

From Peer Deviance to Peer Helping

James Longhurst and Joan McCord with Starr Commonwealth Students

These contributions are from a research symposium on peer group treatment at Starr Commonwealth, a Michigan program for troubled youth. Psychologist James Longhurst and delinquency researcher Joan McCord dialogued with real “experts” on peer influence, nine students at Starr. These youth from different Positive Peer Culture groups share how helping others fosters prosocial change.¹

Dr. James Longhurst: All too often groups and gatherings of experts come to talk about really important issues about young people, and something is missing from these discussions: that is to hear from the experts themselves. These students are the real experts on what it means to face the challenges of today, growing up as adolescents. All are students on the Albion campus of Starr Commonwealth. We met informally once a week for lunch the last four or five weeks. I have asked them to share their experiences and how they feel about helping others and getting help.

David: Thank you all for coming up and joining us for this research symposium. I feel that helping others is one skill that everybody should have because it is not easy to go through life without helping others. I say this because I know. Two years ago, I was hurting others, not caring. I didn't even care about myself. I didn't like others and really didn't care how my actions affected others. I learned that helping others is a very complicated process. I was never taught how to help somebody and it was very hard. I had a lot of barriers as my family has not shown me much support and hasn't been part of my treatment. My Dad would call me to tell me he was coming up and then he wouldn't. But I learned to cope with it by interacting with other family members. I base my success on being able to help them, and I was able to help myself. I also helped persons from other races and cultures. Before I came to Starr, I didn't have the opportunity to deal with other races – my Dad tried to keep me away from people who were Black. Another part of my success I

value is learning of the oneness of humankind. I feel that I have been successful in a lot of areas and now as I return to the community, I will try to keep myself positive and successful.

Marquis: I am from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and have been at Starr for 13 months. When I first got here, I had problems with my anger. I was trying to be bigger than other people, trying to view myself higher. When somebody would say something to me that I didn't like, I would say something back, I would disrespect people. Now, I can respect people. They feel comfortable coming to me expressing themselves, and I talk to them, letting them know how I feel. If you can help people before they get mad, they are more apt to listen to you. When they are mad, they aren't going to be willing to listen because they have these other things going through their head and they start disrespecting and doing all of that other stuff. Basically, you set the pace and calm them down. I have helped group members like Demetrius. He thought that because he was from Detroit, he was bigger than other people, just like I once thought. Not too many people talked to him because he said, “I'm from Detroit and I do this and that.” Then I told him, “You are trying to beat everybody, man. You better think about that because you are from Detroit and that is a big city and a lot of stuff has been happening down there. It is time you get out of that kind of attitude.” So once he finally realized that, he started helping people. My sister is having problems, too, because of things that were going on at home. I feel good when I help somebody so

they won't be in the same position that I was in. A couple of weeks ago, we were playing a game where we were blindfolded; this guy Ricky pushed me against the locker. Before I would have reacted like "I don't want anybody touching me like that" and I would have tried to fight him. But I just looked at him and walked away. I am going to keep trying to help others when I go back out into the community.

Jim: I am originally from a little town near Big Rapids, Michigan. I would like to talk on a personal note about why I think that group programs are important. I have mental diseases like bi-polar and stuff that make it really hard for me to function properly. I have to take medication but the medication doesn't always work. It is not a sure thing, the medication is not a cure for your problems. Often I find myself in a very low position, like I feel like what is the use of really going on? I don't see the point of living. I noticed that there is one thing that can really help me get out of depression. It took me a while to learn it, but if you go out of your way to help somebody out, it makes you feel better about yourself. It can sometimes pull you out of depression. There is this student nobody gets along with; he has a bad disposition and is not friendly. I went up to one of the staff members one day and said, "Mr. Cox, do I really have to help him?" Mr. Cox said, "If you think about it, Jim, you were the same way when you first got here and we didn't give up on you." That got me thinking. Sometimes when you are in depression, it is like you are falling and falling and falling, but for some reason you don't want to reach up your arm to grab anything. All of those times that I have mistreated the group and been in my low, they have been there for me. Just before Christmas, I was toying around with my medication to see if I could go without some of it. It didn't work, I found myself not being able to control myself anymore. I was playing around too much in many people's boundaries. But the cool thing about it was, instead of the group nailing me, they cared for me. They could have said, "Let's hold him accountable," but they tried to understand why I was having problems. They tried to help me. Obviously when you are in your low, if someone nails you, it is going to make you worse; it isn't going to help you at all. If you can learn to get along with peers and help peers, it is going to be beneficial all through your life. We go once a week or every other week to Jackson Interfaith Homeless Shelter. We feed folks, do the dishes, and help them out. One day, I was feeling really bad about myself. I didn't want to go there. I wanted to stay in bed. But my counselor

encouraged me and basically convinced me to go. By the time it was over, my face was beaming and happy again because I had helped somebody. As Anthony says, it gives me a feeling of euphoria.

