CYC

PRACTICE HINTS – I

A collection of practice pointers for work with children, youth and families

The CYC-Net PRESS

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Foreword

A long time ago, in a website far far away ...
I feel both honoured and privileged to have been asked to write a foreword for this little gem of a series of books. So my title might seem a tad strange for someone so honoured. My intention is not to be flippant as this is not the start of a children's story; but it is a story for those who work with troubled children nonetheless. It is also a story about care and caring, wisdom and generosity.

This foreword will contain a small story in keeping with the *Practice Hints* format. I hope the story will demonstrate that wisdom crosses generations and continents, as many of the pieces that make up the content of this series flowed thousands of miles across oceans and significantly influenced child care practice far, far away from the pen of their original author.

I first started reading the *Practice Hints* section of CYC-NET (www.cyc-net.org) in 2002. As I read each piece I assumed that they had been submitted by experienced CYC practitioners from around the world. These hints were sometimes only a couple of paragraphs long and covered many subject areas; however the common characteristic of each piece of writing was compassion, understanding, courage and hope. They summarised all that our field was supposed to be. Oh, one other feature of these shiny practice gems, they were anonymous.

These 'little gold nuggets of practice' as I would later refer to them, were printed off and put diligently into a folder, which I then used as supervision and staff support in my programme. They were distributed to CYC workers in my residential setting and read by many individually forming the basis of discussions in team meetings, supervision sessions and also in lifespace situations with staff and young people. They would also be picked up by kids in the programme and often formed a basis of discussion

about their experience of being cared for and about.

Two or three paragraphs of wisdom, written regularly, on a wide variety of topics; night shifts and nurturing, a child crying and what is happening, the need to allow space for youth to express anger, what it felt like to walk in the shoes of a troubled youth, to take some examples. These paragraphs of pathos opened in writing a window to the pain and hurt of troubled kids and facilitated helping adults to follow that stream of light to enable understanding and better practice.

For nearly six years this little blue folder did the rounds of my programme. Despite its influence on practices in my programme I had never made the connection that all of these practice hints were written by one person, a wise elder in CYC, Brian Gannon. Anonymity however is purposeful. Anonymity is a form of generosity; these 'golden nuggets' were given, without thought of reward or status. Yet these hints helped night staff in my programme to understand children better, they helped workers and managers reflect on how they practised relationally and for the whole programme to put real care into our caring.

In 2008 whilst working with another elder of our field, Thom Garfat, I mentioned to him that I had been collecting these little gold nuggets of practice and workers had been using them to enhance practice. Thom told me that they had in fact been written by someone in South Africa by the name of Brian Gannon. Brian had no idea that these hints were used at all.

So my small story goes full circle. Thom Garfat took my folder back to Brian in South Africa to tell him what his words had done to inspire many others. For the first time they have all been put together and I hope they can be used to inspire again. So for those who will now read these them for the first time or are reading them again, enjoy, understand and reflect and pass them on.

So, thank you again Brian.

Max Smart
Lothian Villa, East Lothian Council, Scotland

Having something to say

There are two truths in child and youth care work which can often fight against each other. One is that amongst our most powerful tools for guiding and working with kids are companionship and conversation: unless we spend time with them and exchange ideas, we will have little impact.

The other truth is that too often, however, we come from such different backgrounds, cultures and educational experiences that we find that we have little in common with each other. It's our job to redress this.

In work with young people and families in difficulty, it is not enough that you know about them. You must know them — know not only what bugs them and hurts them and enrages them, but also what moves them, inspires them, draws them. And you will never get to know kids at this level unless you spend time with them and exchange ideas. What do we have to say? How do we get started?

Always have in your pocket some of the small change of conversation. Take an honest interest in something which each young person you work with is interested in. Know enough to come on shift with a recollection or an opinion of a movie, a DVD, a sports event, a pastime, anything that might help you establish what Brendtro called a "relationship beachhead". By this he means landing on another's shores, gaining a foothold of contact, knowing something of the language, sowing the seeds of a dialogue, which might lead to a follow-up encounter ... and hopefully, then, towards a relationship. (Read Brendtro's ideas on this*.)

Arrive on shift with some headlines or editorialising on last night's football match (motor race,

prize fight, baseball game ...) or concert (soap episode, school play ...) or news event (disaster, achievement, controversy ...) When you know something about skateboards, make-up, fishing, fashions, internal combustion engines ... you can get as far as some person-to-person, role-free conversation.

Which brings us to another truth about child and youth care work: often it is enough to get only as far as the conversation. When you and a young person are able to talk about anything, you are both feeling part of it, listened to, valued, functional, mutual, competent, significant ... You have probably already achieved something important which the youngster needed from our program.

* Brendtro, L. (1969) Establishing relationship beachheads, in Trieschman, A., Whittaker, J. and Brendtro L. *The Other 23 Hours: Child care work with emotionally disturbed children in a therapeutic milieu.* New York: Aldine de Gruyter. (Start on page 85 ...)

Value-Added Tax

If you live in a country or state where you have to pay VAT or GST, you know what it's like having saved and economised to buy something – and then having to lay out that extra amount in tax! It's something we would all rather not do, pay that "value added" hit on top of all the other work. Or would we ...

* * *

It was seven minutes past seven. The last youngster had reached the breakfast table looking reasonably ready to start the day. The last half-hour or so had been (as it was most days) one of the tough periods for the child and youth care workers: the "bright and early session", not only shepherding the kids through

waking, dressing and preparing for their day, but also getting their assigned chores done. (The youth took turns to do things like picking up papers in the yard, helping with breakfast, emptying the household trash bins.) The early mornings are often knife-edge times when youngsters and staff can easily lose their cool, and the adults must all be at their most diplomatic and patient. Today things had gone, as the staff called it, "averagely".

Before breakfast was over, Alan Myers, senior worker on duty, stood up from the table and held his coffee mug aloft, looking for all the world as though he were about to propose a toast. Which is exactly what he was doing: "I just want to say thanks for what you all did in the house this morning. I think it looks grand – like a four-star outfit. Well, maybe three-and-a-half!" A dry laugh – as good as it gets at that time of the day. "Today started fine. Enjoy the rest of it. Keep in touch."

* * *

Alan and his team had done good work before breakfast, and so had the kids, no matter how "averagely". Instead of leaving it there, he added value to the exercise with the small touch of remarking on this and thanking everyone. There was a bonus in this small ritual – nothing fancy, simply a casual minute over coffee when everyone was present anyway.

We adults don't have to wait for youth to do something wrong before we "get in their face" — we can also try sometimes, as someone put it, *to catch them doing good!* How sensible to "debrief" after a success, not only after a disaster. We can achieve much by adding the small extra percentage.

Cheap at the price.

Create occasions

How do we avoid kids in residence feeling unstimulated and isolated, and help them to take responsibility and feel effective? We might use group activities for this, but even when residential units today are far smaller than formerly, we can take our cue from the phrase "everyday events" – a core concept in our field.

An example: Once a week at Red Roofs, where there are seldom more than nine young people in the program, someone is invited to dinner. This could be a member of a youngster's family, perhaps a teacher from one of their schools, the corner shopkeeper, a child and youth worker from another unit, whoever. The staff prompt with "What would be a good night for a guest next week?" and "Who could we invite?" and youth themselves suggest guests and then take care of the invitation. Several guests become 'favourites' and are invited more often.

Talking about this easy plan, staff consider it to be one of their most valuable activities.

