

# THE MEGAPHONE !

[navigating **adolescent** transitions]

Promoting the voices of Manitoba's children and youth

2013

i am... **THE GENERAL PUBLIC ISSUE 06**  
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## When children's needs are not met...

One of the markers of adolescence is the process of puberty, "a complex biological and psychological process involving sexual development, accelerated growth, and adrenal maturation."<sup>1</sup> Adolescence is also 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."<sup>2</sup>

Maltreatment of children does not cause them to become violent. As researchers note, many maltreated children are not violent. Still, children who are maltreated and not provided with opportunities to experience healthy attachment to nurturing caregivers are clearly at risk of developing negative behaviours and violent tendencies. In his examination of child maltreatment and its link to adolescent violence, Mark Totten explains that

"Although far too common, acts of child maltreatment and adolescent violence are **RARELY SENSELESS**. They are **predictable outcomes** of a snowballing of risk factors. It would be surprising if adolescents having these negative experiences did not harm themselves and others."<sup>3</sup>

"Let your voice cry to the sky, hear your pain rise, brush off your shoulder and keep trying,  
**KEEP TRYING**"

Excerpt from a rap written by a youth in care

As children progress through adolescence, they practice social skills and develop peer relationships that can carve out success if they experience appropriate support from the adults who surround them. Those adolescents who are constricted in their social abilities and peer relationships, and who have the experience of childhood trauma in their histories balance on the edge of risk. Acts of youth violence are predictable outcomes of a complex pattern of risk factors, beginning in infancy.<sup>4</sup>

"Acts of youth violence are predictable outcomes of a complex pattern of risk factors, beginning in infancy."<sup>4</sup>



"we worry about what a child will become tomorrow, yet we forget that they are someone today."

Stacia Tauscher



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# WHAT YOU BELIEVE IS WHAT YOU GET

Diane Malbin (2009) describes the necessary “paradigm shift” that

families, caregivers, professionals, and community members must achieve in order to more positively support individuals who may be struggling.<sup>8</sup> The chart on the left, adapted from Malbin’s work, suggests improved ways of understanding behaviours. Although Malbin’s chart was developed regarding the FASD-affected child, many of the suggestions are applicable to a wider-range of hard-to-engage youth.

Adolescents who have endured years of neglect, abuse, family and community rejection and have engaged in violence and risk-taking behaviours as a means of coping are often labeled as

**VIOLENT, RUDE**, irresponsible, **unreliable**, **ANGRY**, **beyond control** and numerous similar descriptions.

What we believe about people affects how we describe them and subsequently how we treat them. **In the early years, when it is obvious children are not**

**choosing their environments, it may be easier to see the wounded, traumatized child beneath the extreme behaviours.** But what happens when we believe adolescents are choosing destructive behaviours because they want to? “It may well be the case that these youth are making the ‘best choice’ they can under such adverse conditions.”<sup>7</sup>

**S**ome adolescents who appear difficult or non-compliant may in fact be processing external cues and expectations through disability-impacted parameters. In her work specific to FASD-affected populations,

**R**eputation management for children and youth is paramount since they occupy a vulnerable role in the society’s power structure. What adults think of young people can greatly impact the type of opportunities they are afforded. Lowered expectations on children can add to their challenges; if young people do not think we expect much from them, they may not, in turn, come to expect much from themselves. A child’s reputation can influence the standards that child may be expected to meet. “Our system places [young people] in segregated groups and does not expect much from them, which is perverse when they possess so much potential ... Research has found that a culture of higher expectations and a common focus, along with dedicated parental involvement, is what is needed for students to succeed.”<sup>9</sup>

| From seeing the child as... | To understanding the child as...         |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Won't                       | Can't                                    |
| Bad, annoying               | Frustrated, challenged                   |
| Lazy, unmotivated           | Trying hard, tired of failing            |
| Trying to get attention     | Needing contact, support                 |
| Inappropriate               | Displaying behaviours of a younger child |
| Doesn't try                 | Exhausted or can't get started           |

1 Definition of Puberty. <http://www.medterms.com>

2 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.

3 Totten, M. (2001, March 30). Maltreated kids, violent adolescents: Is there a link? Discussion paper prepared for Family Violence Prevention Unit, Health Canada. 4 Ibid.

5 Walking photo: [http://www.ctvnews.ca/polopoly\\_fs/1.1103502!/httpImage/image.jpeg\\_gen/derivatives/landscape\\_620/image.jpeg](http://www.ctvnews.ca/polopoly_fs/1.1103502!/httpImage/image.jpeg_gen/derivatives/landscape_620/image.jpeg)

6 Swaddled babies photo: <http://www.kgcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/babies-swaddled-in-a-heart.jpg>

7 Curran, A., Bowness, E., & Comack, E. (2010). Meeting the needs of youth: Perspectives from youth-serving agencies. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba: Winnipeg

8 FASD support network of Saskatchewan, Inc. (2009). Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder: A guide to awareness and understanding. Retrieved online, May 16, 2012, from <http://www.skfasnetwork.ca>

9 Quesnel, J. (2008, December 23). More culture not necessarily the answer. Aboriginal voices from ground zero: The Frontier Centre for Public Policy. Retrieved March 2, 2012, from <http://www.fcpp.org/publication.php/2520>.

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

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