

# THE MEGAPHONE !

[navigating **adolescent** transitions]

Promoting the voices of Manitoba's children and youth

**2013** i am... **A SERVICE PROVIDER** **ISSUE 05**  
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## focus on Social Competence

Adolescence is characterized as "a stage of life of testing limits, taking risks, poor impulse control, making mistakes, errors in judgment, lack of foresight & planning, [a] feeling of invulnerability, [and a] lack of empathy."

The achievement of personal, social, emotional, and behavioural regulation is known as social competence. "Social competence is possessing and using the ability to integrate thinking, feeling and behaviour to achieve social tasks and outcomes valued in the host context and culture."

The experience of childhood trauma can greatly impact an adolescent's ability to transition successfully through this period, which is generally agreed to be from about age 10 to 18, depending

on rate of maturation. A lack of social competence can create incredible challenges for the child who struggles to understand his own transformation.

Stapp and colleagues (2011) recommend a focus on developing social competence in children at-risk for delinquent behaviours. They note that "...socially competent youth have less involvement with delinquent peers." The risk is significantly elevated for adolescents who are also working within the parameters of a brain based disability such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

### **SO-CIAL COM-PE-TENCE:**

The ability to regulate thoughts, feelings & behaviours in order to successfully adapt to the culture

**On the importance of the compassionate guidance of young people:  
"Adolescence is like having only enough LIGHT to see the  
step directly in front of you." - Sarah Addison Allen**

**"You can learn many  
things from children. How  
much patience you have,  
for instance"**

**Franklin P. Jones**

<http://www.cywclub.com/quotes.htm>

Research by Stephanie Stepp and colleagues (2011) indicates that:

"...promoting the development of **SO-CIAL COMPETENCIES** and reducing involvement with delinquent peers may protect at-risk youth from engaging in serious delinquency in early adulthood while **INCREASING THEIR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS.**"

## Office of the Children's Advocate

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# THE SOCIAL ATTRIBUTES CHECKLIST

## INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES

### THE CHILD:

- Is usually in a positive mood
- Is not excessively dependent on adults
- Usually attends programming willingly
- Usually copes with rebuffs adequately
- Shows the capacity to empathize
- Has positive relationships with one or two peers; shows the capacity to really care about them and miss them if they are absent
- Displays the capacity for humour
- Does not seem to be acutely lonely

## SOCIAL SKILLS ATTRIBUTES

### THE CHILD USUALLY:

- Approaches others positively
- Expresses wishes and preferences clearly; gives reasons for actions and positions
- Asserts own rights and needs appropriately
- Is not easily intimidated by bullies
- Expresses frustrations and anger effectively, without escalating disagreements or harming others
- Gains access to ongoing groups at play and work
- Enters ongoing discussion on the subject; makes relevant contributions to ongoing activities
- Takes turns fairly easily
- Shows interest in others; exchanges information and requests information appropriately
- Negotiates and compromises appropriately
- Does not draw inappropriate attention to self
- Accepts and enjoys peers and adults of ethnic groups other than his or her own
- Interacts nonverbally with other children with smiles, waves, nods, etc

## PEER RELATIONSHIP ATTRIBUTES

### THE CHILD:

- Is usually accepted versus neglected or rejected by other children
- Is sometimes invited by other children to join them in play, friendship, and work
- Is named by other children as someone they are friends with or like to play and work with

"I'll see it when I believe it"

## REPUTATION MANAGEMENT FOR CHILDREN: DOES IT EVEN MATTER?

After years of neglect, abuse, family and community rejection, violence, and risk-taking behaviours, some adolescents are among the most challenging clients an agency may have on its caseload. Our Office reviews file recordings and conducts interviews with service providers in which adolescents are sometimes described as violent, rude, irresponsible, unreliable, angry, beyond control, and numerous similar descriptors.

At some point along the path of their involvement with professionals, some youth lose the empathy of their workers, who no longer seem to acknowledge the challenging adolescent behaviours as symptoms of unresolved trauma and unmet needs. The onus for change seems to come to rest firmly on the shoulders of the child, who was given neither an example of positive development, nor a consistent, caring adult to whom they could form a healthy and flourishing attachment.

Documentation regarding children often precedes their introduction to new professionals and service organizations. File reviews by our office suggest that the reputation of a youth can be influenced by the ways in which service providers complete forms and case notes. Case notes may omit the child's significant experience of childhood trauma and abuse, and may further blame the child for predictable behavioural reactions to unmet developmental needs.

Reputation management for children in the child welfare system is important. If children are introduced to service providers through pessimistic descriptions of their behaviours, it is little surprise that service providers might meet young people at the door with a guarded cynicism. Creating a negative pathology of a young client serves to lower expectations of the child. A child's constructed reputation can influence the standards that child may be expected to meet.

In offering suggestions for more effective approaches to engaging difficult-to-reach clients, Andrew Turnell (2005) suggests that workers are more likely to receive a client's confirmation of the client-professional alliance when workers "continually try to approach their professional colleagues and clients from a stance of humility, informed through a spirit of [curiosity]"<sup>5</sup>

Do we blame adolescents for being traumatized?

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<sup>1</sup>Bala, N. (2011). Youth offending in Canada: Principles, policies & politics. Faculty of Law: Queen's University: Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School, University of Regina, 1-28.

<sup>2</sup>Image Source: [http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/automatic/images/teenagers\\_conf.jpg](http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/automatic/images/teenagers_conf.jpg)

<sup>3</sup>Promoting social competence. (n.d.). University of Dundee: School of Education. Retrieved online April 16, 2013, from <http://www.dundee.ac.uk>

<sup>4</sup>Stapp, S. D., Pardini, D. A., Loeber, R., & Morris, N. A. (2011). The relation between adolescent social competence and young adult delinquency and educational attainment among at-risk youth: The mediating role of peer delinquency. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 56(8), 457-465.

<sup>5</sup>McClellan, D. E., & Katz, L. G. (2001). Assessing young children's competence. *ERIC Digest*, EDO-PS-01-2. Retrieved September 29, 2013, from <http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/eecearchive/digests/2001/mcclel01.pdf>

<sup>6,7</sup>Turnell, A. (2005). Relationship-grounded, safety-organized child protection practice: Dreamtime or real-time option for child welfare? In Drumbill, G. C. (Ed.) *Child welfare in Ontario: Developing a collaborative intervention model (Consultation draft)* (Appendix 9, 269-281). Toronto: Provincial Project Committee on Enhancing Positive Worker Interventions With Children and their Families in Protection Services: Best Practices and Required Skills.

<sup>8</sup>Side banner image source: <http://www.mrwallpaper.com/wallpapers/Love-Hands-1920x1200.jpg>