Anthony: My name is Anthony and I come from Cherry Hill, New Jersey. I am 19 and I have been here for about a year and four months. I have what is called Asperger's, a form of autism. People respond differently but I would put myself down. We have this [former] gang leader in our cottage, Beandre, who wondered how anybody could feel so down about themselves. He has been helping me to pull my self-confidence up. I used to have trouble sticking up for myself around others. I would get mentally and physically abused by them, but I would keep running back to them because I just wanted friends. Here I have been learning to get a more positive image about myself and to stick up for myself.

I am a natural at helping others. Sometimes the group gets down on one person and just starts piling problems on him. I am usually the one sticking up for the low person. Another thing I do to help people, in group meetings, I point out problems boldly. It is kind of a blessing and a curse at the same time because they want to avoid the topic altogether. I will give you an example. One of the people in my cottage was being a fake, trying to make it look like he was helping, but he had an ulterior motive. I said, "I really don't like what you are doing. You are doing this to manipulate the whole cottage to get what you want." He was shocked at first but eventually he came back to me and said, "Anthony, you know what, thank you for saying that. I really needed that."

Our group goes to this center where we help disabled kids ride horses and we lead the horses around the stable. My spirits would raise just by helping the kids there. In the morning, staff would have to literally take me out of bed. They would say, "Anthony, you are going to the center" and I would try to avoid it. Like I said, I get down on myself and don't want to do things that help me. But when I get there, I am all happy because I am helping all of these kids. I am one of the best helpers there because I don't talk down to the kids. I always used to get talked down to by my friends. Even if they are 10 years younger in age, I talk to them on the same level, like they are my buddies. They are always anxious for me to lead their horses. I am so good there that I have gotten a job there, an internship this summer.

In the chapel, we have all of this electronic stuff and I am the senior tech team technician. Helping others is very significant in my life because that is basically what I was built for. Staff talked with me about running for the student council. So I ran for student council treasurer because no one else was running. No competition. Okay, I'm treasurer. On the Starr campus, you could ask any cottage and they would say, "Oh we know Anthony, he's cool."

Josh: Before I came to Starr, I was negative all of the time. I didn't really listen to my grandmother or people who were trying to help me. I was on my little soap box and nobody could tell me anything. When I got here my group helped me out and told me, "Look, Josh, you need to check the way you come off to people cause you are rude sometimes and maybe the tone of your voice or the way you carry yourself sometimes is kind of arrogant." I was real selfish. They kind of brought me to my senses. They didn't sugarcoat anything for me, just told me flat out "you need to change." I thought I knew all the answers, but they told me in a hurry that I didn't. I learned that in order to help someone, I have to have a relationship with them. I used to be very sarcastic. I would say, "Look, didn't I just talk to you? So why haven't you changed?" I learned there are different kinds of people and you have to help them differently. You have to know what triggers them, what sets them off, what gets them mad, and you need to talk to that person, one-on-one to get to know that information. You may not see the effects of helping until down the road, maybe that person will do something with their life. As long as you put in your effort, you can say, "I tried to help that person. Now it is up to them to do that extra step." People that helped me in my group were Ken, Ryan, James, Sanchez, they all pretty much sat down and talked with me and told me "You need to get it together." Now, helping people helps motivate me and keep me on track, and stay focused.

