

Teens Who Intimidate Adults: Understanding Symptom Estrangement

Gerrit De Moor

This story gives a brief overview of the possibilities and opportunities of the Symptom Estrangement Reclaiming Intervention. It is the history of a three-year effort with a child caught in this self-defeating pattern of behaviour.

During LSCI trainings, participants often say that a Symptom Estrangement Reclaiming Intervention is the most difficult to do. Many trainees have the impression that this approach leads nowhere when brought into practice. These professionals have the idea that the Symptom Estrangement intervention is beyond the limits of LSCI and/or their own ability to reach a troubled child.

Introducing Carson

Carson was 13 years old when he arrived in our school and residential care system. According to his files, he had a history of aggression towards students, adults, and his own mother. Carson's parents were divorced. It was reported that Carson's father exhibited the same behaviours as his son, including manipulation, lack of emotions, and cruelty to others. Carson lived with his mother and had less contact with his father since the divorce. Once, he had a quarrel with his mother and they ended up fighting. Carson hit her face with his fist and broke her nose. Carson was considered a high risk for school drop-out and showed no respect towards teachers or staff.

That was exactly how we got to know him. On the second day after his arrival with us, he was caught in a fight with a student. When the educator tried to intervene, Carson attacked the educator and needed to be physically restrained by three adults. It was the start of a series of fights, intimidation, and manipulation.

After a few months, Carson did fight less, but only because most of the students—and even several adults—feared him. Carson had everyone intimidated and only a few adults had the courage to put restrictions on him. For two years, Carson lived according to his own rules: aggression, manipulation, and cruelty.

Carson was 15 years old by the time he came to our group. Our team had just finished the LSCI training when the school year started. Often, in talking with Carson after a conflict, we would recognize a pattern of Symptom Estrangement. In particular,

De Moor, G. (2011). Teens Who Intimidate Adults: Understanding Symptom Estrangement. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 19(1), 58–61. Used with permission. www.reclaiming.com

Carson's characteristic use of defense mechanisms to justify his unacceptable behaviour led us to this diagnostic conclusion. Also, Carson was consistently aggressive and manipulative towards his peers. Thirdly, Carson did not express any emotion towards the pain or the damage he caused to others. Our goal was to make him unsuccessful with his hurting behaviour. We planned to "throw one pebble into his static pool of thought" using the Symptom Estrangement Reclaiming Intervention every time he was involved in this type of conflict.

The Incident

One day an educator noticed the window in the student lounge was broken. He had recently been standing in the area with three young men, so it was a logical thought that the three were responsible for the newly broken window. We decided to question them separately. My colleague talked to Steve while I found Carson playing football in the yard.

I said, "Hey, Carson. I need to ask you something."

Carson replied in an arrogant tone, "What's up, man?"

"We noticed the window in the lounge is broken," I said. "Can you tell me whether the window was already broken when you arrived?"

Carson was glib again, answering, "I don't know anything about a broken window, man. I was there today, but not to do your job finding things out about broken windows!"

I felt I was not going to get much cooperation, so I got back to the group, checking out with my colleague. My colleague experienced more cooperation with Steve, who almost immediately told the whole story:

While the three students were hanging out, Steve put one foot high on the wall. Carson challenged him, "I can do better!" and he touched the wall with his foot, higher than Steve did. Peter, the third student, loved the competition and joined their game; he managed to touch the wall with his foot higher than anyone else. As Steve realized he was going to be the loser of the game he invented, he made a huge effort to beat the others. But as he lifted his foot as high as possible, he lost his balance and his foot broke through the window.

First they were laughing, but then Steve got scared. He told the others that he was going to be punished severely by his father when his parents were billed for the window. Carson immediately had a solution: "If we don't tell anyone, your parents won't get the

De Moor, G. (2011). Teens Who Intimidate Adults: Understanding Symptom Estrangement. Reclaiming Children and Youth, 19(1), 58-61. Used with permission. www.reclaiming.com

invoice. So we shut up about the whole thing and no one will ever know you broke the window.”

They agreed, but as Steve was questioned he felt so much remorse that he told the story.

Drain off and Timeline

Based on this recollection of the Incident by Steve and my colleague, I realized that Carson had lied to me. I was disappointed, since Carson and I had recently begun building a positive relationship and I believed Carson felt good about it. I needed to discuss the situation with Carson, who was still tossing a football in the yard.

Interviewer: “Carson, can you stop playing for a moment, please? I need to talk to you.”

Carson kicked the ball high up in the air and shuffled towards me:

Carson: “What’s up this time? Do I have to solve another problem of yours?”

Interviewer: “Well, Carson, Steve has told us what happened with the window. And if his story is true, it turns out that you did know about it. A few minutes ago, you said you didn’t, so I feel disappointed. But to get it all clear, I would like to hear your version of the story.”

Carson: “Steve broke the window, man. I got nothing to do with it.”

Interviewer: “Tell me all about it, Carson. I need your help on this.”

Carson: “Well, Steve touched the wall with his foot. I got higher and Peter even got higher than I did. Steve felt like a loser, so he tried again. But he almost fell and broke the window.”

Interviewer: “Did he break it on purpose?”

Carson: “Of course not! He was off balance and hit the window with his foot. The window broke. But Steve did it. Go nag at him, man!”

Interviewer: “Help me understand why you thought you would need to lie about it, if you are talking about an accident.”

Carson: “Oh, man. Steve was scared. I think his father is going to beat him up when they have to pay for that window.”

