

"School stinks," said Bobby, a ninth grader who'd just reported for his first school counseling session. John J. Murphy, the school psychologist, was surprised Bobby had shown up at all.

Several teachers had referred Bobby for counseling, frustrated by his bad behavior. He was constantly late, rarely did his work, as disruptive in class, and sometimes made loud threats to other kids in the hallways.

Bobby's home life was just as chaotic. He'd been shuffled in and out of foster homes and special facilities for kids with behavioral problems. He and his father were on the waiting list for family counseling. The local social service agency in Covington, Kentucky, was keeping tabs on Bobby. By the time he showed up for his session with Murphy, he was in danger of being placed in another special facility because of his problems at school.

Murphy was almost powerless in the situation. The counselor has no way to improve Bobby's situation at home, and time was working against him --- at best, he'd see Bobby for an hour here, and an hour there. Murphy couldn't reward Bobby if he behaved well or punish him if he behaved poorly. (Not that punishment would have worked. Bobby usually ended up in the principal's office by mid-morning for disciplinary issues, but his behavior never changed.)

Ignoring the "school stinks" comment, Murphy began talking to Bobby and posed a series of unusual questions. So began the first of a handful of conversations between Murphy and Bobby.

Now, fast-forward to three months later: A dramatic change had occurred. The number of days Bobby was sent to the principal's office had declined by 80 percent. Bobby hadn't become an Eagle Scout, mind you, but the improvement was strong enough to keep social services from having to transfer him to the school for troubled kids. Bobby, a chronic offender, had become an occasional offender. And it happened because of a few hours of talking with a counselor.

What, exactly, happened in those conversations?

Let's circle back to Bobby, the troubled student, because now we can start to understand his rather abrupt transformation. Here's a brief exchange from one of Bobby's counseling sessions. Notice how Murphy, the school counselor, starts by popping the Exception Question:

Murphy: Tell me about the time at school when you don't get in trouble as much.

Bobby: I never get in trouble, well, not a lot, in Ms. Smith's class.

Murphy: What's different about Ms. Smith's class?

Bobby: I don't know. She's nicer. We get along great.

Murphy: What exactly does she do that's nicer?

Murphy wasn't content with Bobby's vague conclusion that Ms. Smith is "nicer." He kept probing until Bobby identified several things about Ms. Smith and her class that seemed to help him behave

well. For instance, Ms. Smith always greeted him as soon as he walked into class. (Other teachers, understandably, avoided him.) She gave him easier work, which she knew he could complete (Bobby has a learning disability). And whenever the class started working on an assignment, she checked with Bobby to make sure he understood the instructions.

Ms. Smith's class was a bright spot, and as we've seen, anytime you have a bright spot, your mission is to clone it. Using Ms. Smith's class as a model, Murphy gave Bobby's other teachers very practical tips about how to deal with him: Greet Bobby at the door. Make sure he's assigned work he can do. Check to make sure he understands the instructions.

What Murphy had avoided, of course, was archaeology. He didn't dig into Bobby's troubled childhood, and he didn't try to excavate the sources of his anger and willfulness. For Murphy, all that information would have been TBU, as Sternin would say: true but useless. The other thing Murphy avoided was Genentech's knee-jerk skepticism. The mental quibbles could have come so easily: *Ms. Smith is just a nicer person than the other teachers or Her class is easier or Teachers shouldn't have to adapt their approach to a problem student.* Instead, Murphy found a bright spot, and he trusted it.

Bobby's teachers were pleased when Murphy approached them with such specific guidance, and they promised to give his recommendation a try. Murphy asked the teachers to help him track whether the solutions were working by recording Bobby's performance on three metrics: (1) arriving to class on time, (2) competing assignments in class, and (3) behaving acceptably in class. Over the next three months, as reported earlier, Bobby's rate of being sent to the principal's office for a major infraction decreased by 80 percent. Bobby also made striking progress on day-to-day behavior as measured by the three metrics. Before solutions-focused therapy, his teacher typically rated his performance as acceptable in only 1 or 2 out of 6 class periods per day. After solutions-focused therapy, he was rated as acceptable in 4 or 5 of the 6 periods. Bobby is still not a model student. But he's a lot better.