Sean: I have been here 8 months. When I first came, I acted out, trying to be against the rules. I grew up thinking that I knew more than everybody because I could depend on myself, I don't need anybody's help. "I do it my way or no way. I am not going to back down. I am not going to be a punk." If somebody tried to fight me, I would fight because I was worried how I looked to other people. My group helped me by telling me, "Why would you be here if you don't need anybody? Because if you knew the right answer, you wouldn't have got yourself in

trouble to get here." So I started to think about that. I heard what they were saying, but change wasn't that easy. I thought, all I have to do is impress these people. But I started building more trust with people. Then in turn, my group members started helping me and I started helping them. Now when people have problems, I am not going to drill them with questions; I am just going to listen to them. Or I ask somebody, "Do you want me to listen to you or do you just want me to give you some feedback or advice?" That would make them feel more comfortable. Then they would open up and express themselves without acting out or doing something wrong. They know what they did was wrong and you let them know how it is affecting other people. I started to tell people from my own life experiences, "Man, I used to get mad like that and get into fights and cuss people out, and it hasn't got me anywhere; it got me into trouble." I try to help them off my own experiences and they listen to that. They can understand what I am saying and respect that because I am their own age and have been through the same problems. So they say, "Yeah, he knows. He has changed. He has had the same problems I have had. If he did it, I can change, too."

Nick: I am originally from Pontiac, Michigan. When I arrived here at Starr, I was always thinking in terms of myself. I was real arrogant and was not going to make any friends. I thought that if I came here by myself, then I would leave here by myself. I would just do my treatment and get out of here. But then I came to find out, that when I was struggling, I couldn't always get myself out of it. I had to count on other people, rely on my group members or my team to help me out, because I didn't have all the answers. When I started helping other people, it made me feel better about myself. Then after other people were helping people, I saw how to do it the right way. At first I was rude to people who were not performing on the same level as me in treatment or school. I would get frustrated and look down at them and think, "Why aren't you doing this?" or "Why do we always have to have help? Why can't you do it by yourself?" After a while, I learned that you have to help people even if they aren't on the same level as you. A group member who helped me a lot was Duwann. If I was having problems, he would come to me on a natural basis. He would speak to me, not in program language and not like your psychologist. He would come to me naturally and talk casually with me. He wouldn't come like your psychos or triggers or all of that. He made me

feel more comfortable to open up to him. After a while, I started helping other people like that. I treated John like a little brother because that is what it feels like because he looks up to me a lot. When I was doing wrong, he was doing wrong. When I was doing good, he was doing good. I started teaching him how to help people, and he and I worked on trying to help Tony. One day, Tony came up and said, "Nate, thanks for helping me because you really helped me a lot." I didn't think anyone would ever say that. After a while, I was trying to help my whole group. But some people weren't really listening to me. I got frustrated with that and thought, "I am trying to tell you what to do and you just blow me off." They have to decide if they want to listen or not and accept the help. But they can still go out and help other people.

Antonio: I was locked up a few times before I got here, but I am from Detroit. I ran from a lot of help because I didn't think the help was official. Like my old placements. You wake up early and you get points. People would say something to you and they just put you on blast. They never take time to talk to you. I never really felt help anywhere at home or in placements, so I would just leave. When I got caught when I was truant and I came here, I didn't really think about helping anybody. Most of what I thought about then was just joking around and roasting people, making people feel bad about themselves. I didn't listen to what anybody said. But people started getting to me. The staff would talk to me and tell me how I was acting wasn't even on my age level. I was way down there acting like I was twelve instead of getting ready to be eighteen. I was just trying to make people feel bad because I felt bad about myself. If staff or a group member would try to help me, I wouldn't accept their help. I would hurt them to get them away from me. People in here don't give up on you easily. You try to push them away, but they won't go away; so you have to hurt them to make them leave you alone. They broke that down and they got inside. And that is what I don't like people to do, to get inside of my feelings and stuff, for me to start caring about them. I pushed a lot of people out of my boundaries, like my parents; I told staff that I didn't want to talk to my parents so I really had a no-care attitude at first. Then I would see others doing the same I did, like a straight-up copy of me. Exactly what I used to do, hurt people. You could see it and you could see that people would really be needing help. When I help them, I really don't feel good at the time I am talking to them. But when I see them act from the help that I

