

The Art of Kid Whispering: Connecting with Adult-Wary Youth

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Monty Roberts is a real life “horse whisperer” who creates connections between horses and humans. This article extends these concepts to the challenge of connecting with guarded, distrustful youth.

Humans can be either fight or flight animals; because of our make-up, we are constantly deciding whether we are predator or prey, whether flight or confrontation is the most prudent course.

— Monty Roberts
Horse Sense for People
equine therapist

Billy comes to mind: 15 years old and hardened by a life with parents addicted to drugs and self-centeredness. He was unwilling to connect with or be touched by an adult, dressing himself in the black protection of a gothic. He wore that dark mysteriousness like a well-chosen perfume and it worked. Most adults were either annoyed or frightened by his professed fascination with death and killing. As a young supervisor, my staff asked me—or I should say challenged me—“let’s see you engage Billy!”

Unfortunately, I confirmed Billy’s perspective of youth workers. I figured and figured and then strategically released him from our program—unchanged and unaffected. Based on the accomplishments of some other youth workers, let’s look at the kids you and I both relate to every day. See if you can find your “Billy” in the following paragraphs.

These seven profiles are compilations of the work of Nicholas Long, Frank Fecser, and Mary Wood (2002)

with Life Space Crisis Intervention, along with the work begun by Sullivan, Grant, and Grant (1957) and further developed by Carl Jesness (1957, 2003):

1. **New Tools, Aggressive Type:** These are young people with no social or affective skills and who tend to be negative toward authority figures at home and school. As students they tend to be negative and pessimistic, with low motivation levels and only minimal awareness of their own anger and frustration. They are more prone to blame others, and accuse others of being hostile toward them. Under stress their behavior can be seen as aggressive, unbearable, and obtrusive.
2. **New Tools, Passive Type:** These are also young people with no social or affective skills, giving the appearance of being negative toward authority in both home and school. They are different in that they feel disliked and unable to cope. They tend to have little understanding or insight while remaining unrealistically positive or optimistic. They tend to be seen as nonconforming, inappropriate, and even a little bizarre. They are students who, under stress, withdraw due to poor verbal aptitude. They complain of anxiety and somatic symptoms.
3. **Gullible, Follower Type:** These are power and control kids who usually have positive attitudes

toward authority both at home and school. They get into trouble because they tend to be dependent or “followers.” They are uncritically open and accepting, naïve and trusting of others, often despite evidence to the contrary. They struggle with low levels of hostility of which they are usually unaware.

4. **Negative Peer, Follower Type:** These youth are interested in power and control, but usually are low in motivation and poor achievers at school. These young people usually have negative attitudes with authorities at school. Consequently, in the school context, they feel alienated, distrusting, and hostile. They tend to minimize problems, using denial as their primary defense. These young people also have low anxiety about negative behavior.
5. **Negative Leader, Manipulation Type:** These are the most sophisticated of the power and control types. These kids were observed to be somewhat cocky, cynical, uninhibited, and non-anxious. They show generally positive attitudes toward school authorities and relatively positive self-esteem. These are young people insulated by pride and the ability to manipulate both adults and peers.

6. **Oppositional, Acting-Out Type:** These are youth with above-average verbal aptitude, behavior problems in school, and negative attitudes toward school authority. They are self-professed, tough, no-nonsense kids who may feel somewhat disenfranchised and “mixed up.” They tend to be angry and easily angered. These are kids with hassles everywhere, both school and home, and they can be observed to be provocative.

7. **Introspective, Acting-In Type:** These are kids who are generally positive in school, usually prone to shyness, nervousness, and low self-confidence. They usually do not perceive themselves to be well-liked and they are prone to blame themselves for their problems. They are observed to be conforming, dependent, anxious, insecure, and somewhat perturbable. These kids tend to be non-delinquent in orientation, and experience all kinds of interpersonal conflicts.

Experience shows that these seven profiles can be grouped into three categories of young people we commonly see in our centers and treatment programs. This can help simplify understanding the private logic of these kids. Private logic is explained by Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, and Sperry (1987):



“Levi,” by Tyler A., Lincoln High School, Sioux Falls, SD. Used with permission.

