

Using their power to see beyond troublesome behavior, school counselors can help at-risk girls realize their potential.

BY NONA C. JONES

Today a baby girl will be born in a nearby hospital. When her brand-new eyes finally adjust to the bright lights and focus on the blurry images surrounding her, they will meet the loving gaze of her mother and father. Her parents will be awestruck by their daughter's immediately evident brilliance, and they will instantly agree they will do anything to help her succeed.

RE-ENGAGE AT-RISK GIRLS

In that same hospital, another newborn baby girl will lay alone in the nursery. Crying. Uncomforted. Her birth unplanned and her life unwanted. She will be the mistaken byproduct of a young mother's search for validation with a guy who used her body for his own dysfunction. If her mother had one wish, it would be to never have had this baby. And she's angry.

These two baby girls are equally vulnerable, but one will grow up cradled in a protective home, and the other will learn to fear the dark of night because the dark is where her mother's many boyfriends violate her. One girl will discover a zeal for learning in a supportive school with encouraging teachers. The other will fall behind in school because her anger and hopelessness leads to suspensions for acting out. One girl will look out into the audience at graduation and see the familiar, loving gaze of her parents. The other will look out through prison bars and see the familiar glare of her guards.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Within each of us lies a transformative power that can change this girl's life, the power to see beyond her behavior and believe in her potential.

A groundbreaking report released in summer 2015 articulated a truth those of us serving girls at risk have always known; a girl's pathway to school failure and delinquency is different than a boy's pathway. A boy's pathway, particularly a boy of color, has long been defined as the school-to-prison pipeline. But the report leveraged years of data showing a girl's pathway to delinquency is best described as the sexual abuse-to-prison pipeline, because 80 percent of girls in our nation's juvenile justice system report being victims of sexual violence. That's eight out of every 10. Coupled with sexual abuse, system-involved girls report experiencing physical abuse, poverty, family instability and school failure at alarming rates.

In 1980, girls were 20 percent of the nation's juvenile justice system

population, and despite the nation's overall juvenile incarceration rate declining in recent years, girls were 29 percent of the national juvenile population by 2012. Although girls are the fastest-growing segment of the juvenile justice system population, they account for a very small share of juvenile arrests for violent crimes. Girls continue to be far more likely than boys to be arrested for offenses such as truancy, running away and underage drinking – acts that are often simply an attempt to escape trauma that even adults aren't equipped to handle. Girls at greatest risk for school failure and delinquency need more than a one-hour-per-week visit with a mentor; they need healing, hope and deep interventions that prepare them to succeed in school and in life by turning their trauma into triumph.

In 1985 a social worker at the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice noticed an increase in the number of middle- and high-school-aged girls who were being arrested. She did something that should

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It's ultimately about helping each girl reclaim her confidence and self-worth, both emotionally and academically.

be common practice but too often is not. She asked the girls "why?" "Why did you run away?" "Why do you keep skipping school?" "Why did you start that fight?" The answers she received pointed to underlying trauma. "I ran away because my dad rapes me when no one's around." "I skip school because the kids tease me because I can't read." "I started the fight because I need money to buy food, and she had it." The realization that trauma was driving girls into the juvenile justice

system created the recognition that a new approach was needed to working with girls at greatest risk of system involvement, an approach that addressed the trauma while reengaging the girls in an educational environment that could prepare them to graduate and chart a path toward success in life. PACE Center for Girls was born.

PACE Center for Girls has spent the last 31 years refining a program model that has positively changed the life trajectory for more than 39,000 girls across Florida. At the heart of our model is the fundamental belief that all girls, regardless of their circumstance, matter and deserve an opportunity for a bright future. Although PACE is intentionally nonresidential, our family-oriented case management practice ensures our girls return home to a stable environment at the end of each school day.

Renee McQueen, Ed.D., PACE senior director of social services programs, spent many years leading PACE Centers in

Florida and describes the PACE approach to trauma-informed academics this way: "A trauma-informed approach begins with an understanding of trauma and an awareness of the crippling impact it can have on a girl's life. Traumatized girls often experience feelings of hopelessness, and processing their trauma is extremely difficult. PACE girls often describe their deterioration in school as a feeling of falling through the cracks and spiraling out of control."

This is why PACE's trauma-informed academic approach marries delivering the required reading, math, science and history curriculum within the broader contextual goal of building a relationship with each girl that is based on her unique story and not just based on what's in her cumulative folder. It's ultimately about helping each girl reclaim her confidence and self-worth, both emotionally and academically.

PACE served 2,224 girls in 2016 in our 19 nonresidential alternative schools

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HIDDEN RULES CARD GAMES - SET OF 4

Hidden Rules is the term used to describe rules and behaviors that most people know without ever being taught. But some children, particularly children on the Autism Spectrum, seem to be unaware of these rules and the way that they influence social acceptance. Each of these card games presents a different set of rules, which can be reviewed individually (like flash cards) or used in a simple and fun game.



THE SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE BOARD & CARD GAME BUNDLE

A fun way to teach empathy, communication skills, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, self-management, and responsible decision-making. The Card Game (Revised) can be used with the Board Game or as a stand alone card game. The goal is to educate players about a specific disorder and provide skills for managing the disorder.



THE TALKING, FEELING & DOING CARD GAMES -

- ANGER CARD GAME
- CONFLICT RESOLUTION CARD GAME

These card games address specific issues and are designed to help a counselor, teacher, or parent focus on the area that is a concern to children. Games are intended to help children reveal their concerns and conflicts to an adult who can provide both nurturance and guidance. Ages: 6-12.



