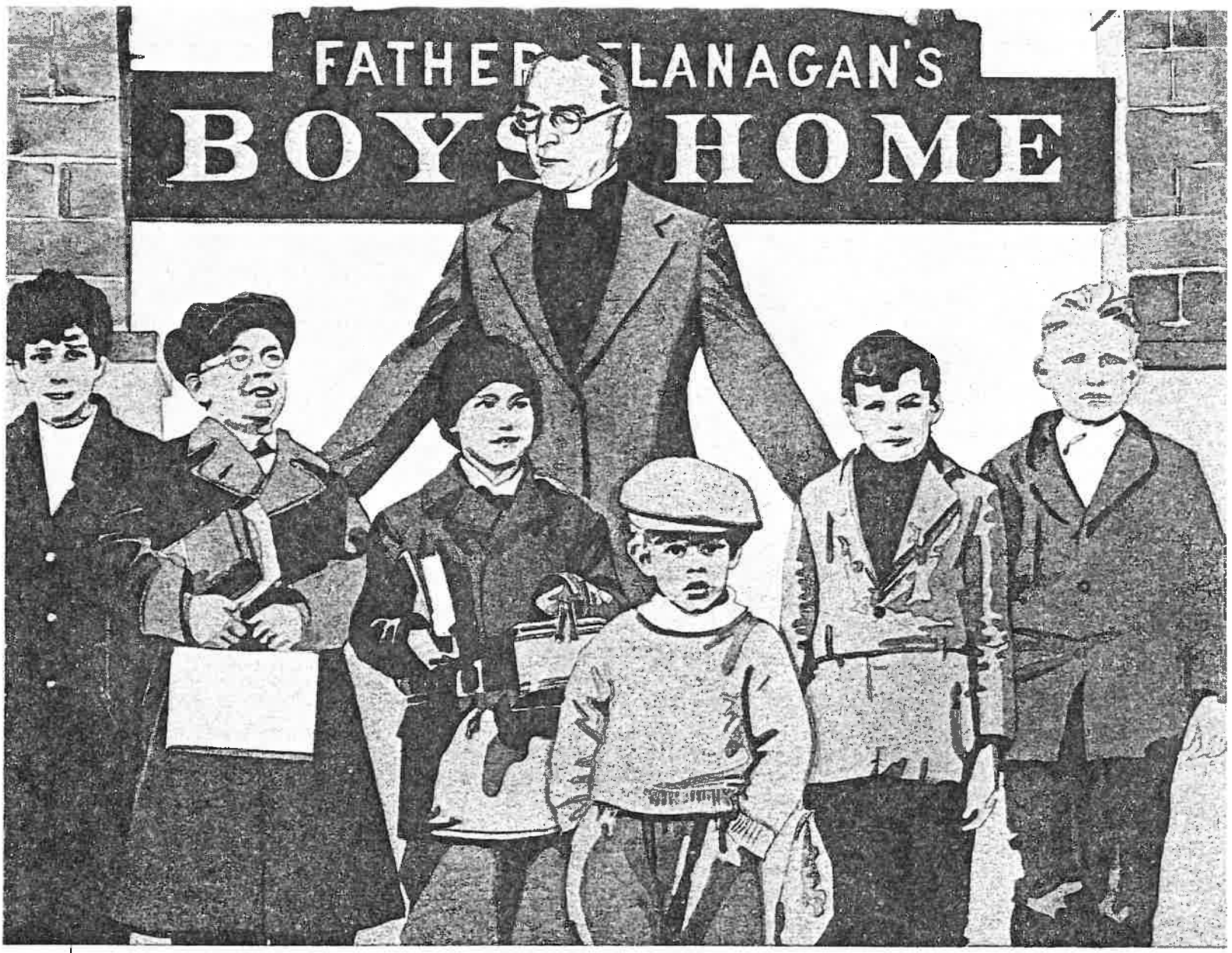

THE BOYS TOWN REVOLUTION

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When behavioral psychologists applied a new method of child-care technology, a venerable institution was transformed.