1. There is a sense of occasion, as the guest may be known to some of the children but not to all, and most often the guest will come with his or her spouse, so they get to meet new people.
2. The guests love to be asked and they therefore come with positive attitudes to the program which gives out helpful messages to kids who are reluctant or uncomfortable in the program.
3. Everyone can be involved at some level. Great ideas include choosing a menu ("Let's get the boys to cook this time!"), table decorations (girls do flowers or candles, boys choose 'special arrangements' like pine cones or low lights) and "Who will sit where — and why?" Leave

arrangements to the young people and they will surpass your own creativity — one 17-year-old "jock" decided he would make attractive menus, another decided on background (!) music.

4. Even though occasions are kept relaxed and nobody has to stay on and "entertain' after the meal, most enjoy having a visitor. But all learn simple skills like planning and cooking, or discriminating between "family" behaviour and "guest" behaviour.

The idea takes something which happens in the unit anyway, like dinner, and adds an extra ingredient to what kids get out of the program.

Bon appetit!

Fools rush in

There is a problem with one of the young kids. She's been smoking up again or down in his school grades or roughing up one of the others; she's not talking to her mother or has angrily destroyed someone's prized possession or told destructive lies about her former friend. You have been asked by the team to "have a talk" with this youngster.

What to do? The easy thing is to get right to the point, to state unambiguous expectations, lay down the law, make clear demands about cleaning up acts and "getting your head right", right? Maybe. Maybe not.

To go into any encounter with a youth having already made up your mind as to the outcome you want, is to make a mistake:

- The kid doesn't get to feel heard.

- You have heard only one side of the story.
- You don't get to understand the needs behind the troubling behaviour.
- You impose your solution and don't give the kid a chance to build his/her solution.
- You forget that you are meant to be building internal, not external controls.
- You don't get a picture of the resources and skills you could be building in this youth.
- You assume that this is the one problem, and the kids is not going to have more problems in future.
- So you're not teaching problem solving; you are wanting to solve only this problem.
- You forget that it's the young person, not you, who owns the problem.
- You are limiting the possibilities which exist in this encounter, and in this kid.
- You don't get to see where the youngster might get to in dealing with this problem; only where you think you can get.
- And maybe you have a personal need to go back to your colleagues on the team with this problem " all sorted out" ...

Here we are already with twelve reasons to take it slow, to listen, to spend the time, to try to understand, to create possibilities, to build rather than bully, to give information and skills, to encourage, to wait upon the child ... to see where things might go ...

Always better to talk *with* kids, not at them.

Time to be free

Much of your on-duty time as a child and youth care worker is planned by the organisation. There are times when the schedule says you have to be working with a home study group, visiting a parent or travelling with a child to an appointment. But when you are busy all the time, some kids may find it hard to get to you.

Free up some time in *your* schedule each day in case a youth or a group needs to fit you into *their* schedule. It can happen that someone wants to talk, but is put off when they see that you are so 'busy'. Also, many kids find it hard to pluck up the courage to bring up a subject with you or run some idea of theirs past you when it's hard to get your attention.

So make times when it is clear that you are 'unbusy' and available. Hang out in a common area, leave your door open, page through a magazine in the sun ... show that you're free.

Get into the habit of leaving yourself lying about in the unit. Someone may want to connect with you.

Attending the everyday events

The hallmark of child and youth care is that we work in the life space of young people and their families — and we use everyday events as the medium of our involvement and our relationships. Thus, the "daily round" (of waking,

cleaning, eating, learning, talking, playing) is our place of work, and we must, in the most appropriate ways, be present within those events.

Because we also find ourselves as the "responsible adults" within living situations, our special way of working can easily be subverted into the control and supervision of the everyday events rather than as fellow participants in the events. How we attend the everyday events is a crucial consideration for our effectiveness.

Mealtimes offer us the very best model for being present at daily events. We recognise mealtimes as unique opportunities for being alongside kids, when we are sitting together with a degree of intimacy and for extended periods, when we can interact in a role-free way, simply as fellow diners at the table. In the "bad old days" staff didn't eat with the youth, and spent mealtimes on issues like "Sit up straight" or "Don't talk with you mouth full." Today it is hard enough to find times when we can be with kids, so we are sure to make and keep whatever appointments with them that we can — the times when we can listen and understand, build their sense of self and their significance for others, offer engagement to offset their rejection, optimism for their sense of defeat.

So, attend these everyday events! Eat with the kids. And work out the best ways in which you can be truly present at those other events like tidying up and learning and talking and playing — and thus have the opportunity to work at our incremental daily tasks and objectives in rebuilding and restoring young people and families.

Problems of the Third Kind

There are three kinds of problems which kids suffer.

First are those which we as adults and professionals cause — when we disappoint or fail young people, when we get impatient or punitive, when we are not care-full and thorough in our upbringing and education tasks. We confuse kids, wreak uncertainty and mistrust where we are supposed to be building and reassuring. These are our problems and we have to do something about them.

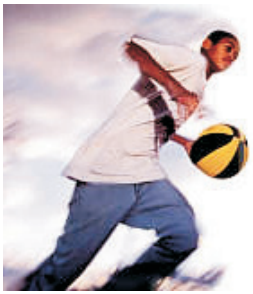
The second kind of problems are those which the kids experience as threatening and immobilising — for whatever reason. Young people in special need have their own cues and triggers about things that scare them, and when we recognise these we protect them and help them to overcome their fears. These are also our problems.

The problems of the third kind are not life threatening. They are the daily challenges thrown up by life which the kids bring to us because they would rather not do the work. And we are willing to help because we can and we like to demonstrate our know-how and we want to show that our program is responsive and helpful and because maybe we are uncomfortable with any kind of problem lurking around the place and maybe it buys us a little credit with the kids and anything for a quiet life.

The problems of the third kind are not our problems, and we greatly risk the life curriculum of young people when we play Mr Fixit to their past-due dependencies and avoidances. These problems are the muscle builders of the children's wills and skills which they need to take home with them, and we cheat them when we say "Let me do that for you."

These are the problems which we listen to but hand back to the kids, asking "What do you think that you can do about that?" This way we affirm their strengths and growth, we convey expectations and possibilities, we express interest and confidence, encourage independence and autonomy.

Our experience tells us how to discern a problem of the third kind. It's hard to decide when to say yes and when to say no. In every intervention we know that we must always do as much as is needed and never more than we should. What do you think you can do about that?



Transitional objects

We are familiar with the teddy-bear which accompanies the young child to bed to ease the transition from company to alone-ness, from waking to sleep, from light to dark. We know the value of this sort of "transitional object" as a comfort and reassurance for children across the divides of life. I think of my own need, when I am away from home, to take with me some of my music and books – things which not only offer familiarity, but also help to define and affirm who I am, what I do ...

How often do we find ourselves welcoming new arrivals to our program by giving lots of information about the facilities we offer, the people who make up our team, the attractions and amenities, and the

policies and expectations of the organisation? But this is all our stuff. The real task, surely, is to focus our attention on the newcomer — not only the person, but who he is, in the widest possible sense — to safeguard and preserve intact his role and standing in his home and community, his talents and interests, his achievements and successes, likes and dislikes ...

Trouble is, as child and youth care workers, we usually get to hear only about the problem which is being referred to us. What an insult to the dignity and worth of this young person! Please God that we never have to enter a social grouping where only our negative attributes are known. Certainly our profession has learned to be realistic about the work we face with troubled kids, but we have learned primarily to seek that side of the equation which affirms the positives, the strengths and the possibilities.

