

12-20-1999

## Interview with Derik Fisher

Derik Fisher

Kate Hitchcock

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### Recommended Citation

Fisher, Derik and Hitchcock, Kate, "Interview with Derik Fisher" (1999). *Interviews*. 7.  
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## ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Accession Number: AE-KH-A102099  
Researcher's Name: Kate Hitchcock  
Event: Interview with Derik Fisher, AC counsellor  
Place: Moundbuilders Guidance Center  
Date: October 20, 1999

### (Side A)

K: Just to start off with your basic biographical information, where you're from, how you came to work at Moundbuilders and what relation you have to the alternative center.

D: OK. I grew up in Belleville, Ohio, and I went to school, went to college at Mount Vernon Nazarene College and then I went to graduate school at Ashland Theological Seminary. And while I was where I did an internship with Moundbuilders. And after completing my graduate courses I took a job in Sandusky, Ohio, working for Firelens Community Hospital. And while I working there I had received a call from my supervisor at Moundbuilders telling me that there was an opening and wanting to know if I was interested, which I was. And so that's how I came to come back down to the area to work on the children's team. An old teammate of mine that worked here, Jim Bessineas, used to work at the alternative school during groups and individual therapy with the kids there. And he had since gotten promoted to a supervisory position, and he had done such a good job at the alternative school that the judge decided that he would like to have somebody doing it full time. And due to the fact that I had worked with Jim, Jim and I sat down and talked about it and I agreed to take the position there.

K: So you have had past experience with the group sessions? Or what have you done there?

D: Well, at Firelens I ran groups all day long. That's what I did primarily. And working here at Moundbuilders I work on the children's team. I do home-based family therapy. In addition to that I've done some groups at the schools. And I've been there at the alternative school in a variety of different settings based on the fact that we work with the probation officers there pretty closely. Cough – excuse me. So I have had some exposure to the alternative school, quite a bit actually. And I did run a short term group there with one of the other adult therapists here at the agency.

K: From what you've seen, what are your perceptions of the relationships or the roles between, I guess, the teachers, the probation officers and the counselors?

D: From what I've seen working in the community, it seems to be we have a really good relationship with the probation officers. We work hand in hand with them on a number of cases, and I think that that's why a lot of the cases are successful.



Because there is such good team work. And I'm – from talking to people in other communities, I'm not sure that that's always the case. But the probation officers are right over there with the teachers and so they seem to have a pretty good working relationship. And I personally haven't had a whole lot of involvement with the teachers at the alternative school, but I have had a little bit. And everyone seems to communicate really well and work as a team. And I think that's probably the most important piece of it, you know, working together.

K: Is there like a hierarchy of who is in charge and then the next, or how does that exactly work?

D: What we do is we typically get together on what we call a child and family team, and that would involve the probation officer, probably someone from the school, as well as a therapist that might be involved, or a case manager. And basically there's really a hierarchy, there tends to be somebody who just takes over the role of the leader during the meetings. But it's not really specified. And everyone just has different thing, different tasks, that they're supposed to accomplish by the time they meet again, whether it's contacting someone, getting a piece of paperwork signed, or making a phone call. Everyone just kind of splits up and, you know, assigns different tasks.

K: What do you see your role as being? What do you plan to do in the alternative center? What type of programs?

D: I'll be running educational groups and therapeutic groups. In addition to that, due to the fact that I have background here at Moundbuilders, I'll be covering a lot of emergencies involving suicidality, homicidality. In the past they haven't had someone over there that's been able to do that full time. So I'll be doing that. The groups that I'll be running we've discussed – anger management groups, and groups on dealing with depression, coping skills, socialization groups, and education groups involving drugs, alcohol, those kinds of educational groups. And some ideas that we've kind of brainstormed are trying to get the kids involved in, I guess, what you'd call quote unquote normalized activities. I've thrown around the idea of having like a flag football team for kids who would, you know, want to be involved in sports, but don't really have the opportunity. Um, we've talked about field trips to places that the kids probably don't get exposed to, art museums, some places in Columbus possibly, and just trying to make the setting there feel as normal as possible for the kids. And at the same time trying to be therapeutic and, you know, above all getting the education that they need.

K: Now how would your groups be structured? Is it gonna be all girls, all boys?

