

Best of the NETWORKER

Feature Articles from Past Issues

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Not Just A Bumper Sticker ... *I hope ...*

By Jerry Fest



While I agree with the sentiment of this bumper sticker (click on it if you want to get one), I'm constantly saddened by examples of our need to be reminded of this. Last night, while watching news coverage of Rifqa Bary, a 17-year-old Ohio runaway who says she fears for her life after converting from Islam to Christianity, a *professional* made the following statement: "Those of us who have kids know that you threaten to kill them every day." OK, leaving aside a critique of the suggested parenting technique, the statement was meant to dismiss the young girl's claim that her life was in danger. Granted, I have no way of knowing that it was, but this professional equally has no way of knowing that it *wasn't* ... the statement was simply based on a mentality of "believe adults, be dismissive to kids."

I've seen this in my own work. I remember advocating for one young woman who revealed abuse to me. She had a State case worker so, before I made a call to Children's Protective Services, I contacted her case worker to determine if a report had already been made. The case worker stated that she had not made a report because "I believe that there may have been *some* abuse, but I don't think it was as bad as she says it was." Excuse me? If you believe that there *was* abuse, then exactly *how bad does it need to be* before you'll take action ... and on what basis to you disbelieve her account?

Granted, we shouldn't believe without question everything young people say any more than we should believe without question everything adults say ... but we should also get past the bias that young people are *probably* lying. The danger of missing the truth far outweighs the danger of believing a falsehood.

With H1N1, it's More Important Than Ever.

By Jerry Fest

An important method of preventing the spread of H1N1 virus is hand washing, and doing it well and often. This is not news. We all know this. We also know that among those most vulnerable to H1N1 virus are the young and persons with weak or compromised immune systems. So here's a question: Why is it that at virtually every drop-in center for homeless youth that I've ever visited, washing your hands before eating is not a requirement?

When I ask this question the answer I get is that it isn't practical. Trying to get a population of drug-affected, street-involved youth to wash their hands prior to getting a meal is either a barrier to service or a nice idea that just can't be implemented. Let me present a different perspective.

When operating programs we have a responsibility to make the environment as safe as possible. Requiring hand washing before meals is the least we can do with a vulnerable population in an era where we are at risk of viral pandemics. To avoid implementing this simple safety measure out of a belief that street youth can't or won't cooperate is a reflection of low expectations ... the antithesis of Positive Youth Development philosophy. However, I am not so inexperienced in this area as to be unaware of the potential for conflict and power struggles, particularly when changing from an environment that never required hand washing to one that does ... so let me suggest a transitional plan.



Step One: Designate a hand washing area. Most drop-in centers have an area that is available for hand washing even if it's not currently required. If not, create a sanitizing station at minimum.

Step Two: Designate a date to implement the required hand washing. The date should be *no less* than a week out and *no more* than a month out.

Step Three: Create Signage. You will need *three* types of signs. First, a "how to wash your hands" sign at the hand washing area. Second, several "thank you for your

cooperation" signs designed to create community and awareness. Things like "Washing your hands keeps us all safe from disease, thanks for pitching in" and similar messages. Creation of these signs would be a good youth-involvement project and they should be placed prominently throughout the center. Third, create "countdown" signs. These are temporary signs that get changed daily and indicate the day and date of the hand washing requirement and the number of days remaining. Something like: *You will need to wash your hands before eating beginning in 10 days, Monday, September 21st.* Every day the sign should be changed to reflect the new number of days remaining.

Step Four: Purchase or create confirmation tickets. During meal service, station a staff or volunteer at the hand washing area. Encourage youth to wash their hands, provide guidance on proper hand washing technique, and issue a ticket after a youth washes their hands. Implement this immediately, before the requirement deadline.

Step Five: When a youth receives a meal, ask if they have a hand washing ticket. If "yes" take the ticket before serving and publicly thank them for their help and cooperation. If "no" serve them with a reminder that *"in 10 days on Monday, September 21st, you'll need a ticket to be served."* Make sure to include the *day, date, and number of days* remaining in your reminder.

Step Six. When the date arrives, *do not serve youth who cannot present a ticket.* Refer them to the hand washing area to get a ticket.

There are a few other things that will help. Include information about the hand washing requirement in all orientations for new youth. Visibly model the behavior ... have all staff wash their hands intentionally to have youth witness the act. Do it randomly and often to demonstrate that this is not a behavioral expectation for them, but a safety measure for us all in which everyone participates. NEVER eat *anything* without *visibly* washing your hands first.