Forty years ago in the movie *Boys Town*, Spencer Tracy and Mickey Rooney immortalized Father Flanagan and his "city of little men." The priest had begun to care for street waifs, orphans, and delinquents as early as 1917, and his success with the community he founded, called Boys Town, brought him international fame. By the time of Father Flanagan's death in 1948, Boys Town and its national fund-raising drives were as established as the March of Dimes.

As often happens to well-meaning institutions, Boys Town slowly ossified after its founder died. By 1975 Boys Town was an incorporated village with a mayor, a city council, churches, schools, a public-utilities system, a safety department, and street maintenance. At another level it was a nonprofit organization with a board of directors, assets to manage, budgets to negotiate, and dozens of departments to oversee. It was also a school system, complete with an alumni association, class reunions, yearbooks, sports teams, and a choir. Under all these layers of organizational structure were 400 adolescent boys, ages 10 to 16, who came from all over the country because they needed help. These boys either did not have parents or had parents who were unable to care for them; most were angry and rebellious and had been in some sort of trouble with social agencies and the courts.

Boys Town could not keep up with the social changes of the 1950s and 1960s. Birth control and improved social services reduced the number of orphans; street waifs gave way to street gangs; and as products of the postwar baby boom reached adolescence there were sharp rises in the incidence of child neglect and juvenile delinquency. By the 1970s the

In the early years of Boys Town, Father Flanagan and the orphans marched in parades to publicize the institution.

old program at Boys Town could no longer cope with the new problems of its teenagers. Four directors of the youth-care program came and went in only two years, with no improvement in the chaotic conditions.

When Father Robert Hupp, the executive director of Boys Town, invited us, as behavioral psychologists, to reorganize the place in 1975, we accepted. We had had seven years of experience with Achievement Place, a home for neglected and delinquent teenagers, where we and our colleagues Elaine Phillips and Montrose Wolf had developed a behavioral technology for child care that we call the teaching-family model. The teaching-family program at Achievement Place ran smoothly and kept the adolescents in school and out of trouble with the law. By 1975 we had helped at least 75 other group homes around the country adopt our program, but we had never before attempted to work with an entire organization like Boys Town. Had we known the depressing track record of professionals and administrators who attempted complete institutional overhauls, we probably would never have tried what they said could not be done. Yet we are succeeding.

When we arrived at Boys Town—1,400 acres in eastern Nebraska—we found the type of child-care institution that was considered ideal 20 years ago. The dormitories were sterile, uninviting, and uniform. The central dining hall was massive and served food cafeteria style. A central laundry handled the boys' clothes; a central bus system handled transportation. For that matter, all services were centralized: A warehouse purchased goods and food in large quantities; a medical and dental clinic offered centralized health care; another staff took care of recreation; social workers took care of specialized treatments and therapies; a separate group of teachers planned the education program. All these groups and programs needed considerable organizing and supervision. There were head counselors to oversee the counselors, directors to oversee the head counselors, and coordinators of the directors. Each subgroup had its own ideas of how things should be run, and each felt that they were doing a good job and that things would be better if only those other departments started doing *their* jobs. The extreme specialization of tasks, so typical of child-care institutions, created jealousy and competition.

Such organizational complexities did the boys a disservice. Hundreds of people dealt with them each day, conveying messages that were often contradictory. Because no one individual had responsibility for a given boy, various departments would conflict over scheduling a youth's treatment: "I've got him scheduled into the clinic to have his teeth cleaned," a nurse would say. "You can't have him then," the social worker would respond, "I've got to talk to him about his therapeutic hour." At this point a teacher would invariably enter, angry that the boy had missed class.

