

Eliminating the Stigma Often Associated With Disorders of the Brain: Two Evidence-based Practices used to Create One Innovative Approach The Tough as Leather™ Program

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What We Know

The stigma often associated with disorders of the brain, whether that disorder is primarily a physical health concern due to an illness, injury, or developmental delay, or accompanied by emotions and feelings that have a direct impact on the individual and other persons in their family and community hurts everyone - including at-risk youth. The stigmas associated with being an offender, a person in foster care, affected by substance use/abuse often prevent our youth from seeking care, reaching out for help – or responding appropriately when that care is offered or mandated. Even youth who've 'crossed the line' need to be kept safe. They do have value, their actions do have worth. Sadly, many of these same youth do not believe that about themselves.

It has been shown animals can reach people when other attempts made solely by people have failed. Animals don't place blame and labels on people, but they're not always perfect "fuzzy friends" either. Some get left at a facility to either be adopted or die. Unfortunately for society, this same attitude is often shown and applied in the actions taken towards our "not-so-perfect youth". Disruptive and unruly students aren't welcomed in school, often are considered unworthy of 'expensive' preventative and intervention programs and frequently become labeled as burdens to society as they move into adulthood - and adult correctional facilities.

In essence we euthanize their chance at life, just like we euthanize the unwanted dogs at the pound. This article does not address the opinions of kill vs. no-kill shelters. This article deals only with fact. The fact is we are losing too many of our youth unnecessarily, as evidenced by the number of them housed in correctional facilities and we are not providing them with the care they need. The Tough as Leather™ program truly is one of, "The last chance helping the last chance".

What We Can Do

Many youth feel they must convey an attitude of being tough. Due to their personal environment, some have to be tough, literally, to survive. Acknowledge this need for youth to be tough, quit the power struggle, and help them be the best manipulators of their own lives that they can be. Campaigns have tried saying, "Just say no". It didn't work. We tell our youth to, "Stop it, and be nice." Why should they? The world is not always nice. Sometimes it bites.

Although the concepts we're trying to instill in our youth are not new, the Tough as Leather™ program is a novel approach. Leather is a tough material. Once it is worked with, leather can become soft and flexible while still maintaining its strength. We are going to teach our youth what it is like to really be tough, just like leather. Being tough means things like:

- Making the right decision, even if it's not popular with your friends or family
- You are assertive. You stand up for your rights, but not at the expense of another individual's rights
- Sometimes doing things you don't feel like doing, because they need to be done (such as going to school, doing your homework and staying on the job)
- Being able to ask for help, when you need it
- Stopping what you're doing and helping others when they need it, if you're able to help meet their need.

How We'll Do It

Phase I of the program is the juvenile/animal therapy portion and has two mentorship components. It is for juveniles of the at-risk and graduated sanctions population. The program will be a part of their plan to achieve permanency for one year, a goal established for them by Minds and K9s, Inc., and hopefully adopted by the youth themselves as a life long goal. Success for the youth means staying in their community and out of trouble. This may be their last chance at avoiding incarceration.

The canine component to this program has the youth working with dogs that have no homes and are now available for adoption. However, the dog's chance at finding a new home, and retaining life itself, is limited by the total amount of space available to house them at the animal facility. The cutest, best behaved and friendliest ones will find homes the fastest. Putting down a healthy dog is a last resort. It is used when the facility is full.

As the youth learn to do some basic obedience training, grooming and play therapy (socialization) with the dogs, there will be many parallels that will become naturally apparent. A dog that physically behaves better, appears better and emotionally responds in an appropriate manner to people and other pets is more likely to find a home (be adopted). Youth who behave appropriately, maintain a condition of health and respond appropriately to others will find improved success in their personal lives.

There will be times when a particular dog seems, "bummed". When it is time for the youth to engage the dog in physical (play activity) it may not want to play. It may want to just sit and be held or stroked. This can lead to comments such as, "Even dogs sometimes don't feel so happy. What do you think that dog needs right now?" (Empathy training.)

When basic obedience training is being done with the dogs, the youth are taught positive ways to seek and maintain the dogs' attention. The youth will learn that to teach a dog to sit, that means it must learn to sit on the first

command. There are advantages and natural consequences to the dog for "doing it right". Praise follows. They're more fun to be around and work with. A dog will soon manipulate people to receive praise. It will come, and it will sit. And we can't help but reach out and praise the dog. Who then, is manipulating whom?

