

5

JEFF

Mrs. Green sucks, English sucks. If you say you're glad to see me, you suck, too. There isn't an adult in the whole world who's glad to see me.

Jeff represents a huge group of lonely children and adolescents who have been disconnected by the external control psychology they have been exposed to, often at home, almost always in school. I believe they can be reconnected in school if the staff is careful to avoid any use of external control in their contact with these students.

If Jeff can't achieve a satisfying relationship with a responsible adult, he has almost no hope for a happy life. Our jails, prisons, divorce courts, and child protection agencies are filled with Jeffs and their female equivalents. Because the primary burden of caring for children falls more heavily on women, women have evolved a stronger need to love and belong than have men. And generally, they have less of a need for power, so they are more able to connect, at least with each other, than men.

Jeff's frequent use of the word *sucks* to describe the world he lives in tells how disconnected he is. Although he has learned to read at grade level, he has the potential for school failure, violence, drug abuse, sexual misconduct, and even suicide. He hasn't an inkling of what a good relationship with a responsible adult may be. He has friends, but they are as disconnected as he is. His friends exist mostly to support the

destructive and self-destructive choices they make when they hang out together. Jeff cannot even conceive of the caring and support of a responsible friend.

At fourteen, Jeff sees the whole world as a conspiracy to control him. Since he was young, he has been the victim of external control psychology; the only thing he can count on is criticism, punishment, and rejection. Because he hates school, he has been just barely making it since the fourth grade, when he did well. He loves violence in movies and on television. He's been smoking since he was nine and is very interested in addictive drugs. He was rejected by his father, who disappeared when he was three years old. And though his mother tries, she is severely disconnected herself. Jeff and his mother spend the time they are together screaming at and threatening each other.

There would be some hope for Jeff if he could get a job. But to succeed at any job, now or later, he will have to be lucky enough to work for a person who will tolerate his early misbehavior and deal with him kindly, rather than with threats. But at fourteen or any age, this possibility is very unlikely to occur. The only other people who might save him are school personnel, perhaps a counselor working with one or two of his teachers. Given the way Jeff behaves in school, this, too, is unlikely to happen. But it is his only real chance.

To help him, both his counselor and teachers have to avoid any talk of control: any criticizing, blaming, threatening, and punishing. Jeff is supersensitive to external control psychology. As soon as he detects that anyone at school is trying to control him, even with rewards, he turns against the person. The external control psychology of the world has done a good job on Jeff. All any administrator, counselor, or teacher can do that has any chance of helping him is to try to make a relationship through the total avoidance of external control of any kind. Until the counselor and later a few teachers make that connection, it will be almost impossible to talk to him about changing the way he chooses to live his life.

In this instance, I will assume the role of the school's assistant principal. Jeff has been sent to my office frequently, so I know him. By using choice theory, all I am going to do is try to connect.

I'll start by saying, "Jeff, Mrs. Green sent you to see me. I'm glad she did. I'd like to talk to you for a little while. I never seem to have enough time, but today I do."

You may have noticed that I avoided all talk of what he did in class that led him to be sent to see me. Or any threats of what is going to happen to him if he keeps doing what he is doing every day. If I can continue to do so, I have a chance of establishing the relationship we must have if I am to help him.

"Mrs. Green sucks, English sucks. If you say you're glad to see me, you suck, too. There isn't an adult in the whole world who's glad to see me."

"I'm an adult, and I'm glad to see you. I think it's my fault that we haven't really talked. I'd like to hear what's on your mind."

"If I start telling you what's on my mind, you'll call the cops. I hate this school; it's like a prison. If you really want to help me, get me out of here. The idea of spending two more years in this cage blows my mind."

"I agree with you completely. That's why I want to talk. Like we're talking now. It's good."

"Good for what? Why don't you just give me detention and get it over with. That's what's going to happen anyway."

"I'm not going to punish you. I don't really know what to do that'll help, but I know that punishment's not going to work. Tell me, what was going through your mind when you got up this morning."

"What kind of crap is that question? The only thing on my mind is how much I hate going to this school. It sucks, everything sucks."

What I'm trying to accomplish is a conversation with Jeff in which I do nothing to control him. He may never have had this experience with any adult in the schools he's attended.

"What else do you hate?"

"What do you mean? I hate a lot of things. Like I said, the whole world sucks. What's to like?"

"What's to like? That's a good question. Is there anything that you like right now?"

"Yeah, I like to party. And I like to play a little hoop. That's about it."

"Have you ever liked a schoolteacher?"

He thought a little while about that question. The fact that he thought at all is encouraging.

"Not for a long time. But one I did. My fourth-grade teacher. She was cool; she wasn't always on my back."

Not using any external control behaviors, such as criticizing, blaming, complaining, threatening, or punishing, has taken him to where he has a good word for a teacher. It didn't take that long and, in my experience, it usually doesn't. But however long it takes, we've got to get there. No shortcuts here.

"I'll bet you remember something you did in there."

"She was always making us write. But she read some of the stuff I wrote, and she liked it. All the papers came back with things like 'Very good!' or 'How did you think of that?' She was always encouraging; she said keep working until you say what you want to say."

Now I'm where I want to be. He's talking about something positive that he did in school and a teacher who helped it to happen. We're at the very beginning of a connection. My keeping totally away from external control is starting to pay off. His attitude and language when he said, "I like to party" were all red flags. He waited for external control to zap him and didn't get it. I didn't even raise my eyebrows. I passed that little test. But he'll keep testing, that I can count on.

"Do you ever write in class now?"