Surrounding our new group member is a buzzing constellation of experiences and qualities which we need to know about, so that we can give him full credit for his development so far, and so that we can reflect (both to himself and to others) a balanced and rounded picture of his life as he crosses a significant divide.

Let him bring his teddy bear.

In or out?

Robert Frost wrote –

Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.
I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve.

This is not the home experience of most of the youngsters we work with – who have experienced repeated separations and loss, and what they often see as

indifference, neglect and rejection from their families. Much of the "problem behaviour" we face in our practice represents these kids fighting their way back into roles and relationships from which they have been left out or rebuffed. Or it reflects the distrust and animosity which expects only the worst from the world. Or the tragic attempts to deserve what many of us took for granted.

Their behaviour is disturbing – destructive, hostile or unresponsive. And many of the adults they come into contact with are easily tempted to respond to this in the same way that adults did before – with defensiveness and judgement, with control and punishment, with distancing and, ultimately, again, rejection.

There is a simple theory to challenge us as child and youth workers: *Included kids feel, and therefore behave, differently from excluded kids*. So you and I have learned the value of saying come, come with us, join us, meet us, let's ... And if we don't do this, then who?

Take a youngster in today.

Hotel or Zoo?

As a child and youth care worker you may have heard yourself saying one (or more probably both) of the following ...

When the kids have got you running around after them and waiting on them hand and foot: "Do you think I'm running a *hotel* here?"

When you've been cutting the kids too much slack and they are getting used to the mess: "Do you think I'm running a *zoo* here?"

About the hotel, there is a sense in which our program does have to look straightened up and organised. For one thing, insecure kids need the predictability. For another, all kids need the sense of being looked after. And it is good when youngsters feel they can identify with a positive, good looking and successful outfit. The

opposite (an erratic, non-caring and sloppy program) is frankly unhelpful and is giving fuzzy messages.

Then again, the zoo. There is also a sense in which our program has to look a bit threadbare and unsettled. For one thing, kids don't want to live in a place which is too smart to be comfortable for them or where breaking something would arouse too much guilt. For another, every kid needs to make the connection between tasks and obvious needs – so that *they feel the need* to start preparing supper or tidying the rec room, not just because we say so.

We are not running a hotel or a zoo. We are running a purposeful environment which meets needs, which teaches, and which draws out the possibilities and contributions of each young person. So we never reach equilibrium and we never lose opportunities: we are always allowing tensions, facilitating solutions and celebrating successes. We take risks, sometimes things go wrong, most times kids really learn and grow.

It's a balancing act – without a net!

Conversation piece

Many newcomers wonder what on earth they will *talk about* when they are with kids in the program. It feels rather in-your-face to sit down over a mug of coffee and talk about a youngster's "problems" and why he or she is in the program. On the other hand it's pretty weak to talk about the weather.

Well, your employers are probably less interested in what you talk about than the fact that you can just talk. They assume that you have a range of knowledge and interests that will help you get a conversation going, because that's about the most important thing you will get to do.

We succeed in getting youngsters up and running again when we get them *interacting*. To this extent we are more concerned about the process

(that kids and adults engage and talk, so that they can listen and understand each other) than the *content* (the weather). And if you have no interests, then you're not interesting. You won't attract the kids and arouse their interest.

Of course, you may have thought that you're not meant to bring your interests and passions on to the premises – that you should leave your own stuff at home. Not so! What makes you valuable to the team is that you *do have* interests and passions, that there are things which fire you up and motivate you, that you bring energy and new ideas to work with you.

Take a child and youth care worker ... and add a guitar, a magazine, an enthusiasm for track events, a recipe, a sharp wit, a love for mountains, an obsession for good movies, a camera, some good jokes, a wet suit, an unashamed love for hamburgers, a football, a strange hat, the latest scores, a fishing rod, an intriguing book ... what*ever* ... and you add possibility and excitement and movement to yourself, to the program and to the kids. You will have something to talk about. You will engage with the youth. As the old saying has it — it doesn't matter what you do with kids, so long as you do something.

Bring your toys with you.

Learning curves

When we finish our shift it is useful to ask ourselves "What did *I* learn today?" This is a good test of the educational and growth qualities we are creating in the environments we design and manage. If we reply "I didn't learn anything, but I did my job," then we are in danger of doing the same job tomorrow ... and the next day. We are

also in danger of reducing our role to that of keeping order and maintaining the *status quo*.

Child and youth care work is much more than this. The young people we work with are on a fast-tracked growing and learning course between Point A (where they are having difficulty in believing in themselves and motivating themselves and functioning adequately in their personal, social, educational lives) to Point B (where they have built for themselves a raft of attitudes, skills and resources which make it possible for them to cope with a reasonable chance of effectiveness) — *and they will get to the finishing posts of childhood and adolescence at the same time as everybody else.*

In the short while that we are in contact with youth in our program, there is much to do. Every moment is precious, every step can be a step forward, and the climate for growth and learning which we create must be a real one — a climate that we participate in as much as we would like the youngsters to do.

As the kids battle with attachment and reassurance and identification issues, with their self-image and confidence and with daily challenges, *we are walking just a little ahead of them*, acutely aware of how fast we can move, when to slow down, when to wait. In every moment we are learning more about the youth, more about ourselves, more about the skills and techniques we are building and using. Not to keep order or maintain the *status quo*, but to keep things changing and moving onwards, to discover new possibilities and opportunities.

And as we walk through new territory, unknown when we woke up this morning, we learn. We both learn. At the end of our shift we (and the young people we are working with) are in another place.

So, what did I learn today?

Talk the walk!

We are often advised to *walk the talk* – that is, we shouldn't expect people to do what we cannot do ourselves, we should put ourselves into other people's shoes, we should lead by doing rather than telling, and we should put our verbal undertakings into action ...

In a special way, though, child and youth care workers must also *talk the walk*. This means that, with many of the kids we work with, we must help them with the words and the meanings of what they are experiencing day by day.

In our profession we are usually good, for example, at reflecting feelings. This is an important part of our training, and we know that hurt children's fears, anxieties and instinctive acts are often scary and overwhelming for them, making them feel lost, out of control, or guilty.

Neglected children who lost out on the normal *complex* interaction with parents didn't get to understand meaning or learn from sequences. When they were distressed and whiny, their parent maybe picked them up or just as likely walked out and slammed the door; when they became excited and spilled something the parent sometimes wiped up the mess and at other times smacked them. Not knowing what to expect, they became anxious about their *feelings* which led to these erratic, often punitive, *reactions.* When we give them words for their feelings, they are reassured that we recognise and acknowledge the feelings, that there are such feelings, that they are permitted, and they even have names. So we talk their walk.

Similarly, troubled kids often need help in making sense of what happens to them from day to day, how they fit into the action, how they may cause events and how they are in turn affected by them. We show them what

they did to make someone pleased or angry; we tell them how they are growing and when they learn new things, we celebrate what they have achieved and contributed .

This is not a difficult or highly technical task, but a necessary and generous one as we, as adults, offer commentary on their actions and experiences, their effectiveness, and their impact upon those around them. We should be consciously busy at this throughout the day. We are not moralising but offering information and meaning. We tie together for them cause and effect, and they learn from our words and explanations (no matter that they learn these things later than other kids) ideas and constructs and the universal laws of people and things and behaviour.

We talk the walk.

Keep Talking

When we talk with troubled kids, we are trained to make open-ended replies, not to cut communication dead in its tracks.

