

“I am sick of the Problem’s Dirty Tricks” by David Epston
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Serena, a disgruntled eleven year old accompanied Jenny, her single-parenting mother in to my office. Jenny wasn’t in a very good mood either. Whatever the problem was, it certainly was one of those that had set each of them at odds with the other. Although when turning and speaking to me, Jenny was polite and good natured, she couldn’t help scowling in response when she looked towards Serena who made no attempt whatsoever at putting on a good face for me. In fact, she looked vengefully at her mother as if she had been injured by her in some way or other. The looks on her face suggested something like this to me: "if you tell him what the Problem is, you will be sorry when we get home afterwards!"

As is my custom, I proposed a tack that caught both of them off guard. "Look, do you mind if we go about this conversation in a way that might be very, very different than what you both might have expected? I was wondering, Serena, if I might get to know you through your wonderfulnesses? You know- your talents, abilities and what your friends think is cool about you. Jenny, I wouldn't be surprised if you wanted to know why. Well, by the looks on both your faces, this Problem has got you pretty upset with each other. So I guess it must be a tricky Problem. And we might have to 'team up' if we are going to do anything about this sort of Problem. But before we even can think about teaming up, I guess it would be good for me to know what your wonderfulnesses are, Serena, so we can all see what you have going for you so we can think about how to 'put' that against the Problem that has got you so upset with each other?" Serena and Jenny were somewhat taken aback by this tack but if nothing else were intrigued by my proposal. They consented for me to proceed when I asked for their permission to do so. I doubt, at this stage, they could have known what was coming but at least both were able to temporarily tear themselves away from the unspoken mutual recriminations implied in their scowling at one another.

"Serena, it may make you feel uncomfortable, perhaps like a braggard, if I were to ask you about your 'wonderfulnesses'. So do you mind if I ask your 'wonderfulness' questions to your mum?" She raised her eyebrows as if to say- 'what is all this about?' but stumbling over her words, she said- "yah, go ahead...ask her?" Although it was not entirely smooth sailing at the beginning of this half hour long discussion but by the end of it I was not left in any doubt that Serena was a wonderful eleven year old young woman. Jenny, at first with strained enthusiasm for the task at hand, proceeded to tell me about her daughter's wonderfulnesses. She told me that Serena could be "lovely, friendly and kind to little children"

and I was provided with examples and stories of her practices of loveliness, kindness and friendliness towards the next door neighbour's children and her cousins. When I enquired if such expressions of kindness were extended towards her at times when the Problem- "whatever it may be"- steps to one side, Jenny admitted that Serena "at times, could be a good help". When I sought her to specify how Serena went about her helping, Jenny told of occasions when "you go out and bring in the washing off the line" before Jenny arrives home from work which "makes it easier for me". Jenny started to appreciably warm up to these questions while Serena looked far less chilly than she had at the beginning of our meeting. Jenny had cause to commend her daughter for the way she 'baby-sits for Olivia'. Jenny had gone along with her the first few times but when she observed Serena's "nice considerate nature" she felt her daughter could baby-sit on her own. "Serena, have you turned this wonderfulness of yours into a form of gainful employment?"

This was the first time she smiled coyly and replied with a muffled 'suppose so'. Jenny, at my urging, turned to another arena of her daughter's wonderfulnesses ("Jenny, do her wonderfulnesses show up anywhere else in her life?". Before I could propose some other sites eg. "at school, on school holidays, in her sports, in the things she loves to do either by herself or with her girl-friends, etc", her mother with a measure of pride in Serena said she could be "daring, fearless and brave" when it came to her cheer-leading and trampolining. "Serena, whatever the Problem might be, do you think it knows just how brave, fearless and daring you so obviously are?" She seemed surprised by this form of this enquiry but once again grinned and said she supposed it wouldn't know this about her. "What do you think about us teaming up and telling the Problem about this." Once again, somewhat bemused, she said- "oh...oh..okay!". "Well, say we all got together and told the Problem, whatever it may be- the truth about the kind of person you are that allows you to get out there and cheer-lead and jump up and down when you are trampolining, even though there is a risk of falling off and hurting yourself? Do you think this Problem would have second-thoughts about intruding in to your life if it knew full well just how daring, fearless and brave you truly are?" Once again, she shook her head smiling and said- "I dunno!". "Jenny, most Problems have a pretty narrow version of a young person because they only know the kid in trouble and not out of trouble and probably aren't that interested in knowing about their daring, bravery and fearlessness". "Serena, do you think your daring could be bad for the Problem?" Both Jenny and Serena considered it would be worthwhile informing the Problem- whatever it may be- how Serena's daring might make trouble for the Problem.

