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What do failing kids need most?

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From Saturday's Globe and Mail

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Sharla is a tough kid from a tough part of Toronto , a neighbourhood whose main claim to fame is gangs and guns. At 16, she's been kicked out of at least five schools for truancy and aggressive behaviour. For the past two years, she's barely been to school at all. She was even kicked out of an alternative school – the place they send you to when the regular schools can't handle you – for refusing to take off her gang colours.

“I don't get along with other girls too well,” she tells me. “I got into a lot of fights.”

Today, she's found another sort of school. It's in the basement of a rambling, rundown house in North Toronto . Her classmates are mostly large hulking boys, dressed in regulation giant droopy pants, running shoes and hoodies. The schools can't cope with them, either. Most of them belong to ethnic groups in which the dropout rate is 40 per cent or more. They're the education system's biggest challenge.

Regesh Family and Child Services has a great track record with kids like these. It gets them plugged back in. Founded 30 years ago by a ferociously dedicated man named Ed Schild , Regesh has always taken on the hardest cases. I came here to find out what they're up to.

“Sharla's a hothead and she shoots her mouth off,” says Mr. Schild. “But she's very bright. She can do her work when someone is sitting by her side.” (The youths' names in this story have been changed.)

The biggest object in the room is a pool table, where the kids and staff sink a few balls during breaks. The pool table is an excuse for life lessons. “It's not textbooks all the time, but it's always learning,” says Mr. Schild's son, Uri, the chief child and youth worker at Regesh. At 31, he shares his father's philosophy and commitment. “Everything we do here is treatment-based. When they're shooting pool, they're also talking about issues, though they don't even know it.”

Oh, yes, they have issues. Anger issues, impulse-control issues, relationship issues, parent issues, peer issues, attention issues, self-esteem issues. Their academic issues are the least of their issues – just a

symptom of all the other issues that are overwhelming them. What these kids need most are life skills, and that's where Regesh comes in. "The teachers aren't qualified to deal with the emotional and behavioural stuff," says Uri. "We are."

The foundation of Regesh's approach is to respect the kid. I admit this sounds a little touchy-feely suspect to me, since "respect" often turns out to be synonymous with letting them get away with murder. I ask Uri to explain. "We don't make judgments when they first come in," he says. "We listen. These are kids who are just screaming for help." In turn, the adults ask for – and get – respect. "Sam? What do you do when you see the door closed?" asks Uri when a gigantic 16-year-old comes barging into his office unannounced. "Knock," the boy says sheepishly. He goes out, closes the door, then knocks politely. Small life lesson learned.

These kids are chronic "skippers" (i.e., truants). That doesn't mean they're dumb. It means they're disengaged. They can't stand school, so they don't go. At Regesh, they get the kind of flexible, individualized instruction that few schools can deliver. "I have four kids who are here every day because they cannot sit in a classroom," says Uri. "Some schools have 55-or 75-minute periods. They can't sit still that long." Sam is one of them. He can do the work, so long as he has someone to keep him focused and change the subject every half an hour to accommodate his short attention span. Once Sam achieves some (genuine) success, he'll start to feel good, or at least better, about himself.

"So many of these kids have no idea what it's like to be successful," says Ed Schild. "They don't even know what the experience is. You literally have to bring it to their attention. But as soon as a kid feels self-esteem, the world around him improves."

Very nice. But how do you make them behave? "I can make it very clear that I have expectations, and also that I care," says Ed. "I can say, 'This is your curfew and I expect you to be home on time. There will be a consequence if you're late. But I won't be angry with you.' So when someone doesn't show up here, we call and say, 'We were worried about you.'"

It seems to work. There are very few behaviour problems here.

What's really going on at Regesh, I realize, is an intensive form of substitute parenting. These kids are in desperate need of a significant adult, and here they find them. The adults genuinely like and care about them. Their own high-functioning behaviour – warm, affectionate, fair, non-aggressive and committed – sets an important example for the kids. The adults have high expectations, but they also show the kids how they can succeed. And they don't give up. In other words, they're everything you'd want a parent to be, and everything the kids' own parents are not.

The biggest problems in the inner-city schools – the high dropout rate, the violence and behaviour issues – are in no small part a consequence of family failure and dysfunction. People who argue that the school system can't possibly compensate for broken families are right, of course. But that doesn't mean we should do nothing. We have to do what we can, because they're our children, too.

Unfortunately, a lot of the things we're doing are beside the point or worse. What these kids need most is not a lesson in identity politics. They will not turn themselves around by having lessons translated into hip hop or by having more ethnic teachers. They will not be turned around with a few more after-school programs or a few more millions thrown at learning disabilities. They will not be turned around by lowering behavioural standards or being allowed to skip their homework without penalty. "These

kids don't need appeasing. They need skills," says Ed Schild . They will not be turned around by educators who insist that what they really need is "a way to construct their identity."

They will be turned around by people like Ed and Uri Schild, who have turned around the lives of hundreds of such kids – and gained their loyalty and respect – despite the fact the Schilds are ethnically white Jews.

The schools are begging for the programs that Regesh provides. These programs have been shown to lower dropout rates and drug use, and improve mood and behaviour. Ed Schild insists he could easily expand the service if he had the money. Yet, the agency operates on a shoestring. It isn't eligible for most types of public funding, and survives mostly on private charity. The staff dig into their own pockets to buy TTC tickets for the kids.

"What we teach them is that it's okay to be committed to something," says Ed. "We live in a throwaway society. But we won't throw them away."

For further information on the programs at Regesh Family & Child Services, please feel free to contact Ed Schild, Executive Director at 416-495-8832 ext. 222 or by e-mail eschild@regesh.com