In pursuing the goal, the individual employs his unique cognitive and emotional abilities. Private logic refers to the individual's cognitive constructs that serve in pursuit of a goal and represent a set of "personal truths" that guide the individual. Private logic is not necessarily in line with common sense. A statement makes sense in terms of a person's private logic but not in terms of what we might call "common logic." (p. 14)

They go on to further state:

When people don't do what a situation calls for, they are often operating on the basis of their private logic, which may differ widely from the logic of the human community. Behind every action are plans, goals, expectations and decisions that cause the behavior but of which we are only vaguely aware. Most of our actions are the consequences of thinking processes that we don't recognize and often prefer not to know but that have a definite influence on our actions. All of these thinking processes, which never reach the threshold of consciousness, can be considered part of the private logic. (p. 32)

Let's take a generalized look at the private logic of these kids as they fit one of three groups. In doing so, we will look at how they perceive the world and how they typically respond.

I. Profiles 1-2

The first group (profiles 1-2) represents loosely connected youth who tend to think concretely and lack socialization skills. These kids usually respond to stress in a rude and unsophisticated manner, either aggressively or passively. They tend to disappear or withdraw under stress. Van Voorhis, Spruance, Ritchey, Johnson-Listran, Seabrook, and Pealer (2001) report the following:

Their primary concern is whether or not their needs are being met. Other people serve merely as sources of gratification or are seen as barriers to their satisfaction. They are unable to understand or predict the behavior of others. Criminal behavior may result from poor impulse control. Also, external pressures may lead to fear or anger. An inability to cope with the negative effects then results in delinquency. (p. 59)

Sees the World:

- A. Demands the world take care of him or her.
- B. Others primarily "givers" or "withholders."
- C. Unable to understand, predict, or explain behavior.
- D. Others are only a "source of supply."
- E. Unaware of the effects of his or her behavior on others.

Responds to the World:

- A. Resents those who deny his or her requests.
- B. Has "bottomless pit" dependency.
- C. No remorse—no capacity to criticize own behavior.
- D. Behaves impulsively—can't predict reaction of others.
- E. Minimal attempts to manipulate or conform.
- F. Relationships with adults and peers are poor.

Perceived by others as:

- A. Helpless, blundering, and very difficult to deal with in structured settings (institutional workers).
- B. Unstable, unpredictable, immature, and unreachable (non-professionals).
- C. Odd, undependable, inappropriate, "loner," sometimes a bully, sometimes cowardly (peers).

II. Profiles 3-5

Secondly, let us look at the power and control kids in profiles 3-5. They tend to be rude, proud, and interested in confronting or beating the system. These kids are very much aware of where the power lies in a helping system as well as in their peer group. Van Voorhis, Spruance, Ritchey, Johnson-Listran, Seabrook, and Pealer (2001) report the following:

Their primary concern focuses on sources of power. They are aware that their behaviors have consequences for others, yet they lack empathy. Their view of others is limited to stereotyped roles. They attempt to manipulate the environment to their favor, and typically engage in only short-term planning. Criminal behavior results from attempts to gain peer approval, gratification of material needs, or an attempt to gain control in a situation via a "bad guy" role. (p. 59)

Sees the World:

- A. Aware that his/her behavior affects getting what he or she wants.
- B. Manipulates environment to get what he or she wants.
 - 1. "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em."
 - 2. "Get him or her before he or she gets me."
- C. People may or may not be useful.
- D. Denies any strong involvement with others.
- E. Uses people.
- F. Conforms to whatever "power structure" is in operation.

Responds to the World:

- A. Manipulates by conning, conforming, or intimidating.
- B. No individualized description of others—only roles.
- C. Can't blame self for past or present difficulties.
- D. Has formula for success.
- E. Formula only applies to short-term planning.