If this procedure is implemented consistently it is likely that over time a culture will be created where the ticketing process is no longer necessary and can be phased out. And remember, our attitude toward the process

is not that we are doing something to them, but that we care about their health and safety and need their cooperation in making the center safe for all who eat there. It should be promoted as a way for them to contribute and be involved, and our gratitude should be expressed to them as they demonstrate cooperation. Consider giving this a try, and let me know how it goes if you do!



When it Comes to Kids, it's not About Politics ... or, it *shouldn't* be.

By Jerry Fest

For me this was a disappointing week on the child advocacy front. It began last weekend when tapes began to come out that were secretly recorded by a 25 year old posing as a pimp and a 20 year old posing as a prostitute. They went to ACORN* offices around the country and sought assistance with getting a home loan to open a brothel where they could prostitute underage girls trafficked in from El Salvador and launder the money into the pimp's future political campaign. In the end, tapes were released from 5 different ACORN offices in Baltimore, Washington DC, Brooklyn, San Bernardino, and San Diego. In all 5 tapes, ACORN staff offered counsel on how to manipulate tax laws to open the brothel and didn't bat an eye at the idea of trafficking foreign minors into the country to be sexually exploited. In fact, advice was offered on how to do it, ranging from training the girls to "keep their mouths shut" to offering to connect with "contacts" in Tijuana to help smuggle the girls in.

Here was the problem, though. The young people doing the sting are politically on the right. ACORN is politically on the left. Initially, and for the first half of the week, only right-of-center news media were covering the story. Center and left media were virtually ignoring it, or glossing over the content of the tapes. For ACORN's part, they went on the offensive, claiming it was a right-wing hatchet job using doctored tapes (yet, oddly firing the exposed employees as each tape came out) and sending cease and desist orders to the media that was reporting the story. It turned into this huge right-left battle, with the right using the story to beat up on ACORN, and ACORN and the left attacking the veracity of the story and the motivation of the right (to their credit, they are now calling for an independent investigation). Missing in the fight was outrage by child advocates that such a large organization could have that many employees across the country willing to aid and abet in the trafficking of underage girls. There has been so much silence on this story that you could hear crickets chirping.

The only explanation I have is that one would have to associate themselves with the political right in order to voice outrage. Most child advocacy organizations are politically left of center ... that's just a fact ... and the media that broke the story, as well as the political leanings of the film makers themselves, are distinctly to the right. But when it comes to the exploitation of children, maybe we should put politics aside. If this problem were uncovered in a right-of-center organization, I suspect we may have heard something from child advocates. It might have been used to point out the attitudes that permeate our society and put children at risk. There may have been calls for reviews of hiring practices, training, and supervision to ensure that no organization serving vulnerable populations allows such practices to have to be exposed by sting operations to come to light. Organizational representatives may be appearing on radio and TV using the story to raise awareness of the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children. And the young film makers, at age 20 and 25, might have been lauded as examples of the contributions that young people can make.

Look, I hate it when people get up on their moral high horse, so I am extremely uncomfortable up here ... but this story was not about the left and the right ... it was about a potential for children to be sexually exploited. I'm sure many of us are outraged by what the sting uncovered, but I'm not sure we raised our voices loud enough due to the political implications. Sometimes being an advocate for children may require us to speak out even if it gives one to the other team.

* ACORN is the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now and identifies itself as “the nation's largest community organization of low- and moderate-income families, working together for social justice and stronger communities.” [CLICK HERE](#) to visit their site where you can read their statements on this story.



GARY'S RECENT READINGS

By Gary Hammons

Occasionally I find the time to read or review publications that relate to the field of youth work. I would like to share or summarize some of these in this and forthcoming issues of the Networker in hopes that it will add to reader's information and interests. Jerry and I would welcome feedback and alerts as to other papers and interests.

One of my favorites is *The Prevention Researcher*. This month's edition features school dropout prevention and contains five articles on the topic. Following is a summary:

Preventing School Dropout: How All Adults Can Support School Completion **Volume 16, Number 3, Item# 163**

Preventing school dropout and facilitating successful school completion is the responsibility of all adults who pay a role in youths' lives. This issue of *The Prevention Researcher* looks at how adults within the varied environments that youth inhabit (after-school programs, places of worship, neighborhoods, schools) can support youth to successfully complete high school. | Published in 2009

Current and all older articles can be found at www.TPRonline.org. I would encourage readers to subscribe to this journal as it addresses a wide range of youth related topics.

NOTE: The Northwest Network for Youth has no financial or other formal relationship with The Prevention Researcher. This publication is highlighted solely as a recommended resource.