"For her? Get real. She fills my papers with red marks. I don't think Shakespeare could please her."

Shakespeare, that's an interesting reference. Whenever a school-hating kid uses an educational reference, it's encouraging. What I've got to do is continue on this tack. Then I've got

to handle why he came to see me. I'll assume we made a small connection, and I'm now ready to send him on to class. The bell's just about to ring, so he can go to his next class. But if I'm not careful with how I let him go, he may just see me as another controlling person.

"I guess its time for you to go to your next class./I've enjoyed talking with you. I'd like to do it again."

"Yeah, thanks, man. I was hoping I wouldn't have to go back to English. My next class is art; I like to draw. But how about Mrs. Green, what're you going to do about her kicking me out of class?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. I'm not going to do anything because I don't know what to do. You handle it. If she asks you what I did, tell her we had a talk and that I sent you to your next class. It's the truth. And I've enjoyed talking with you Jeff; that's the truth, too."

I have worked in schools enough to know that what I just said will ruffle some feathers—that some people will think I'm letting Jeff get away with something. But I'm not. Jeff had a talk with me, and we made a connection. The more we connect, the better chance he has to start working in school. Just by Jeff's mention of Shakespeare, I know he has the brains to do well if he wants to. But as long as he keeps being punished, he'll stay disconnected and do less than he's doing now. He'll go from breaking school rules to breaking the law, and there's a good chance he'll end up in prison or dead at an early age. We need to deal with him successfully before he commits a crime. But that means some of us will have to stop using external control while we can still do it. Once he gets in the totally external control hands of the law, it'll be too late. This positive meeting with an authority figure and our beginning to connect is good, but Jeff also needs to connect with a teacher like Mrs. Green. I'm on good terms with her; I have to talk with her and feel her out about taking a choice-theory tack with Jeff.

"What if she kicks me out again? Two more times, and I flunk."

This question is interesting and hopeful; Jeff cares enough about school to mention that he doesn't want to flunk. As much as these kids seem to hate school and teachers, a lot of them would turn around if we could get rid of the external control. Jeff now thinks I'm worth telling this to. On the basis of what we've been talking about, there's a part of him that *wants* to pass.

"Well, we've started talking, I want to keep talking, to get to know you. You don't have to be kicked out of class to talk to me. If it's okay with you, I'll call you in when I get some free time. It may be every day even if sometimes it's only for a few minutes. If you think you can figure out how to stay in there for a few days, I'd like to talk to Mrs. Green. I'll tell her about your fourth-grade teacher; maybe she'd like to encourage you a little, too."

This is a little external control, but I won't get to first base with Mrs. Green if Jeff can't control himself in her class for a few days. I've got to tell him that. I've done this enough that I think he'll give it a try. If he doesn't, well, I'll do the best I can with her.

Let's skip to a meeting a few days later with Mrs. Green. I told her to stop by this afternoon for a few minutes to talk to me about Jeff. She came in, but she was not very friendly. She started in immediately.

"I'm upset with you. I sent Jeff to you the other day, and you know what he told me? He said you didn't know what to do, so you didn't do anything. What kind of a thing is that to say to a kid like Jeff?"

"He told you that?"

"Do you think I'm making it up?"

"No, no. It's the truth; that's exactly what I told him. I'm just surprised he told it to you."

"If that's the truth, what's gotten into you? Have you lost it? What goes?"

"What goes is, it's the truth. I don't know what to do with Jeff, and I told him so. No one in this whole state knows what to do with Jeff. Do you?"

"Well, I know one thing. Letting him get away with disrupting my class is the wrong thing to do."

"How's he been for the past two days?"

"Well, I haven't had to kick him out, if that's what you're asking. But I'll tell you, that kid's no good."

"If you're right that he's no good and you're right that I've lost it, what good does it do to send him to me? I think we can reach him. We've had a talk, a good talk. Have you ever tried to talk with him?"

"Look, I'm a teacher, not a counselor. I've got twenty-nine kids in there. I don't have time to talk to any of them. I give them something to do, and some of them do it. Some of them try pretty hard. Jeff doesn't do anything. I wouldn't mind it if he were quiet about it, but he's not. His mouth is going all the time. I'm sick of him."

"Would you ask him to write something? Anything, maybe three sentences, that's all."

"I ask them all to write. He hasn't written anything yet. Why should he start now?"

"Because he told me that when he was in the fourth grade, he used to write and the teacher encouraged him. I wonder if you'd try that. I mean figure out something he could write about and ask him to do it for you. It'd take you ten seconds, what've you got to lose? If he writes anything, write 'good' on it and send him to me with the paper. I want to see him as soon as he does."

"Okay, I get what you're doing. I hate to come across like I just did. I appreciate that you're trying to care about him. I know that's what he needs. Don't you think I know what's going on? Will you keep seeing him if I work with him? To tell you the truth, he's a smart kid. He could do something. It's so tough around here that sometimes I just want to give up."

Mrs. Green needed the attention I gave her just as much as Jeff did. She's a good teacher, a good human being, but she's over her head with kids as desperate for attention from adults as Jeff is. With choice theory, there's a lot that could be done for Jeff. With external control, he's finished. I worked with a middle school full of Jeffs for a whole school year, 1994-95, in Cincinnati and replaced external control with a lot of choice theory. The change worked some minor miracles. External control in school was killing those disconnected kids. The account appears in Chapter Ten of the book, *Choice Theory*, where I tried to show the difference between an external-control and a choice-theory approach. It wasn't reality therapy, but it was what had to be done before we could even think of using reality therapy.