give them, that makes me feel good about myself and it makes me feel good about them. It kind of gives me goose bumps on my arm. It just makes me feel good and puts a smile on my face. I would try to hide it because I wouldn't want anybody to see me as a mushy person. Some people act like they don't want to help you and that is just the image. You have your friends on the outside and don't really want to be friends with young teenage boys who are locked up. You come in by yourself and you can leave by yourself. You may not like them, but sooner or later, just like a little brother or niece or somebody in your family, you are around them for so long, you get so used to them. It is like they are family now, my home away from home. We had a group member who had an anger problem. When I first got here, he would just blow up. He would disrespect people, and I helped him with that just by talking to him. If I don't think that talking in front of staff is helpful, I would rather talk to certain people on a one-to-one basis. Some people, you have to give them time to smooth into the program; because they don't care who is around, they will just be disrespectful. I was real difficult to help when I first got here. You might think that people don't want your help or don't need you, like they are just cruel and cold-hearted. In reality, people really want to help each other, but it is just that they are trying to hide their feelings. You can't just give up on people that easily. Like my mother, she gave up on herself, she used a lot of drugs; she stopped for a year or two, but then she just called me the other day. She was drunk and that really got me frustrated. I used to take my feelings out on other people, but now I talk about it. I wanted to give up on my mom, but I am trying to change that thinking because I give up on myself a lot, too. I had to stop that. Your social skills build up and you can tell when somebody wants to accept your help; sometimes you should give them their space and sometimes you should approach them. One thing that is important, you don't want to give up on people no matter who they are. If you have the willpower to help them, then you should go ahead and help them because it is a good thing to do. Like Anthony says, it comes naturally once you get used to helping people.

Erik: I am from Sparta, Michigan, and have been here for about nine-and-a-half months. I am here to tell you how important it is to help your group members. It is like letting your real self come out; basically you don't have a "front" anymore; you don't cuss or disrespect anyone; or you don't have to say that you are hard or whatever. Your group members talk to you

about how you need to respect people. If you start respecting people and start helping group members out, it is going to help make you feel good about yourself. After you start doing lots right, you are going to get home visits and then your mom and dad are going to feel happy that you are coming home. How that changed is that I don't disrespect people anymore. I help others by giving them good advice and give them positive help. I let them help me by accepting their help. I like to get positive help because negative help isn't going to help any of you.

Dr. Joan McCord: I do a lot of research and I work with teenagers, trying to understand what would help most. A lot of times, the teenagers seem to be saying being in a group makes it tough. It is clear that all of you are saying being in a group makes it good. Can you tell me some of the differences?

Youth: I think it is beneficial to be around teenagers your own age with similar issues. I listen to adults but they don't have the same affect as somebody you see everyday or interact with every day. A peer tells me, "Man, I used to do the same stuff that you do. I used to get mad and hit people, and I have been at Starr longer so I know how to change and how to help you." I am more willing to listen because it is from someone my own age. He has changed and is making progress and is about to leave. We have a relationship, so I know this is the truth and this is what his life is because it is working for him. You know their issues and you know your issues and you know how they changed and you want to make progress.

Youth: I would like to build on that. Other programs are mostly staff run and staff tell you what to do. The group doesn't have a say about what goes on, so they like to mess each other up. In this program and this setting here at Starr, the kids actually make the program. Sometimes it can be negative, but most of the time they come together for the greater good.

Dr. Joan McCord: So many teenagers that I talk with say groups are harmful. They do things, they make me misbehave, I show off to them, that sort of thing. It is clear that you people are all saying being in a group is something that is helping you. Helping you figure out how to change your life, how to do something with it. I am trying to understand how that got started. What is going on that makes this one work well and so many other groups don't?

Youth: You were saying that groups are tough and that people are being hurtful. I see two things. If

there is a lack of respect in group settings, that plays a part. I also think that if you have a good mindset, you will be more prone to respect somebody. If you don't have a very good mindset, you will be more apt to disrespect somebody. A lot of people don't really have the best mindset when they first come into Starr Commonwealth, maybe because they weren't taught the right things before, they weren't taught respect. Now they are in a new place and don't know what to do, and it is very confusing. They feel all alone and believe they need to try to get relationships by putting themselves out there for peer pressure. I don't know about other groups but my group tells me that we try not to have peer pressure. Respect is where everybody's mind is at. And, we try to make it comfortable, "You know what, if you are this way, it is cool." I think these are the keys for what happens in that group.

Youth: A youth group, like a church group, is not always the most comfortable setting because each person comes from a different background. The reason it works so well at Starr is that everyone has similar issues. People can relate to how you are feeling. If there is one thing that will make a kid sick it is if an adult says, "I was there. I know how you feel." That just doesn't work with us. It is better having someone your own age telling you, "I know how you feel." We actually see them suffering the consequences just like you are.

