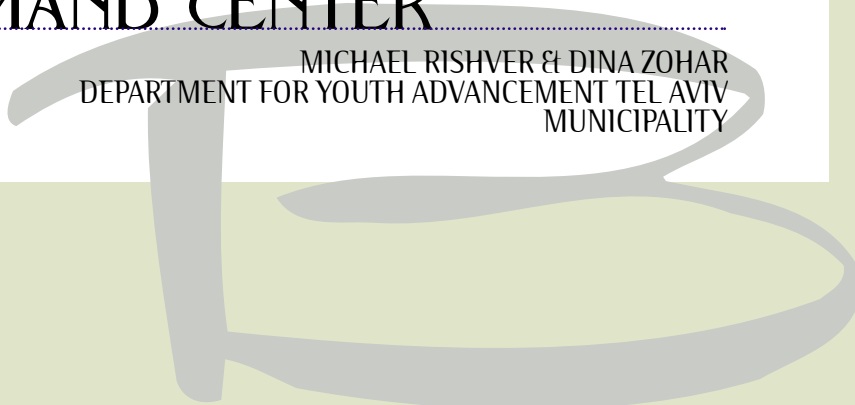


# “BETTER A FREE BUTTERFLY THAN A CAGED LION”

## A WORKSHOP AT THE ABU KABIR YOUTH REMAND CENTER

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### Background

For about a year now, the authors, two group leaders from the Tel Aviv Department for Youth Advancement, have been conducting group therapy sessions with young people on remand, in a joint initiative of the Department, the Tel Aviv Anti-Drugs Authority, and the Remand Center itself. On first consideration, we had thought the idea of group therapy could not work: the young remandees were too varied – they were of different ages, had been arrested for different offenses, had different criminal records, etc. – and the state of uncertainty they had been thrown into was too overwhelming. But we found that they felt a real and authentic need to talk to each other in a group context, moderated by neutral figures who presented no physical or emotional threat. In fact, the rationale for the project

was summed up for us by one of the remandees, who said, “Better to be a free butterfly than a caged lion”. From a life of liberty, to find oneself in a prison cell creates such immense emotional pressure, bewilderment and fear of the future that we thought it right to offer them an opportunity to vent their feelings in a supportive peer context and receive, as a group and individually, some help with their new ‘here and now’.

#### Our specific objectives were:

- To encourage them to voice their feelings and support them through the pain of doing so;
- To inform them of their rights while on remand (to consult with their probation officer and lawyer, to make telephone calls and receive visits);
- To expose their ambivalence between a desire to

rehabilitate themselves and the attraction of offending;

- To tell them about the institutions they were likely to be sent to;
- To prepare them for leaving the remand center for a correctional/rehabilitational facility;
- To offer support in any breakdown or crisis, such as a suicide attempt or violence from fellow remandees;
- To encourage them to give each other friendship and support during group sessions and afterwards in their cells;
- To put them in touch with outside sources of therapy, if desired.

### The Remandees

They came from all over Israel’s central region, their ages ranging from 13 to 18. They were on

remand for theft, robbery, burglary, assault, drug abuse and drug pushing, indecent acts, rape and attempted murder; some of the offenses were committed within the family, some outside it. For most it was their second or third arrest, or more, and most had spent time in residential homes and facilities of one kind or another. Their ethnic backgrounds were of all kinds: Arab, Israeli and the children of foreign laborers; some were immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia, others were born in Israel. All said their first offense resulted in part from their parents' poverty. Most had only one active parent (the mother).

## Methods

The first decision was to give the group a 'train stop' format, that is, individuals could join and leave at any juncture. Well aware of the limitations such a format set, we believed that in the particular setting of a remand center there was no alternative. So, given these limitations, how does the group work?

- We introduce ourselves to the participants: We are group leaders from the Department for Youth Advancement, who will be with the group for a year or more. We are neither prison officers nor probation officers nor police officers nor lawyers, i.e., not part of the legal system. We are not interested in knowing for what offense you are on remand. Each remandee will chose by himself and for himself what he wants to talk about and how far he will go in talking about it.
- We go into each participant's criminal record (how many arrests, for how long) and then ask if anyone wants to talk about any particular subject. To get things going we rely on the

veteran participants, if there are any present.

- Every participant and every subject is equal and equally legitimate. The only condition set is "no names and no details of offenses committed". We try to encourage them to talk to each other, to give support, to expose their own ambivalences, and to continue the conversation after the group session is over.
- We try to get participants to see the positive aspects of what they describe – about themselves, about strong friendships, feelings for their parents at home, worrying about friends and giving genuine help to cell-mates in trouble.
- When the dialog reaches highly sensitive issues, often the talker suddenly launches into a demand for "social justice". This is in itself a painful and recurring topic. We try to deflect the issue to the group. In most cases a question mark is left hanging in the air, because the young remandees, well aware of the gravity of their offenses, nevertheless find it hard to identify with their victims. A large number of them talk of their fear of "opening up the box of your feelings, because your real feelings can drive you mad". At one session, group members began talking of the guilt they felt for past offenses. During a reconstruction we did with them, some recalled childhood memories from when they were 6, 7 and 8 years old, when they committed their first offense, some of the offenses being no more than the pranks normal at that age. They recalled adults around them calling them "bad", a "no-good", a "brute", or saying "You'll never amount to anything". They described how the experience of that first

offense had remained with them and in practice had decided the future course of their life.

## Conclusions

The dictum, "Better to be a free butterfly than a caged lion", offers a metaphor for the sensitive soul of a young boy who, for reasons of personal, family and social circumstances, finds himself "a caged lion", and how hard and painful it is for someone still only part way along the road to maturity to live this stage of his life in a prison cell.

We believe that these youths, despite the offenses they are accused of, have the right to dignity and respect. We are committed to giving them the opportunity of receiving support and aid in the physical and emotional here and now of a prison cell, for it is in these circumstances that they have to 'search their souls' and arrive at a reckoning. Much of the meaning of these group conversations may well not become clear to them until some time later, perhaps much later, but we invite other members of our profession to 'pick up the gauntlet' and set up similar groups.

One practical conclusion from our own experience is that many of the youths had ended up in the remand center because they had not been able to cope with a long period of house arrest without group peer support. We are now examining the possibility of setting up a support group for young people sentenced to house arrest, in the belief that group peer support will help them cope with the strain and help them chose a path to a normal lifestyle, and not a return to crime.