III. Profiles 6-7

Lastly, there is the group of independent, reactor kids in profiles 6-7. They see and understand the complexity of relationships but, when frustrated, act in or act out. Van Voorhis, Spruance, Ritchey, Johnson-Listran, Seabrook, and Pealer (2001) report:

Their primary concern is developing their own individuality. They have internalized values and standards, and are rigid in their application of those standards when judging themselves and others. They feel guilt when they do not measure up to these standards, or feel conflict when admiring others' behavior. Criminal behavior may result in response to internal discord or situational tension that leads to acting out. These conflicts may yield internalized criminal standards and value systems. (p. 59)

Sees the World:

- 1. Has internalized set of standards.
- 2. Judges his or her and others' behavior by set of standards.
- 3. Aware of his or her influence on others.

- 4. Aware of others' expectations of him or her.
- 5. Wants to be like people he or she admires.
- 6. May feel guilty for not meeting his or her set of standards.
- 7. Some ability to look realistically into the future.
- 8. Wants recognition and status from those he or she admires.

Responds to the World:

- 1. Ability to relate with others.
- 2. Relationship can be more than just dependent or supportive.
- 3. Uses own standards or others' standards to form relationship.
- 4. Able to assume some responsibility for self and others.
- 5. Can delay response to immediate situation.

Each of the categories gives way to three or four profiles or means of behaving, relating to peers, and responses to authority figures. It's critical that we have a framework for understanding the youth we encounter and desire to build relationships with.

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Eyes on eyes, shoulders square and encouraging the horse to go away is the same as allowing people to consider their options and recognize their mutual needs.

—Monty Roberts

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Developing the art of kid whispering or gentling youth demands that we meet these kids on their own terms. At the same time, we must maintain an adult, mature, balanced response to the challenges they send our way.

Roberts (2000) seems to engage the horse's natural response to a predator. He states: "My message to him (horse) is, 'you made a choice to go away and that is fine, but don't go away a little, go away a lot'" (p. 13).

Our three groups and seven profiles are a starting point. To every kid we encounter, we offer a choice: respond as usual or choose a different response. What we typically forget is youth, like Monty's horses, respond negatively when they are in pain or

experiencing trauma. Kids often tell me their initial response to adults isn't even a coherent thought. They simply react to a "vibe" they perceive.

Brendtro and Shahbazian (2004) say this response is evidence of a distrusting mind and purely a function of the brain's own security screening. Even the slightest sign of threat activates a response: attack, freeze, or retreat.

My work with youth confirms it. If a youth perceives threat from an adult (i.e., disrespect, blaming, belittling, mocking, or shaming) resistant behavior is set in motion. We must understand that we all put up resistance in the presence of a threat. Resistance is a healthy sign and usually proactive in intent. Physically, youth will attempt to protect themselves and we see that they do it psychologically as well.

Some kids are overwhelmed by their problems, and others live as if they are unaware of any problems or challenges. We need to develop connections that help youth face and overcome problems. We don't want them to simply overcome problems, but to learn to build the kinds of strengths that will sustain them long-term.

Resistance to bonding usually is a function of two dynamics: a youth's willingness or unwillingness to be influenced by adults, and his or her ability and willingness to address problems. According to Goldstein (2001), there are four typical strategies of resistance youth will employ:

1. Withholding communication or being silent.
2. Controlling conversation content.
3. Manipulating or out-witting the youth worker.
4. Violating boundary rules.

Beth, a 14-year-old Native American sent to me by her probation officer, simply would not talk. I asked all the questions, tried to engage, and got nothing. That is a typical response. You may also find youth who respond infrequently, make small responses like grunts and moans, or who randomly ramble.

Jake, 16, discovered I like rap music. He wanted to overwhelm the conversation, talking about different styles of music, showing me his raps and even performing mini-rap sessions. All this was meant to resist our dealing with his drug problem. Other types of resistance include intellectualizing, asking rhetorical questions, and obsessive rambling.

Jodie, LaTasha, and Chelsea, three teenage girls I worked with on an outpatient unit I supervised, laughed when I asked how I might be perceived by the youth I meet. They asked if I really wanted to know. Then, they told me that girls understood they could manipulate me with their tears. If they cried and talked about family problems, girls knew JC would not ask about their drinking and drugging.

That is an example of relational manipulation. The three other forms of this kind of resistance are discounting, externalizing, and forgetting.