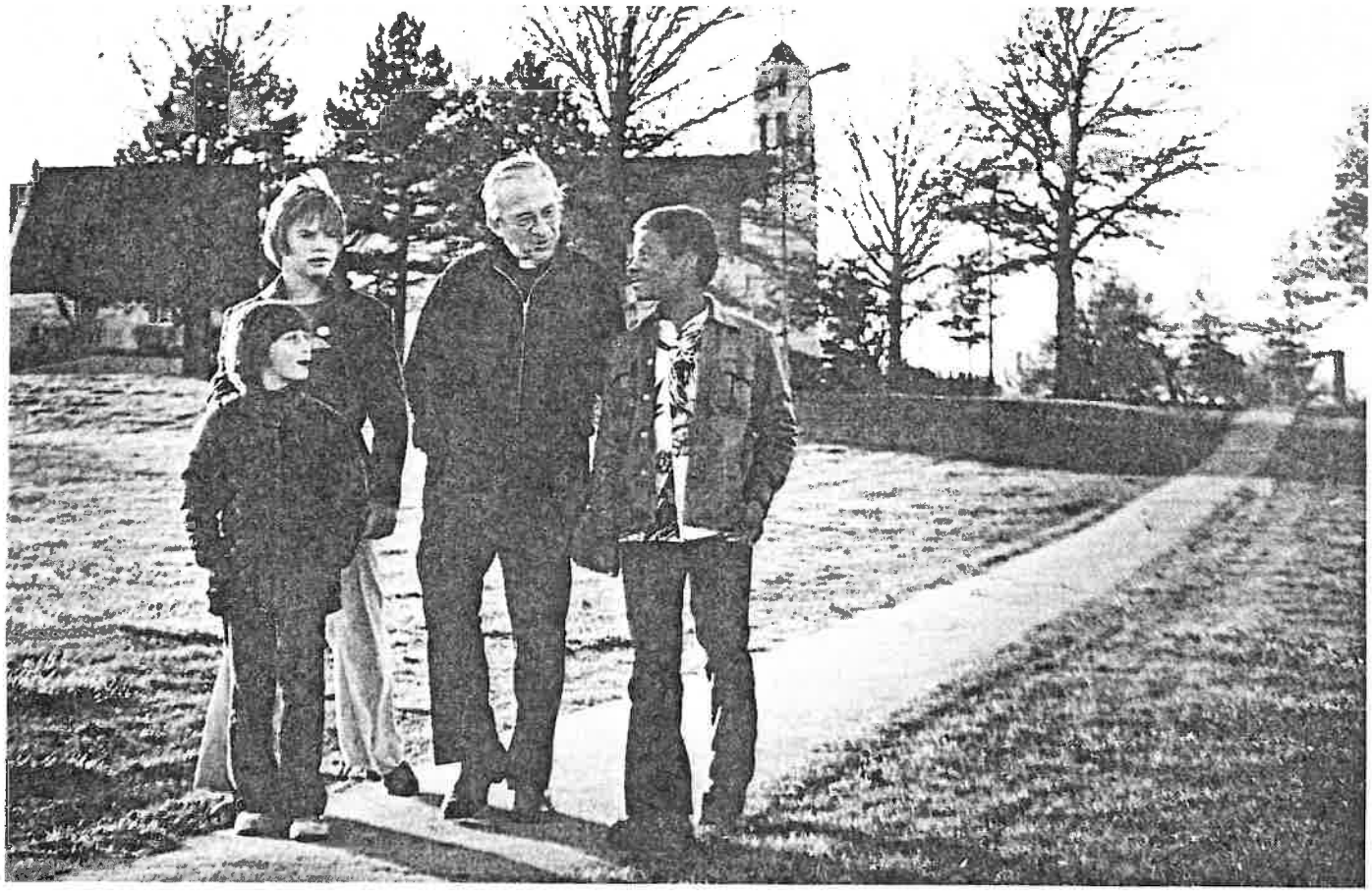
Such a pattern of divided responsibilities meant that no one took responsibility. Most staff members seemed unconcerned about a boy who was not in their unit. "He's not heavy, Father, but he's not in my section either" seemed to be the prevailing attitude.

