

TO:

NICOLE RABNER

FROM:

CAPRICIA

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September 20, 1999

Mrs. Hillary Clinton
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Hillary:

I know that you are deeply concerned about the welfare and well-being of all young people in this country. I share your concern and I too am greatly troubled by the despair that is rampant among them. Their physical and mental health are greatly at-risk as we are about to enter the new millennium. I am writing to you because I believe that you are committed to improving the quality of life that youth today are currently exposed to. And I believe that I have some workable solutions that have had enjoyed success across the world.

The forces that produce alienated young people are growing at a dangerous rate. The power of the family and school has eroded. Many students perceive school as a negative place—a place they simply don't want to be. They hear too often from teachers, *"Don't do this; Don't do that; You did it wrong."* Many students see school as a place where teachers use their power to control them. They find many of their teachers out of sync with the times and the real world. Many of their teachers still lecture in front of a room and teach material hardly relevant to their lives.

One study suggests that 80 percent of all kids enter school feeling good about themselves, but by fifth grade the figure drops to 20 percent. By the time they're ready to graduate, only 5 percent have any self-esteem left. It is not surprising if at school they receive on average the equivalent of 60 days a year of reprimanding, nagging and punishment. During 10 years of schooling, a student is subjected to 15,000 negative statements—three times the amount of positive reinforcement received. And at home much of the same pattern is followed. The little bit of time most parents spend with their children, they often end up nagging, criticizing and disciplining. Is it any wonder why so many young people turn off, tune-out, lose interest in school and academic achievement? It shouldn't surprise us that many productive, potentially successful youth simply drop out—ultimately leading to criminal or gang involvement.

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PAGE TWO

If teachers and parents aren't listening they cannot hear their students. But if they cannot reach their students or children, then they cannot teach them. Just as a child who needs glasses and cannot see will not be a good learner, and a child who is hungry or homeless will have difficulty with schoolwork—if indeed attends school at all—a child who lives among drugs and violence or in a state of constant or emotional pain is ill-prepared to flourish academically or to find a place in society in which to flourish. If we only approach this economically, a child who doesn't learn today won't earn tomorrow. But if we examine this issue on a more humane level, then we must acknowledge the strong possibility that child may not be alive tomorrow.

It is imperative, therefore, that teachers be trained or retrained to better deal with young people and their problems because they will be confronted with them daily. And if not handled, these students and their problems will continue to disrupt the classroom. Then all students will suffer the consequence and no one will have the opportunity to learn. As I travel around this country, I hear teachers often cry out. Many are angry because they are being asked to do something they were not hired to do. Most are just frustrated because they feel so helpless. They want to help their students. They simply don't know how. During one of my presentations at a recent At-Risk conference, one of the teachers in the audience began to cry. When she approached me at the end of the session and I asked her why she was crying, she replied, *"I recently began teaching a class of at-risk students and you described exactly all the problems my students are having. I just don't know what to do and I feel so sad that can't help them."* I am convinced that the key to reaching students and building a more supportive school environment is to help educators find innovative ways to empower students.

How can we blame teachers—even in some cases discipline them—for doing the best they could with what they have? They must be taught not only to deal with but to help troubled students. And, unfortunately, our colleges of education are not preparing new teachers to deal with the scourge of social problems and the ensuing disruptive behaviors occurring in the classroom. I am convinced that the key to reaching students and building a more supportive school environment is to help educators find innovative ways to empower students. I believe that it is imperative that we help teachers explore their own attitudes and expectations that often get in the way of their reaching kids productively and positively. Yet with all the talk about restructuring education, we have not heard much about the teacher/student relationship.

Hillary, a few years ago I had the opportunity of reading and reviewing 14 drug-free school grants for the Department of Education. Upon completion, I do not know whether I was angrier or sadder at the thought that we are continuing to fund programs that simply will have little, if any affect on drug use or for that matter reducing any other social problem. Most of the potential programs that I read about were no more than a bandaid approach. You cannot continue to put a bandaid on a wound so deep that life

PAGE THREE

is slowly oozing out and expect the person to be cured. We must stop this waste of taxpayers' money and we must stop this waste of young lives who are dying each day—physically, emotionally and spiritually. Drugs and alcohol are not killing our youth—**HOPELESSNESS** is. And it may very well be the most deadly and the most pervasive disease affecting young people this century.