"Sid, can we go down to Sloane Street?"
ANSWER 1 "Yes"
ANSWER 2 "Sounds good. What are you guys hoping to do down there?"
"Where does the coach for Jamestown leave?"
ANSWER 1 "Probably Second Street Station."
ANSWER 2 "I'm not sure ... where could we find out?"

"I'm worried about my mom."
ANSWER 1 "She'll be fine."
ANSWER 2 "Tell me ... "

In each of these examples, the first answer is that of a "busy" person who deals with questions decisively and with seeming effectiveness – but it leaves nothing more to be said. This worker may think that the questions have been "dealt with", but sure didn't communicate.

The second answers all invite further interaction. They deal with the question with responsibility, with engagement, and with respect ... but they also create the opportunity for further exchange. We need these opportunities.

Listen to yourself carefully next time you respond to a young person's question – any question. Do you dismiss it efficiently in one second – or do you use your skills to make it last a little longer?

No Fancy Steps

'How do you get kids to do that?' 'How do you get kids to stop doing that?'

How often we hear those questions when we care workers get talking. As if there were certain pocket skills (or tricks?) to make kids' behaviour less irritating or more compliant.

Group situations and reluctant children do bring out the worst in us – a desire to do crowd control or achieve performance by "quick fix" methods. We hear people replying to these questions: "Oh, I just tell them ..." or "I simply make them ..." Zap! Magic wand stuff.

When we economise on method we limit ourselves to short-term (and often unworthy) goals. When we use standardised and hand-me-down tools to "manage" kids we limit our own learning. When all we want is for kids

to do this or stop doing that, we subvert our goals into what we want rather than what the youth might be able to make of their own lives. When we look for instant skills we focus on ourselves rather than on our being-with-kids.

We are, with the youth, in the painstaking process of rediscovering, reassuring, rebuilding and relearning after a difficult start. We do this with open minds, with patience, with respect and with optimism. We do this in dialog and partnership with the children and their families. We will all see where we are getting as we review our days and weeks and months. We are often unsure, we doubt, we listen harder, we risk.

There are no fancy steps.

A ladder of learning

Some people have the idea that childhood ends on a certain day — poof!! — and that before that day children should do "children" things and not be expected to do "grown-up" things. Then, after that day, they should do grown-up things and drop the children things. This is similar to the idea that as children, people are only learning about how to live — and then on a certain day they can stop learning how to live and actually start living!

For most people, learning and growing is more incremental than that. Kids learn to tie their shoelaces at three and having achieved that they are admitted to the world-wide graduate community of competent shoe-laces tier-uppers, and they can then move on to become certificated

tooth-brushers, master toast-makers and licensed lawn-mowers.

Put this progression to work in your program. As soon as a youngster can do something properly, he can teach others to do it. This means (a) that nine-year-old Charlie gets taught to use a hammer, and (b) twelve-year-old Mike gets a lot of status and acknowledgement as a hammer teacher. And the status thing is important. It is a strong reinforcer for Mike's previous efforts (and hence his future efforts) as a learner, but it also changes his status from being a "taker" or "receiver" to being a "contributor" and a "giver-back."

This helps us to rethink our "human resource" problems in programs where the upbringing of a number of kids demands very intense curriculum. It certainly turns Mike into the best kind of role-model you could wish for. It also adds maturity to Mike's on-going attitudes as a learner, teacher and liver of life. You can bet that when, in eight or nine years' time, when he gets to teach Charlie to drive a car, both of them will take the responsibility pretty seriously.

Get your youngsters on this ladder of learning, making sure that they look both forwards and backwards.

Children and youth after all

As child and youth workers we usually enter children's lives through scary doors – drugs, abuse, aggression, crime, rejection, despair ... and because these are such risky issues we tend to start by arming ourselves with facts and theory to back up and inform whatever interventions we must implement. And it is true that with

troubled kids we have to take precautions to avoid their impulses and crises leading to yet more serious problems — for them or others.

It's a long-standing dilemma of our trade: as agents for social control our programs are expected to protect communities; as agents for child and youth development we are expected to get alongside difficult kids.

How often have young people we work with told us of their resentment when they were treated as "cases" rather than as people — that we see only the problems they present rather than their positives? The truth is, we do have to be alert to the risks when we take responsibility for youth who may be suicidal or depressed or addicted or filled with hate. We do have to understand dangers and triggers of such youngsters.

But our encounter with them must never be framed or restricted by these concerns, otherwise we will, in fact, see them just as "cases".

The central principle of our work is that by meeting these youngsters as people we can create new possibilities. We begin to reverse and transcend the cycle of neglect and abuse and the consequences which such experiences elicit in young people. We offer them responses which they haven't earned, because that is how they would have learned to trust and achieve and relate had things had been better.

So we don't come at them primarily with text-books, suspicion, treatments and restrictions; we come with company, activities, respect and apples.

They are kids after all.

Not enough words?

In our day-to-day exchanges with kids, we can inhibit their healing and growth by using vocabularies with too few words. For example, 'anger' is a word we over-use: we too commonly say "I can see that you're *angry*" and as a result we give some unhelpful and inaccurate messages. One is that anger is one of only a small group of negative feelings. Close to this is the conclusion that most of our negative feelings are 'angry' feelings. Another is the suggestion that we are generally destructive or aggressive when we are angry – as if anger automatically leads to bad behaviour (and is therefore normal or excusable?) The use of the same old word gets us stuck with an undifferentiated and static construct which does not accord with development. ("When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.")

Once youngsters 'get' anger as a common human feeling, we need to move them on by offering more complex notions which start to unpack the clumsy "me-dominating" feeling of anger. Words like 'irritated', 'annoyed' and 'frustrated' are more transitive, more contextual, implying that their feeling (now more accurately defined) has to do with their relatedness with something or someone else. We can then use words which reflect different intensities ("cross", "peeved", "furious") and different feelings like 'impatient' and 'exasperated' which focus on their own (now more tolerable and rational) responses to being irritated or frustrated ...

Words, of course, are *symbols* of our feelings, and as we develop they help to put us in control of our anger. Our aim is to give kids more adequate and

usable symbols to express their anger, more maturely. Reflections like "I can see that you're frustrated (disappointed, agitated, troubled)" move kids away from simplistic and self-involved "anger" towards a better knowledge, acceptance and responsibility for their feelings.

Build your own lists, widen your vocabularies — then give them to the kids.

Moving towards role-free relationships

Child and youth care workers inevitably have a number of roles thrust upon them. When youth are in residence, we fulfil a number of parental functions and so we get into parental roles. When we are expected by society to control out-of-control kids, we get into policing and containing roles. When we offer life skills and behaviour curricula we find ourselves in teaching roles, and when we work with young people towards self-understanding and self-direction, we are in helper or therapist roles.

These may all be valid roles with youth coming into our programs, roles which aim to engage, stabilise, correct ... but, *and especially when they seem to be working well*, we must remember that they are not the end point of our work. They are only temporary and instrumental in leading young people beyond them.

For the real aim of our work is for kids to grow into adequately functioning and autonomous adults. We are *not* aiming for externally controlled, dependent and obedient kids. Therefore, whenever we find ourselves functioning in a parent, teacher, helper or therapist role, that's fine, but we know that our direction is ultimately towards mutual, reciprocal and role-free relationships with our "clients".

Our child and youth care interventions are meant to be promoting strong identity, acknowledging individuality, allowing choices, inviting achievement, accepting diversity and building social networks — so that as soon as possible the young people will not need us for anything more but to say "Hi."

