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Listening Between the Lines

Become part of the solution —
but only after you hear the whole story

This guide and **Living Between the Lines** are part of a larger kit called **Between the Lines**, designed to raise public awareness and stimulate social action towards caring, safe, literate communities. **Between the Lines** was produced by

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You can get a copy of the complete kit by contacting
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Introduction

It's hard to know what to do about a problem when you don't have enough information. When it comes to crime and low literacy we seldom hear the whole story.

The stories we hear of the pain of families who lost someone they love through violence fill us with sadness, anger and fear. They often make us feel that someone should pay for the suffering. We want to punish the person who committed the crime and blame those who failed to prevent it. We find it hard to see what we can do when people are hurt. We feel powerless to change things. We look for quick answers. But these reactions don't give us the information we need to prevent other crimes. In fact the fear, anger and blame they bring out in us can leave us feeling helpless.

It can be the same when we meet or hear about people who haven't been able to learn to read and write well. We may judge and blame them, instead of understanding what kept them from learning and how we can remove these barriers for them and other people.

Many adults can't understand why some children and teenagers can not read and write well. They have even more trouble understanding why some of them are violent. We often hear people say: "I don't know what's wrong

with young people. They seem to be out of control.” It’s easy to blame young people for their problems. But blaming does not move us closer to preventing crime and promoting literacy.

Another Side of the Story

The audiotape in this kit tells another side of the story of a young person who has problems learning and gets in trouble with the law. It shows the feelings of a young person who has been abused by her parent(s), who has been violent, who has been put down in school, who has used drugs and has been in trouble with the law. The tape does not give details of everything that happened in this young person’s life, but shows how these experiences affect her feelings about herself and about other people.

How the Tape Was Made

The script was written by Guy Bilodeau from Théâtre Parminou, based on his interviews and group discussions with many young people. Many of the young people he spoke to have had trouble learning and have been in trouble with the law.

Jennifer Smythe is the young actress who brought life to the script by reading it for the English tape. If you flip the tape over, you will hear Gustave Héon reading the French

script. We wanted you to hear both a man and a woman telling this story because Guy Bilodeau heard similar stories from both young men and young women.

Moving Beyond Blame

The young person on the tape has been deeply hurt. She reacts the way most of us react when we are hurt and fearful. She looks for someone to blame. First she blames her mother. She also lashes out at the social workers and other people that she feels mistreated her. It is important to hear this side of the story, because like many young people, she was treated unfairly. Physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children and young people are too common.

But there are other parts of the story that we don't hear. What else was happening in her home? Often women who are seen as abusive or neglectful are abused themselves. Often, the father is abusive to his partner or his children. We don't hear much at all about him. We hear that sometimes there were other people around when the abuse was happening, but we don't know who they are. We don't hear the frustrations and hopes of the parents, other family members, social workers and teachers who try to help this young woman.

If we are to move beyond the blame to a deeper understanding that will help us prevent other young people from

living lives of abuse, fear, blame and injustice, we need to uncover these other stories. We need to let the whole story be heard, to look for the roots of the problem in the experiences of the different people involved. Then we need to listen again to find the roots of the solutions in the different points of view.

To move toward solutions, we need a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the injustices. After you have listened to this tape, think about and discuss the questions that follow. Talk about the facts provided, and look for more information to help you understand the experiences of the mother, the father, the friends, the foster parents, the counsellors. Talk about what happens when mothers are blamed for the abuse they suffer and for the abuse of their children. Are the women's and children's needs for protection and support being met? Look for ways that you can use this understanding to reach out to young people who are living with abuse and injustice. Think of ways you can help support parents who abuse or neglect their children because they feel so isolated, unsupported and hurt themselves. Think of how you can help prevent them from abusing. Talk to parents, young people, social workers, justice workers and teachers about their frustrations. See if there is some way you can lend a hand. Become part of the solution, but only after you hear the whole story.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think the parents in this story were feeling when they decided they could not deal with their daughter on their own any longer?
2. What kinds of stresses are there on families today that could lead to this kind of situation?
3. After hearing the tape, do you feel you have a better understanding of why young people get in trouble with the law?
4. What do you think could be done to help young people with stories like this one?
5.
 - a) Who are the victims in this story?
 - b) Who are the offenders?
 - c) Do these names “victim” and “offender” make sense?
 - d) How do we view “victims” and “offenders”?
 - e) How do we understand who becomes “victims” and “offenders”?
6. How do people decide who to blame?

Did You Know?