D: I think it will probably depend on what group that we're running at the time. If it's an anger management group, if it's a group on dealing with depression, it will



probably be mixed. But we'll probably keep the numbers set at around eight to ten kids. And it'll probably be a closed group for the duration of however long we run it. We may do it in cycles. If it's a socialization group, I would anticipate that at different times we'd probably have maybe an all male group or an all female group and maybe bring them together at different times to see how they interact and go over what we've talked about.

K: In terms of socialization, what would you be ...

D: On just basic social skills that a lot of the kids would seem to lack or would seem to need, you know, brushed up on. You know, interacting with peers, dealing with peer pressure, even dating, interacting with members of the opposite sex. I think those groups would be really good to, you know, have them meet separately to talk about certain issues, but bring them together too to talk about certain issues.

K: In terms of, I guess, the movement of the school, I've noticed that people – or at least with Jim – wants to focus more on education rather than the discipline aspect and behavioral modification. If you go into that a little bit, maybe an explanation?

D: I think a lot of the kids that we see that are at the alternative school really don't have a lot of positives in their life. And they're dealt with pretty much strictly through a consequence-driven motivation and that works with some kids really well, and it works with other kids to a point. And there's some kids that it just will not work with at all, it's too confrontational. I think what we're going to attempt to focus on is trying to be more positive, you know, focusing on getting in the education that they need, trying to build up strengths that they may not be looking at that they may not be even aware that they have, and when necessary, you know, but let the consequences come in. Jim and I kind of share the same philosophies about having the kids do all their focusing on positives, having them, you know, focus on the choices that they're making and accept the responsibility for the choices that they're making through natural consequences. In other words, if they know that they're required to be at school at a certain time and, you know, they've known that and they show up late consistently, that may be a time where one of the probation officers may need to step in and kind of take a little bit of a harder stance. But most of the kids we work with, the strict confrontation doesn't seem to work. It just aggravates them and creates more problems.

K: How do you propose to change that in concrete terms? I mean, realistically speaking?

D: Realistically speaking, I'm not sure exactly how much we'll be able to do with, you know, the other workers at the school. We are fortunate to have such good communications with most of the probation officers and the people that run the school. And I would say that the majority of them kind of share our philosophy.



There are a few that I think it's just gonna take time and kind of mediating and trying to, you know, be supportive of the kids and try to mediate with the probation officers. And to this point that seemed to work. And our role with Moundbuilders, we've been really fortunate because they tend to, you know, work with us and we try to compromise if we don't agree on things. And you know, most of the probation officers have been willing to try a different approach if we feel that it might work. I think probably what we're gonna try to do is just go in with a positive attitude and by some of the programs that we're setting up try to lead by example, I guess. And try to take more of a, not necessarily a soft approach with the kids, but one that's more empathic, I guess, as opposed to just confronting all the time. And to be fair, like I said, most of the probation officers over there are very good at that. They know when they need to be strict with the kids. They seem to know when they need to give the kids a little bit more leeway. So I think that just through the programming that we're going to set up and just working hand in hand with them and, like I said, trying to lead by example, I think we'll be able to make some of the changes that we need to.

K: Do you think that will call for training for the teachers?

D: I'm anticipating that we'll probably be having in-services and trainings with the entire staff over there, and talking over ...

K: This is over the next couple years or ....

D: Yeah. The position that I'm going to be taking, while Jim did do that, his role was a little bit different. He wasn't working full time and he would often get pulled back by Moundbuilders to do emergencies or for coverage. And so the position that I'm going to be filling is actually a new position. So we're gonna be kind of making it as we go along. And Jim will be directly supervising me and we'll be working together on that. So some of these things will happen over time. There'll be some changes that I anticipate we'll make immediately and others will just take time to implement.

K: Which ones do you think (inaudible)

D: Just some of the programs that we're trying. We have a couple people that are working on grants that would provide funding that would help take the kids on some field trips, some things after school that we've talked about like some kind of sports program or activities program where there's some competition, but you know, there's not necessarily an emphasis on winning. Those kind of things I think we can do right away. The trainings and things may take a little more time to get put together, you know, to make sure that everyone has the time to make it, to make sure that we have good information to go over. So those things will probably take a little bit longer.