Joey, a responsible 16 year old, arrived at therapy with his parents. After the first meeting, he made it clear this was not his idea. He missed three appointments, so I called his mother and learned he had arranged to get himself to the sessions. He was telling his folks how good it was to see JC while, in truth, he was skipping the appointments altogether. Violating the rules like this is one example of how kids show resistance. Other examples include pocketing payment, making improper requests, and displaying inappropriate behavior.

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My message to him is, "You made the choice to go away and that is fine, but don't go away a little, go away a lot." Horses have a flight distance of approximately a quarter to three-eighths of a mile.

— Monty Roberts

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In the words of Harry Stack Sullivan (1954), "... we will speak of these operations for the protection of the self-system as security operations. In other words, all anti-anxiety operations are security operations; all efforts to protect one's self-esteem are security operations" (p. 102). The same is true of both people and animals: when pressed, the horse runs. When human beings are pressed, afraid, and/or in pain, they engage in a variety of security operations: fight, freeze, or flee.

Following Monty Roberts' suggestion, you can press a horse in a round pen. He intentionally activates the horse's security operation of running, but in a context where the horse can and does make manageable choices.

In the same spirit, kid whispering must involve getting youth to show their typical pain-based responses but in the safety of a “round pen.”

One of the most masterful agents of change in our day was Milton Erickson, known for engaging the most difficult clients and students. He accomplished his feats by applying a principle he called utilization.

Nichols and Schwartz (2002) describe this principle as using clients’ (students’) language and preferred ways of seeing themselves to minimize resistance. Instead of analyzing and interpreting dysfunctional dynamics, the idea was to get the client active and moving, which usually happened between appointments.

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I remain eyes on eyes and shoulders square, but I watch closely for gestures of negotiation—gestures that make up part of the language of Equus that I’ve deciphered over time. I virtually always see first that he will lock on me the ear closest to me. It will point in my direction. This means, “I respect you. I don’t know who you are or what you are up to, but I will show you respect and attempt a negotiation.”

—Monty Roberts

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Now understanding the horse’s behavior, discerning that the running is a function of fear or pain-based programming, Roberts pursues the animal in a round pen and the horse chooses to stop running. He looks for the slightest signs that the horse is making a different choice or deal.

When we allow kids to show their pain-based reactions and avoid joining them in a cycle of conflict, we can take advantage of teachable moments, that slight turning of the ear.

Brendtro and Seita (2002) describe this as building respectful alliances. In this trusting situation, the youth believes the adult genuinely cares, understands, and can help. The youth and adult cooperate toward common goals and engage in mutual problem solving. Over time, both the youth and the adult increase respectful communication and social bonding.

A youth’s respectful response to this alliance shows in his or her increasing levels of cooperation. The youth may find the courage to work with, instead of against, adults. He or she may begin to show assertiveness rather than protective or vengeful hostility.

As they learn that adults can help them and choose to help them, youth may begin to state their needs appropriately and collaboratively. Their consideration and care for others, as well as themselves, increases. Youth engaged in respectful alliances are less likely to hide and more likely to take responsibility for both their problems and their gifts. As ownership for personal problems develops, so too does the ability to accept the mistakes and choices of others.

As a complement to tolerance, these youth begin to understand and seek forgiveness from others. Emotional management increases as youth move beyond the need to protect themselves and begin to deal with the reality of their lives. They also learn to better manage anger, disappointment, confusion, and rejection.

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One of the goals in human-to-human Join-Up, then, is to create, through communication and behavior, situations where the satisfaction of cooperation outweighs the negative reaction to unnatural conditions.

—Monty Roberts

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Understanding private logic, responding to resistance, and building connection are necessary in helping an adult-wary adolescent change how he or she reacts to their environment. Going a step further and unleashing the “inside kid” requires four critical skill sets: connecting, clarifying, decoding, and responding.

1. Connection Skills

Jennifer is a 15-year-old youth I encountered in the hall on the way to my office. She demanded my attention because she perceived herself as being assaulted by another female her age in the hall. How did I make myself present to her and avail myself of the opportunity to hear the “inside kid”?

