

SURVIVING THE URBAN JUNGLE

12-STEPS to SUCCESS

Recommended ages: 10-18
Youth section written in "Urban style"

Dortell Williams

Don't just be a dad, be a dad for life!

DEDICATION

To the victims and survivors of violent and senseless crime.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to provide guidance to youth, particularly those facing the extraordinary challenges of inner-city life. Challenges such as aggressive police policies, coercive gang recruitment, and family dysfunction. A disproportionate number of these youth are also subjected to sexual and other abuse, governmental and societal neglect, and otherwise hostile environments that are saturated with rampant substance abuse.

As a result, millions of these young Americans grow up damaged by adverse physical and psychological experiences, often culminating in post-traumatic stress disorder and other chronic ailments. When these children inevitable last out, through what is termed “trauma re-enactment,” they are disproportionately disciplined by school authorities, authorities who often ignore the underlining issues of the maladaptive behavior. Ultimately, these inner-city children end up thrown away in prisons, with the harshest sentences possible, and deemed incorrigible.

Taking a script out of the Bible, parents are urged to teach their children (Deuteronomy 6:6-7); children need constant and consistent guidance. Unfortunately, this sage advice has been ignored for so many generations, many parents have lost the ability to teach or guide effectively. Sadly, countless children have lost their lives, or are in prison as a result of their dysfunctional parents or caregivers. These parents and caregivers guide America’s youth into gang banging, model drug abuse and send them into prostitution. These children never had a chance.

In an attempt to intervene, to offer guidance and advice sorely missing in the lives of these youth, this book is presented for these otherwise beloved, talented and worthy children. America’s other children.

In memory of
Kimberley Susan Williams

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I was raised in a dysfunctional household. I was exposed to domestic violence, taught to steal, encouraged to sell drugs and be a womanizer. My model? My father. I was witnessed my father suffer violent attacks by my paternal grandmother, and fight with his brothers until blood was drawn. For my father, the cycle had already begun.

The first murder I witnessed was as a young child. A hapless man was shot mercilessly on our cul-de-sac, on the Westside of Los Angeles, in broad daylight. It was a gruesome, unexplained scene that I remember as vivid as a movie. I never made sense out of it, and the act was never put in context for me. Yet that one incident was a single branch to many other roots of the maladaptive thinking that I later embraced as a teen. That one unexplained

and ruthless act during my formative years conveyed to me that this is a cruel existence, a dog-eat-dog world, where survival is for the fittest.

As a result of my own family dysfunction and ignorance, I ended up in prison for murder just seventeen short years later, at the age of twenty-three. I was sentenced as a first-time offender to life without the possibility of parole. Thirty years later I can say that I have made the best of it, in the worst of circumstances. I have learned that the potential for me to achieve was always there. It just needed to be nourished and honed.

My first real accomplishment behind bars was to earn a paralegal certificate. I accepted the challenge at the urging of others who believed in me enough to make the \$500.00 investment of the course. With little else to do while being no more than warehoused in an environment of sheer idleness, I accepted the challenge. This accomplishment showed me what was possible and was a catalyst for me to challenge myself in other ways, such as learning Spanish.

Initially, I wanted to learn Spanish for the wrong reasons. While housed at Pelican Bay State Prison, the Black population was attacked by a Spanish-speaking clique. *Ya va!* (Let's go!) A vicious attack then followed. After that, I vowed to learn the language for "security reasons." However, the more I learned the language, history and culture of this diverse population of Spanish speakers, the more I recognized our many commonalities. By learning to read, write, and speak Spanish, I gained a new tongue, a new family and a new culture. In just this one venture, the world and the opportunities it has to offer got a lot bigger.

With these accomplishments, and after having a few articles published, I gained enough confidence to teach a writer's class. It was through that experience that I was able to help other prisoners get published for the first time. Together we published our first youth diversion book, *Dark Tales From the Dungeons: Horrors From the Hood for Youth to Beware*.

My personal journey of inner-reflection and personal growth was greatly enhanced by my ability to participate in a community college correspondence program. It was through this program that I came to understand the genesis of my criminal behavior, human nature, and society's influence on its citizens. I am thankful for the opportunity to have earned four academic degrees from Coastline Community College, majoring in behavioral science. My efforts were acknowledged by the Dean. I have since helped my peers, my family, and the outside community through my newly acquired knowledge.

I instruct my peers through an academic group we started called Men For Honor. To offset the idleness, we proudly offer cognitive behavioral therapy classes geared toward parenting, gang banger's anonymous, personal development and others. We also offer victim sensitivity, creative writing and a number of other self-help courses that help us reform our thinking.

Of course, I don't share any of this to brag. I have no right to brag. Had I not embraced the criminal lifestyle, those who I have harmed would certainly be much better off. My life's work is now dedicated to those I have harmed.

Nevertheless, my story is an example of the waste that comes from bad decisions, dysfunctional families, and neglected neighborhoods across America.

This is not a success story, it is a tragedy. Please don't let your children have to tell a similar story.

PARENTING GUIDE

NOTE TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

PARENTING is a huge endeavor, no question. Parenting in the inner-city, with all of its social challenges, is probably the hardest job of all. There are so many additional dangers that inner-city children are exposed to, that the odds of their success is often less possible than for other children. Yet their fate does not have to be sealed in failure, or worse, death. One of the most promising gifts a child can receive from a responsible parent or caregiver is education.

Yet relying wholly on the formal education of governmental school districts is where many go wrong. Too often, inner-city schools themselves are dysfunctional. Parents must educate themselves in order to educate their children. In this generation of rapid technological, medical, and educational advancements, it behooves families to catch up and keep up through self- and formal education. To some, this advice translates to more work, more sacrifices, more stress – in addition to perhaps two jobs, a grueling commute, and et cetera. To a single mother, this can be overwhelming.

Nevertheless, a little strategizing and time management could ensure that your child's freedom is permanently preserved, or that s/he makes it to their next birthday. It's that serious!

I advise the following:

- Most parents take the time out to watch some television. I recommend that parents watch television with their children. Point out what is real, what is fiction; make an emphasis on the real life “consequences” of the actor’s behavior, illustrate the consequences that are never revealed in these fictionalized depictions.
- When children are enjoying the internet or television, parents should avoid judging their children’s viewing habits. When children are adamant about certain behavior, and are prohibited from the behavior, they simply hide it. Thus, the parents never gets to know their child. Remember, just as society cannot legislate morality, parents cannot force children to behave in any particular manner. They will do as they please out of your presence. It is better to teach your children the “Hows and Whys” of life so that your parental guidance becomes a natural part of their will and thinking. The method to success here is to simply watch television (or whatever the medium is) with them and politely interject our critiques of the show. As you plant these seeds, you will influence your child’s worldviews on a wide range of issues without alienating them. Remember, they are going to see things you can’t even imagine out of your presence anyway. So you might as well wield as much of your influence as efficiently as you can, where you can. Don’t let the streets raise your children.
- I enthusiastically encourage reading. Books are fairly cheap, but their influence on your children can be transforming. Your children love you and respect you more than they know how to express. A gift from you, even a book, demonstrates love, teaches sharing and gives you influence on the topic you’ve chosen for them. (magazines can have the same affect.)
The first book I ever read in its entirety was in a cage in the Los Angeles County Jail, facing the death penalty. *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, by Alex Haley, was a transforming experience. Malcom was a straight-telling-truth teller who offered thought provoking facts about misguided youth, “the system”, the sub-culture I had so readily embraced and some real insight on our participation in our own individual and collective demise. Malcom little, the maladaptive youth who was arrested, found tutelage on the inside. That tutelage transformed him from a self-destructive, rebellious young man, into a vociferous, insightful advocate for his people, and for world justice. I have since tried to emulate him in the sense of self-education. In addition to the college degrees mentioned above, I have also earned certificates in drug, alcohol and family counseling. I am currently a straight “A” student in my second year at California State University = Los Angeles. Again, I share this not to brag, but to demonstrate the potential in those who are misguided and marginalized. If I can achieve under the most restrictive circumstances imaginable, think what your children can do on the other side of the razor wire. If I can achieve, I *know* your children can succeed.
- When purchasing a mobile phone for your children, consider asking the sales technicians for apps that block certain subjects, and that link some of their activities to your phone through notifications. Ask for apps that have tracking abilities and other proactive capabilities.
- The importance of conversations: perhaps while shopping, walking or sitting around the living room with your children, parents might raise a topic and just share your perspective on the subject. This is a great way to plant a seed of guidance without confrontation or resistance. You’re simply sharing how you feel about a subject – and providing guidance.
- It is also recommended that parents avoid asking a lot of questions. “How was school?” “What did you do today?” Children tend to take a barrage of questions no matter how well intended, as intrusive and irritating. Instead, tell them how your day was and what you did in hopes of starting a conversation. Sometimes children, particularly adolescents, simply will not engaged. This is normal, not personal. The idea is to keep the lines of communication open; to simply build trust.