Get role-free.

Natural law

In any program with demanding or difficult youth, we try to avoid the kind of rules which we make up along the way or which are there to make life easier more for the program than for the kids.

We all fall into the trap. When there's something happening which we can't get a handle on, we get legislative and draw a solid black line which says "Thus far and no further!" There's no easier way to get into some head-to-head stuff with youngsters. These rules get personal; they are ours and we become over-attached to

them, while the kids are always ready to take a shy at them.

Wherever possible, play by the rules which everyone knows, or those which are plain natural. When you get the youngsters involved in soccer, basketball, darts, monopoly, scrabble, whatever, these games have their own rules. Youth who are battling to come to terms with their (often unfair) worlds easily accept the universality of these rules, they accept the judgements, they cannot blame anyone, losing or winning are dispassionate outcomes, and they achieve (or don't) on a level playing field. They are also, by the way, learning both the games and the laws which will last them a lifetime.

The same is true with life's own laws. Try to base your early mornings on the *school's* starting time rather than your own timetable; get the kids in touch with the bus and train schedules which have their own authority; let them come up against the library's penalty for late books; and earn advancement through the Scouts or Guides. And if they're late for dinner, it's enough that their food is cold. All of these are just facts of life, whether we're young or old, children or caregivers, and they are part of the best possible training ground.

Get natural!

Asking "Why?"

How often do we find ourselves asking the kids "Why?" "Why did you do that?" A youngster loses his cool and lashes out at another. We charge in with "*What did you do that for?!*" Another rushes away from a confrontation or disappointment and trashes a window. "Hey! Why did you do that?"

To use a Freudian illustration, before asking "Why?" we should first be clear as to whether we're asking an "ego" or

an "id". If we're asking an ego, then we're assuming that the youth made a conscious decision (however delinquent or anti-social) to do the deed, and that a cognitive challenge is fitting.

But a kid who lashes out in rage is usually impelled by some unchecked inner reaction or impulse. We would be very surprised if such a child were to answer our "Why?" with: "Well, you see, from my infantile developmental position I was overwhelmed by my intolerable feelings of defeat or rejection, and my destructive protest was unmediated by any control from my fragile ego."

Of course we cannot ask this youngster "Why?" – *but it is nevertheless a question we have to ask ourselves*, in the moment, for it will decide our immediate response. A youngster who reacts to frustration by hitting out with raw aggression, even though this carries serious consequences or damage to self-esteem, is seldom in control of the sequence of feelings and behaviour. Here is someone who needs containment, protection and reassurance – and help with feelings, rather than a rational discussion. We cannot ask him "Why?"

Youth who *have* established self-control (or ego strength, if you like) and a level of verbal skill, can indeed be reasoned with. We *can* ask them "Why?" Some of our important cognitive intervention methods are appropriate with such youth – Adlerian approaches ("faulty beliefs") or Rational Emotive Therapy, and psycho-educational techniques such as "reversing" (Brendtro et al, 1983).

But we must decide whether it is meaningful to ask "Why?"

Reference

Brendtro, L., Ness, A., and colleagues (1983) *Re-educating troubled youth: environments for teaching and treatment.* New York: Aldine de Gruyter

Keeping connected

When a child has been through such difficult times that admission to our special program becomes necessary, we are easily preoccupied by all that we have to do. This starts with reaching past the hurt and confusion to the point where we can begin to work on the emotional, social and cognitive roadblocks which are incapacitating the young person. There is the assessment, the intervention planning, the engaging, the meetings, the day-to-day management of the environment ...

It's easy to forget our responsibility for keeping youngsters connected to their own world back home, their family (often itself divided and separated), their neighbourhood, friends, roles ...

However tangled and distressing the relationships and circumstances at home may be, kids look for the reassurance that their people are still there. Without news and information and contact, they become more and more anxious. We know that it is the situation back home which the child must ultimately be able to manage – not the details of our program or the expectations of us who work in the program.

We are not rescuing children from home and family, but making it possible for home and family to work better for the children. Long after we have left our program and moved on to other jobs and other children, these youngsters will somehow still be connected, possibly never comfortably or contented, but nevertheless connected, with family. Whatever we may be able to add toward better relationships, better functioning — or just coping — we help most by keeping young people connected to their homes. One thing studies seem to have shown us is that kids do better when they leave us if they have been

in touch with the realities of home and family while they are with us.

Keep them connected.

Keep records

We are all too familiar with the child and youth care worker's administrative tasks of logging, reporting and record keeping. We do these usually to keep the program running properly, to keep interventions on track, to keep team members and others informed. And, of course, we do this for the benefit of the kids and families who are the 'consumers' of our program and team.

But there is another kind of logging and record keeping which is just as important to the children and youth we work with – not the program's but their own. If you have amongst your personal skills the ability to click and shoot, no matter how complicated or simple the camera, do it often. You will never know how central to their self-image, their *sense of being*, are the pictures and mementos we manage to collect of their lives.

Two things: One: with the disruption and confusion so common to families of kids in our programs, the taking and collecting of photographs and other keepsakes is usually low or absent from their priorities; these youngsters invariably get to the end of their childhoods with but fragmentary reminders of the journeys they have travelled. Two: we may be the *only people* in a position to record the current periods in their lives, the times they are with us and working on significant healing and growth points. If we are doing our job properly, these will indeed be times of challenge and change, and hopefully of new discoveries and new directions – times they will want to remember.

Our aim is that the young people we work with will leave with new insights and skills and strengths.

But let them also leave with some pictures!

Taking a break

There is a story from one of the First Nations traditions. A man is walking with a group of children from one village to another. When they are about half way, he notices that one of the children is tiring. The man stops and sits down on a rock and says to the group: "I am getting tired. Would you mind if we take a little break?"

In child and youth care work, it is not only our relationships and interventions and skills that are crucial, but also our timing ... our *pacing* of young people through the work we have to do together. We know that their development has been temporarily interrupted, that they are short on self-confidence, motivation, trust and energy. But also that ultimately they must catch up with their timetables, with their peer groups.

Our story is about knowing where kids are headed, being acutely aware of what they can manage right now and what must wait — and of protecting their dignity when the economy of their energy and performance is upset ... when they need a break. The breaks which result from our observation and sensitivity will usually prove to be perfectly timed — and they are necessary, strategic breaks. Any breaks we take on a journey have reflection built into them: how far we have travelled, the direction we are taking, what we expect to pass on the way ahead, how much further to go. The breaks we are talking about here are exactly like that.

We are often tempted to be impatient. We wish kids would shape up, get their act together, do what's expected of them. But we also remember that we are in a process of rebuilding, regaining balance, restoring hope. These things will take time. Maybe tomorrow, next week, next month, they will be getting back up to speed. Maybe not today.

Debriefing

Children usually come to us from families which have experienced shifting fortunes, discord, unexpected crises, frequent moves ... to all of which family members reacted with denial, blame, violence, helplessness, despair, flight or abandonment. The adults have often been preoccupied by their struggles, felt unsupported, had to work long hours, become survival oriented, resentful ... and they have not spent time talking with their children. The children have thus not understood the cause-and-effect links in the circumstances and behaviours of their families. Rather, they have come to see their world as arbitrary and unpredictable, capricious and hostile. They often see others as "bad" and untrustworthy, they come to feel helpless — and often feel guilty or responsible about all that has happened.