- K: In terms of Podville, where do you see that heading? Do you see getting rid of it or modifying it?
- D: I would anticipate that it would be modified. I've even talked with the judge about that briefly, well Jim and I have actually. For instance, the way the program was set up at one time, if kids that had chronic problems with absences, if they were absent one day, the next day when they came to school they would have to sit in Podville the entire day. Which really kind of goes against what the philosophy of the school is and what we're trying to accomplish because, you know, they've missed one day and so their punishment is to miss another day. So it kind of works against that. And just some ideas that I've had that I've talked with some other people, some of these kids that seem to have, you know, what the teachers might think of as too much energy in the classroom or they're unable to focus, their thoughts are scattered and things, maybe they get into a fight in class, they have too much energy. As opposed to trying to force them, you know, to sit still for an hour or three hours or whatever, I would think that we could try different approaches with them or different interventions like, you know, maybe something as simple as, you know, running up and down the stairs a couple of times to get out some of that excess energy and then trying to get back into the classroom as opposed to trying to force them to sit there for two hours when they can't sit in class. And then they sit there and brood over what happened and, you know, a lot of times become even more angry. So I'm hoping that we can modify it a little bit.
- K: Just to jump back, you talked about briefly the philosophy of the school or maintain the philosophy? What do you see that as being?
- D: I think the primary philosophy is just getting these kids an education. That's probably the most important thing that we're trying to do. I think also, I don't know if it's a modification of that but adding onto that, is just trying to give them positives that they otherwise don't have. Which at times may seem difficult due to the fact that they're right there and a lot of them are on probation and they're probation officers are right there. But I think a lot of these kids just don't have any positives in their life and they're in this pattern, in this role of thinking that, you know, they're chronic screw-ups and they can't do anything right. And I'm hoping that we can try to change that and show them that, you know, they have – while they have responsibility for their actions, they have control over that, and helping them to see, you know, long term consequences.
- K: What's your personal goal in going into this school?
- D: Well, to some, I guess, being a philosophicalist to help kids. But I think what I said earlier would probably be my goal just trying to give these kids a more positive outlook, showing them that everything is not so bleak. Because I think a lot of the kids that are over there, they get earmarked in school as being screw-ups



and having all of these problems and so they get sent to the alternative school. And it's like they start to believe that. And they're in a place that's different from where all of their other peers are at, you know, it's a different place, they have different classes, and they're not doing the same things that a lot of the other kids are doing. And so my goal is to try and just make it an environment where they're getting the education that they need, but – and I keep saying this – but it's just important to me that they start getting some positives and seeing that the choices they make today can put them in a better place in the future.

K: Do you feel as if they are stigmatized once they're sent there even once when they go back to their schools?

D: I think a lot of the kids are and that comes from having done some groups at the middle school and just listening to some of the kids that were – maybe they'd been sent to the alternative school at different times, but a lot of the kids that are still mainstreamed would sit in the groups and tell us that they feel like they've been stigmatized like that. Like the teachers are already looking at them and expecting them to do something. And I think from listening to some of their stories, I mean, some of the times you can look at that and clearly see what their role was in that. And some of the choices that they made that they could have made better. But there were some times where we could look at it and it did seem that, you know, they had been stigmatized. And, you know, if there was a fight, whether they started it or not, they seem to be the ones that people came to first, which in a way is a natural reaction, but at the same time we would want them to see the other side of that that they can change that over time.

K: Do you see a peer separation as well?

D: Oh, yeah. At the alternative school I don't have a feel yet for, you know, what the clicks are at the alternative school, but at least in the middle school I was amazed talking to the kids that we had in groups. And these were all sixth grade girls that we did an anger management group with and every day that we ran a group with them they were talking about the preps and how they were labeled as the skanks and then there were the jocks. And I mean it was just so clear. And while I can remember some of that from being in school, it seemed to be a lot more distinct with them. I mean, they could – somebody would walk down the hall and they could tell you what click they were in. And a lot of them felt like, you know, they were just gonna be in this group, the skanks, and there was no way out of that. And they would just start thinking like that. And it pretty much became hopeless to them.

K: Do you see a certain similarity in maybe demographics or what have you in the kids that go to the alternative center? Do you feel you can make that assessment yet?