Youth: I feel we are working harder in this program. There are a lot of challenges if people are disrespectful. But we are going to be faced with all of these things in the world so if you can overcome them here, then when you go back into the community, it is a lot easier to overcome them there. I am thankful that this program is hard, because I feel it has made me a better person. It made me work harder.

Youth: I told you earlier about my question, "Do I have to help this group member?" If you can put up with and learn to help or show empathy toward the lowest member in your group, the worst to get along with, you can show empathy to anybody. I think that is another reason why the group setting is so helpful because it teaches you to show empathy toward everybody.

Youth: I think what makes these groups easier is understanding. At first you might be kind of timid and scared, like, "All right I don't want to say this or that to offend anybody. They may look at me differently." But everybody has stuff that they have done

that they don't want people to know about or they just want to forget about. Here at Starr they teach you that this is okay as long you correct it and don't make the same mistakes. You change your thinking and your values.

Youth: I would compare this program to the last program I was in. Nobody ever really sat down and talked about situations. They would do something like "circle up." So you are in a circle and you are standing there, and if you make any kind of movement, you get a strike. Here if you do something wrong, people are going to talk to you. They are going to take time to talk to you. Even when you come in here, it is hard because you aren't going to want to be here and you want to be home because it is a program and nobody wants to be in a program. But then in my group, as soon as I came in, people were talking to me like, "Do you need help with this?" or "Do you want to put your stuff here? Do you want to contact your family? Do this? Do that?" It was basically like another home away from home. It wasn't like I want to be here, but I would rather be here than any one of the other programs. Another program I went to, I was only there for 8 hours. Just as soon as I got there, I didn't trust any of them guys and the first thing they talked to me about was walk-

ing out the door. But when I got here, people were talking to me about getting on workout and doing this and trying to get my GED and doing what I needed to do. People were trying to help me. So it is what you make it. If you make it hard on yourself, then it is going to be hard. Or you have a chance at doing what you need to do and getting where you need to be. And that is my honest thinking.

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Joan McCord, PhD, (1930-2004) was president of the American Society of Criminology and professor at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

NOTE:

¹ From the *Research Symposium on Peer Group Treatment* at Starr Commonwealth, Albion, Michigan, Spring 2003. Youth comments are as recorded and edited for length and clarity. Other symposium presenters included sociologist Martin Gold of the University of Michigan, resilience researcher John Seita of Michigan State University, and Starr Vice President for Research and Evaluation, Tom Tate. Key findings of this symposium will be published in the forthcoming book, *Respectful Alliances with Youth*, co-authored by Larry Brendtro, Martin Mitchell, and Herman McCall. Published with permission of Starr Commonwealth and Resilience Academies.

Remembering Joan McCord

This special issue on peer influence is dedicated to the late Dr. Joan McCord, noted criminologist from Temple University in Philadelphia. Dr. McCord was collaborating with Starr Commonwealth to explore how Positive Peer Culture could counter "peer deviance training" prior to her passing on February 24, 2004.

We first met Dr. McCord at the United States Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention where she presented an impassioned critique of delinquency interventions which were contrary to scientific evidence. Popular examples were boot camps and Scared Straight shock treatment forcing juveniles to visit adult prisons. McCord called such interventions "iatrogenic" which meant they did more harm than good. To our surprise, she then added Positive Peer Culture (PPC) to the list of suspect programs. While PPC seeks to enlist troubled youth in helping their peers solve problems, her research on "peer deviance training" showed that delinquents reinforce one another's problem behavior.

McCord was familiar with early critiques of PPC by delinquency researcher Martin Gold of the University of Michigan. However, she was not aware that Gold had concluded from later research that PPC did in fact build positive cultures among delinquents.

In 2003, Starr Commonwealth hosted a research symposium on peer group treatment with major presentations by both Joan McCord and Martin Gold. Dr. McCord also had an opportunity to interview youth from Starr's programs and was interested in how PPC operated to reverse negative peer processes. We were exploring further ways of documenting the effects of PPC with Dr. McCord at the time of her death. The editors dedicate this special issue of *Reclaiming Children and Youth* to Dr. McCord whose research was a beacon in the search for effective interventions with our most troubled young people.