- Never tell the boys “they’re just like their [despicable] father.” It is better to emphasize the good things children do, and correct but downplay mistakes.
- Never tell a child s/he won’t amount to anything or that he is dumb or stupid. These are confidence-busting statements that can endure for a life time.

For an example, I was told by my high school counselor that I wasn’t college material. This confidence buster sent me straight to the underworld where I began as a low-level drug dealer and ended up a murderer.

Take an active role in the lives of your children. Even when they balk, studies show that they recognize the love and care, and they appreciate the structure and boundaries you provide for them.

THE NATURE OF CHILDREN

Children, like all people, want to be accepted. For teens, acceptance from their peers means the world to them. And, it is through this lens that reputation – for boys and girls – is paramount. Teens will join gangs, bully others, experiment with drugs and have sex simply to be accepted.

When I instructed Men For Honor classes and men open up, the most frequent reason for joining gangs is the need to feel accepted. When youth perceive that they are being neglected at home, they seek love outside.

According to acclaimed behaviorist Abraham Maslow, who is credited with a human needs chart named after himself, people grow and develop with an orderly priority of needs. These needs are as follows:

- Physiological needs: food, water, warmth, and rest.
- Certainty: Safety, security
- Physical safety from harm: natural or deliberate
- Security: confidence in surroundings, stability
- Social: Sense of belonging, friends and intimate relationships
- Esteem: Self-confidence
- How they view themselves based on ability, aptitude.

- How others view them based on appearance;
- How they fit in (the unique adolescent subculture);
- Their abilities as viewed by others;
- And how much weight the child gives to the views of friends and associates based on the security the child has within him or herself.
- Self-actualization: Aptitude in achieving one's fullest potential, including work performance, healthy relationships and creative endeavors (1)
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THRILL SEEKING

Curiosity and exploration are activities that children of all ages use to learn about the world about them. As children become teens thrill-seeking is yet another part of their natural development pattern. Youth test the limits. That's just what they do.

Parents shouldn't be surprised at risky behavior among their teens and young adults. As stated above, their under-developed brains, along with a natural, but false sense of invincibility prompts them to take chances that adults would cringe at – often because as adults we have either learned by experience or been the fool's witness.

Parents often have to wrestle against the natural rebellion of their thrill-seeking, independent youth simply to get them to listen. Given these inevitable struggles of dominance, their insistence on independence and finding their own path, parents are advised to let them hit the rubber walls. That is, advise, and then pull back. Rubber walls – or fairly minor mistakes – are okay, while saving your energy for the concrete walls that are more damage inducing and destructive.

Unfortunately, many youth from marginalized environments take on a fatalistic outlook that often drives the most extreme behavior. Though I was actually raised in a middle-class household, and despite the violence and dysfunctionality, it was my choice to adopt a fatalistic mindset by embracing the criminal lifestyle. This line of thinking becomes centered on the false belief that no one cares about us. We extrapolate the "proof" of these beliefs by how we are treated at home (feeling neglected, et cetera); how "the system" treats us (harassed by the police, dilapidated schools, et cetera), and perhaps how our peers treat us. These factors can give rise to more bold risk-taking and adrenalin addiction. Drugs and alcohol (the concrete wall) serve to exacerbate all of the above.

This is why it is imperative that parents constantly express and display their love. Be creative about it; tell a trusted neighbor or friend to check on your children in your stead and express these sentiments to your children vicariously. Remember, expressing and sharing love to a child does not have to cost money, only a little creativity, boldness and perhaps a little cooperation from other caring adults in the child(ren's) life (2),

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

In our advanced society, most people understand the definition of trauma, particularly physical trauma, such as beatings. However, as I discovered while teaching victim sensitivity on the compound, it is the subtle traumas in life that can have the most enduring and damaging effects. When I asked my peers to raise their hands at the traumatic experiences that most resonated with the, the following activities engendered a resounding response:

- Divorced or separated parents (talking / explanations for context help)
- paternal abandonment (explanations help)
- An imprisoned close relative (explanations help)
- Exposure to violence (explanations help)
- Yelling, being the punching bag in the aftermath of a bad day
- Being told they wouldn't amount to anything, or they would be like their (bad) parent
- Exposure to drugs and, or, alcohol
- Isolation
- Hopelessness
- Lose due to extreme events / natural disasters (explanations help)
- Neglect
- Instability (moving a lot)
- Being bullied (verbally or in cyberspace) / threats to life
- Chronic chaos (cumulative / chronic stress)
- Cultural or racial bias (explanations help)
- Responsibilities beyond a child's age or maturity (3)

TRAUMA RE-ENACTMENT

Trauma re-enactment describes the typical, but counter-intuitive ways people with traumatic experiences respond to their pain. Some of these typical responses are based on the following sentimental expressions:

- Anger (Chronic anger for no apparent reason)
- Shame
- Anxiety
- Sadness / Depression
- Chronic stress
- Rage
- Frustration
- Loneliness

Traumatized people also tend to act out in the following typical ways:

- Crime (hurt people hurt other people)
- Joining a gang
- Self-abuse
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Unprotected sex / Unplanned pregnancy
- Hardness (Insensitivity to others)
- Self-isolation
- Toxic relationships
- Compulsive behaviors
- Eating disorders
- Racism / Hate
- Bullying
- Disrespect (particularly toward authority figures)
- Suicidal ideation
- Violence

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THE HARM IN CONFORMITY

Conformity occurs when we change our behavior, viewpoints or personal beliefs in response to social pressure. As social creatures, it is normal for everyone to want to be liked and accepted. Changing our hairstyles or wearing the latest trends in clothes are all normal compromises to social pressure. This type of conformity is willful and

healthy. Behaviorists call this normative social influence. However, when we begin to alter who we are fundamentally, or change how we think simply for the benefit of others, these are red flags.

Many schools and most prisons depend on conformity to control their masses. This can be damaging to people, particularly children, if the sole purpose is to control. The problem with this damaging short-term goal of institutions, is that in the long run it robs people of their ability to think independently and exercise critical thinking skills.

For instance, prisons operate through a cloud of petty, superficial rules that really amount to nothing. Prisoners cannot pass items. Prisoners cannot give away food on their trays or share personal items (discouraging socialization). Yet these adverse rules do nothing to address criminal thinking. They simply restrict and deprive for the sake of it. Then there are the items considered dangerous, such as cell phones and drugs. The prohibition of these items are enforced with vigor, and punishments are meted out stringently. Yet with all of the rules prohibiting just about everything imaginable, there is nothing instructing prisoners as to the hows and whys of these prohibitions. The very instruction that would transform the maladaptive mindset toward mainstream thinking is withheld. A band-aid, not a cure. This explains the 70 percent failure rate for parolees.

Certainly, if prisoners were taught why drugs are harmful (It is not always intuitive) and incentivized to avoid them independently, these critical thinking skills would help reverse decades of personal and institutional failure.

Likewise with parenting, it is imperative that children be instructed with explanations—the hows and whys of life. Children and young adults do not understand abstracts well. As the front of their brain, the prefrontal cortex, matures in their mid-twenties, they begin to control impulse, they learn to reason, understand and foresee consequences better. Until then blind curiosity will always win out because children literally cannot compute abstracts. (Likewise, this is why “Because I said so!” is not effective, and like conformity in institutions, it does nothing to teach or instruct.) (5)

PUNISHMENT DOESN'T WORK

Punishment is defined by the effect it produces. If the consequences of behavior do not change future occurrences, then punishment is effective. When it comes to children and young adult, a punishment may appear to have been effective, when in actuality, the punishment may have just driven the behavior underground. Thus, many consequences commonly referred to as punishment—deprivation, being reprimanded, ridiculed, fired from a job, fined or even incarceration – fail to change the behavior.

According to noted behaviorist B.F. Skinner, adverse consequences are not consistently effective because the punishments do not immediately follow the behavior. Punishment is more effective if it consistently, rather than occasionally, follows the behavior.