Before we could take this up, Jenny sat up in her chair and proudly looked Serena directly in the eye and said: "You are independent-minded!" I

asked Jenny if she had fostered Serena's independent-mindedness. This certainly was the case. "I brought her up like that..to do things for herself. I don't like children being mollycoddled". Turning to Serena, I asked if she had been aware of her mother championing her independent-mindedness before now. Serena said this was news to hear. "Is it good news or bad news to know your mother was behind your independent-mindedness all the way?" Serena thought it was "good news". I then asked if she was of the opinion that her mother was an independent-minded mother, woman and saleswoman. She thought she was and furthermore when I asked if Jenny had a reputation amongst her family and friends for her independent-mindedness, they looked towards one another and laughed out loud. "Serena, do you think there is any of your mother's independent-mindedness in you?" Serena confirmed this with a grin and then looked towards Jenny who was smiling.

Jenny went on to said that she had always been determined that Serena "grow up to be an adult who can think for herself and be self-reliant". "Serena," I asked, "do you have any idea what the Problem might think of messing with an independent-minded young person? "Dunno!" Turning to Jenny, I asked: "Do you think a Problem would prefer to do the thinking for Serena and make up her mind about things for her? Or even have Serena rely on it?" Jenny and Serena thought any Problem wouldn't like an independent and self-reliant mother-daughter relationship at all. "Serena, by the way, what do you call this problem?" She answered me relatively matter of factly: "Dirty underpants!" "Oh no, dirty underpants!" I exclaimed! "Tell me is your dirty underpants problem like so many dirty underpants problems I have met over the years?" "What do you mean by that?" Serena asked. "Well, I don't know a Problem that can play more dirty tricks on a young person than a dirty underpants problem. Can I run through some of its tricks that I have learned about from people your age? I will start from the least dirty tricks and then work my way up to the dirtiest of dirty tricks. Is that okay with you?" Serena indicated that I should go on.

"No. 1. Does it pretend it's not a problem and you shouldn't bother yourself about it?" Serena thoughtfully commented- "Sort of....." Jenny said: "That's right..it does do that!"

"No. 2. Does it try to have you believe that if it is a problem, it's not yours but it's your mother's problem." Jenny smiled perhaps in recognition of so many arguments she and Serena had had. Serena appeared uncertain or bewildered.

"No. 3. Does it try its old favourite that if you do nothing about it or even forget about it, it will go away all by itself!" Once again, Serena mused: "Sort of....." but Jenny added: 'No, that's right!"

"No. 4..now this is a particularly dirty trick. Does the Problem tell you that it is good for you and will help you grow up!". Both Serena and Jenny

laughed out loud saying that that trick would never work because they were too independent-minded to fall for that one.

"No. 5 and Serena and Jenny, here is the dirtiest trick of them all. Serena, has the Problem tried to convince you that your Poo smells as sweet as roses and everyone should wear some Poo on their body for its perfume?" They laughed out loud saying at the same time as Jenny saying there was something to that. I enquired as to what she meant by that. She told how she worked in a paint and home decoration shop in sales and often was told by her friends that she smelled of paint and turpentine and she didn't have a clue she did. She looked over at Serena and told her that "you get so used to it that you can't smell it yourself"? Serena looked thoughtful but kept her thoughts to herself for awhile until she expostulated: "I don't like it!" "What?" I enquired. "The dirty pants Problem!" "Do you think we do? I asked. "I suppose not" Serena replied. Both Jenny and I commiserated with her as we shared her dislike of such a problem and the dirty tricks that made it possible. "Serena and Jenny, I am heartsick to learn that this problem has been playing the same tricks it has played on so many young people I have met over the years".

"Serena, you are now an independent-minded eleven year old and this comes from your mother both by her example and her fostering of it in you. Do you think the Problem's dirty tricks are wearing a bit thin, even if they can fool you every so often?" She replied that the dirty tricks could fool her "quite a bit" but in spite of that, they were "wearing thin". "Serena, if you weren't quite so independent-minded, do you guess you would be fooled all the time rather than just quite a bit?" She nodded in agreement as did her mother who was now a very respectful audience to this conversation. In fact, Serena jumped to the conclusion that "it's a bad problem and I can do something about it!" Jenny and I were taken aback by my Serena's forthrightness in regard to the Problem and the dirty tricks by which it had duped her.