They were also not helping the boys by being overtolerant, nonjudgmental, and nonevaluative. If two boys got into a fight, perhaps they just needed to "ventilate some pent-up emotions." Unfortunately, such ventilation in the real world may land a man in jail. If a boy was late for work or class, perhaps "he'd had a rough time lately and ought to be extended some understanding." Unfortunately, such tardiness on a real job may cost a man his employment.

Our major goal in restructuring Boys Town was to teach boys the skills they would need to live and work in the larger society. We did not merely want the boys to survive Boys Town; we wanted them to enjoy it, learn from it, and be able to leave it better prepared for life.

The first thing we did was to transform the dormitory houses into livable homes. We created 41 family-style homes, each for eight to 10 boys and run by a married couple who live there with their own children. All couples are thoroughly trained in the philosophy and execution of the program; we call them teaching-parents, to emphasize their roles as instructors and as parents who assume final responsibility for each boy in the house.

The boys had been living in a male-oriented world that was dominated by men; the family arrangement gives them a chance to be around women and girls as well as boys of all ages. This way they learn about family duties and family pleasures, the aggravations and benefits



Robert Hupp, director of Boys Town, strolls with boys on the city's 1,400 acres.

of having younger siblings, and what families give and what they require.

Each house has its own van, its own washer and dryer, and its own kitchen. In the small kitchens each boy learns how to cook for himself and for the family, how to care for and use appliances—most didn't even know how to use a toaster—and how to clean up. The boys go into Omaha to shop for food, so they learn about cost, budgets, and quality.

Equally important, the family homes reduce the organization of Boys Town to a scale that is human and humane. Someone is *responsible* for individual boys and *accountable* to other individuals, not to amorphous groups, for success or failure with a boy. And from the boys' standpoint, they know whom to go to for help or with questions.

The family system further ensures that someone is available for the boys at all times—not just from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays. When the teaching-parents need special services for their charges—medical or psychiatric help—they buy them from the Omaha community, just as parents would in any part of the city. Because the teaching-parents are basically in charge of all home services, including the budget for their home, and because the boys are doing more of the service jobs for themselves (such as shopping and laundry), we were able to streamline the bureaucratic hierarchy of the organization. We reduced the many layers of administration to two levels: the community directors, who work directly with the teaching-parents and the boys; and the director of youth care, who coordinates the whole program.

Of course, teaching-parents cannot make all the decisions regarding their home. Just as with parents in a normal community setting, they face certain limitations by virtue of being part of a community. In a typical community, for example, the choice of schools is generally limited by the geographical location of the home in which the family lives. At Boys Town there are three levels of decision making: Teaching-parents are primarily responsible for such areas as treatment-plan development, counseling, working with parents and social-service agencies, and nutrition and meal preparation. Teaching-parents share responsibility for budgeting for their home, selecting educational programs, and establishing specialized programs for their youths; but the role of teaching-parents is limited when it comes to which youths are admitted to Boys Town and which are referred to a residential treatment facility outside.

Simply putting the boys into a family situation would not have solved the problems of Boys Town. Using the behavioral technology we developed as part of the teaching-family model, we translated the vague conceptual goals of Boys Town into concrete, measurable terms. What does it take to "be a good boy"? "Improving self-esteem" is an admirable ambition, but how do you do it? One simple way is to improve a boy's style of greeting people. If a boy holds his head up high, looks people in the eye, offers his hand, has a warm handshake, smiles, and makes pleasant comments,

The system of teaching-parents at Boys Town allows boys to live with a couple trained in the principles and methods of behaviorism. Each couple heads a household of eight to 10 boys and combines the stability and affection of parents with the skill and experience of teachers. At left, teaching-parents Sam and Amy Williams relax with some of the boys.

he will meet more people, be better liked, and ultimately have a better self-concept than if he does none of those things.