Speeding tickets and prison sentences are often referred to as punishments. However, the consequences of the behavior leading to these punishments are inconsistently applied, and often administered only after a long delay. The inconsistency in application and delay decreases the punishment's effectiveness. To further exacerbate the failure of punishment, too often punishment is meted out simply for the sake of punishment. If the trespasser is not replaced with a more healthy way to respond to life, then the punishment is served in vain. Parents, and the powers that be, often forget that people are cognitive beings, they must be taught and instructed.

Punishment also has its down side. Intense punishment may result in complete passivity, fear, hostility or trauma (6).

ALTERNATIVES TO PUNISHMENT

Reinforcement of positive behavior (the reward) is often the best way to respond to negative behavior. For instance, when a child whines it is best not to respond to the whining. The parent may even explain to the child that whining does not, and will not, work. However, when the child expresses himself clearly and respectfully then a desirable response is rewarded. Positive reinforcement should be encouraged even when the negative behavior is not being displayed. For instance, while trying to break the negative behavior, thank the child or comment positively that you have noticed the behavior hasn't occurred in a while.

To dissuade negative behavior, such as an adult co-worker interrupting your work with gossip, a method called extinction should be employed. Extinction is to respond in a way that discourages future occurrences such as to simply act uninterested (7).

PEOPLE NEED PEOPLE

People are social creatures by nature. We survive well alone. Thus, it is normal for children to feel the need to be accepted, to be a part of something larger than themselves. Like all people, children want to be recognized, appreciated and reminded, every now and then, that they are special. And special they are. This is evident when parents take the time to learn the gifts their children possess. Parents who expose their children to a variety of new activities often find that one or more of these activities fit.

Over the years I have come to meet many of these children in prison with astonishing gifts, and even more who have honed their talents in these concrete and steel cages, just as I have. Of course, by encouraging the development of new talents in children, this stimulation boosts the section of Maslow's needs for self-esteem and self-actualization. The bottom line is, when children develop a healthy sense of who they are and have a good sense of their own investment in themselves, it is difficult for outsiders to derail whatever course they have set for themselves. Through hobbies and education, children learn indirectly to protect their own interests.

CHILDHOOD DELINQUENCY

In addition to low self-esteem and suicidal ideation, anger is a common factor in adolescence. Many children slam doors, yell, defy parents and otherwise "act out." Teenage boys are more likely to act out by breaking the law than

girls. Arrest statistics around the world indicate that virtually every young teen breaks the law at least once before age twenty. However, only about one- fourth of young law breakers are caught, and most are warned and released (depending on their zip code, of course) (8).

The consistent and major indicators of delinquency are: short attention span, hyperactivity, insufficient emotional regulation, slow language development, low intelligence, autistic tendencies, exposure to second-hand smoke, substance abuse, and child abuse. Other factors for increased likelihood of law breaking are victimization, standard education, divorced or separated parents and exposure to repeat violence. Neurological impairment (either inborn or as a result of an adverse childhood experience) increase the risk that the child will become a long-term offender. (9)

BULLYING

Bullying is pervasive in society. On the Internet, at the work place, and in schools. Children are by far the most vulnerable because they don't have the tools to cope. Our advice is to talk about bullying. Build trust with your children so that they understand they can talk to you. Most children do not share that they are subjected to bullying because of shame. First, it is important to ensure that it isn't *your* "cuttie pie" who is the bully. This is why discussions on the topic are so important

- Bullies are often angry and lack self-esteem
- Bullies have usually been traumatized or bullied themselves
- Bullying is often a learned behavior – that can be unlearned.

Convey to your children that:

- If they're bullied, it is not their fault.
- Explain that bullying is wrong and why.
- Assure your children that if they are bullied, they can talk to you.

If they come to you:

- Ask them how they want to deal with it.
- Get all the insight you can on the child and the situation
- Never tell a child to meet violence with violence. The law will be less compassionate than the bully
- Teach your children what empathy is. Hurt people, hurt people. Do not perpetuate the cycle.

Options for children who may be bullied:

- Tell someone they can trust
- Try to reason with the bully
- try to get help for the bully
- Walk away
- Defend yourself as a last resort

(10)

References:

- *The Developing Person: Through Childhood and Adolescence* (7th Ed.), By Kathleen Stassen Berger (Bronx community College, NY 2006), pp. 323-324
- Ibid. pp. 481-486
- Victim Offender Education Group, Insight Project, pp 34-35
- Ibid. pp. 42-44
- *The Developing Person: Through childhood and Adolescence* (7th Ed.), by Kathleen Stassen Berger (Bronx community College, NY 2006) pp. 454-456
- Ibid. p. 194
- Ibid. pp. 438-439
- Ibid. pp. 452-453
- Ibid. pp. 453-454
- Ibid. pp. 366-368
-

Recommended readings:

- *State of Delinquencies: Race and Science in America's Criminal Justice System*, by N. Chavez- Garcia
- *The PTSD Crisis That's Being Ignored as Americans are Being Injured In Their Own Neighborhoods* by L. Becket
- *Taught by America*, by Sarah Sentiles
- *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, by Joy Degruy
- *Man Child In The Promise Land*, by Claude Brown
- *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, by Alex Haley
- *Great Books for High School Kids: A Teachers Guide to Books That Can Change Teens' Lives*, Ed. by Rick Ayers and Amy

SUICIDE PREVENTION

Suicide is one of the most elusive health concerns in America. Those suffering from suicidal ideation are rarely forthcoming about their confusion. It is therefore imperative that we all be familiar with the most common risk factors and subtle signals given by those suffering such temptation.

SUICIDE RISK FACTORS

- Depression, mental health issues or substance abuse disorder
- A prior attempt
- Family history of mental disorder or substance abuse
- Family history of suicide
- Family violence, including physical or sexual abuse
- The availability of guns or other firearms in the home
- Incarceration
- Ideation (thinking about suicide)
- Purposelessness (no sense of belonging)
- Chronic anger
- Feeling trapped (feeling like there's no way out)
- Hopelessness (there's nothing to live by, no hope)
- Withdrawal (from family, friends, co-workers, schoolmates)
- Preoccupation with death
- Sudden loss of personal interests
- Giving away prized possessions, setting one's affairs in order
- Recklessness (high risk-taking behavior)

While anyone can fall victim to suicidal ideation, those suffering from mental illness or incarceration (particularly in California, which happens to have the highest rate of suicide in the nation). The stigma associated with mental illness can discourage people who need help from seeking it. It is recommended that the topic of suicide be addressed with family and friends in general, so that the subject is not foreign when those who need help desire to talk. By breaching the subject by way of course builds a credit line of trust for that day when trust may be needed most.

It is important to remember that when someone is suffering from suicidal ideation, your opinion is irrelevant and potentially damaging. It is not recommended that you counsel the person that their situation is not that bad, or that they have everything to live for. These type of statements may increase their feelings of hopelessness because they simply do not see the enthusiasm you are imparting. Instead, reassure them that help is available, which is what they desperately need. Reassure them that what they are experiencing is treatable and that their undesirable feelings are temporary. Offering care and concern can be a game-changer for someone contemplating suicide. Simply asking if they are okay, and by listening to them express their feelings can have a very significant impact.

An effective tool to prevent suicide is simple dialog. Often those contemplating suicide have bottled up emotions and unexpressed sentiments that need to be aired. It is paramount that your approach be nonjudgmental and supportive. Listen to the person very carefully.

Questions that are okay to ask:

- “Do you ever feel so badly that you think about suicide?”
- “Do you have a plan to commit suicide or take your life?”
- “Have you thought about when you would do it?” (Today, tomorrow, next week?)
- “Have you thought about what method you would use?”

These questions will help you assess the level of danger the person may be in. Whatever the situation, the person needs professional help. Don't worry about betraying their trust at this point; it is better to betray trust to save a life than to plan for a funeral.

Never leave a person alone who is contemplating suicide.
Never keep a plan for suicide a secret.

Call 911 or 1(800) 273-talk (273-8255)

References:

Hockenbury & Hochenbury, *Discovering Psychology* (4th Ed.),

Suicide in America: Frequently Asked Questions (National Institute of Mental health (www.samhsa.gov))

International Association of Suicide Prevention, World Suicide Prevention: Day, September 10, 2015,
www.lasp.info/wspd

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

SESSION OPENING:

Trust is paramount in group sessions. After everyone introduces themselves, rules should be agreed upon by the group participants. The facilitator heads the session and all of its components. Participants might be prompted to agree on the following:

- Whatever personal information (or secrets) are revealed in session remain confidential among the group.

