



## The Buzz

# Helping Teens Through Troubled Times

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Everyone goes through changes during their teenage years. Some of those changes can be exciting and rewarding. But, for many teens, adolescence can be an extremely tough time. And when a teen is really struggling, it may be time to turn to a professional for help.

### Have you ever considered a career helping troubled teens?

"There are many career options for people who are interested in working with struggling teens," says Frederic G. Reamer. He is a professor of social work at Rhode Island College in Providence, Rhode Island.

Struggling teens show significant signs of distress, Reamer says. Common warning signs include isolation and withdrawal, problems at school, defiance toward authority, running away from home, impulsive behavior, trouble with the police, depression, abuse of alcohol or drugs, eating disorders and self-injury.

Serious stuff, right? Working with struggling teens isn't for the faint of heart.

It's important to recognize whether a career helping teens is the right fit for you, Jo-Dee Hecko says. She's a social worker who teaches in the human service work department at a college.

### Important personal qualities

Working with teenagers requires a high maturity level, says Hecko.

"It requires a person to be self-aware -- to know what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, and what their thoughts and feelings are. It requires the discipline to put aside one's own personal values, biases, reactions, thoughts and feelings to focus on the client," she says.

"It requires a person to be a team player. People in this profession never work alone, but rather they work alongside many other professionals as they strive to support a client."

Careers that involve helping others often attract people who have gone through hard times themselves. They might have experienced an addiction to drugs or alcohol, domestic violence, a mental health issue or a disability.

"This is natural, but what is really important is for people coming into this field to ask themselves if they have healed from these experiences and if their issue is being managed, under control, in a healthy place, so that their time with a client focuses on the client and not [themselves]", says Hecko.

But that doesn't mean you have to have experienced trouble in your life to work with teens. Doing things like peer counseling or other volunteer work can provide valuable lessons.

### Growing career options

So you want to help teens. What's next? For starters, there are many different career options to choose from. Professionals who help struggling teens include social workers, school counselors, residential care workers, juvenile detention officers and probation officers.

Child psychologists and mental health counselors can also specialize in teen issues.

Based on the challenges teens face in the school system, one can expect the demand for these jobs to increase rapidly, says Corinne Gregory. She is the president and founder of The Polite Child in Bellevue, Washington.

"Too many of our children these days are not coming to school equipped with social skills and relational skills that allow them to be productive and successful in their school careers first, and later, when they transition to the job market," she says.

Many of these helping careers require professional training, such as counseling, mental health and behavioral psychology. However, the demand for life coaches and mentors is also going to offer a huge job market, says Gregory. That's because many teens need someone to teach them life skills.

Mentors act as role models for teens, and give them advice on things like school and social skills. Basic interpersonal relationship skills, character development, customer-employee relations training, and goal setting are among the skills that mentors teach troubled teens.

"Many teens, especially those from minority or low economic populations, will need to learn skills to compete on a level footing with their mainstream counterparts," Gregory says. "When repeated studies show that 85 percent of a person's success depends on their social skills, a great many of these teens at risk will be in the hands of specialists."

### Back to school

The education required to work in these careers varies. For mentoring-type positions, a job candidate may need some specialized education. However, many organizations provide their own training, both in methods and in philosophy, says Gregory.

Entry-level job opportunities are available to people who have associate's and bachelor's degrees in social work, psychology, human services and other disciplines, Reamer says.

Master's degrees are required for more advanced positions, such as counselors, therapists, and clinical or program directors.

"There are many entry-level jobs available for people who want to gain work experience in the human services field," Reamer says. "These jobs offer many opportunities to learn about how to help people in crisis. The jobs can be very stressful and demanding. Entry-level wages are modest but can increase significantly over time to reflect increased experience and responsibilities."

### Jobs available in many locations

Careers that involve working with struggling teens are available in many types of workplaces, Reamer says. Work responsibilities vary from place to place, with different programs giving different degrees of emphasis on personal and academic issues.

Professionals helping troubled teens work in a variety of workplaces:

**Alternative high schools:** Provide education, including special education services, to teens struggling academically or socially in traditional high schools.

**Youth diversion and mentoring programs:** Help at-risk teens avoid the juvenile justice system (courts and correctional facilities). Such programs offer counseling, mentoring and links to other needed services.

**Independent living programs:** Help adolescents develop the skills they need to live on their own. These skills include money management and career and educational planning. Programs primarily serve teens without stable families.

**Wilderness therapy programs:** Offer intensive, short-term (six to seven weeks) therapy in a remote location. The location removes teens from other distractions in their home lives. The challenges can help build a teen's confidence, encouraging them to make better choices once they return home.

**Boarding schools:** Serve teens with significant learning disabilities, emotional difficulties and substance abuse. In addition to counseling, an academic educational program is offered.

**Residential treatment centers:** Offer treatment to address substance abuse and family and mental health issues. In contrast with boarding schools, these centers are more like psychiatric hospitals than schools. At some centers, teens attend a program during the day, and then return home at night.

### The benefits

Hecko finds her career rewarding. One huge benefit, she says, is providing teens with support as they strive to work through their struggles, and to enhance their lives in new ways.

"It provides me with a great sense of privilege when a client trusts me with their thoughts, feelings and their story," Hecko says. "I feel such excitement when I see a client learn and grow and make the changes he or she wants to make in his/her life."

A challenge working with teenagers is keeping professional boundaries, says Hecko. You must understand that you're not a client's friend, although you are friendly.

"As [human service workers], we understand it is important to not give advice nor fix a client's problem, but rather support clients in learning how to make their own choices and decisions," she says.

### Links

#### National Association of Social Workers

Learn about this association

<http://www.socialworkers.org>

#### American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Learn more about the psychiatric field

<http://www.aacap.org>

#### Teen Help

Find resources for teens in trouble

<http://www.child.net/teenhelp.htm>

#### TeenCentral.Net

Find a list of phone numbers for troubled teens

<http://www.teencentral.net/Help/other.php>



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