For every comprehensive goal—teaching a boy to be "moral," "nonaggressive," and the like—we specified the particular behavior that we would encourage or inhibit. We wanted the boys to learn an enormous range of social skills; too many people have taught them what not to do rather than what they should do. The boys need to learn everything from how to use the telephone to how to keep a job. They learn to listen, to treat pets properly, to study, to fix tools, to arrive on time. They learn to work and how to behave appropriately at work. They learn how to bathe and dress.

We also wanted to continue Boys Town's emphasis on moral development, so we incorporated clergymen into the program to guarantee the youths access to their counsel, retained religion courses in the school curriculum, and refined the aspects of the treatment program that were designed to teach moral attitudes and behavior.

When the boys arrive at Boys Town, they have few social abilities. In order to develop them we use the teaching-family treatment technology that has been evolving since 1967. It consists of four basic components: the behavior-skills curriculum, the motivation system, self-government, and good teaching.

The behavior-skills curriculum outlines a course of study that teaches boys the skills necessary for successful family and community living. When a boy first comes to Boys Town, the curriculum is used to help assess his current skill level and the skills that remain to be taught. As a boy progresses, the curriculum ensures that his goals are being met.

After we decide what should be taught to a boy, we need to motivate him to learn those new skills. Some boys are self-motivated, but most of the boys we see at Boys Town need special help. To accommodate the wide array of individual differences, we have developed several levels of motivation systems. To determine which level of motivation is appropriate for a boy, he is first placed on an "assessment system," and we attempt to teach him new skills without any special motivation. For example, a simple compliment like "Good, Johnny, I think you've done a fine job" might be sufficient motivation.

On the other hand, many boys need the more structured motivation of the "negotiation system." Under this system the teaching-parents keep track of what the boy does and offer praise throughout the day for good behavior. At the end of the day the teaching-parents and the boy review the record of his behavior and negotiate the privileges that will be available to him the next day. The better his behavior is one day, the more privileges he will have the next.

In some cases the negotiation system does not provide enough structure for youths who need more immediate rewards. These boys are placed on a "point system," and they earn or lose points immediately following their behavior throughout the day. The point values assigned to a boy's various kinds of behavior give him an idea of their relative importance, and the immediacy of earning and losing points constantly reminds him of the skills he needs to learn. At the end of the day the boy adds up the points earned, subtracts the points lost, and uses the remainder to buy privileges

for the next day. The point system is the most structured kind of motivation in the teaching-family model and is used only if less structured systems fail.

If the original assessment shows that a boy does not need heavily structured motivation, he is placed on the "progress system," which uses the natural consequences found in most homes (praise and adult approval) almost exclusively. Under this system a youth begins with all privileges and does not have to earn them on a daily or weekly basis. Of course, he may still lose an occasional privilege, just as parents sometimes "ground" their child in a natural home. While a boy is on the progress system, the teaching-parents maintain a record of the types of behavior he is learning and give him feedback on his progress.

At Boys Town most youths start out on either the negotiation system or the point system. But as they learn the skills outlined in the curriculum, they become more confident and their self-motivation increases. As this occurs they advance to the less structured motivation systems and eventually behave very well with the minimal structure provided by the progress system.

The third basic component, the self-government system, consists of a family conference, a "youth manager," and responsibility development. In the family conference all the boys and the teaching-parents gather each day to discuss accomplishments, rules, and the problems of day-to-day life. It is a semi-democratic system; each issue brought before the boys is voted on by the family. However, they have no say about some issues. For example, the family cannot vote on whether marijuana usage is legitimate; such a rule is determined by factors outside the self-government system. But many issues do come before the family for solution. Among these are home curfew hours, problems with other boys in the home, and the fairness of various consequences.

One boy is elected to perform the role of youth manager in the home. His task is to settle various squabbles among the boys in a fair and systematic manner and to make routine decisions such as when to schedule showers or whether to save a particular leftover food. It is also his responsibility to report to the teaching-parents any event he feels should be handled by them. At the end of the day everyone evaluates the youth manager on the basis of his firmness, his fairness, and his general quality as a manager.