D: I would say typically they're from a lower, you know, if you want to look at economically status, a lower socio-economic status, probably majority. There are a few that get sent there that, you know, maybe they have a few behavioral problems in class or just they're kind of sent there as a one time thing to try and curb their behaviors. But I would say that there probably is a clear distinction.

K: Do you feel that the type of family that they come from had a big part to play in that?

D: My personal philosophy is that, and it's come from working with kids for a number of years in church settings and working with kids here at the agency, but I think the family is probably in 90% of the cases the most important factor that affects the kids. And that's where I feel like I've kind of been blessed at working in this position and doing home-based family therapy because I get to go out into the home and actually see what happens and see how the kids are interacting with their parents, and where a lot of these behaviors may be coming from, and actually having the opportunity to try and address it at the roots. Whereas the schools a lot of times all they see is the kid. Or they may see the parent on occasion, but they're not seeing what's going on in the home. They may not understand why this kid might be coming into school and acting the way that they are or acting out in the way that they are. And so I'm hoping that with my job at the alternative school that when I do have downtime over Christmas break or over spring break or even in the summer that I can continue to get out into the homes and kind of meet some of the families and see what's going on and try and have an impact there. I think that's, you know, and that's being preventative too, I think, if you can get into the home in any way and establish some kind of relationship with the family that you can have a bigger impact.

K: Because as of now or that role in the past, the parents were not, are not brought in that often in school.

D: I would say in general that's probably an area that's really lacking. And a training that I was in the other day discussed, you know, how one school when dealing – they were trying to deal with reducing violence in the school. And their approach had been to, you know, if they were going to have meetings that they wanted the teacher or the parents at or if they had trainings that they wanted the parents at meeting at a different location other than the school trying to kind of get to the parents as opposed to always having the parents come in where a lot of times they've had negative experiences.

K: If you were to do a comparing contrasting their home school versus the alternative school, what would you say that they're losing by going to the alternative school?

D: Just from what I've heard, and a lot of this I can't base on may actual observations, I've heard some people complain that they don't feel that the kids



are challenged as much on an educational level at the alternative school right now. And I see that changing from what I've heard and from some of the changes that they've already made over there. I'm hoping that that will change over time or at least the perception of that will change over time. Another thing that I've seen which I have observed is the way it has been set up it's gotten to the point where a lot of the teachers in the mainstream classes have tried to kind of use the alternative school as a dumping ground. They have a kid in class that they can't figure out how to deal with, send him to the alternative school. They're not – they've gotten into the habit sometimes, and of course, they may only be a few teachers, but sometimes they get into the habit of instead of looking for that different approach that may work with that kid in their class, they send him to the alternative school. So the problem's out of the class. And some parents I've heard complain that due to a lot of the kids being over there with behavioral problems that they may go there and learn behaviors that they hadn't learned before.

K: In terms of what they benefit or how they benefit from going to this school.

D: Well, I think that with what we're doing now they'll benefit in some different ways because I think they'll have an opportunity to talk about some of the issues that are going on in their lives. I think that the alternative school does try to individualize their approach with different kids which I think sometimes can get lost in a larger classroom. A lot of the kids are in smaller classes at the alternative school and they can do better in that environment as opposed to having, you know, so many other distractions. But I think the main thing is just being able to try and take the time to individualize what kind of approach you take with each kid over there. I think that happens a lot more at the alternative school.

K: In terms of the pace of education or the pace of ...

D: I would say just all around. You know, if they're having difficulty concentrating in class they may set them in the hall and let them work on their work. Or just trying to be creative I think you have a little bit more flexibility with the smaller classes to try and be creative with the approach that you take.

K: Are you going to be doing one on one counseling?

D: Yeah. At this point I'm not really sure how we're going to set that up. Jim and I are going to iron out the details as to how many groups I'll be running each day. And there may be alternating days where maybe Monday, Wednesday and Friday I would do groups all day long and Tuesday and Thursday I may meet with kids individually. I'm not sure how we're going to set that up yet. But I think that's a key piece.

individual  
counseling  
split time  
w/ groups

K: So \_\_\_\_\_ is doing individual counseling?



D: Cynthia?