I then asked another question which stumped both Serena and her mum. "In that case, would you be willing to put pressure on yourself to put pressure on the Problem?" "What do you mean by that? Serena wondered aloud. I surveyed the Problem's effects on their past and recent present. "Look, the Problem has been putting pressure on your mum to put pressure on you. How about turning the tables on the Problem by putting pressure on yourself to put pressure on the Problem? "How?" Serena asked with interest. It seemed like a viable tack to take to get her own back and out-trick the Problem. "Well, you might have to play a clean trick on the Problem instead of being taken it by its dirty tricks? Would that be okay with you? Would that be okay with you, Jenny?" Everyone confirmed the policy in general without any specific tactics being discussed. If nothing else, we had teamed up against the Problems' dirty tricks and had outlined a response and named them as clean tricks. "Serena, before we go any further, I need to know how much pressure you

are willing to put on yourself to put on the Problem. Serena, although interested, justifiably wanted to know how to go about this. I told her of several young women who decided to put pressure on themselves instead of the Problem putting pressure on their mother to inspect and wash their underpants. "Serena, an eight year old said that if the Problem had the nerve to dirty her bed, the next night she would put pressure on herself by sleeping in her sleeping bag on the floor to get back at the Problem for its dirty tricks. And you know she really taught the Problem a lesson because the Problem hardly ever messed her pants or her bed after that. There was a 15 year old who was very humiliated by the Problem and got so indignant that she gave her mother one thing of make-up every time the Problem messed her up and said her mum shouldn't give them back until she went clean for a month or two. Are you surprised it worked so well that she got back all her make-up within three months?" Neither of them seemed surprised by these outcomes. In fact, Serena displayed her independent-mindedness to the full. "Right, I will give Mum my cell phone, ipod and computer if you find my pants messed up!" Jenny looked stunned by Serena's declaration and tried to talk her out of including her cell phone as this would be inconvenient for her when she wanted to pick her up after school. But Serena stood her ground and said this would be the necessary pressure to put on herself to put on the Problem. And it just had to be this much and anything short of that wouldn't do the trick of going clean.

We then creatively put our heads together and collectively came up with the following agreement. Admittedly, I led the way in the detail of the planning but each step of the way both Serena and Jenny confirmed it as their mother-daughter policy.

"Serena, you decided to put pressure on yourself to put pressure on the Problem. Here is what everyone agreed to do:

- 1) Serena will hand over one pair of her underpants to Jenny at approximately 8:30pm before she goes to bed.
- 2) Serena will state loudly and clearly to her mum: "I am giving you these underpants so you know that I am putting pressure on myself to put pressure on the Problem. It is no use putting pressure on you because all that does is hurt our daughter-mother relationship. and no matter how much pressure you put on me, that isn't going to make my body clean and unsoiled. Because only I can do that!"
- 3) Jenny will state loudly and clearly to Serena: "I think it is very independent-minded and brave of you to put pressure on yourself to put pressure on this very dirty and tricky Problem. Thank you for not putting pressure on me because no matter how hard I tried in the past, it has not made your body clean".
- 4) A decision should be quickly reached as to the state of the underpants-clean or dirty? If there is any dispute, the underpants will be set to one side in a special place until Aunt Judy can be called and come over to

decide the matter once and for all. You both told me that your trust her to be fair. And for that reason, what Aunty Judy decides goes.

5) If the Problem has soiled Serena's underpants, Serena will put pressure on herself to put pressure on the Problem by surrendering her cellphone, ipod, and computer for one week to her mum after which time, Jenny will return everything to Serena.

6) After one month of Serena putting pressure on herself to put pressure on the Problem and going clean, Jenny and Aunty Judy will declare her a 'clean' eleven year old young woman. Of course, after that there may be the odd slip-up if Serena gets overconfident and lowers her guard. Then we will return to David to discuss ways of "getting back on a horse after you have fallen off".

Serena, I know I only met you for an hour or more today; but I have known this Problem for many years and consider it to be one of the dirtiest tricks going. I respect the fact that you have risked your ipod/cellphone/computer to go clean. And I suspect a lot of this has to do with how your mother trained you to grow up to be independent-minded.

I believe you can do this!

Yours sincerely,

David".(from a letter sent immediately after this meeting)

We were never to meet again although we reviewed matters on a regular basis over the phone and by email. There was a period of dramatic success leading to Serena's mother and aunty declaring her 'clean'. As predicted Serena did become overconfident and perhaps complacent leading to predictable 'slip ups'. However, the renewal of putting pressure on herself to put pressure on the Problem soon" got her back up on a horse" again.