As part of the family conference, the boys learn to organize their thoughts, to take turns during a discussion, to negotiate with one another, and to solve problems rationally rather than through strength or "street skills." As part of the manager system, the boys learn how to direct other people, to give feedback, to accept criticism gracefully, and to teach the skills related to accomplishing a number of jobs around the home. These are skills the boys must learn if they are to become adults who assume responsibility for their own actions and who realize that their behavior affects other people.

Obviously the teaching-parents are the cornerstone of this method. They are prepared for their assignment during a one-year training program that consists of five parts: an intensive two-week workshop; four months of supervised on-the-job training; an early evaluation period; another eight months of training and consultation; and a final evaluation, after which—if they succeeded in all areas—they are certified as professional teaching-parents.

It took us six years of working at Achievement Place before we learned how to teach good teaching, the fourth basic component of the program technology. In that time we were able to discover, describe, and isolate the methods that a good teacher (parent or professional) uses. Once we knew them, we could transmit them to the prospective teaching-parents. For example, one of the hardest lessons for any of us to learn is how to accept criticism—how to listen to it and respond. A teaching-parent follows 10 steps in instructing a boy about this issue, or any other:

1. *Express affection:* a smile, a pat on the back, a joke, a warm greeting.

2. *Offer praise for what has been accomplished:* "You've been doing very well with the chores this week, John"; "Say, that meal you helped with was terrific." Statements like these let the boy know that the teaching-parent is aware of his accomplishments.

3. *Describe inappropriate behavior,* so the boy knows exactly what he has done: "When I took away that privilege, you stamped your feet and cursed me."

4. *Describe or demonstrate correct behavior,* so the boy knows what is expected of him: "Instead of getting mad, why don't you look me in the eye and say something like 'O.K.'? Or explain your point of view more calmly?"

5. *Give reasons for correct behavior,* pointing out future advantages of behaving appropriately, so the boy knows why he is being asked to behave this way: "It is important for you to learn how to control your emotional behavior if you expect people to respect you and listen to what you have to say. If you shout or curse every time someone criticizes

Teaching-parents learn specifically how to combine criticism with supportive praise, and they teach their young charges everything from how to repair equipment to how to prepare a meal. At left, Mark and Betty Johnson appraise–and praise–the work of Joseph Golata.

you—maybe your boss one day, or your wife—you're going to get into more trouble. Besides, if you just listen to the criticism and think about it, you are likely to understand what the person is saying to you and learn from it."

6. *Describe the immediate consequences of correct behavior:* "If you react to my criticism well now, I'll make sure you go to the movie tonight."

7. *Request acknowledgment*—"Do you understand? O.K."—to prompt the boy to ask questions and to confirm that he understands instructions.

8. *Practice correct behavior:* The boy reenacts the event properly, showing the teaching-parent that he understands the requirements and that he knows how to behave correctly. If the behavior in question is something the boy has never done before—such as taking criticism well—he has a chance to practice it in the presence of a supportive instructor.

9. *Give feedback, both praise and correction, during practice:* "That was a very good effort, John, but next time you should make a point to look me in the eye." Practice continues until the boy gets the behavior right.

10. *Give reward in the form of praise and points:* "That was great. You'll be home in no time if you keep progressing like this. Be sure to remind me when it's time for the movie to start."

Naturally, in some circumstances the teaching-parent will not need all 10 steps. But the basic philosophy remains the same: positive instruction, positive feedback, information about what is right as well as what is wrong, reasons for changing behavior, and moral support throughout.

Because it took well over two years to make the administrative changes—to recruit, hire, and train the teaching-parents and merge them into the Boys Town family plan—we were able to compare the progress of boys living with untrained adults, with adults who had been through the initial workshop, with those who had passed the first evaluation, and with those who were fully certified. The results were perfectly linear: The more training teaching-parents have, the better their boys do. For example, boys under the guidance of untrained staff members missed an average of 19.9 classes a quarter, compared with an average of 3.8 classes for boys living with certified teaching-parents. Such comparisons allow us to tie the progress of the boys to particular methods; otherwise we would not know whether improvements were due to the program or to unknown changes in the adolescent culture. (Perhaps clean rooms and school attendance are "in" this year.)

