

October 2016

My dear friend,

Belinda was known to us all as “B-nui”. She was 14 years old when she came to us at Youth Outreach. She had a younger sister and a younger brother. Her brother was the youngest in the family. Her parents had divorced when she was five or six years old.

Her father worked in the mainland and at least part of the cause of the divorce was the fact that he had girlfriend there and so after the divorce he went to live in the mainland with his girlfriend. Her mother worked as an accountant in an import export company. Perhaps because of the fact that her whole day was taken up with money and figures, she was quite neurotic about details and accuracy. It seems probable that this obsessive nit-picking and subsequent nagging also contributed to the divorce.

The three children all lived with their mother and like their father were subject to constant nagging and faultfinding. In B-nui’s case it was worse, because as her mother later told us, her first daughter looked like her ex-husband and so she hated to having to see her every day. Not only did this upset B-nui but it was obvious to both daughters that their younger brother was their mother’s favorite and so she spoiled him and let him do whatever he liked.

Their father kept in touch and from time to time gave B-nui pocket-money and took all three children out for the day whenever he was in Hong Kong. On the contrary, because of the attitude of her mother even as a small child B-nui increasingly came into conflict with her and at the age of ten eventually spent some time in residential care. She hated it and was constantly at loggerheads with the staff and the other girls in the center and eventually she was asked to leave and so went back to live with her mother.

By this time, she was beginning to challenge her mother in the same tone that her mother used with her. She demanded that her mother give her daily expenses. “You still owe me a thousand dollars from last month! You are supposed to support me” was the kind of argument frequently heard. To punish her for her bad manners her mother simply refused to give her any money at all. It never seemed to occur to her that her daughter had learned this way of talking from her.

She told her mother that she wanted to go and live with her father in Shenzhen. But while her father was quite happy to entertain his children on his occasional visits to Hong Kong, it soon became obvious that he would not take up his children full-time. We got the impression that this opposition really came from his girl-friend. B-nui was stuck!

Her belligerent attitude to teachers and classmates in school and her obvious lack of spending money brought her to the attention of the school social worker. The school social worker did a good job. She visited the mother and spent time talking to B-nui and began to understand what was going on. And that is how B-nui came to us.

It was clear to us that the most important thing was change her communication patterns. We could see that there was no point in starting with her communication with her mother. That was too much to begin with. So we started with her relationship with our social workers. They treated her as a younger sister – who was their favorite. They let her know that they were always there for her and would always help her out. In the beginning that seemed to puzzle her since she had never experienced this before but slowly she softened up and learned to voice out what she wanted or what she needed in a normal tone of voice. Whenever possible we gave it to her and when we could not we explained in a calm and reasonable way.

Her life seemed to become more peaceful and so we moved on to her relationships with the other girls in the center. Although not perfect (young people tend to be rather impulsive) she seemed to understand what was going on and she began to make friends with the other girls. And so we began to look at the underlying problem – her relationship with her mother. That was not so easy!

By now B-nui was becoming a young woman – no longer a child. Our social workers, in their interaction with the mother tried to model the kind of relationship she could establish with her daughter. It took a while but we pointed out how her daughter was relating to our social workers and to the other girls in the center and her mother became thoughtful.

Eventually, we actually worked out a “contract” between the two. Both of them had rights and responsibilities and any discussion should be based on reasons, which should be clearly and quietly spoken. A month later, B-nui went home. Our social workers have paid regular visits both the B-nui and her mother separately as well as together.

Obviously, not everything is instant peace and harmony, but it is clear that both are trying their best to make things work. What else can we ask for.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Newbery', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Peter Newbery
Executive Director