- Perhaps a time limit for each person might be established.
- Whether the participants will sit in a circle (formal) or relaxed.
- Laughing at or otherwise disrespecting someone else while they are talking is prohibited.
- Interrupting is strictly prohibited.
- Whether participants should raise their hands and be called upon, or just respond in an orderly fashion.
- Encourage participants that the session is a “safe place” and that it is okay to be open and honest.
- It is recommended that every participant should have the right to “pass,” only being encouraged to speak, but never forced to do so.
- Each participant might begin by sharing something personal about themselves. Perhaps a favorite pastime or an idol.

Sometimes, sessions can get intense and a participant might experience an unexpected emotion. It is advised that when this happens the agenda be set aside and that person's moment be given priority. Ask questions when appropriate so the person expounds. For instance, “Is it okay if I ask why you are crying?” or, “can I ask how that made you feel?”

With young participants, it is advised to ask questions with the obvious objective to elicit a teachable moment, and provide answers for the benefit of the larger group.

- Emphasize the importance of the interconnectedness of the group. All are equal; all are important.
- Be cognizant that the focus on the 12-steps can morph into “talking sessions,” “healing sessions,” “sessions of support,” and “conflict resolution sessions.” If appropriate, go with it.

The facilitator is the authority of the group, while the participants are all equals among themselves.

In closing the facilitator should reserve enough time to ask if everyone is okay and if anyone has anything they need to express.

Sources:

The Little Book of Circles Processes, by K. Pranis (Good Books, Intercourse, PA 2004)

Center for Council, www.centerforcouncil.org, contact@centerforcouncil.org

GROUP SESSION BENEFITS

The following 12-steps to success are structured for maximum effect. Guidance is offered, and then written comments and group discussion are requested to provoke thought among the participants.

While a single parent can work with one or more children in a home, the group discussions are considered “therapeutic” in that they situate similar people, in similar situations, to talk about failures and triumph regarding their everyday problems and challenges. In this format, popularized by groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, people of equal status actually teach and learn from one another by simply sharing and discussing their life experiences in response to standard prompts.

By sharing real issues, and voluntarily making themselves vulnerable, the participants learn to relate to one another on a deeper level. They learn what it feels like to share more cohesively. They learn to trust one another in confidence as secrets are shared. Participants also learn discipline, responsibility, and accountability. They bond in healthy ways.

12-STEPS TO SUCCESS

Step #1

Be a Leader

What the world needs are more leaders, not followers. It is easy to follow. Followers do not have to think, they spend no energy and they sacrifice themselves, their ideas and dreams for the person or people they follow. The reality is that everyone has talent and worth. So when followers sacrifice their own dreams to follow others, they cheat the rest of us of their individual talents.

Sometimes followers don't think they have talents, usually because they are so busy following others; they never take the time to invest in themselves. The truth is, we just have to try new things to learn what talents are hidden inside of us. Here's some qualities of a leader:

- Leaders trust themselves
- Leaders believe in themselves because they try new things
- Leaders understand that courage is to be scared, but to act anyway
- When leaders have ideas, they have the courage to express them
- Leaders have the courage to try their ideas
- Leaders have an open mind

Mission: Write the following and discuss it:

- Describe your definition of a leader.
- What other qualities could a leader have?
- Do you see yourself as leadership material? If not, what are you missing?

More on Leadership

Having an open mind, you are willing to try new things. That's how leaders build confidence. By having an open mind, leaders try things and learn what they are good at, and not so good at.

- True leaders do not judge others
- True leaders are not afraid to make decisions
- True leaders do not believe in stereotypes; everyone is unique
- True leaders are tolerant; they understand that everyone is unique

- True leaders read and like to learn new things
- True leaders like to push the limits in a smart and safe way
- True leaders ask questions and are curious about life

Mission: Write which of the above characteristics of a leader you relate to most
Discuss them as a group.

Leadership Continued

By asking questions, leaders learn the world around them. They learn about themselves by learning about their environment. This helps leaders understand themselves better, because we are all reflections of our environment. A true leader understands him or herself.

- Leaders surround themselves with people who truly care about them
- Leaders believe in themselves, in spite of what others say

Mission: Write how you're a reflection of your environment.
Perhaps how you talk?
Do you curse?
Do you have an accent?
How do you dress, like everyone else?
Discuss it in class.

True Leaders

True leaders believe in themselves because they invest in themselves. By reading, asking questions, and trying new things leaders build confidence in themselves. Reading, asking questions, and trying new things help leaders understand themselves better. When we understand ourselves we know where we shine and where our weaknesses are. Leaders understand that weaknesses are okay. Every leader, every human being has weaknesses. Personal weaknesses tell us where we need to improve, or when we need to rely on the talents of others. True leaders understand that it is okay to ask for help. Because true leaders understand that pride can get in the way of success and true leadership requires humility.

Mission: Write down your weaknesses/strengths
How could you improve your weaknesses?
Discuss it in a group.

Leadership is Humility

Part of humility is understanding that you do not know everything, and cannot know everything. When true leaders understand this, they have no problem saying, “I don’t know.” But smart leaders will seek to find out the answer. Life is a continual learning process, no matter what age.

Humility helps leaders have empathy for others. Empathy is when you can put yourself in another person’s shoes and try to understand what they are going through. Empathy helps leaders relate to others who are different from themselves. Empathy helps leaders have tolerance for people who are different. Empathy and tolerance means having an open mind.

Leaders also understand that they must be truthful and keep it clean. This means taking responsibility for mistakes and learning from them. True leaders understand that everyone makes mistakes, and that courage means facing the consequences of mistakes and owning them. Others respect leaders for taking responsibility for mistakes. Taking responsibility means not blaming others.

Mission: How do you feel when you don’t know something?
Do you think it makes you look weak to say “I don’t know?”
Is being humble weak?
Discuss it in a group.

Leadership *is Not* Following Others

Leaders do the opposite of followers. When weak followers try to hear a leader down, s/he doesn't bite. The response is always the high road. True leaders encourage those surrounding him or her.

Leaders understand that hurt people, hurt other people. Again, this is what exercising empathy is. Leaders also acknowledge that they are vulnerable because they are human. Weaknesses make us vulnerable, which is completely normal.

Mission: Write how it makes you feel when others try to tear you down?

Is it smart to ignore these type of people?

Even if what they are saying is true, does that mean we can't fix and improve it?

Discuss this in a group.

Leaders Are Useful

Leaders make themselves useful, useful to their families, useful to their neighbors, and useful to their communities. This is what true leadership is and why true leadership last.

Mission: Write how you can make yourself useful at home.

Write how you can make yourself useful at school.

Write how you can make yourself useful in the community.

Discuss this as a group.

STEP #2

Self-Destructive Behavior

Along with me, there are literally thousands of other prisoners in this dark palace of sadness and loneliness. Most of us got here by taking stupid chances and exercising self-destructive behavior. Self-destructive behavior is so easy to get involved with, especially if you don't think about what you're doing or think about the consequences. Some destructive behaviors and real life consequences are:

- Street racing. You can Google a lot of street races that turned into deadly accidents.

People racing down the streets, running red lights and BAM! Disaster. And the ones that lived through it, came to

prison to be here with me.

- Tagging. It seems innocent enough, but the problem is that when we tag we are disrespecting other people's property. Sometimes they call the police, other times they come out shooting. If you Google tagging/shooting you will see something so small straight blow up. Who wants to lose their life over tagging? It's just not worth it. Practice at home, get good and make money doing art. That's how you can make a mane for yourself – without coming to prison, or worse.
- The choking game. This is the one that is a monster. When we choke people it takes them so close to death. The problem is, many youths have pushed the game so far they accidentally died. It's all bad at that point; that's the problem with destructive behavior. It's too dangerous. So we have to ask if the thrill is worth the terrible consequences? The thrill is never worth it if it all goes bad. Think about it: a person dies, and the other goes to prison forever. We must think of the consequences because they are real.

It's like bad food. We never eat spoiled food because we know the consequences are a horrible taste, and we'll get big time sick, too. Looking ahead, and foreseeing these consequences are enough to keep us in check. Making a habit of thinking of the consequences in every part of our life can also save us from a gang of heartache.

- Cutting. This is definitely a challenge, but after the deed everyone regrets it. This is why being a follower isn't cool. It's always better to make your own choices and decisions.
- Riding the side of trains and the backs of trucks. Again, all you have to do is Google the many disasters that have resulted from this type of thrill seeking. If you take just a moment to look at yourself in the mirror, most of us have all of our arms, legs and feet. We have both eyes and all ten toes. While we are often amazed at the talent of those who don't have all their limbs do what they do, I'm sure they must be asking: "Why would anyone risk losing their limbs forever, just for a few minutes of fun?" It doesn't make sense.