We also keep longitudinal records of behavioral change. Between July 1975 and December 1976, for instance, the cleanliness of the homes improved from about 50 percent to 95 percent.

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of our success is the drop in runaways. Between January 1974 and June 1975, when we took over, about 8 percent of the boys ran away each month. Today the runaway rate is down to 2 or 3 percent each month; conversely, school attendance has steadily increased.

We went to Boys Town to start a program for the boys, but we could not have succeeded without overcoming the resistance to change that we encountered among many of the old Boys Town personnel. We dealt head on with the many sources of resistance we found at Boys Town. The first objections were philosophical. Staffers said that the behavioral approach treated only the "symptoms" of bad behavior. It would not allow for individual differences. It would turn the boys into robots. Our response was to explain what we were doing and why, and then go right ahead with our plans. The best argument is results, and when old staff members saw that their fears had no basis, most became supporters of the new system.

The next complaints concerned money. There were strenuous objections when we wanted to inaugurate kitchens to replace the dining hall. Most of the staff were convinced that buying 500 pounds of flour and 14 head of beef was less costly per boy than allowing the boys to buy retail food in grocery stores. When about half of the homes were renovated, we compared the costs of preparing meals in the homes and in the central kitchen. Home meals were about half as expensive as cafeteria meals (and

twice as good). We no longer had to pay staff salaries for the people needed to service and clean a large dining facility, and we no longer had the enormous waste of the dining hall—food not eaten because too much had been bought, or had gone bad, or was left on the plates.

The family-style homes cut costs across the board, with only a few exceptions: For example, it cost more to have an individual van for each home than to have a centralized transportation system. But we had decided that flexible transportation was worth the extra cost—otherwise the boys would often have to wait several days just to get a trip to town for hamburgers. A van in every garage was a nonnegotiable need.

Many staff members feared the new requirements of accountability because they could not hide behind the team approach of shared responsibility for a boy. We explained to each staffer precisely what he or she would be in charge of, and of whom, and we described the evaluation system that would be used. Once the staff members learned the technology to carry out their responsibilities, they lost their fear of the accountability procedures and even welcomed them as a way of showing their talents.

By far the most serious objection to our changes came from people who felt threatened with the loss of their jobs. In streamlining the organization—closing the dining hall and central transportation system and dispensing with services that had lost their purpose—some people did lose their jobs. Over a period of two years we reduced the staff in charge of youth care from 268 full-time employees to 206, a drop of 24 percent; many more left voluntarily or were fired, and some of those were replaced by staffers amenable to our training process. But we moved carefully.

Once we made sure that a job had to be phased out or that specific people had to be let go, we removed those individuals from their jobs at once so that they could not affect the boys with their dissatisfaction. Second, we developed a generous severance plan. Third, we set up a job-finding service to help each individual get another job.

By reducing unnecessary staff, we made existing jobs better. We could give teaching-parents the status, benefits, and responsibility they deserved. The idea that we could get along as well as we have with excellently trained paraprofessionals instead of expensive professionals such as psychologists, social workers, recreational therapists, and guidance counselors is heresy. But it is heresy that makes revolutions, and the child-care field is surely in need of one.

Spencer Tracy and Father Flanagan would not recognize the structure or style of Boys Town today, but we have done a few things that would please their spirits. The program will continue to evolve and improve, but in our three years at Boys Town we have created a place where boys and staff are happy. We have learned to improve services while reducing costs. We have developed the technology that will allow us to transfer the system to other institutions. We survived bureaucratic reform, and live to tell about it. Most of all, with the support of Father Hupp we have restored Father Flanagan's emphasis on the boys, which is what the place is about, after all. □

For further information:

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