We child and youth care workers get to be the adults who accompany kids through their time with us, and of course we will initially offer comfort and reassurance to such youngsters — of whatever age. But we cannot leave kids with the perception of their lives as a succession of threats and crises which they must somehow survive or be defeated by. If we do this, they remain anxious, watchful and pessimistic — and can often become unhealthily dependent on us as their 'protectors'. Rather, as soon as we can, we offer a rich regimen of

information, commentary and explanation which builds inside of the youth a realistic understanding of how they are connected to events and people in their lives.

In helping kids to make sense of their worlds, we actively seek to extract the maximum possible learning and empowerment for them in our environment – and a very useful method is to debrief after any significant event (an argument or conflict, a loss or a gain, a failure or an achievement). Some essential components of debriefing are:

- An objective description or demonstration of what has happened. ("I saw that you ...") This communicates not only the sequence of cause and effect, but also that we were present, attending.
- Acknowledgment of feelings. ("It's scary/exciting/worrying when ...") We allow kids normal feelings rather than denial or shame.
- Universalising ("I think most people would feel threatened/ encouraged by ...") We reassure them that in such circumstances their feelings are not unusual or wrong.
- Explanation of the rational sequence of events. "She probably got a fright/was surprised ... so she ... and you ...") We emphasise logical sequences of cause and effect, moving away from such "faulty beliefs" as "I'm no good, other people always, the only way is ...
- Refer to personal and interpersonal differences. ("People feel differently about that ... some people don't mind ... now if this had been Jane ...") We convey a belief that the youth can master more complex sets of possibilities and dynamics.
- Preparation (and maybe rehearsal) for future events. ("Imagine that this might happen again tomorrow: what could we do...? Try that with me ...") Predicting and planning for similar circumstances which might re-occur, we convey a sense of mastery rather than victimhood.
- ... and what further ideas do you have for this task of debriefing?

A youngster could leave a challenging or hurtful experience feeling more confused and vulnerable, confirming his belief that life is against him — or he could leave with greater understanding and increased feelings of empowerment and personal responsibility for managing realities in the future.

In brief, debrief!

Social maps

Young people who come into child and youth care programs usually have very limited social networks. If we take the time to "map" the significant people they have in their lives (and consider a few variables such as positive-negative, nearby-far, etc.) we will often come up with a map such as the tragically limited one on the left — both a consequence of past difficulties and a constraint on future healthy development.

Comparing this with a healthy functioning youngster in the same neighbourhood, we may see a map like the one on the right — which includes parents, siblings, neighbours, school friends, sports teams, boyfriends and girlfriends, local shops, church, interest groups ... a variety of younger and older, family, school and community people who sustain the child in a buoyant trampoline-like network.

The map on the left is also very precarious, in that one or more of these relationships may be conflicted or negative, and the youth can become overly reliant or neurotically enmeshed with whoever remains. When youngsters become "stuck" at a relationship which is not coming right, particularly with a parent, they use up time and energy on this preoccupying relationship, and are

not free to move out to explore new relationships.

Which brings us to our task as child and youth workers.

In theory, the map on the left can become richer and more helpful (a) when the youngster is freed from the things which immobilise and (b) when increased inter-personal encounters are facilitated.

In practice, it often takes just one person to "enter" the empty map ... one person who wants to take an interest and who welcomes, includes, invites, connects ... This one person is probably you. The child and youth care relationship begins by offering an additional choice We represent the *possibility* of other meaningful relationships, and hopefully we get to prove wrong a child's negative expectations about other people. We begin to loosen the logjam. When one extra person has the will and the skill to join the map, those "things which immobilise" start to shrink in significance. Our relationship can be the prototype for — and then the bridge towards — future helpful relationships and social networks.

Draw the map. It sketches a useful picture of young people's social contexts, suggests what needs to be added to the mixture, and offers a simple graphical measure of their improving personal and social functioning.

Make sure you are in the map.

Put off for tomorrow

Yes, there is an urgency to our work. Every day a youngster has stopped along the roadside is a day we have to catch up on later. Every day spent apart from the normative activities of family, school, neighbourhood and peer group is a day's travel back. And, of course, every day spent in our program costs

money — with some financial official, somewhere, shaking an impatient head.

We are ourselves often guilty of wanting to see progress immediately — and especially when we feel our authority challenged, we hear ourselves saying "Do it **now**!" A good exercise is to ask: "If I apply this intervention or consequence now, where will we be tomorrow with this youngster? Will he or she be better or worse? Will we have moved forward or backwards? Will the tension or hostility or anxiety be greater or less?

We do have to keep kids moving, but we are very sensitive to priorities and timing.

Melissa is having one of her really scratchy days. We know that any provocation can lead to a destructive tantrum or a chasm of sulking which can go on for hours. There may certainly be an issue which has to be raised with her, but we will lose ground if we try it today. We're not there to score a point for ourselves but carefully to build insights and strengths for her. Let's wait until tomorrow.

Cory is on the cusp of putting into practice some new learning — managing a tough interview at school, returning to an activity group he was timed out of, going home to his stepmother for lunch. We know that he needs to face the task, but we also know that he is currently in need of experiences of achievement and confidence building. So we choose not to risk a failure or an upset today which may cost us another week or even a month. Let's put it off for tomorrow.

As we facilitate young people's rebuilding work, we consider which "brick" would be best today, which is necessary, which must be prioritised, and which can wait ...

And another thought: the word "therapy" comes from the Greek "therapeuo" which means *to wait upon.*

Group and regroup

We all work with groups in our programs — whether with the scheduled ball game or with two or three kids gathered around the end of the lunch table. Some groups we consciously plan, to make sure that we cover the curriculum required by the youngsters (recreation, stimulation, belonging, skills, achievement, etc.); other groups (of two, three or more) form spontaneously from moment to moment. Both kinds of groups, the planned and the spontaneous, are the concern of child and youth workers.

Some ideas about the groups you may plan or come across today:

Groups work for the kids. If we find that one youngster is being hurt (teased, excluded, made fun of) or that another is using the group to dominate negatively (hijacking the group for some purpose, bullying) then we clearly have a process which is working against our program goals. We will want to enter such a group to add support and balance where needed, or we might regroup the members into two groups. (Remember, we may *want* a particular youngster to be find a group difficult, to learn assertiveness or to experience some reality; or we may *want* another to be dominant in order to practise some new learning, but these groups will be carefully managed within our goals.) The point is that if a group is not working for the kids, we are losing program impetus and potentially harming young people.

Groups vary. Good planning will ensure that a youngster experiences groups of varying size, formality, composition and levels of activity during the day. We are always tempted to use groups "to keep the kids busy", and in doing this we will soon fail to meet their needs. We know that too

many large, noisy and active groups can be overstimulating; too much undirected free time can be experienced as boring and neglectful. Children enjoy a quiet time after an active time, and vice-versa, and we are good at using this knowledge. We get opportunities to talk after a ball game; we blow off steam by jogging after a quiet study period. Youngsters also learn valuable social skills from variation, for example, to discriminate between boisterous and quiet times, between "locker room" and dinner table conversation.

Groups teach, challenge and reward. We have youngsters in our programs for a limited time and we should try to get the maximum benefit from the groups we work with.

- Try to give children at least one group a week where they get the opportunity to lead (perhaps helping with a younger group or teaching a skill);
- Try to include children in at least one group a week where they are "bottom of the pack" and have to learn new things and work their way up;
- And, just as often, try to have them in groups of their equals where they face good peer interaction and competition.