K: Cynthia. Excuse me, Cynthia.

D: Yeah. She's going over now and meeting with kids individually as well. But I anticipate a lot of times between groups, you know, have kids coming up and wanting to talk about different things. And there'll be a lot of things that happen that aren't necessarily on the schedule which is only natural.

K: Right. I guess you've answered most of the questions that I had in particular about your role. Is there anything else you would like to add?

D: Not offhand. I think it's an exciting opportunity and I think that with a few changes and just trying to keep working at this I think it'll be a really positive place for the kids. And I think that, hopefully, we can get to a point where the kids want to be there because they're getting positives out of it and not because they feel like they have more leeway or, you know, that they're getting out of their regular classes or anything like that.

K: Just on a side that's outside of the alternative center, SBH program, how is that done? I haven't gotten any clear answers about that.

D: I'm not really sure how it's set up at the alternative school. I do know that in the SBH programs, there again they're trying to individualize a little bit more for each kid and they move, I think, at a little bit, I don't want to say slower rate, but they may not be moving quite as fast. I don't know if that's answering your question, but in terms of the actual classrooms and things, the classes tend to be smaller. And they're trying to deal with kids in class that may have had some difficulties with, you know, getting a regular education or staying focused or just having learning disabilities due to their behaviors.

K: Do you have any contact with the court in terms – I mean, you say you talk to Judge \_\_\_\_\_, but can you speak for a kid if they're in trouble?

D: Yeah. And I've done that in my role here at Moundbuilders as well. And I think that's going to be an even larger role when I'm actually at the alternative school. But the community here is fantastic in that sense. I've met with the judge on different occasions. I know Jim has met with the judge on different occasions and some of our other therapists to discuss kids before they even go into a court hearing. There was a kid that had gotten in trouble a week or two ago for truancy and I sat with the judge and talked about some possible ways that we could address that without just sending him to detention. And he is really sympathetic to that and he will listen. I mean, that's one thing that everyone says about the judge that we have here in Knox County for the juveniles is that, you know, he



genuinely cares about the kids and he'll listen to what you have to say. And I know that that's the case for the probation officers as well. If you really go in to the judge and say, you know, your honor, I think it's time that he took a hard consequence for this or she, I think the judge would listen to that. And the reverse of that would be going in and saying, you know, your honor, I think this is a case where you may want to cut him some slack. He tends to listen to that. Of course, there's certain instances which his hands are tied in and he has to give them certain consequences. But I feel very much like we've been listened to here and, as I said, my role over there I'll be listened to.

K: Sounds good. Now, I'm really excited about the programs because I know everybody loved Jim over there. The kids really missed him.

D: Yeah. I don't really think I'll be able to fill Jim's shoes, but ...

K: I just think those programs are well \_\_\_\_\_.

D: Yeah. I think just being in that role, I think the kids miss that and I think they'll be looking forward to having somebody over there. And from talking with Cynthia, some of them have already inquired about when we're going to start that. And so I'm hoping that some of the things that we do in addition to the actual groups, you know, they'll be excited about and start to get involved in.

K: Now, when exactly do you start?

D: Sometime around the first of November.

K: Pretty soon. Gotta cut your ties here, huh?

D: Yeah. I've been doing that. Last, let's see, next week I guess will be my actual official last week that I'll be meeting with families and things. And hopefully whenever the new pay period starts over at the court that's when I'll start. So it'll probably be the first or second week in November. And I'll be heading over full time. I'll still be coming back here for what we call treatment teams where all the therapists and everyone gets together and talks about kids. And I'll probably come over for some staff meetings and things just to have that connection.

K: Right.

D: And a lot of the kids that I'll see over there they have therapists here or case management here. So we'll be in close contact.

K: Do you have any questions for me?

D: Not offhand. How many other programs have you talked to so far?



K: I have actually – this is the only one. But I'm branching out the Keifer alternative center in Springfield, Ohio. There's also one in Portage county which he told me he doesn't have numbers for those so I'm gonna have to call mine and get those out. I'm also planning on talking to principals of the high schools or middle schools or what have you to try and figure out when they send students to the alternative center.

D: Sounds like a big project.

K: Yes. Well, thank you so much for taking time out.

**(end of side A)**

**(side B is blank)**