Mission: Write a few bad experiences where you didn't think of the consequences until it was too late. Discuss them with the group.

Sexting

Another self-destructive behavior that can land you in the big house of concrete and steel is sexting. There are real perverts and weirdoes out there who like doing bad things to children. So lawmakers have made up a gang of laws to protect young people your age. The problem is the law makes no distinction between potentially dangerous weirdoes and innocent youth. So here's where you get in trouble:

- Texting sexual messages and descriptions of sexual desires and things like that can get you in trouble with the law. Remember, anything you put on a phone, the Internet, including Facebook, Instagram and others, is there forever. Once you put it in cyberspace, it is there permanently. That means the law could come knocking on your door – at any time.
- Naked pictures are the same as graphic messages. The bottom-line is that sex is a private, sacred activity between two consenting adults. That said, I know that limiting sex to adulthood is not reality. So for those who make the decision, against my advice to wait, I must warn you of the pitfalls:
- Jail time is a potential reality. If you go to jail for sexting, having underage sex or transmitting nude pictures, the law could come knocking. That's real.
- Sexual diseases are another pitfall. There are a lot of sexually transmitted infections out there. Smart adults protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections by researching "How to protect myself from

sexually transmitted infections” on the Internet. Of course, the best way to protect yourself from an STI is to wait until you’re 18-years-old, but hey, I know some ain’t trying to hear that.

- Pregnancy is yet another unwanted result of sexual intercourse as a youth. Unplanned pregnancies derail future plans, add challenges and difficulties you don’t need. True preparation for life is to have a completed education, to have a good paying job or an on-going career. That is the ideal definition of being prepared for pregnancy, and life. Of course, reality doesn’t always mesh with this ideal goal. Again, searches on the Internet are invaluable for guidance into specific challenges. And better yet, a quick Internet search will also show you how to avoid these pitfalls, while offering good alternatives to these predicaments.

Whatever the situation, the Internet has much more information than I could provide in this short guide. Still, books have been my best friend as far as guidance here in prison. Think of a situation or a topic and someone has probably written a book about it. Books are usually better than a general Internet search and an Internet search is better than asking someone for guidance who isn’t an expert or who has no formal education.

Remember every decision you make – big or small – has a consequence. Make decisions wisely.

Misson: Write an example of someone you have seen get set back by an underage pregnancy.

What advice would you give to someone about to make such a mistake?

Where would you tell them to seek help or advice?
Discuss these in a group.

Challenges

This is where you really have to be careful. Online challenges can be fun, they promote socializing and, like gangs, a false acceptance. Challenges to your abilities can be cool, even fun. But like every decision in life, you have to be smart about the challenges you accept. One measure I would recommend is to always weigh its worth: Is it worth it?

If the challenge is to collect 100 soda cans in an hour, that sounds cool. No one gets hurt, it isn’t dangerous, and the environment wins, too.

But what about a challenge that involves fire? Well, in that type of challenge property could be damaged, people could get hurt – including yourself – and you could get arrested. That’s all bad, and for what? It isn’t worth it.

Misson: Search some online stunts that went bad.
Write down one incident that affected you online.
What would you do differently to avoid the person’s mistake?
Discuss them in class.

Hanging Out

Just hanging out with the fellas or the girls is not bad in and of itself. We all live in the great American democracy where free speech is applauded and where innocence goes without consequence. Unfortunately, things are not always the way they are supposed to be. The problem with hanging out in public places is:

- Hanging out exposes you to people who mean you harm: Jackers and gangsters who live by a different code and by a different lifestyle. The bottomline, when you're not out in the streets: outta sight outta mind.
- Hanging out exposes you to all kinds of dangers. We've all heard the stories of innocent people – in the wrong place at the wrong time – being hit by a stray bullet.
- Hanging out makes you susceptible to unwanted police attention. To be real, many other races who do not have to suffer frequent deadly police encounters also tend to meet, play and do what they do behind closed doors. That's real.

And to be fair, the police have no idea what people on the streets are doing. When they make the decision to conduct a safety check, they also expose themselves to danger. Unfortunately, they can't just look at someone and know that they are thinking; they don't know who has good or bad intentions.

The reality is that there are a lot of crazy people out in the streets. There are drunk drivers, folks on drugs and people with weapons. There are a lot of angry people out there just looking for someone to take out their frustrations on. I don't share this to scare you, but only to make you aware, to help you think about your decisions before you decide to hang out. It's just a warning to simply be careful, to simply beware.

Mission: Write a couple of examples of bad experiences you've seen or heard of, or even experienced, as a result of hanging out.

Discuss this in the group.

Step #3

Gang Banging

Banging is so serious, avoiding it is a positive step on its own. Ask anyone in prison doing a life sentence if they think gang banging is cool, and the overwhelming response will be: “No!”

Gangs, in and of themselves, are nothing more than neighborhood fraternities. Like anyone else, gang members are social creatures who want to make meaningful friendships that are founded on love, loyalty and sacrifice.

The problem with gangs is that they tend to rely on criminality as their main activity: drug dealing, robbing, stealing and territorial and retaliatory shootings. These activities generally end with one of two outcomes: prison or death. But life has so many more options than these.

Instead of gang banging, you can find love, loyalty, and sacrifice in a mentor. Just like girls look for boys and boys look for girls, you can do a responsible search for mentors or ask a teacher or other professional in your life – including fire department personnel – for help finding a mentor.

The one thing the fellas here absolutely advise against is being tricked into joining a gang. Beware of euphemisms (you-fah-miz-ems): a word, or words, used to lessen the impact, or seriousness of the subject. For instance, when the homies say they are going to do a “jack,” that means they are going to rob somebody. But if they say rob somebody, the word “rob” rubs against your conscience. So they use softer words to take the sting out. Same thing with “take that fool out”; “hit a lick,” you know the business. Here’s some other things to watch out for:

- Quick riches. When I got busted for murder, I had over \$75,000 stashed, a racing motorcycle, and off-road vehicle, and a sports car. None of it was enough to save me from this sentence of life without the possibility of parole. Quick riches the wrong way often end in a prison sentence or death. It isn’t worth it. After 27 years in prison, I could have gone to a university and started a career earning 75,000+ every year – with no penitentiary chances. My criminal lifestyle wasn’t worth it.
- ”Prison ain’t nothing; you can kick it in prison,” some homies say. If not having a cellphone, and being told when you can see your family is kickin’ it, then prison is for you. If being forced to live with another man in a small cage, or being told what to wear and that you can only have three pairs of pants is cool, then hey this is the place to be.
- ”You won’t do a lot of time if you get caught because you’re young.” Not! My neighbor came in at 18-years-old. He’s been in for 22 years. Don’t believe the lies.
- “If you join the gang, or do the lick, you’ll be showing how down you are,” they say. But being down is only part of it; you gotta be smart, too. Being down is sacrificing your life for mother or brother. That’s love, loyalty, and respect. The question is, if you do the lick, will the homies be down for you? (Read *The Pains of Gangs, Prison and Death* for the answer.)
- If you are looking for acceptance, learn a talent and people will not only accept you, they will respect you. Sing, dance, paint, draw, play an instrument, learn math or computer skills. Be good, be the boss.
- Joining a gang is never worth it.

Mission: List two reasons why gang banging is a bad idea?

What are some bad experiences you’ve had or witnessed with gang banging?

Act like you think your caregiver would if they found out you got killed gang banging. Write it in detail.

Recommended books:

Project Fatherhood, by Jorja Leap

Dark Tales From the Dungeon: Horrors from the “Hood for Youth to Beware, a Men For Honor Book, edited by Dortell Williams

Tattoos on the Heart, by Gregory Boyle (Founder of Homeboy Industries)

Makes me Wanna Holla, by Nathan McCall

My Nature is Hunger, by Luiz Rodriguez

Always Running, by Luiz Rodriguez

Brothers and Keepers, by John Edgar Wideman

Intercity Miracle, by Judge Mathis

Step #4

Emotional Intelligence

How well do you know yourself? For instance, when you get angry, what happens to you physically? It is very important to know yourself, and to be able to predict yourself before you explode. It's like the ol' saying, "he lost it." He lost "it" because he didn't recognize the signs. Here are some signs people recognize in themselves when they get angry:

- Heat in their heads.
- They ball their fists.
- Their mouth gets dry.
- Some clench their teeth.
- Their heart beats faster.
- They breath heavier.

Mission: Write your signs of anger

Discuss this in the group

The next time you get angry, pay attention. Write down the signs.