One of the central principles underlying our work with children and youth is that it was in social, interpersonal situations that they were first hurt and harmed — and it is in social, interpersonal situations that they rediscover confidence and healing.

So group and regroup.

To add, not subtract

Youngsters usually get referred to our programs because some people (teachers, parents, neighbours, police) feel that they are functioning poorly — making bad decisions, putting themselves at risk, skipping responsibilities, acting aggressively or destructively — and this is often true. The adults and authority figures get to use words like unacceptable, lazy, reprehensible, anti-social, and then often conclude that the kids have too much spare time, too much television, too much freedom, too much mobility — again all of which may be true. Those in charge then characteristically impose limits, restricting freedoms, reducing privileges, curtailing leave, limiting entertainments and pleasures — hoping thereby to funnel kids back into control and 'acceptable' behaviour.

In truth, the youngsters who get referred to our programs are more often than not those who got *too little*, not *too much* in the way of benefits, opportunities and advantages. It may be a good exercise to work out what could be *added* to their lives, rather than what should be taken away. When we find ourselves (as we often do) agonising over what should be done about one of our boys or girls in trouble, it's a good plan to ask these two questions: 'How much longer is this youngster likely to be with us?' — and 'What does he or she still need in order to be able to manage adequately when the time comes to leave?'

These questions are especially helpful in putting together the ongoing "curriculum" for our work with the youngster. We get to estimate how far the youth has come towards achieving the identified goals (here we are tapping into the strengths approach),

and then we can be realistic and positive in our planning about we yet have to do — to add, to strengthen ...

As child and youth care workers we are not allowed to join everyone else in simply feeling frustrated, despairing and rejecting about difficult kids. More is expected of us, especially that we should be objective and creative in working out what to do. We're there to build, not just demand; to offer something useful, not just take away ...

To add, not subtract.

"Pixelated" kids ...

A computer picture is made up of many thousands of pixels (dots). When a computer picture does not have enough "information" it has to get by with fewer pixels — and the result is rougher and incomplete. We describe such a picture as "pixelated".

And it's not just their pictures — kids can be like this also. A good experience of home (which is not necessarily a synonym for a trouble-free experience of home) is filled with millions of interactions and communications from which children get a rich picture of what it is to be human, what it is to be feminine, what it is to be masculine ...

But probably most of the kids who come into our programs didn't get this. They have had parents who were "absent" in one way or another for much of the time — parents who have left the family or who have died, parents who have had to be at work or away from home for extended periods, parents who have been preoccupied or frustrated or embittered — and the youngsters have received very limited and fragmentary identity and sex-role modelling. And as a result, their self-image, their identity and their personal aspirations are based on much less substantial and more

superficial data — "pixelated" — making their next developmental stage of risk and commitment very vulnerable.

Our most immediately useful and generous gift to the kids we work with is the richest possible interchange of images and ideas of who they are and who we are, so that the gaps in their experience are filled in, resulting in richer — less "pixelated" — pictures of themselves as they are now and as they might be in the future.

We can start this within the next few minutes, by reflecting back to them (far more often and in far more detail) who we see in them ... I remember that you don't like ... I think you may be interested in ... You have an interesting way of ... I see you often choose ... I hear that you ... Tell me more about this idea of yours that ... You're a fan of ... How come you support this or that sports team ... Such personalised observations add important layers to their dangerously thin and defended self structures. These are acknowledgements and affirmations, not value judgements, adding self-confidence and self-esteem which will be real strengths as they go out into their young lives.

Maybe it's another way of saying that we "pay attention" to them. And (dare I say this, given all the recent talk about boundaries and self-disclosure?) the more that we offer demonstrations of who we are as ordinary men and women, the more we fill out for them the denser and real images they need in order to pick their own way forward.

Unpixelate them.

Doing enough

We all wake in the morning with at least some distress and anxiety — counterbalanced by some hope and optimism. What makes it possible for us to get up and get to work on time is that our positive stuff, however slightly, outweighs our negative stuff. Our balance is manageable.

It's easy to make a list of the harsh load the children and youth bear. They will often awake with feelings of failure and guilt, of exclusion and inadequacy, of isolation and loss. What makes it worthwhile for them to get started on their day? It is our acute sensitivity to their sense of self and their personal experience that tells us what we might do to redress their balance enough to make getting up worthwhile.

The whole purpose of our program is to fine tune and balance the environment of individual young people so that they can keep functional — strengthened to operate independently and protected from undue stress. But we are extremely careful how we do this. The rare youngster whose circumstances are so far out of balance (as at point A where he or she cannot see forward, cannot access resources) should be regarded as critical ... in intensive care, needing protection, focussed careworker attention, reassurance, basic care, return to first steps ...

However, young people at point B need no more than a nudge into the green area. To do more would be to devalue the efforts they have made so far. We are tempted to intervene with superficial rewards and incentives ("giving kids candy") instead of helping them dig into their own resources and strengths. We facilitate kids at point B to continue *progress* (relying on themselves) rather than too easily letting them *regress* (depending on others). In preparing

them to take up their place again in the real world, we are careful *to do enough*, but not more than this.

Holly Kreider in a *CYC-Online* article about girls in care *(http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0301-kreider.html)*, quoted once: "I've always considered myself very lucky, because even through all the changes that I've gone through, there's always been somebody there who's been good to me, *and who've made me feel good enough about myself enough to keep it together.*" This is a strong statement; there is no sentimentality or over-dependence indicated — just child and youth workers who were careful about keeping the balance just right.

We remember again Hobbs's view that we try "to get the child, the family, the school, and the community just enough above the threshold of the requirements of each from the other, so that the whole system has a just-significant margin of probable success over probable failure ... "

Today we will be 100% attentive to what our young people need. With some we will be intensely involved; others we will just be watching over ...

We'll be doing enough.

Relaxing ...

The expectation that we child and youth care workers must be models for children is probably more intimidating than it needs to be. We can easily get the impression that we should be paragons of virtue and that our every action has the capacity to inspire or impair a young person in our care.

Not so. Paragons make poor models. They are so far from normality as to seem beyond the reach of ordinary kids. More, they are often so suggestive of exaggerated morals that they create more guilt-feelings than hope.

Our job is to model *normal and functional people*. We are helpful models when we, like most people, struggle with situations and have to work hard at finding solutions. We are models who kids can identify with when we make mistakes and errors or judgement. We are powerful and effective models when we persevere and make good on our shortcomings and apologise and get up and try again. Little more is expected from anybody.

So, especially at holiday times like this, we should feel free to model tiredness and relaxation and recreation. It is an honest message that after all the effort and commitment we need to recharge our batteries. We let kids know that it's OK to chill and hang for a while, it's normal and necessary, and part of our human rhythms.

So during this holiday period, help your young charges to do this. And do it yourself.

Relax.

The economy of relationships

Programs are careful to see that staff are assigned to particular youth – to make sure that the available adults are getting around, purposefully, to all of the kids. This happens formally, as in scheduled duties, classes, activity groups, etc. It also happens informally, as the young people and staff members get to spend time together in free periods.

Ultimately it is less important for staff and youth to be connected on paper (as in timetables, clinical plans, etc.) than for helpful relationships to develop in reality.

The fact that Mrs Smith is "seeing" the difficult Tommy three or four times a week as part of an intervention plan may not be having as great an impact on Tommy as his impromptu lunchtime chats with Mrs Brown in the cafeteria. Also, the fact that Mr Green is devoting fully one-third of his free time to the successful Cindy may be a waste of resources when six other staff members are also spending a lot of time with Cindy.