De Moor, G. (2011). Teens Who Intimidate Adults: Understanding Symptom Estrangement. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 19(1), 58–61. Used with permission. www.reclaiming.com

Interviewer: "So Steve was thinking his parents would have to pay for it and Steve feared punishment."

Carson: "Sure, man. You don't know his father."

Interviewer: "So?"

Carson: "Well, we decided not to tell. Than his parents would never know."

Interviewer: "You decided not to tell in order to protect Steve...."

Carson: "You got it! So, leave me alone now. I want to play football. You now know Steve did it, so go hassle him!"

Central Issue and Insight

Interviewer: "I will talk with Steve. But it is disappointing to me when students are not honest. The three of you decided to turn the accidental broken window into a secret. You told me you knew nothing about it, but you did."

Carson: "Wouldn't you help your friend?!"

Interviewer: "Steve felt remorse and told us he did it. He was honest."

Carson: "Well, if you know Steve did it, you should be nagging at him instead of me! I didn't break it. So stop getting on my back!"

Interviewer: "We already worked it out with Steve. No problem. A broken window can be fixed overnight. You lied about what happened and broke confidence. This will take longer than a night to fix. I want you to think about that."

I turned around to go back into the building, leaving Carson behind to think about the situation.

This was not the first time we did this kind of intervention with Carson. He quickly understood that I knew about his role in the situation. It was clear to us that the "pebble" I threw into his static pool of thought moved us forward toward two of our primary goals in this Symptom Estrangement Intervention: causing Carson to doubt the benefits of his dishonest behaviour and making him feel uncomfortable about his manipulative thinking.

Follow Up

De Moor, G. (2011). Teens Who Intimidate Adults: Understanding Symptom Estrangement. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 19(1), 58-61. Used with permission. www.reclaiming.com

For months, we continued to use Symptom Estrangement Interventions with Carson when appropriate and saw bit by bit changes in his thinking patterns and behaviours, while at the same time building a positive relationship. As he was a member of a boxing club, one of us visited him every Friday evening during his training. In that context, he told us he was dreaming of a career as security officer. We believed in his dreams and stimulated him to use his power in a positive way. And the relationship got deeper. We managed to have nice and peaceful moments with him, with or without the group.

The Breakthrough

A breakthrough moment came many months later when there had been a theft in the group. We were asking around to get some clues. We asked the students questions about where and when the theft occurred. When Carson was questioned, he immediately responded, “Well, you know. Punish me. I’ll do whatever you have in mind as punishment and we can move on.”

Since the educator only asked questions without accusing Carson, he answered, “Why should I punish you when I’m not sure who the thief is?”

But Carson kept asking for punishment and for the educator to leave him alone. We didn’t punish him and kept investigating the theft. Soon after, we found out who the thief was. It was not Carson!

This moment was confusing: why would a guy who seemed self-assured and acted like he had everything under control ask for punishment for something he did not do?

By coincidence, we had a refresher course on LSCI that week. We shared Carson’s situation, asking the trainer for his thoughts about Carson’s asking for punishment. Our trainer told us that this is a typical example of a student in a pattern of Massaging Numb Values. In this pattern, the student has a low self-esteem and is used to being beaten whenever there is a stick in the neighbourhood.

We talked about how Carson had a pattern of looking for punishment by doing things to get people on his back. Since we had worked on a relationship and did not get on his back in the same way in recent months, Carson asked for punishment in the recent theft situation as a way of bringing to life the pattern he was in.

It seemed that we had succeeded in getting Carson out of the pattern of Symptom Estrangement, but we did not realize it immediately. With the help of the refresher course and the opportunity to examine Carson’s situation with fresh perspectives, we gained new insights into Carson’s progress and we changed our goals. No longer

De Moor, G. (2011). Teens Who Intimidate Adults: Understanding Symptom Estrangement. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 19(1), 58–61. Used with permission. www.reclaiming.com

narrowly focused on Symptom Estrangement, we were more open to looking for ways to massage numb pro-social values in Carson's daily life and to increase areas of self-control, along with boosting his self-esteem and self-confidence.

In the meantime, we kept working on Carson's relationship with his mother, his academic success, and his social skills towards other students. It turned out to be a very fascinating and inspiring three-year period.

At the age of eighteen, Carson left school and our program. He graduated as a carpenter and was training as a security officer in the place where his mother worked. The relationship with his mother had improved. We had reason to believe that he was going to find his way for the future. But it only was a belief, not proof.

The Proof: A Phone Call from Carson

One year later Carson came to visit us at school. He told us he was doing well. He was employed as a carpenter and was following advanced training to become a security officer. Carson was living at home with his mother.

Three years later, when Carson was 21, he called me on the phone. He sounded very proud about what he had achieved. He was no longer working as a carpenter, but he had graduated as an official security officer and worked for the postal service. His dream had come true.

He also mentioned he was still living with his mother and they had a good relationship.

Carson demonstrated that the Symptom Estrangement Reclaiming Intervention is an essential part of LSCI and it really helps to get students out of a pernicious self-defeating pattern. It takes a lot of patience, skills, and belief in a good outcome.

Gerrit De Moor is working as a special educator in the Koninklijk Orthopedagogisch Centrum Sint-Gregorius in Ghent, Belgium. He is a Senior Trainer in Life Space Crisis Intervention and is a facilitator of The Virtues Project™. He can be reached by email: gerrit.de.moor@hotmail.com