Health Coping Skills

When you get angry, there are alternatives to “losing it.” here are some options you can use instead of losing it. You’ll know which options are appropriate for you and when they are appropriate, especially if you know yourself. The idea is to avoid doing something or saying something you’ll later regret. Try these:

- Patiently and respectfully tell the person you are getting angry and that you need a minute to get yourself together.
- Count to ten.
- Walk away.
- Go talk to someone reasonable; someone you can vent to.
- Read.
- Listen to music.
- Exercise.
- Pray.
- Be nice.
- Write in a journal.
- Draw or do other art.
- At some point, think of a solution.

Mission: Write down three of your favorites.

Can you think of others?

Discuss this in the group.

Step #5

How to Respond to Authority.

Imagine a world without rules and laws. There is a red light and a green light at the intersection. Without these lights telling people where to go, it would be chaos. Cars would crash and people would be fighting and killing each other. Rules and laws create and maintain peace and order.

Stop lights have authority. Teachers also have authority. They lead the class in the direction it should go. Without a teacher there would be chaos, you know?

Parents, teachers, firemen, the police – these are all authority figures.

How to Manage Police Encounters

It goes without saying police are figures of authority. Like all figures of authority, police officers are human. They make mistakes. Still, you gotta respect anyone with a gun. Whenever you are stopped by the police you must do the following:

- Be quiet (shut up!)
- Stay calm
- Listen to their questions and answer them respectfully
- Note the name on the officers badge(s)
- Note the patrol car number if possible
- Never talk back
- Never run from the police/resist – No matter what you may have done, you will live. But you can't survive a hail of bullets
- If you are asked to go into your pocket, purse or glove compartment, #Move Sloooooowly. After telling the officer exactly what you're doing. Communicating is very important.

In traffic school, for speeding, I was taught how to communicate with officers both verbally and non-verbally. My non-verbal communication set the tone. For instance, when I peeped the flashlights behind me, I acknowledge their attention by turning my emergency lights on and slowing down. I searched for a safe area to pull over and when I stopped, I did the following:

- Turned on the interior light
- Rolled the window down
- Waited for officer to approach with both hands on the steering wheel where they could clearly be seen.

- Referred to him as “sir” and only answered his questions.
-

The officer responded with politeness, calm, and respect. When he asked for my license and registration, I told him where they were (the glove compartment) and then asked him if I could get them. He said “yes, please”, and when everything checked out, he explained that I was driving 25mph faster than the speed limit, which turned my speeding offense to reckless driving. An offence where he could’ve snatched my car and arrested me. He said that I seemed like a nice guy and he appreciated my respect. He let me off with a speeding ticket.

Though he had the power, I controlled the situation by initiating a calm respectful atmosphere and actually got a break. I can’t guarantee that every police encounter will be this successful, but I know this: Being polite and respectful doesn’t hurt. I also know that questions like “what I do?” doesn’t help because they’re going to tell you without you asking. At that point you might ask for mercy, but never demand it. At the end of the day, he/she got the authority, so it is what it is, until you challenge it in court, or file a complaint. Never argue with anyone who has a gun period.

Types of Books

Fiction books are not true, like a lot of television shows. Fiction is good because it expands your imagination, its’ fun and if you pay attention to the words used, how the sentences are constructed and the writers’ style, you can learn a lot.

History is good because if you learn history, you’ll know how to avoid repeating it. The simplest example is your socks. If you know your sock history, you know not to wear them two days in a row and if you do something successfully, knowing that history will help you repeat that success.

If you want to be successful, read biographies. Biographies are the histories of peoples’ lives; they’re peoples’ personal stories. You can learn a lot about their successes and failures, and about yourself in comparison.

The more you know, the less people can work you because you know. Books can be borrowed from friends, adults, schools, and libraries. Read more, watch television less, and educate yourself!

Mission: Where else can books be found?

Name a book and google it. Is it expensive?

Step #6 Educate Yourself

The problem with fools and stupid people is they don’t learn; they are unteachable. Fools and stupid people get

played all the time. On the other hand, the more you now, the more successful you'll be. I'm not talking about being smart, a lot of us are smart – and that helps. But you have to build on your intelligence with education. School is important, but not enough. Schools teach what they foresee you will need to serve the establishment. Self-education helps *you* teach yourself what you are interested in. even when you don't know, by teaching yourself in general, you can help yourself find direction.

Self-education not only gives you direction, it also opens the world up for you. Things you never saw or imagined are in books and on the internet. But you have to open your mind. That's what self-education does.

The best way to teach yourself is to read. Read any and everything. Cereal boxes, movie credits, anything because the big wide world becomes a lot smaller when you understand how everything is related in life. Books are the best source of information.

In prison, books have been my best friend. They don't argue with you nor abandon you and they let you go back to the same page over and over again without getting annoyed.

Mission: Write a list of three types of book you'd read.

Can you learn from fiction books?

Discuss this with the group.

Step #7

Civic Duty

What is civic duty? In short, civic duty is basically giving back, contributing. Ants are good examples of contributing. They all work together, doing their part so that everybody benefits. Society is structured the same way. The coders create apps so we can do what we do on our phones. The trash collectors keep the 'hood clean. Uber and taxi drivers get us where we need to go. Like ants, workers help society move forward.

If you ever feel worthless, think about what society needs. If you are a minority, there's plenty of room for your service in society. America needs more minority coders, doctors, lawyers and astronauts. Why not you? America also needs more minority NASCAR drivers, scientists, and engineers. If others can do it, you can too.

The secret isn't money for college, but discipline, sacrifice, and hard work. Remember, it's your activities that dictate who you attract in your life. This is where people become more valuable than money. If you're serious and puttin' in the work, people will come out of the woodwork to help and support you.

Have you ever peeped how sensitive others are to dreamers? Most people like to hear about dreams coming true. Americans are empathetic to people striving for a dream; they want to help. Sensible people know that if they help you succeed, you'll help others down the line. That's giving back. That's civic duty.

Mission: Is helping an elder cross the street civic duty?

Is picking up the trash in the street civic duty?

Is mentoring someone younger than you civic duty?

Step #8 Communication

Communication is one of the most important tools for success. There are a lot of ways people communicate. Some are through looks; you know, when that authority figure gives you that look and *you know* what's up. Another way we communicate is by the clothes we wear. Police communicate their authority by wearing uniforms and badges. Nurses signal they are qualified to help us by wearing scrubs. Gang members communicate what time it is by... well, you know. That all said, the main purpose of communication is to understand and be understood.

Mission: Write down other ways people communicate.

Facilitator expounds:

Did you list writing as a form of communication? Stories, essays, songs, raps and poetry are just some of the ways people communicate. Then there's legal papers, architectural blue prints, and even food recipes.

A person could contribute to the world just by mastering one of these forms of writing. Yet there are so many more.

Mission: Can you think of more expressions by writing?

Language

Language is also just as important as presentation. The vocabulary you use says a lot about you. When you use college-level words to a teacher, a prospective employer or your best friend's mother, they will most likely be impressed. Just like when you use the most dated slang, the homies respect you. In either case, it's about knowing wuss up.

Foreign languages are also what's up. American schools don't teach foreign language as part of the regular get down, but in most other countries a second or even third language is required.

Since I've been locked up, I've taught myself Spanish. There's no question that Spanish has it's advantages in the U.S. But even in this rotten cage, knowing Spanish has been a blessing.

I get along with my Latino brothers because I can relate to them better. They respect me because I've taken the time to learn their language. In prison we only get the regular TV channels and a few Spanish stations. Sometimes there ain't nothin' else on regular TV, but the Spanish channel will have a bomb movie, in Spanish, of course. And I am one of the few blacks who can watch it and understand it. Same with books. What's a trip is that my understanding of Spanish helps me recognize closely related words in other Romance languages; Italian, French, and Portuguese. I can actually understand a lot of these other languages when I hear or read them.

On the outside, someone other than a natural Spanish speaker can snatch a job easier simply because s/he speaks Spanish. There's just all types of advantages to learning Spanish, and other languages. If you get an opportunity, or decide to teach yourself, go for it! If I can do it, anyone can.

When sharing with friends and those closer than friends, the best way to communicate is to listen. Listening is the best way to understand what the other person is saying and avoid misinterpretations. The other person will appreciate you much more for listening. Listening is also a good way to discipline yourself and develop patience, which are also good characteristics.

