetic motivation. Calvin's writing skills typify other clients' handicapssuch as incorrect spelling, lousy grammar, inaccurate vocabulary, and sloppy penmanship.

Calvin (no real names are used in this article) is 20 and the oldest of five children. Since seventh grade, his parents have ignored him. Although formerly a good student in a suburban elementary school, his grades plummeted in eighth grade and "nobody really noticed or cared." Shortly thereafter, he started hanging out at a friend's house and smoking pot after school, which eventually led to his hanging out *before* school.

"My friend's parents never seemed to notice we were there; meanwhile my folks

never seemed to notice I wasn't home."

Calvin says his parents lost interest in seeing his report cards and they stopped attending teachers' meetings, which, at the time, he viewed as his emancipation from adult accountability. That's when his dope smoking, then drinking, escalated.

By ninth grade he was "failing every class and didn't bother to register for tenth grade classes." When asked what his mom or dad said at the time about his dropping out, he shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of indifference: "All they ever said was, 'Don't sit around the house all day and watch TV or play video games; go out and get a job.'"

A five-year binge followed, and he watched from the sidelines as his classmates graduated and headed off to college. In those five years, Calvin never held a job longer than eight weeks and never earned more than \$6.50 an hour.

As his counselor, I realized drug abuse was merely symptomatic of the immense issues plaguing him. CD therapy could do little to restore the lack of nurturing he experienced as a teen. My hope was that it could somehow redeem those "lost years" by offering him ways to live sober and the encouragement to clean up his disheveled hang-dog image. His treatment plan, in fact, focused exactly on that: to improve his hygiene and appearance and to provide him incentives to earn his

April 2003

The PHOENIX

Each issue is a gift!

"Ill"-literate Dropouts on Drugs

evils of "ill"-literacy and chemical dependency.

GED—a credential that would greatly boost his qualifications for a better job, thereby promising him more income and much-needed self-esteem.

Like Calvin's past, dozens of my other clients' lives have been stunted by "ill"-literacy as well. There's the welder in a car repair shop, who at 30 had already convinced himself that he was a permanent failure and could never change. Or the operator of heavy machinery, who at 40 was convinced he had no addictive problems. One arrived crippled with shame and the other dulled by complacency, but each man came to discover the many ways his "ill"-literacy had influenced his drug abuse, which in turn had negatively affected his health, home life, ambition, and spirituality.

"Ill"-literacy and CD, a destructive and pervasive combination

The wounds from "ill"-literacy in these men's lives have cut deep. If only they were the rare exceptions. Contrary to my own impression as a high school graduate in the 1960s among a class of 450, in which only a handful of classmates did not earn diplomas (less than 1%), I was dumbfounded to discover that today approximately one out of three of my clients (30-35%) is a dropout. That's about five dozen people in an out-patient recovery program that serves 180 each year.

Clearly, there's a powerful and pervasive connection between one's dropping out of school and that individual's drug abuse or addictions. Poor literacy skills limit and inhibit any person's progress in life or the workplace. And, when barriers like these prevent the pursuit of a livelihood or successful career, the results are frustration and failure—both predisposing factors for chemical abuse and dependency.

I've had clients tell me, "Why should I apply for a better job when the application form is the first of many barriers? I hardly understand what they want to know on the form," they say. The applicant is then faced with the incapacity to write appropriate answers. He knows he'll lose out to other job candidates. "I know I'm unqualified, so I just shrug and scrape some money together, buy another stash, and get loaded to forget for a while."

The question I keep asking myself as a therapist is, "How did this happen? How could so many students have been allowed to fail?" More importantly, I wonder, "How can this trend be prevented? And *who* can prevent it from getting worse?"

From my perspective, the answers rest mainly with parents.

Parents, you play a crucial role in your child's success

When a child loses interest in learning or attending classes, often during junior high, it is Mom or Dad (preferably both) whose effective action will make the difference. Every child's education is the parents' responsibility. Because they are your children, not the school's, your handling of the challenge will do more to determine



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positive outcomes than anything else. Cooperation with your children's educators is essential. By putting forth caring and wise efforts, you show your child how important he or she is while emphasizing the value of learning, thereby increasing the likelihood of your child experiencing a productive future.

Based on my track record of dealing with "ill"-literate clients, I encourage you, as a parent, to recognize your rightful duties and obligations to your children. Then, deal compassionately with your kids' problems.

Perhaps you feel tired and burned out by the time junior high (puberty) has rolled around, or you're tempted by "more important things to do" based on your own unmet needs and desires. Please resist the temptation to opt out. Parenting your offspring for two decades into fully functional adults—tomorrow's citizens—can be time-consuming and demanding, but it's a necessary investment in the future. Both your kids, and society, will thank you for it.

John Prin heads the Men's Out-Patient Program at a treatment center in the Twin Cities. He is currently writing a non-fiction book, Secret Keepers Living Secret Lives, about the secrets that make us sick and how we can stop leading double lives. He also lectures on recovery topics to a variety of audiences about healthy ways to think, behave, and live. To comment on this article, contact John at Prinworks@aol.com or 952-941-1870.