

Necessary Discipline, Or Brainwashing?

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By IRV EDELSON

Tampa child psychiatrist Dr. Joseph Lupo is one of Straight's strongest supporters, a result of visits to the center and observations of the program. While he has no official connection with Straight, he has recommended a number of teens to the drug rehabilitation center.

Dr. Lupo said he feels Straight works well because clients are "in house" rather than being treated as "outpatients." "Outpatients have too much time in between to be influenced by drugs, peer pressure and the good feeling drugs give them to satisfy their psychological needs," Dr. Lupo said.

He added that the temptation is too great for some of "these children" who need a more structured program where limits can be set on their "acting out" behavior. "The best approach to dealing with the drug problem is peer pressure, and Straight has that," Dr. Lupo said.

"Straight uses rational therapy, which helps the person be more in contact with reality," the Tampa psychiatrist said. "He accepts responsibility for his own behavior."

Straight is not without its critics, but to its credit, criticism seems to be tempered with praise for the overall accomplishments of the St. Petersburg center.

Pressed for some of Straight's weaknesses, Dr. Lupo remarked: "Some children who go through the program feel that they have been programmed too rigidly. Their responses are too robot-like, not natural. A lot of people see that as an extreme way of brainwashing."

"But even if they are brainwashed, less natural or more robot-like in their responses," Dr. Lupo said, "it is better than the alternative of having someone who is destroying his body and brain with drugs."

He explained that Straight counselors "challenge" all their (clients') beliefs, and then make them dependent on the group, which tries to substitute their previous beliefs with those of a more constructive value. That's the process or variation of brainwashing used."

Another risk of the program is the possibility of mistaking a youngster's emotional problems (abnormal attitude or behavior) for drug abuse, he said. In such a case, a person with a severe neurosis or psychosis might buckle under

the peer pressure at Straight and suffer a breakdown.

"This would happen if their defenses weren't strong enough to handle the situation," Dr. Lupo said. "That person would probably have a breakdown later in life. And that can be dealt with."

But Dr. Lupo noted that the Straight program does have competent and well-trained counselors who are on the lookout for signs of behavioral problems that might lead to a breakdown. "Straight refers those clients to the appropriate treatment agencies," Dr. Lupo said.

A Tampa couple also commented on the program. While praising Straight for saving their twin daughters from drug abuse, the couple found fault with the rigid, unbending rules of the program's administration.

Although both girls dropped out just prior to their 18th birthdays, they have remained straight and strong supporters of the St. Petersburg program.

The parents' criticism of Straight included: (1) elimination of car-pooling, which created a hardship, (2) the creation of self-centered, selfish children by teaching them a self-love concept and (3) the shunning of dropouts by those who complete the program.

Driving to St. Petersburg — three trips a day from Tampa when the twins were in school — was one of the real

hardships of Straight, the parents said. They were paying \$300 a month in gasoline bills (at last year's cost).

"Initially, we were allowed car pools. We could meet on Davis Islands or Westshore and go together," the mother said. "But then Straight decided 'no more car pools,' and the hardship grew."

But the Tampa mother freely acknowledged: "It took us 18 months (to get the twins straight), but no matter what the cost was, it was worth it. I couldn't put a value on it. One of my daughters will tell you today Straight saved her life. For nearly three years now, they've been straight, and that means no beer or wine, either."

But twins Robin and Renee feel Straight's unyielding regulations — which precipitated their decision to leave without completing the program — today estrange them from the program and close friends they made.

"We were allowed to car pool," Robin said, "boys in one car and girls in another. Straight forbids boys and girls to socialize in the program. The guys started getting high on the way to St. Petersburg and screwing up. They

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stood the guys up in Straight, and they admitted they were drinking.

"All of a sudden, everyone from Tampa was (supposed to be) a screw-up. The car-pool privileges were taken away. They stood all of the girls up from Tampa and accused us of doing the same things as the boys. They asked: 'What else were you doing?'"

By then the twins were back in high school, getting high grades. "We were afraid Straight would put us back to first phase, and we would be unable to graduate with our class. So we told our parents if they did not let us withdraw from Straight, we would on our 18th birthday anyway. We were straight then and intended to remain so."

One of the philosophies of Straight is that if you don't finish the program, you are a "screw-up" and are then shunned by Straight clients and those who graduate. The Tampa twins made a number of good friends in Straight, who now shun them because they didn't finish. "I don't think that's fair," their parents said.

Often the twins will see former Straight colleagues who lived at their home as foster sisters. "They will give us a chilly 'hello' and walk on," Robin said. "It hurts."

That ties in with another criticism of their mother. "The program lacks God," she insists. She feels that the Golden Rule has been replaced by individual priorities.

But the twins disagree. "Each individual is encouraged to identify God as he sees him," Robin said. The twins' parents feel that in teaching the kids to develop self-esteem and to put their own needs and priorities first, they are creating selfish persons. She cites the shunning of dropouts as an example. "Straight should reach out to them. They need help. I don't think it's godly to be unfriendly or ignore those who need help."

Robin explains that in the third phase, when participants are too insecure to risk an association with former drug-using friends, Straight insists that clients avoid "screw-ups" who have dropped from the program. "You're too wrapped up in whether or not you yourself will be able to stay in Straight," she

said. The rule remains.

The mother said: "Everyone has to go out and face druggies. I don't think Straight teaches the way to be friendly without associating with the druggies."

But Robin, defending the lessons of being self-centered and picky about friends, noted: "Before Straight, I had no priorities. Now my priorities are what I think are important."

She and her sister do speak at public meetings on drug abuse, counsel individual girls who seek them out — and tell about Straight, always praising the St. Petersburg center.

"What is so good about the program is the way they pin down the kids," the mother said. "So many kids, no matter how good their intentions, go to an out-clinic program and say 'goodbye' to it in two days."

Both parents said they felt an awareness program among parents would do more to reduce drug abuse by children than anything else.

A Land O' Lakes salesman and the parent of a child who ran away from the program and is now living on the streets in Miami, said it was the third time his daughter had run away. A

member of Alcoholics Anonymous for the past 12 years, the salesman said the secret of Straight's success is the step program patterned after AA's.

His only criticism was that the Straight psychologist was trying to treat irrational children in a rational manner. "They have a sickness, a disease. The first step says that they have some form of insanity. Until you restore that sanity, how can you start dealing with a person psychologically? They haven't recognized they have a problem."

The salesman does not blame Straight for failing his daughter, the offspring of a previous marriage. "You can only help someone who wants help," he insisted. For the past year he has been helping another Straight dropout, a former foster child who, with his guidance and counseling, has remained free of drugs.

His daughter either will "hit bottom," wake up and return to Straight, "or she will die," he said realistically. "Ten of us came into AA together. There are eight of us still here who are straight. The other two are dead. They shot themselves."