The same principles apply to people. Not all of the concepts we are trying to get across will occur as a natural thinking process by the youth. What happens at the animal facility will be reinforced and/or drawn out in this part of the program which is a mentorship and emotional literacy program, using the Lionheart Foundation's Power Source materials.

Why We Must Do It

We will present to our youth that they and what they do in their lives are worth something very important. Keeping youth safe and guiding them towards having productive lives doesn't mean we only help youth who are being bullied; emotionally, sexually or otherwise physically assaulted, etc. It also means we help at-risk and troubled youth again find hope for their lives and futures. When they can believe in themselves – they begin believing in the value of those around them.

Sadly, some of our youth believe otherwise. They will engage in behavior that is risk-taking, against the rules, and sometimes illegal. They want to show the world they have some sort of control, and that they can be right about at least one thing - they are worthless as a person. They have come to believe they are worthless as people, and by engaging in these behaviors they know that the responses they get back from society will tell them they are worthless. They now have shown themselves that by their definition, they are tough, and that they do have some control and power in life. By their actions and the following consequences, their belief that they are worthless is reinforced. Often, youth feel that is the only control they have in their lives and that they were right about one thing - they are worthless.

It is indeed a youth's right to wear ripped dirty jeans, chains and spiked hair to a job interview. After all, why should they "cow toe to the man"? We will show these youth that putting on a pair of pants, a clean shirt and being groomed to go to a job interview is not bowing to the man and being weak. We will show the youth they can manipulate other people's first impression of them - they do have power, and they are tough! They were able to help manipulate the job interviewer's first impression of them.

The Tough as Leather™ program will not only guide these youth through the discovery process that they can be tough in a whole different way, it will also help guide them on the journey discovering they are worth something special - and so are their actions.

How We're Making it Happen

Minds and K9s, Inc. is dependant upon public support for its operation - including that of the Tough as Leather™ program. As with most nonprofit organizations, money is always tight. Because we are also a very small organization with little funds, we have chosen to partner with other organizations in our community to make this program a reality. With this partnering, we also hope to see an increased sense of ownership from our community: "those" youth becoming "our youth".

- We found a canine facility that didn't reject our program because of the youth population we would be serving
Key: Look for partners that won't let the stigma of being a "troubled kid" be a barrier
- The canine facility we are using always had their volunteers serve as volunteers from one particular organization. We agreed our volunteers and the youth would also be required to be registered volunteers with this other organization. The unexpected benefits were that our volunteers were covered by this organization's liability insurance, had to watch a general safety video, and will be provided the pre-exposure rabies vaccine for free. We could not have afforded to offer the vaccination for free to participants in the program.
Key: Be willing to cooperate with organizations that support your interest, too
- An individual experienced in working with troubled youth found materials she felt were very worthy of use. Upon examination, we also felt the Lionheart Foundation's materials were what we wanted to use for the mentorship part of our program.
Key: Network, find out what's going on out there with other people and organizations.
- With our financial situation, we could not afford the materials. By a generous donation, the Lionheart Foundation helped make our program a reality by providing enough materials to get the mentorship portion started.
Key: Don't close other people's doors on yourself. Don't be afraid to ask for help, at worst they can only say "no" to your request.
- The initial grant application that would have provided salaries for the two mentors and two mentors for the canine portion was denied. We have found qualified individuals who have committed to serve in that capacity as volunteers. We continue to seek grant funding and donations to our organization so that those positions may become paid positions.
Key: Believe in yourself and your program. Surround yourself with others that do also - it becomes contagious and others will find you!
- Although the Tough as Leather™ program is made up of two programs that have their roots in evidence based practices, it is the combination of the two components that make our program innovative and unique. As such, it is important to have an evaluation process for the program. Will having these two components be more effective

than just having one or the other? We believe so, but that is not what constitutes evidence based practice. We did not feel qualified to develop such an evaluation on our own. An individual experienced in the short and long term effectiveness of intervention programs has agreed to work with us to implement an evaluation process that is compliant with evidence based practice guidelines.

Key: Good ideas and programs are just that - ideas, unless they can be documented to be effective.

- Designing and implementing a program such as Tough as Leather™ takes time and a lot of patience, especially because we're involving so many community partners and relying upon public support - as do most public or nonprofit programs. In this article, a number of ways have been identified to make a program such as this work, without an organization having to make a heavy financial investment to get it started. We will be reporting on the linear results of the program, and look forward to meeting other organizations wanting to implement a program that truly is one of "The last chance helping the last chance".

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