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## “HELPING ADOLESCENTS AT RISK” – *Excerpts from Michael’s Story*

The book, *Helping Adolescents at Risk: Prevention of Multiple Problem Behaviors* examines the co-occurrence of multiproblem behaviors from birth through adolescence. The book is illustrated by way of “Michael’s Story:” his personal history, opportunities for intervention, and breaking the multiproblem-behavior cycle through the implementation of proven interventions with his son, Tommy.

The lead author of the book is Anthony Biglan, Ph.D., a senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, and incoming president of the Society for Prevention Research. The co-authors of the book are: Patricia Brennan, Ph.D., Emory University, an expert on aggression; Sharon Foster, Ph.D., Alliant International University, an expert on peer relations; and Harold Holder, Ph.D., Prevention Research Center at Berkeley, an expert on prevention of alcohol problems.

### **A Summary of “Michael’s Story:”**

#### *Michael as a Teenager*

Sixteen-year-old Michael just ended a stay in a juvenile detention center. Arrested twice—once for breaking and entering, and once for an assault that followed a night of heavy drinking, Michael’s problems are much greater than his frequent encounters with the legal system. Michael attends high school erratically and no doubt will soon drop out entirely. He smokes almost a pack of cigarettes a day and marijuana regularly. Recently he has begun to experiment with harder drugs. Now, Michael has yet another surprise in store for him—his girlfriend is pregnant and she plans to tell him as soon as he is released from juvenile prison.

When Michael is 19, the authorities arrest him for driving while intoxicated. His third arrest in six months, the judge sends him to jail. In jail, he goes through involuntary detoxification and develops seizures requiring medical attention. His doctor notices the tracks on his arms and gives him a warning about HIV risk. Although the jail staff offers counseling to Michael for his drug abuse, he refuses. When he gets out of jail, he gets drunk, goes to his girlfriend’s house (the mother of his child), gets into an argument with her, and beats her up.

#### *Michael’s Early Childhood*

By age eight, Michael was already showing some real problems with aggressive behavior—but, his problems started long before that. Michael’s mother worked throughout her pregnancy to help her

husband support their other three children. Her job in a local deli was fast-paced and stressful. She and her co-workers enjoyed their cigarette breaks, although she tried to cut down to only one pack a day during her pregnancy.

Michael was born prematurely. When he was a toddler, his mother found it hard to cope with his frenetic activity level, inability to obey and aggression. Maybe if she had been able to stay home, hadn't fought with Michael's father over his drinking and job loss, and didn't have four children to raise, she would have been better able to deal consistently with Michael. In fact, she was often worried and for a time took medication for depression. Michael's father was home more often when he was out of work, leaving more time for him to argue with Michael's mom.

Michael's parents found fault with almost everything he did and frequently yelled at him, leading Michael to discover very early in his life that if he cried or threw a fit, his parents might back down. He also found that causing trouble with his siblings resulted in gaining his parents' attention. When yelling did not work, hitting did the trick.

In kindergarten, Michael found it hard to stay in his seat, which irritated his teacher. He tried his usual strategy of yelling and even hit her once. Not surprisingly, he was sent into the hallway more days than not. Soon he noticed that he could not read as well as the other kids. They laughed when he tried to read aloud and he reacted to their teasing by getting back at them. Eventually, other kids began to leave Michael alone. His only friend was another boy who also got into trouble a lot.

### *Michael's Middle School Years*

As he got older, Michael did badly in school, although he did advance from elementary to middle school. At home, things changed after his dad left. His mother occasionally yelled at him, but her interest in disciplining him began to slip away. Because his mother worked two jobs, Michael was alone after school and tended to wander around the neighborhood. On the street, Michael watched the older kids hang out together and smoke. He kept his distance though, because one kid threatened him with a knife when Michael asked for a cigarette. He still bought cigarettes occasionally from a local convenience store, as the clerk believed they were for his mother.

When Michael entered middle school, it did not take long before he was spending time in detention. As he connected with the other detention-prone kids, he encountered new temptations. One day on the way home from school, he was offered alcohol in exchange for some cigarettes. Getting beer from the older kids was easy because the local store employees never carded. Soon Michael began to hang around with these kids, although he sometimes fought with them and found them hard to deal with. When drinking, he felt better and worried less about his trouble in school.

One afternoon, Michael and his friends skipped class to drink in the parking lot of the liquor store. Two police officers drove up, threatened to arrest them, then took them to their homes. Michael's mother

was at work, but one of the officers called her and told her about the incident. She assured him that she would handle the situation. When she came home, she yelled at Michael for embarrassing her, he responded by swearing, and she threw a hairbrush at him. He retaliated by slapping her face. She ran into the bedroom to get away from him, but the next day, she seemed to have forgotten the whole thing. Michael met his friends as usual in a neighborhood parking lot; he joked about what had happened with his mother and they all laughed. They had the whole weekend ahead of them and it looked like it would be a fun one.

### **Points of Intervention:**

Could Michael's adolescence have taken a different course if something had altered those risk factors when he was a child? At the age of 16, can anything help Michael get his life back on track and reduce the chance he will continue to have problems with criminal behavior, drugs and alcohol?

When Michael became an adolescent, he increasingly associated with friends who drank, smoked, and offered him various drugs. Drugs and alcohol were readily available in his neighborhood. As he continued to increase his use of drugs and alcohol, he became even more distant from his mother and disengaged from school. These many risk factors at the individual and community level collectively increased the chances that Michael would move from a troubled boy into a teen with serious behavior problems. Moreover, nothing stood in the way of these developments. What could have helped deter Michael from his increasingly detrimental behavior as he reached adolescence?

### **Breaking the Cycle:**

Michael's girlfriend Barbara gives birth to a baby boy. Tommy is a healthy, full-term infant, due to Barbara's enrollment in a program for pregnant teens, where she learned to quit smoking and drinking and was able to improve her nutrition.

When Tommy is three, Barbara attends college part-time and works part-time. She ends her relationship with Michael, who moves away and seldom sends child support. Because of her low income, Barbara qualifies for Head Start and enrolls Tommy in a program close to home. Head Start includes parent training, which helps Barbara to handle Tommy in better ways. Due to Barbara's consistent discipline, the frequent tantrums Tommy had as a toddler occur only rarely by the time he is four-years-old.

When Tommy starts school, he knows his letters and cooperates well with others. In the second grade, he has trouble learning to read but his school provides tutoring, and by grade three, he is reading at grade level. Although he has a tendency to be disruptive because he loves attention, his first-grade teacher provides appropriate consequences and soon this tendency is under control. He gets along well

with others, and is a funny, engaging child. Still, parenting is a challenge for Barbara as she finishes her BA and works full-time.

As Tommy grows up, he and his mother have a good relationship—even though they sometimes bicker a little over rules. Barbara cannot afford to move out of her neighborhood, which worries her as Tommy begins middle school. Nevertheless, she always knows where he is and who is with him. She tries to steer him away from bad influences. Eventually, some of Tommy’s friends begin to experiment with tobacco and alcohol. Tommy however is involved in a smoking and substance abuse prevention program at school and, although some of it seems “kind of lame,” most of it really makes sense to him. His teacher invites him to train as a peer facilitator and Tommy may do it—he has seen ads about helping other kids stay off drugs and alcohol. He does not want to grow up like his father.

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