- Child abuse and neglect happens in all types of families – rich and poor, two-parent and single parent families and in families from all cultures and religions.
- However, child abuse is more likely under circumstances that leave parents with a lot of stress and without support. Some of these circumstances might be:
 - when a family has money problems;
 - when a parent is unemployed;
 - when the family is isolated or has few or no friends or family nearby;
 - when the parents don't work as a team, but instead one parent always has to be in control or when there is only one parent;
 - when parents feel bad about themselves because of past family experiences, discrimination or unfair treatment.
- Studies done by Statistics Canada show that the majority of families, but particularly young families with young children, are under a lot of stress.
- Young families with parents under age 25 are having a much harder time making ends meet than they did ten years ago.

- Although most children living in single-parent families are poor, most poor children live in two-parent families. This is because only about 13% of families are single parent families. Most single-parent families are headed by women.
- In families where the children are abused or neglected, the mother is often also abused by the father or step-father.
- Research shows that when abuse occurs in families, women, children, and elderly family members are most likely to be abused. The abusers are most often men.
- Canadians still say the most important things in their lives are their families. This is true even for young people who have been badly abused by family members.
- Even though some people feel that young offenders get off too lightly, researchers have found that when people know the whole story about real cases, most would actually give lighter sentences than the courts handed down.
- Media coverage of court cases involving young offenders has made many people feel that young people are treated very leniently by the justice system. On average, young people are punished more than adults who commit similar crimes and are jailed at a greater rate than adults in Canada.

Suggestions for Action

1. Talk to young people, parents, child welfare workers and other people who work with young people in your community. Ask them about their experiences and stories concerning young people who get in trouble with the law or who have problems learning.
2. Look into ways that you can help build or strengthen different kinds of programs that help families, such as child care and early education programs. You might also look at health programs and job sharing programs. Could you encourage local employers and government departments to increase their support of these programs?
3. More and more neighbourhoods are finding ways to give busy families the support that used to be provided by extended families. For example, in some communities, people are matching elderly people with families that have young children to provide a substitute “grandparent” when there are no actual grandparents nearby. Could you start a program like this in your neighbourhood?
4. Playgroups are another free or low-cost way to reduce the isolation that parents and children often feel when they are too busy or don’t know their neighbours. Most playgroups are simply run by parents who take turns making snacks, setting up the toys and getting crafts

ready for the children. The parents can support each other and share information about issues related to children, to services in the community and even to abuse that some may be experiencing. Ask a school or childcare centre in your community if they know of a playgroup nearby. If there isn't one, they may be able to help you get one started.

5. Most mothers and fathers want to be good parents. There is very little support to help parents prevent problems during stressful times. Instead, we step in and take over after family problems start. We also tend to blame parents, especially mothers. As Toronto psychologist Dr. Paula Caplan recently pointed out, "We are quick to criticize our mothers for not being perfect, but appreciate our fathers for merely trying". Make a real effort to move beyond "the blame game". Get together with friends, neighbours or people you work with in your job or your volunteer work. Talk about how your community could provide more positive and early support to prevent abuse. Maybe you can talk to people who work in pre-natal clinics or who give pre-natal courses about what can be done even before a baby is born. How could you and others in your community help after the baby is born, in terms of health, family and personal support?

From the Inside Out - Putting a Reality Together

You land in this world here and the first thing you know, you're being hit and screamed at by this person who's gonna be around most of the time. You start to be scared of her and her reactions. But what gets confusing is that sometimes she takes you in her arms and she's really warm. So you're happy, you feel her warmth, it's really good. Then all of a sudden she starts screaming at you. You're scared and you cry. Looks like that makes her even more furious, and so she starts hitting you. You're scared, you want it to stop, you show her you're scared, you cry, you scream, you call for help, but nobody answers. You're in an empty space and you're falling. There's nobody to protect you, nothing to grab onto. You hurt. Being hurt and being scared wear you out. You fall asleep.

And then you wake up. Here she comes. You stiffen. You're scared. She takes you in her arms and it's warm. You relax a bit. Her voice is soft, you love that smiling face, you feel safe, trusting. There are other people around. They feel good, they feel the warmth, too. Then, there's no time for you to figure out what started it, but the room gets noisier, the faces get twisted, and you feel that things are heading fast, really fast, for what you're already scared

of. There's shouting. You're scared again. You start crying. Now they're looking at you. You know what's coming and that makes you scarer. You already know you shouldn't cry but you're so scared you can't help it. Then somebody's hitting you. A lot. The screaming and that tone of voice hurt even more. You look for somebody or something to hold onto, but it's the empty space again.

Next time, not even the smiling and cuddling make you relax. Now you're always scared. You know the screaming fits are your fault but you don't know exactly what it is you do that sets them off. So you take up as little room as possible, you say as little as possible, you watch your every move like a hawk. Especially when, at home, you feel that uptight feeling you can recognize. You don't even want the warmth she used to give you any more 'cause now, when you get warmth, the uptight feeling is always there too. So you make a little place inside yourself where you can feel safe from being hit and screamed at, and be with your sadness that keeps you company and understands you. Then, to get warm, you hold on tight to your pillow, and you fall asleep inside yourself, away from them, away from people you love but that don't love you. That's the only place you don't hurt, the only place you're not so scared, and you go there every chance you get. So you learn that outside is a threat, it's dangerous, and no matter how often you try, outside you can't find the warmth you sense you need. So

you hide out in the only place that isn't dangerous, the place only you know about.