Donna Shalala was quoted some years ago as saying "Reducing drug use among students requires a different kind of strategy that will be part of an overall illness prevention plan". Yet we have spent millions on "drug education" like the DARE program which has shown to have no effect on drug usage. " A few years ago, I met with Shay Bilchuk, Director of the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention to share my concerns that we mustn't make the same mistakes that we made with drug education programs that were so one dimensional. I queried about the plans to commit big bucks on conflict-resolution programs that would—in essence, be limited to teaching non-violent problem-solving skills in a vacuum. That vacuum takes away the opportunity for young people to learn the kinds of holistic social skills that will prevent them from acting out in destructive ways. We have also had enough of the crisis-intervention approach (e.g. gun control) that simply has not worked as attested by the rising statistics of social ills plaguing young people and their families. It may very well be that the only way to stop or prevent drug abuse and violent and gang activities is to empower young people—through the development of programs that give youth the tools they need to make healthy choices and appropriate decisions about every segment of their lives.

Prevention programs should be as basic as math and science and should begin in early elementary grades and continue throughout the child's education so they can move with ease into adult responsibility. That way appropriate relationship skills for living are learned daily and come as naturally as speaking or eating. How strange that we won't hire a lawyer or accountant or even a plumber without all kinds of training or degrees, but we let young people grow up and take on the two most difficult jobs on the planet without any skills at all. Those jobs are being a parent and being a partner in some kind of relationship—whether intimate or professional.

I am the author of **"The Dynamics of Relationships: A Guide for Developing Self-Esteem and Coping Skills,"** implemented in schools around the country which is one such program that would not only help to empower students, but would also give them the opportunity to talk to many friendly and supportive people while learning coping skills, social skills and survival skills. Teacher's who facilitate the course often say that kids skip other classes to be there, they are never late and Leroy Swain, a social studies teacher in Washington DC schools said **"the course was truly a bridge over some troubled waters for many of the students. I personally believe that this program was the missing ingredient that kept some of my seniors from dropping out of school. As a matter of fact it was the sole reason why they hung in there until June and graduated."**

PAGE FOUR

A couple of years ago I visited a DC school where the course was being taught. The teacher mentioned a young man who occasionally came to school high on marijuana. She said the class was making some headway with him because he had cut down on his drug use since beginning the class. At the end of the session, I asked Ronald if he would stay awhile and talk with me. He seemed to be a bright and caring young man in spite of his drug use. I asked him why he gets high. He said "the pressure was is great and everyone is carrying guns". *"If you looked at them funny they would shoot you"*. I also asked him what he thought we could do about the violence—the rampant killing in Washington—especially among the youth. He first said, "get the guns off the street" and then he said ***"maybe if we could get more kids to take this course, we could stop some of the killing"***. Next day Ronald came to class "straight" and asked if he could lead the class in their lesson and discussion on anger. **EXACTLY ONE WEEK LATER, RONALD GRIFFIN WAS SHOT IN THE BACK AND KILLED BLOCKS FROM SCHOOL BY STUDENTS.** When the teacher called me crying and told me about his murder, I cannot tell you the rage and the pain that I felt at that moment. And when I saw his mother on TV that night saying, ***"It's not fair he was a nice boy and now I will never be able to hold him again"***, my heart cried out and my rage deepened. He was a nice boy and he deserved a chance to grow up and enjoy a productive and happy life like all our children deserve. **SOMEONE MUST LISTEN—NOT JUST TO ME BUT TO THE KIDS— BECAUSE THEY FEEL THAT NO ONE IS LISTENING—NO ONE CARES, NOTHING MATTERS. AND THAT FEELING OF HOPELESSNESS IS KILLING THEM.** (Five years ago another young man at another DC school where the course was offered said to me during a taped interview: ***"If we could get every kid to take this class, we could stop the killing."*** (I sent that tape to the then Mayor, Marion Barry and the Superintendent of DC schools and no one bothered to listen or respond to me.)

HILLARY, I BEG YOU TO HELP ME STOP THIS RAMPANT VIOLENCE—THIS NEEDLESS LOSS OF YOUNG LIVES AND THE PAIN OF SO MANY YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES.

My goal is to see programs like mine offered in every school in America so that young people have a much needed arena in which to deal with the myriad of social problems they face. That arena can offer students: a) a non-structured support system that nurtures and cares about them and really listens to what they have to say; b) a chance to see that other kids feel exactly the way they do about many of the problems confronting them (Many teen suicides are a result of the isolation and alienation that so many feel); and c) the opportunity to learn skills that can protect them and prevent them from falling prey to any one of the horrific disasters that are taking the lives of our young people everyday emotionally and physically.