Attending: It's crucial to tune in to Jennifer's frequency and reduce the noise both of us bring to the table. This skill also involves observing Jennifer and how she engages or attempts to disengage me. This is an adjustment skill where the fine-tuning happens inside the head and heart of the youth worker.

Assessing: A couple of things need to happen here. First, I need to try to determine what behaviors Jennifer uses to get what she wants while defending herself against what she doesn't want. I also have to look at Jennifer—how she dresses, her "style," her language, her interests—to find a place to begin conversation. This process helps determine how Jennifer's private logic connects to my effective evaluation, which in turn will drive my style of interaction.

Accessing: You'll use this same skill to engage a student in crisis. Here, we use it to check Jennifer and press for a reaction. Accessing is twofold: present yourself as respectful and safe. At the same time, you have to be different enough that you create a need for the student to know more about what you have to say.

2. Clarifying Skills

Jennifer has a story. Given the right circumstances, she would like to tell it. These skills help us elicit a youth's drama.

Inquiring: Well-formed and carefully placed questions have the potential for unlocking dusty corners in a child's untold story. It is the youth worker's ability to utilize open questions that bring to the surface rich, lengthy descriptions. Closed questions will help to focus and sharpen various aspects of the story.

Timelining: As youth workers, we must hear each kid's story from his or her perspective. Sequencing that story into meaningful chunks will provide some insight—at least to the worker. It is corrective when the youth worker has the ability to link sequences and get feedback from the young person.

Reframing: Finding strengths—even in a youth's troubling responses—is key. Reframing involves searching out the hidden, positive intention behind shabby behavior or finding the right context for poor, but resilient, responses.

3. Decoding Skills

Jennifer, like most kids, behaves in ways we can understand if we invest in the process of connecting her private logic with her affective evaluations. This is where we will begin to see her motivations.

Listening: As youth workers, we must learn to hear students' thoughts about meaningful or stressful events in their lives, while listening for their typical emotional responses. As time goes on, we'll begin to sense the tumblers falling inside students who have locked their hearts away from the pain.

Locating: We're trying to locate motivators and de-motivators, determine key themes, joys, and disappointments. We also want to focus on the language used to describe these events.

Linking: This is where the youth worker attempts to help the student link private logic with emotion and resulting behavior. Linking also involves connecting today's event with similar past events, as well as linking today's event with possible future outcomes. Lastly, we need to link this student's behavior with other students who show either similar or dissimilar patterns.

4. Responding Skills

The Jennifers of today really do want youth workers who can respond in a healthy, empathic fashion. These skills help students understand their stories as part of the human story. We also want to help them understand a responsive heart is hearing them.

Resonating: Listening must happen in a manner that allows the youth's story into your heart. As a youth worker, you receive the cognitive and emotional vibrations emanating from the student.

Reflecting: It is important to mirror back to the student his or her feelings, thoughts, and impressions. The student must see you receiving and carefully reflecting. This process can happen in part, that is piece by piece, or in full by reflecting a complete picture as you receive it. This is a collaborative process, where the student is invited to edit and correct any distortions presented by the youth worker.

Armed with compassion, understanding, and a specific set of gentling tools, it is possible to disarm the wildest of students. Remember the round pen where

a horse never feels cornered. If we don't corner kids, we give them the freedom to make their own choices. Among those choices is a gentler, more productive outcome.

NOTE

This article was inspired by Mark Strother, training director at Cal Farley's Boy's Ranch, Amarillo, Texas, in a presentation of a video clip of a youth worker, a teenager, and a 1,500-pound horse. If we could understand and teach others to appreciate youth like this equine therapist understands horses, what wonders might be accomplished?

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Inside

Inside you're all alone, no one knows just how much
On the outside, fear of one's own mind, false confidence as a crutch.

I plague one's self so, with rejection of my whole being
When I am loved, accepted by my friends, hated by myself.

Friends think I'm normal, no troubles cross my mind
It is to them my false confidence prevails.

Far away, someday, myself I may condone
But for now, in darkness, inside am I alone.

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