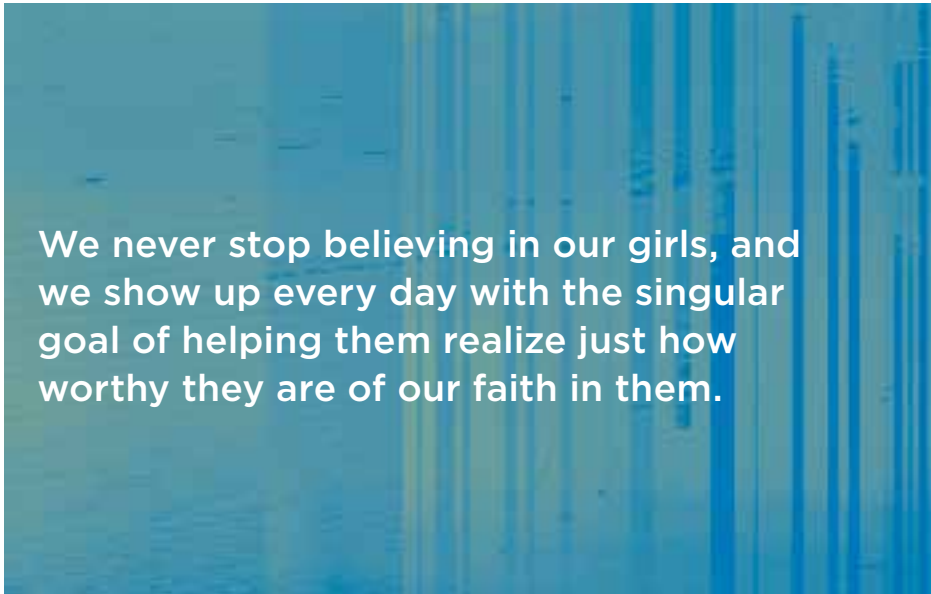
STOP, RELAX & THINK BOARD GAME

A game to help impulsive children think before they act. In this ever-popular board game, active, impulsive children learn motor control, relaxation skills, how to express their feelings, and how to problem-solve. Ages 6-12.

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We never stop believing in our girls, and we show up every day with the singular goal of helping them realize just how worthy they are of our faith in them.

across Florida. Of these girls, 74 percent came to us with a history of grade retention, suspension or expulsion, and almost 30 percent had a prior arrest. But, after completing our program, 90 percent of the girls were at grade level or ahead, and 91 percent didn't reoffend one year after leaving. We accomplish this by integrating year-round academic support during the school day, with counseling and therapy and career and college exploration to meet each girl's unique needs. We recognize family dysfunction often drives girls' behavior, so we employ family-based case management to ensure the girls return to stable homes at the end of each day. The girls stay with us for an average of nine months, and afterward they either return to their home school or, if at graduation age, they go on to college or attain gainful employment.

Turning Lives Around

So, what does this mean for you as a school counselor seeking to help traumatized girls turn their lives around? People often ask, "What's the secret sauce?" What makes PACE so effective? With more than 39,000 success stories at PACE, I believe the mechanics of our approach are best related through a true story and, as you consider the important work you do every day, I ask you to hold this story near to your heart.

A girl was born to parents who didn't have a high school diploma. The girl's

father had wanted a child, but her mother suffered from mental health issues and, when the girl was born, her mother didn't want to hold her or see her. The girl's father was diagnosed with terminal cancer shortly before she was born and, although he fought to see her second birthday, he passed away shortly before. A couple of years later the mother met a new man who became her live-in boyfriend, and he routinely molested the girl between the ages of 5 and 11. She told her mother what was happening, and her mother put the boyfriend in jail several times, but each time he was released, she would take him back. It was on one of their customary drives to pick him up from jail for molesting her that the girl finally decided to stop talking about it and, instead, no longer feel any pain.

The girl began acting out in school and was labeled a problem child. She spent most of her kindergarten, first and second grade years in either the principal's office or isolated in a classroom corner.

Until she met her third-grade teacher.

Her third-grade teacher saw beyond her behavior and recognized her potential. That teacher lovingly encouraged the girl and convinced her that she was smart and capable. The teacher didn't know what was happening to the girl at home, but she knew something was happening and decided to give the girl her time, attention and concern. It transformed the young girl's life dramatically.

Endowed with her teacher's faith in her, the girl focused on her schoolwork and excelled. She was placed on an accelerated academic track in middle and high school and entered college as a first-year sophomore on a full academic scholarship. The day she left for college she vowed two things: to make her third-grade teacher proud and to never return to her mother's home. She lived up to both of her promises, eventually earning a master's degree, completing coursework at Harvard, becoming a corporate executive at a Fortune 500 company at the age of 22 and living out her life's purpose by encouraging and inspiring women and girls around the country who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

I know this story so well because this story is my own. What we do at PACE every single day is what Ms. Johnson did for me. We never stop believing in our girls, and we show up every day with the singular goal of helping them realize just how worthy they are of our faith in them. As school counselors, you stand in the gap for girls like me. You have the power to change a girl's mind about herself, her pain and her future by believing beyond her behavior. What shows up as defiance is nothing more than defensiveness, defensiveness learned from a girl having to defend her dignity. What shows up as apathy is nothing more than hopelessness, hopelessness learned from a girl who has never been given a reason to hope. What shows up as anger is nothing more than explosive hurt, hurt that a girl has contained for so long it has nowhere to go but out and at the nearest person.

As you consider the girls you work with who seem to be beyond your ability to reach, please remember that no human being is beyond repair. And every girl is worth trying to help. ☒

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