The next thing to learn is to share in *dialogue*, that's when there is a flowing back and forth in the conversation. On the other hand, a monologue is when just one person speaks, like a speech. It is never good when one person is expecting to have a conversation, but the other person hogs the dialogue and won't let the other person talk. I've seen some of the best conversations go all bad because of this.

The best dialogues are those where each person is short winded, makes their point and then lets the other person respond. It's really just common courtesy.

Mission: Think of a situation where this happened to you. Write down how it made you feel. Discuss it with the group.

Yelling and Screaming

When is yelling acceptable in a conversation? If you said never, you're right. Yelling is for the stage, sports fields or at concerts. Many people yell at the person right in front of them as if that's going to make them understand better. No, what helps people understand better is to be *clear*, be specific and to be patient with your listener.

Mission: Write down other ways to have a good conversation.

What irritates you during conversations?

Do you have any bad habits during conversation?

Talking

Of course talking is one of the most common forms of communication. When talking we use formal language, like at a business meeting, in courtrooms and when talking with professionals or authority figures.

When we talk with the homies or with the girls we might use slang; we definitely talk more loose and informally; otherwise we sound up tight and we don't fit the situation or our company.

Sometimes public speaking is necessary. One or more people may need to convey an idea or a message to the masses. Most people find public speaking nerve wracking; we get nervous, we stutter and sweat. This is normal, even for professional speakers. Yet with practice, anyone can learn the techniques to speak or write to an audience.

And like anything in life, the more you read up on the subject, the more you'll ready yourself for the task. Preparation is everything.

Mission: If you were to give advice to someone about to give a speech, what would you tell them? Discuss with the group.

Step #9

Managing Finances

They say, "money makes the world go 'round," Not True! People make the world go around and we design money for others to earn and then spend. Money is a tool that has changing value and is based on supply and demand. In other words, a dollar today can buy you more than a dollar 6mths from now. People influence the value of money. Events also influence the value of money. Items you buy with money also tend to decrease in value just because you bought them. Once bought, they're considered "used" so their worth decreases. For instance, you buy a diamond, a car, or whatever, either item during economic times cost \$10,000. The minute you walk out of the jewelry store or drive off the lot, the items values decreases by almost \$1,000.

People are actually the most important resource on the whole earth. The more you invest in them, even if you just invest your time, the more worth and value they achieve. If you know people in good positions, you don't need money to get their help, especially if you have something to offer in exchange.

If you have someone with a valued skill, say like coding or speaking Spanish, and they teach you that skill, it's like they gave you tens of thousands of dollars because that's how much you could earn by selling your services. Yet, no money has been exchanged. Ideas are worth a lot of money and people generate ideas with absolutely no money. This is why I emphasize that people are much more valuable than money and with all the killing going on in our neighborhoods, I think it is important to make this point.

Mission: Write why you agree or disagree that people are worth more than money. Discuss your points with the group.

Money is a Tool

Money is a tool. What I mean by this is that tools help us achieve whatever mission we are trying to accomplish. Here's two examples:

- Money makes money. If you invest money like most rich people, your money will earn you more money. Most stores buy candy bars for say .70 cent each, then they sell that same candy bar for \$1.00. The extra is profit. Cars, stocks, real estate, and just about everything is bought and sold by business people this way. Dope dealers do the same, but at the risk to their freedom or lives. (As a former drug dealer, I assure you it isn't worth it!) The more money you can save to invest, the more money you can earn with your money. Smart people never invest all their money in just one thing because there are never any guarantees. If you think about it, most people work for money. They work two and three jobs for money, when their money could be working for them. Does this make sense to you? Successful people live their entire lives allowing their money to earn them profits. Their money is working for them.

The secret is that you have to do your homework, you have to study investments to see which investments are best for you. The more types of investments you teach yourself, the more options you'll have. Options are what's up.

- Money gives us options as tools, for example, earlier I said that money is based on supply and demand. In other words, people influence the value of money. So Randy wants .80cents for his candy bars. You told him that you'll buy all ten of his bars if he sells them to you for 75cents each. He agrees because he'll make some profit, without having to wait all day for other sales. You could either re sale the bars at 80cent or just enjoy saving because you had the option of bargaining. This is power, no matter what zip code you come from. And the ideas you put behind these concepts are your fate, your destiny

In order to get to this position, you have to manage your money. If you spend, spend and spend, especially on things you really don't need or on high price items you don't need, then you make everyone else rich while you scrape by. It is better to build a financial foundation, first. Then you can spend, spend and spend. But, you'll be able to spend with options, dictating the final price, how much you save and even making a profit – if you choose. You must remember, money is a tool. Money gives you power, power to choose, power to swing the win your way.

Mission: If you had \$25.00 how could you legally invest it?

After reading the above, write down how you would manage your money differently.

Discuss ideas within group.

Generating Ideas and Money

As examples solely generate ideas, if I had \$25.00 I might:

- Go online and look up certificates of deposits
- I would do online search of stocks/penny stocks
- I would do an online search of popular items and then see if I could play middle person connecting those with money to those who have the popular items
- I would invest in some tool that would help me legally make money: a used lawn mower (you could rent one from a neighbor)
- Some of these ideas you may be too young to actually do; however, they are suggested to prompt ideas, still you could partner with a trusted adult to actually materialize these and other ideas. After all nothing is impossible.

Mission: Write down other ideas.

Discuss ideas with the group.

Remember, ideas are the root of everything you see around you. Ideas drive people and people drive the world. If I didn't believe in you, I wouldn't be writing this book.

Mission: Write down some other authority figures.

Discuss why these authority figures are important.

Step #10

Have Fun

Hobbies, Sports and Activities

Life, at no matter what age, can be intense. Life in the inner-city is stressful. To balance the intensity and stress we must have fun. As stated in Step #2, fun does not have to be destructive. It shouldn't be destructive. Because at the end of the day, getting in trouble, or injured, or hooked on dope is not fun.

Fun *can* be constructive, such as playing sports. Not just the popular sports like football, basketball, and baseball, but also sports you may not be familiar with. I'm talking rugby, luge, and maybe even curling. If you don't recognize these sports, that's the whole idea. Check them out online. There's also exotic disciplines like fencing, wrestling and handball.

Did you know chess is considered a sport?

Mission: Can you think of any other activities that people would be surprised to learn are sports?

Discuss this with the group.

Learn What's Out There

It's interesting to just learn what's out there. Have you ever considered checking out the Paralympics? These events and their stars would give you a whole new appreciation of life, and a fresh perspective on human ability. Meanwhile, peep out tennis, the game that put Venus and Serena Williams on top. NASCAR, horse racing or racquet ball. You just never know, but there's a huge world out there that is waiting to be discovered and explored by you. And it is through exploration that people find things, where people find treasures and come up.

Mission: Write down three exotic sports you don't see every day.

Share your ideas.

Hobbies

Hobbies are another angle to explore and discover. People fly kites at parks and beaches. There's remote control cars, constructing miniature homes and office buildings or computer graphics design. With just a pencil, paper and some online guidance, you could draw. Try Googling the word "Hobby" and see what you find.

Hobbies are also good disciplines. Disciplines help us learn to focus, they teach us to reach goals by staying at it. Disciplines help us learn new skills, and about our own abilities and limits. And at the end of the day, hobbies can be a source of income, a cool hustle that people respect.

MISSION: Write down other activities that offer discipline(s)

Discuss these activities with the group.

Step #11 Travel/Explore the world

It amazes me to hear guys locked up with me share that they've never been to the beach. There is a huge world out there that you need to see. There are people and places that would blow your mind, but you have to search for them. Imagine, five billion people spread out over hundreds of countries. They speak languages you've never heard of; they come in colors and complexions that are so gorgeous your brows get excited. And they've created cultures, that is, ideas and rules for how they live, that would amaze you.

Stull, right here in America there are museums on cars, art, dolls, doll houses and celebrity clothes. There's museums on glass, mummies, science and sports. There's also museums on air and space, trains, foreign and American art; you name it, they got it. Google it, check it out.

There are race tracks for dogs, rabbits, and babies. There are fairs for spicy foods, sweets and pies. You name it, they got it. Just use your imagination. The good thing now is you can get a glimpse of it all on the Internet before you actually plan to go check it out.

The bottom line is that there is a wide, wide world out there with activities, cultures, ideas and sights you can't even fathom. People who give up, who contemplate suicide and think fatalistically (as if there's nothing to live for) have not considered the wider world just beyond the dark world that only they see. There is always more to life

than what we see. We just have to look beyond ourselves and our immediate neighborhood.

Mission: Write down three things or events that your peers probably have not seen or experienced

Facilitator's questions:

From the above sports, museum and other activities, what interests you? What would you like to try to explore?