Then one day, you're not at home, you're at your young friend's house or at school, and you come across something incredible: there, people laugh together, look each other in the eye, sing, hug each other, play. You think being that easy with people is a crazy thing to do. But ... but nobody there seems scared or uptight. You can't believe what they're letting themselves do. And the main thing you see is that the children don't seem scared of what the adults might do, and the adults look so nice, so warm, that you love them right away. You feel as if all of a sudden there's a big push from deep down inside you to be close to these people, the ones you've been waiting for. But, hey, you don't say a thing. You make really sure you don't let anything out. You take those feelings back with you to your safe place. You're the only one who realized anything. All this time you thought your life was real, but now you find out there's your life and then there's real life, and there's some difference.

From then on, things don't look the same. There's something else: those smiles, that warmth, those safe places in real life, not just in the cave inside yourself - that now seems so cold to you. Even your pillow doesn't keep you warm any more. And being so scared and so sad for so

long: what for? Not fair! What did I do to deserve that? And your sadness gets worse and worse. It gets so bad that one time, you're shocked, it just blows out. It throws chairs around and lets out such an incredible scream that everybody around you is scared stiff. The whole thing happened as if you don't have a thing to do with it. You feel you've got it all out, and there was a lot to get out. You feel it, and at the same time you're looking at it from the outside, as if someone else was making all the fuss. And then it's over, you're sobbing, your heart's been so full for so long. I feel as if I've blown away all that sadness and had nothing to do with the whole thing. Does that ever feel weird! Does it ever feel good! It feels like I just let go of being so uptight for so long. I've just discovered release. Happiness must be a lot like this.

And then, you're not too sure what happened, but you look around to check out the damage. Only a few chairs lying around and some broken glass. But the weirdest thing is these people around you, not moving, as if they've been struck by lightning. And the way they're looking at you, you've never seen that before. They're scared stiff, as if they can't get over the shock of what they've just seen. From the way they're looking at you, you can tell they're scared of you, and most of all they respect you. They respect you the way people have to respect the power and the violence of an earthquake or some unstoppable danger.

All these new, mixed feelings make you feel peaceful and strong, as if you're plugged into some new current. It's as if you've just arrived on the planet. It's the Big Bang. You've just been born. You've arrived. You're just hitting your stride. What's inside has come out. At last. Then, things outside start moving again. The people look at each other. They pick up the pieces. She manages to say, "Get into your room!" I feel so good I sleep like a real baby. Things are never gonna be the same again. I've popped my cork. It's as if all that pressure I was feeling has blown out at last.

But I had to put the cork back in, PDQ. It was as if knowing that all that punishment and not being allowed to do all those things wasn't fair made the sadness worse. The more I wanted, the more I got told I couldn't do things. I took it all, I took it all back to my safe place, the things I wasn't allowed to do, the accusations, the condemnations, the punishments. They never listened to me. All they ever said was, "Shut up!" But the more you shut up, the more characters remain locked up inside. In time, you realize that your hideaway has been invaded. That outsiders have found a way in. That violence knows no boundaries. That you must protect yourself both on the inside and on the outside. That the words that hurt are echoing inside. That memories are more real than the present. All of a sudden you hear a voice: "Hey! are you listening? Don't you care about what I

am saying? How do you expect to understand if you don't listen?" It happens to me all the time. I get chewed out for being distracted as if it was my choice. But how can I explain that just a word or a flash can revive my nightmares and foul up the present. Even I don't understand. I am trying to direct traffic between jams!

Then I discovered the warmth of friends. We could talk about anything, absolutely anything. No accusations, no court cases, no condemnations. Most of all, they listened. Sometimes I was so surprised they were interested, I couldn't say anything. I'd learned what to do up to a point, how to ask for something, but I'd never got beyond that, I'd never got permission. Beyond that point, I didn't have a clue what to do or say. And I could try anything. With them, I discovered more in a few months than I did in my entire life before: how powerful a smile is, a touch, having fun, letting it out, saying what you think. Sometimes we even made like adults, playing who's the strongest, who's always right, who's the all-round champion. And that was when I discovered the magic of drugs. I smoked a little joint and I got bubbly, high. It was incredible. Everything I didn't get to know or learn all those years came to me all at once. I was normal, I could laugh, I could have fun. I could try coke, too. More magic. One line and I was in charge of my life. I felt I was in complete control. I even found out new things about myself, things I never dreamed

I had before: how fast I thought, how creative I was, what a party person. Wow! I saw why doing drugs is called a trip. It takes you a million miles from that disgusting day-to-day life. It gets you out of all that shit. Really. And another thing, the best thing. It makes you peaceful inside. The volcano's quiet. And that was a good thing. I know now that if I hadn't done drugs then I would have done myself in.

