

The
Economist

Coaching and Mentoring

What they are and how
to make the most of them

Jane Renton



CASE STUDY

Christine Miller

Christine Miller also believes that instilling resilience into her young clients is crucial to their well-being. She has a master's degree in Counselling Practice and is qualified to Master Practitioner level in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), hypnosis and a methodology called time line therapy designed to release negative emotions. Miller says:

I coach them in accelerated learning techniques, learning how to learn, coupled with building rapport and learning to read other people's body language through non-verbal intelligence and thereby assess the response they are getting.

She believes that family breakdown and the decline of extended families are part of the reason she has found a receptive market for her work:

There are fewer elders for children to go to for help and guidance. At one time, it used to be that if you had a disagreement with your mother or father, you could probably find a relative – an aunt, uncle or grandparent – to go and talk things over with, and get the benefit of some wise, impartial advice, or at least step out of the situation to gain perspective, but these days we're more spread out, much busier and children can end up being very isolated with their problems.

Her work centres on children and young people aged between seven and 18 and usually involves 10–12 sessions. The cost is kept to the equivalent of other extracurricular activities such as music lessons. Miller also undertakes pro bono work for problem children whose parents cannot afford such fees:

I tend to get sent the kids who are in trouble – about to be excluded from school, having problems at home – and I'm often something of a last stop before they get referred to the Education Psychology Service.

Often her young clients have behavioural problems and have been violent and aggressive. Others suffer from sadness and depression.

They may have been bullied or are the perpetrators of bullying, or are underachieving academically. But not everyone can be helped:

I do choose my clients - I do an assessment or a trial session from which I quickly determine if someone is coachable - and I have very firm boundaries in place.

She tries to involve the whole family, wherever possible, because they can play a determining role in a child's behaviour. Often a child is merely conforming to the family stereotype that has been set, such as the "naughty child", "the difficult one" and the "not-too-bright one". Uncovering those unseen influences is crucial if the child is to change, she explains.

One mother brought her 17-year-old daughter to see Miller and dominated the conversation, hardly allowing her daughter to speak:

She simply criticised and poured out a catalogue of the ills that she saw in her child. When I got to spend time with the girl, she told me that her mum wouldn't let her do anything that 17-year-old girls usually do - wear make-up, go shopping, go to discos (she'd been prevented from going to the school dance then been criticised for not having friends). Films and boy-friends were totally taboo as well.

What Miller did in handling this difficult situation, which in essence involved an extremely dominant and intolerant father, was to teach the daughter rapport-building and negotiation skills. "I also helped her find some inner resources." She also worked on the mother to impress upon her husband how intelligent, strong and resourceful the daughter really was.

Confidentiality is a delicate issue with children - some parents expect full feedback, which can inhibit what a child will share in the sessions. So Miller operates a policy of something called "informed forced consent", which means that everything remains confidential unless there is a perceived danger to the child. She says:

Obviously, if there were to be concerns about safety then the ethical guidelines by which I am bound [those of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)] would come into play and appropriate action would be taken. My job

is essentially to help these young people find peace and happiness and a stimulus to succeed in their lives, whatever the definition of a successful outcome may be. In the extreme cases, I help them to pause, to stop and think before they break that window, smash the chair, hit someone or even draw that knife.

Often her clients are sent by either their parents or their teachers and do not want to be there:

They're what I call hostages - and winning their confidence and trust is of key importance, so whatever we do has to be relevant and engaging.

It is important to find out what they want - what they believe would make their lives better - not just what the school or the parents think should be happening:

In the beginning I help them find something they're good at - and there always is something, some memory of a moment they felt really good about - then we build on that as a resource.

There are explorations and visualisations to build a safe space and a resourceful state of mind. And her young charges are taught simple self-management techniques based on martial arts and sports, accelerated learning methods, such as learning to count to ten in Japanese in five minutes, and practical skills like mind-mapping, which help to integrate the hemispheres of the brain. All this is designed to help build their confidence and sense of self. It is a delicate process working with younger children; the balance of power is crucially important since they possess little in the way of autonomy. Miller says:

It's not helpful to anyone if they resent being with me, so I always include an element of choice and am flexible, making space for them to suggest what they might want to do.

Storytelling plays an important role, as does creating metaphors to express what it feels like when they are in different states of mind. If they create their story in their own words, they are not going to argue with or resist their own creations, and this will often lead to big breakthroughs and self-discovery. The experience must be as natural and enjoyable as possible, explains Miller:

Laughter tends to be a common factor, we play music, do drawings, and we use the computer for games and to watch ways of handling different behaviour scenarios.

There are homework tasks, but not too many or too onerous. It is part of building a habit of accountability, she says:

The main factor is to offer them what Carl Rogers described as “unconditional positive regard”, completely non-judgmental, to be a mirror so they can see themselves as worthwhile, lovable and loved, and thus take personal responsibility.

Any such engagement involves a degree of discussion over outcomes: what is clearly achievable and what is unrealistic and how such outcomes might be recognised by Miller and her clients. But the best outcomes involve getting telephone calls, weeks, months, or even years after the coaching experience, informing her of the success of past clients, whether that means staying off drugs, passing exams or finding the inner resilience to deal with bullying.

Feedback comes from parents, from teachers and most importantly from the children themselves. If previous academic failure is involved, improved school reports are usually a good benchmark that the intervention is working. Miller says:

Sometimes the mere fact that the child is turning up at school or that they haven't been excluded since we began working together is a good indicator of success.

So too are reports of fewer arguments between child and parents.

But success is on a limited scale in a society where so many children are beset by emotional and behavioural difficulties. “I would like to spread my work much further,” says Miller, who would like to share her skills with schools.

Schools cannot be expected to do everything, or to compensate for neglectful or domineering parents. However, coaching and resilience training show promising signs of doing something to help children under pressure who, for whatever reason, have been unable to find the right level of support from family or friends.