We Must Believe in Ourselves

We must believe in ourselves. Even if no one else believes in us, we must believe in ourselves. Only we really know what we're actually capable of, and how much we're willing to work to reach our dreams.

Since I've been in prison I've changed my outlook. I started reading other people's stories and saw that everyone has obstacles. Success is never easy, it just looks easy from the outside. More importantly, I peeped how they made it. I started doing what successful people do. I quit hanging out; I started educating myself and kickin' it with people trying to be somebody. I read books, magazines and asked people to do Internet searches for me.

Before I knew it, I was earning good grades—in prison! I was getting stories published. People started asking for guidance and advice. I made some money in stocks, on the Internet, and by helping others with their cases. Of course, this was after I earned my paralegal certificate.

The paralegal certificate was my biggest success, at that time. I now have degrees in behavioral science, theology, humanities, and business. Could I have been president? Yeah, I think so. I just had to believe in myself.

If I could teach myself Spanish in prison, with no teacher, then imagine what you could do out there. Every single day the guards have guns to threaten me, they restrict my movement and don't let me use cell phones or computers, but I still taught myself to draw and publish books. And I did this all with very little outside help ('cause most people just don't like prisoners).

If I can do it, with all of my daily obstacles, then so can you. You just have to believe in yourself. You don't need anyone else to believe in you. If you believe in yourself, others will see your efforts and jump on your train.

Mission: Write down three of your biggest obstacles:

How can you help someone overcome *their* obstacles?

If I had done _____ how could I overcome my immediate obstacle(s)?

Discuss these topics in a group.

Failure is Just Part of the Game

One of the biggest misconceptions about success is that failure is not part of the game. It is. Most successful people have failed on the road to success. Failure is a major part of success. Things happen, you and others make mistakes, and things just don't always go as planned. The biggest thing I had to learn is that failure is an event, not a person.

Did you know that Babe Ruth, one of the greatest baseball players ever, had more strikeouts than home runs? Did you know that it took Nike tennis shoes years before they became a hit? Did you know that Oprah Winfrey got fired from her first job? No one would ever say any of these are failures.

Now, when I fail at something, I just try again. I either try it another way, I get help or I just make a few adjustments. The main thing is I get right back in the game.

Like I said above, I believe in you. I know if I can find success locked up tighter than the skin on a drum, in a cage, with guns pointed at me, then you can find greater success than me. You just have to believe in yourself!

STEP #12 Expect to Win!

Like many of my prison peers, I had a twisted logic for life. I adopted that fatalistic view that I would either spend my life in prison, or be killed in the streets. Yet I dug deep into criminality like I wanted to win it all. Which one was it? Did I believe I could really win? Or did I believe I was bound for failure?

Mission: Do you know anyone else who has/had this twisted logic?
Why do we think on such negative terms?
How can we replace this negative thinking?

Your Fate is Your Making

In actuality, I won *and* lost. I got exactly what I believed. I didn't understand then that we all have enormous power to determine our own fate. I set my mind to win in the criminal world and I won, but criminal wins are almost always short lived. So I won for a season, but then the second fate I envisioned came to pass. I ended up in prison for life. I have now been in prison longer than I have lived in society – almost 30 years!

On the other hand, President Barack Obama believed he could be a community organizer, and he did. He then believed he wanted to be a senator. He did that too. Finally, he set his sights on being the President of the United States. You know the rest of the story. What I have in common with Barack Obama is that I believed. I just believed negatively, while he believed positively.

Mission: Do you think I could have become president if I tried?
Do you think you could be president, and why?
Do you think you could be a senator?
What about a community organizer?
Name there other successful people who made the right decisions.

Making the Right Decisions

What I really wanted to be is a real estate tycoon. I could easily have done this had I made the right decisions. The bad decision was to try to cheat my way up; I tried to take a short cut and ended up in slow motion, almost no motion.

That's how prison is. One day bleeds into the next not much different from the day before. The same faces, the same buildings, the same food. In prison memorable events are a fight, a fire or a visit. Perhaps a slip and fall or a power outage. Otherwise, your life just whizzes by in a big blur – 30 years and bam! I'm an old forgotten man, already buried by society behind a string of bad decisions. Don't be me!

Whether you think negative or positive, you have the power within you to act and create your own fate. The harder you work at it, the more successful you'll be – negative or positive. The decision is yours. No one can seal your fate but you. Sure, people can make things harder, and they can get in your way. But it's up to you how you respond to life's obstacles or face the world's share of fools. You can't let them get in your way; go around them, go over them, go under them.

Mission: Have you ever had people get in the way of your dreams?
How did you respond?
If you responded in a negative way, how would you respond now?

Q & A with Dortell Williams by Louis Crosby

What are you trying to accomplish with this book?

I am trying to educate folks about the pressures of being a young person in this generation, a generation where peer pressure is often at the barrel of a gun, and where one bad decision could cost a youth his or her freedom for life. I believe the vast majority of inner-city youth simply need direction, support and inspiration to succeed. They are not incorrigible and they have huge potential.

Do you think you would have been open to the guidance and direction you offer in this book?

Definitely. Unfortunately, the elders I was surrounded by set a bad example for me and I chose to follow them. I was encouraged to sell drugs and fence stolen property. The modeling I was exposed to was smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol. Ironically, it wasn't until I came to prison that I was finally mentored and given some direction. I have excelled since.

How did prison, of all places, change your views?

Prison was my “pause” button. Being incapacitated was my rock bottom; it put me in a position to reflect on my bad decisions and learn new ways of thinking and responding to my environment. Prison exposed me to a panoply of perspectives, some of which took me aback, while others were both thought provoking and inspirational. I followed the latter. At the outset, it was various peer-taught classes that taught me new and pro-social skills, and colleges classes helped me to be a more well-rounded person overall.

What was the inspiration for this book?

The frustration of seeing so many young kids in prison these days. Many young men are in prison with sentences that are longer than the years they have even lived. It is disheartening. It really is.

How do you know your work is effective, has it been tested?

I have been doing youth outreach since 2006. I began with *The Beat Within* organization in San Francisco. Some years later I branched out to Elevate Your Game, in Compton, CA and then Walk the Yard at the fair Chance Organization in Los Angeles. Each of these organizations have written me and shared the impact that my letters have had with the youth, which was an encouragement to keep on forward.

That success prompted me to get others involved. In 2014 our academic group, Men For Honor, we composed an anthology of cautionary tales. We called it *Dark Tales From the Dungeons: Horrors From the Hood for Youth to Beware*. Our book found success with the Gardena Juvenile Justice and Intervention Program. GJJIP reported that they achieved a remarkable 3 percent recidivism rate with the use of our book. Over 180 kids participated in their program for one year, and only 5 reoffended. Of course, we are elated by that report.

If you could change anything, what do you think would make a difference?

I would encourage everyone to educate themselves. Education is empowerment, and continuous education is freedom. Thankfully, many people have begun to self-educate and take formal education avenues, but society is advancing so quickly, in so many areas, that it behooves us all to constantly stay up on things.

I would also like to see more fathers take responsibility for their children, and the mothers they united with to birth these children. I now realize that family, the whole family, is paramount, not only for survival, but success, long-term success, in health, career and finances.

How can the community get more involved?

Readers can support the organizations listed on the following pages. They can support them through volunteerism. They can tell others of their work, support them with modest donations and by “linking” or “liking” their social media sites and pages.

How can people help you and your work?

Office supplies are a constant need. We are also completely restricted from the Internet, so assistance online, with informational searches, are also needed. Postage stamps are also a constant need in order to reach out to youth in the community who need guidance.

How can people contact you?

Readers can write directly or email me indirectly. Emails will be printed out and forwarded to me. I always appreciate feedback from readers.

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PARENT / CHILD RESOURCES

Volunteers of American (activities for youth): www.voa.org
Polaris (works against human trafficking) www.polarisproject.com
Bed Sider (sex education for youth): www.bedsider.com
Make-A-Wish Foundation (where youth can volunteer to help sick youth) www.wish.org
(213) 948-2000
Gangs and Kids (Gang intervention): www.gangsandkids.com
Acorn (offers mentors): www.acorn-networks.org (310) 677-7445 / (661) 874-5839
Front Line Dads (offers mentors): www.frontlinedads.org
Summer Matters (summertime activities): www.summermatters.net
California Science Center: www.CaliforniaScienceCenter.org
Health 4 Kids: www.Health4AllKids.org
Anti-drug campaign: www.drugfree.org

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