PAGE FIVE

The three R's for the new millennium must become "**Respect, Responsibility and Relationships.**" If the goal of education is to prepare young people for the future, we must begin to teach them how to get along with others while respecting themselves at the same time. Teaching young people how to live with one another, how to be supportive and nurturing, how to show respect for each other and to have dignity for one's self are the real '**basics**' that children must learn if they are to survive in the 21st century. If we simply teach children to read and write and they can't hold on to a job, can't stay married, abuse their spouses and/or children, become drug addicts or alcoholics feel out of control or even violent when they can't deal with feelings of anger or stress, what have we really accomplished?

We no longer have the luxury of sitting back hoping that parents or churches are helping our children to deal with the myriad of obstacles and problems confronting them. We can no longer tell our children to just say **NO** without giving them the tools they need to cope with an ever-changing and dangerous society. And crisis-intervention and the typical six-week drug/conflict-resolution education programs can no longer be the appropriate or effective model. Hillary, you and I know that educators and youth workers can no longer take the same old path that they've been taking for years.

"If you always do what you've always done—you'll always get what you've always gotten." School administrators cannot continue to live in a *world that was*, while our youth continue living in a *world that is*. If we don't change our approach—which means no more sitting back and reacting to crises—we will continue to **get what we've always gotten—AND MORE OF WHAT HAPPENED AT COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL, FT. WORTH, AND LOS ANGELES** And other facilities around the country.

Hillary, I urge you to read this letter with the serious intent that it was written. I hope that you will understand why I am so anxious to not only share "**The Dynamics of Relationships**" program, but see courses like this across the country. I believe that it can help to stop the spiraling social ills ruining the lives of so many of our youth and their families. I have enclosed a copy of the secondary program for your review along with some additional background information that will let you see the diverse response and reaction to this program in schools across the country and the variety of settings in which it is being implemented. After you have had some time to review it, I would like the opportunity to meet with you and/or a member of your staff to discuss this further. Thank you for taking the time to look this over **AND THANK YOU FOR CARING.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Pat James".

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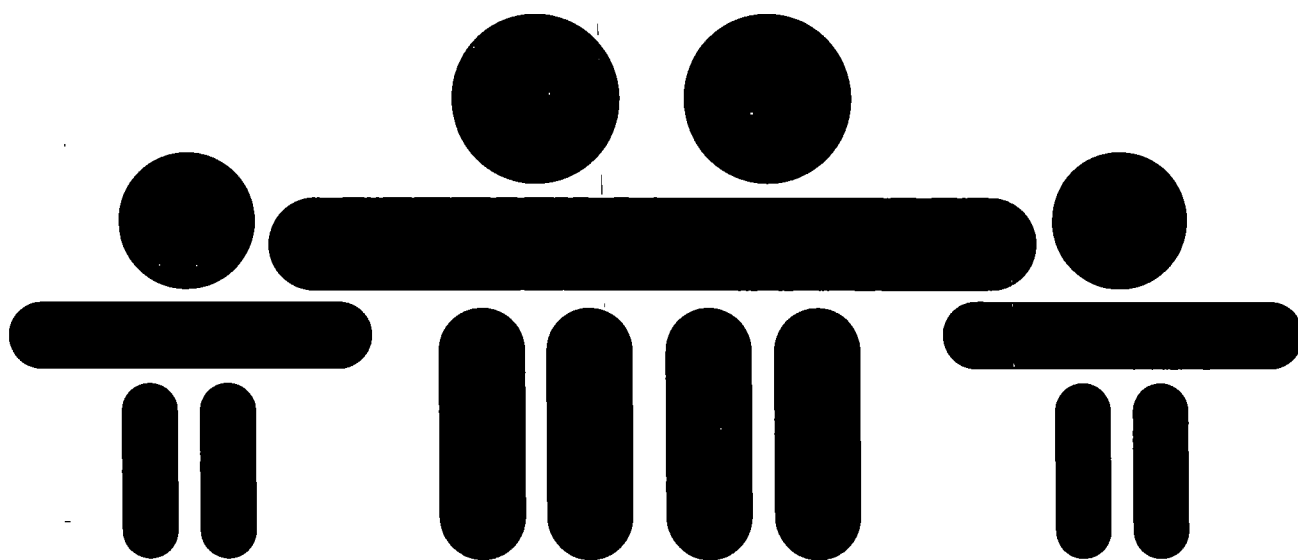
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The Dynamics of Relationships

*A Guide for Developing Self-Esteem and
Coping Skills for Teens and Young Adults*



by Patricia Kramer

TEACHER MANUAL