But it was too good to last. Sometimes then I was feeling so high and so good with my friends, I could forget everything else, forget about time. But one night things got really heavy. This time she was the one who popped her cork. The volcano inside her blew. What happened was that she found dope in my drawer. That time she did the worst things she ever did to me. I recognized the tone of voice, the screaming. But that time, the worst thing was the way she looked at me. I never felt so much hate, so much evil. If looks could kill, if words could kill ... she really got me where it hurt. That's when I learned what it means to break somebody. Actually wear them down. Destroy them. I know right then something snapped inside me. I think it was something like hoping or trusting that things would get better. I thought, "That's it, that's all." And while I was feeling really down like that, she was keeping on at me. At one point through all that pain that was tearing me up, I heard her start into my friends, "those pothead buddies of

yours", and saying there was no way I would ever be seeing that "scum" again. Hearing her start into the only people that cared about me, the people that had given me everything and taught me everything, made something snap. My cork popped. My volcano blew, too. Confrontation. I could take lots more about myself, but don't start in on my friends. They're my only safe place on the outside.

Then it was the social workers. The youth workers. My parents said they couldn't handle it all alone any more. So a bunch of them started to handle it. Now I was a case. They studied me, assessed me, classified me, diagnosed me. And placed me. Incredible. It was really bad. One thing I remember was a screaming match with my parents in the social worker's office. They said I was the reason their life was a mess and the whole world was a mess. They said again they didn't know what to do with me any more. I was their problem. I was a problem. None of that was fair. That was too much. The volcano inside me started to shake and rumble. I was keeping the cork in, I knew I had to shut up, but it was too much. I blew up. When you've been there a hundred times, it's hard not to. So they placed me under round-the-clock supervision in a centre 'cause, the way things were, it was too easy to blow. Then I realized that I was screwed, either way. If they believed my parents, then I was inside to be rehabilitated. But even if they believed me and all the bad

things they had done to me, they couldn't send me back home and I'd still be inside. There was no way out. So I started living like a tourist in foster families and group homes. But the hardest thing was being cut off from people like me, from my friends. And they know it, too. They know that no contacts is the worst thing, the worst kind of blackmail they can hit you with. I learned a lot more than about the rules of the game. Every time, somebody's responsible, it's somebody's fault, and that somebody is you. If you rebel against things not being fair, you're antisocial and you've got to change. If you shut up, then you're withdrawn and that's not good, you've got to open up, but when you open up, nobody believes you. It's the old game, "Answer me when I say something to you!" and "Don't answer me back!". Either way, you lose.

You can't take it any more, things not being fair. You fake going along with things. That's how you stay out of trouble. That's another rule. But sometimes it's more than you can take, the volcano rumbles, and something or somebody gets hurt. Now you're into volcano management. Sometimes you manage OK, and sometimes you lose it. And some people know just how to get you going, as if sometimes they've got to prove they were right that you're the problem, the problem's inside you, you're the one responsible for the whole mess. All the time, you have to find safe places, even if it gets harder and harder, even if

they try and control you more and more. Some friends, some dope, some freedom. Gimme a break.

When you're moving around a lot, it's hard to keep your friends. But you get so you can recognize each other. Even if you don't know each other, you recognize when people are scared, when they're not really there. And sometimes you feel warm again together, like in a pack. Doing dope makes you do other things. For one thing, you have to find the money you need. That's a violent place to be, too. You don't get something for nothing. And then sometimes you're free, you exist, with everything good about you, all your fantasies, all your warmth, all your trust. Usually that happens with friends that know where you're coming from. They've been there. They understand. Too bad you've gotta sneak those times away from the people that never think you're OK.

Good thing there are some people who listen, though. Sometimes I find myself dreaming that there are people like Pops and Dan all over the place, real people that don't analyze you or label you or condemn you but see your volcano inside, connect with your pain, right on, take the cork out gently and give you a hug, for free, not to prove they're right or use you for anything at all but 'cause they love you, just like those cute kids with pink cheeks in happy families that live on that other planet. Know

something? They organized a deportation of violent kids to that planet with the cold caves, and what they do when they get there is to get together and make the volcanos burn and make so much smoke you can see them light years away. Really.

My dream is that some day everybody who sees that kind of violence happening will sign a petition to set up safe places that are open, with friends and help, where people could learn and practice understanding, warmth and trust. That would replace all the court cases that just drive people farther apart. We need you. But, careful, we've been hurt.

We're open to people that want to listen.