The team might consider a few thoughts on the economy of our human resources.

- Troubled kids have a way of rebuffing care workers. For one thing, a worker may not be 'reaching' the assigned youngster; for another, the youngster does not attract the informal approaches of other workers.
- Staff members have a way of enjoying time with improving and successful kids. Their work is affirmed when they share moments with youth who are doing OK, but they may be wasting precious time on what is less urgent and less critical work.
- So some kids have a way of getting left out of the food chain and not really being reached by anyone. And, ironically, it is probable that one or two of the adults in the program may really like this "left out" kid, but the team is not discovering this, and so is not taking advantage of these potential relationships.

If relationships are so crucial in our work, we should be more creatively auditing their availability, their potentials and their distribution.

Face the same way

The young people we work with have very often been in repeated conflict. It is not unusual for them to arrive locked in oppositional positions with parents, school, police. We are tempted to think (because we usually have some kind of personal or institutional power) that we can prevail where others have failed. We step into the roles just vacated by the youth's mother, teacher or parole officer ... and offer no more than the same old conflict.

But as child and youth workers we are not there simply to force our wills on our young charges — to make them do what others want them to do. Our task is to understand the circumstances in which the kids find themselves, the ways in which they try to function in these circumstances, and to understand the sources of the conflict.

Our best vantage point is not to position ourselves head-to-head, but to turn the same way as the kids. This way we avoid the conflict role, get out of their face — and we get to see what they are seeing.

Our own child and youth care language suggests this to us. We try to "get alongside" kids, to "offer a hand", to "walk the talk", "be in their shoes", build empathy. The roles which suggest themselves to us — of co-worker, mentor, counsellor, coach, consultant, neutral ally, companion — suggest a stance which is not eyeball-to-eyeball or shaking a finger in their face, but of sharing with them a view of what faces them and what routes they might choose.

Practice placing yourself — both physically and attitudinally — in a non-conflict position. Yes, it may be that at times you will have to challenge a youngster, to be assertive and authoritative, but always best from a position alongside rather than

confronting, better as a "friend" rather than a "foe".

The "good guys and the bad guys"

Jake stole the money Mick's mother gave him and Mick is crying. Corinne is bullying and threatening Honey and making her afraid to come out of her room. The girls are teasing Alfie about his zits and with quivering lips he doesn't know what to do with his hurt and rage. These are the situations into which child and youth care workers must step, right? — problems they must solve, injustices put to right, right?

Maybe, maybe not. Conflicts and squabbles like these are the bread and butter of our work. We work with difficult kids, many of whom will act out aggressively and hurtfully, and others will come to us for protection and for justice. We are tempted to act as police, prosecutor, judge and jury so that order is restored: "Jake, give that money back to Mick!" "Corinne, you have no right to threaten Honey if she comes out of her room!"

Trouble is, we are not working only with Mick, Honey and Alfie. We are also working with Jake, Corinne, and the girls who are teasing Alfie. And when the only thing we do is to make our obviously sensible judgements, nobody is really learning anything for themselves.

We each find ourselves right in the middle of a microcosm of the society in which people hurt and get hurt. And into this have come more effective ways of working with both aggressors and victims. When

youngsters leave us and there are no longer child and youth workers around to intervene, we hope that the offenders have different attitudes and behaviours, and that the victims are better able to stand up for themselves.

Central to the new ways of working are the methods of restorative justice, applicable in the dorms and hallways of our programs as much as in the juvenile courts. In this system we teach rather than judge, we bond rather than reject, we bring offender and victim together rather than interpose a "justice system", and, most important, we work towards an understanding of each others' circumstances and feelings. The aim is not to pronounce on who is right and who is wrong and what punishment or consequence should be set: the aim is on finding ways and opportunities for them to make things right and to restore both offender and victim to their place — first in our microcosm, and then in the wider community.

Next time kids are having a "go" at each other, you have more than the judge role. You are there for both of them.

It's not about us ...

We work with troubled children and youth, but as we move through our 20s and 30s — even (gasp!) our 40s and 50s — we get further and further away from our own adolescent years. The feelings we experienced then, however intense and exciting at the time, become fuzzier. First dates, high school exams and all the other teenage challenges and panics can seem to us now like no big deal. Even if we don't use those actual words, we often mask a "when I was your age" message when we are reassuring or advising kids.

But child and youth care is not about us. It's about them.

If ever we find ourselves getting blasé about their birthdays and milestones, indifferent to teen fads or numbed to adolescent pains, we need to sharpen our memories and our capacity for empathy. A single minute *re-minding* ourselves of how seriously we took our hair, our clothes, our pimples; how much it hurt when we were overlooked, failing or excluded; how terrified we were by authority, punishments, bullies ... is good exercise for child and youth workers. (But it only gets us part of the way, because for the kids in our programs today their normal adolescent issues are overlaid with other complex experiences of hurt, anger, confusion and despair.)

Certainly, we have to keep a professional grip on our work, but when we also find ourselves moved by the circumstances of the youngsters we work with, we know that we are still in touch with the meat and potatoes of child and youth work. And of course, the closer we stay to our own feelings, the more we may be experienced by the kids as really listening and understanding.

But ultimately it's not about us.

Get past the labels ...

It's very easy to pick up a bias on how we see newcomers to our program — depending on how they came to us. Kids enter the helping services through various "gates" and the different referrers see things from their own perspectives. They tend to describe young people — and express their expectations — in their own terms.

If a youth comes through the

'neighbourhood gate', say from the local community centre or youth club, we may be being asked to give them some ideas as to how they can help: "Say, we have a problem with this youngster."

- If the youth comes through the 'educational gate' we may be being asked to work on the child's grades or attitude to school: "Say, we have this difficult, disruptive, failing pupil ..."
- If he or she comes through the 'welfare gate' we could be being asked to work with the child's neglectful family ... "Say, we have this poor kid in this disadvantaged family ..."
- If the child comes through the 'psychology or psychiatry gate' the expectation could be managing aggression or depression: "Say, we have this screwed up, unhappy, angry kid ..."
- If the entrance is through the 'juvenile justice gate': "Say, we have this repeat offender, drug abuser, gang member ..."
- Perhaps most tragic are the self-referred youngsters (street children are often like this) who come by themselves because they see the lights on and the food smells good ...

There may turn out to be complex problems for us to work with, but no prizes for guessing that all these kids probably share surprisingly similar situations and feelings about themselves. Before we hang around their necks the labels they arrive with, let's get to meet them on common terms, see if they like one lump or two in their tea, pull up a chair, call them by their names.

The whole truth

The principal pediatrician of the city's hospital was welcoming us to the conference, and he referred to some of the experiences of his staff who worked with abused children. Using the acronym CARE, he talked about communication, acceptance, respect and enthusiasm.

We were shocked at his first illustration, clinical and forensic slides of a young baby who had been battered, severe head and facial injuries, both arms broken, all requiring weeks of ongoing surgery and other treatments. The conference delegates were appalled and angered by the harm inflicted on this baby and demanded to know what had been done with the mother ... no doubt seeking some closure for the distressing presentation.

The speaker moved on to material which was more familiar to the child and youth care delegates. His next illustration concerned a young girl of sixteen who had been maltreated and abused, physically and sexually, throughout her childhood. She fell pregnant when she was fourteen, and when this was discovered a few months later, she was made to leave home and was expelled from school. Initially, in spite of the shame she felt and which stopped her calling on friends, she had the pluck to try to make things work out. She lied about her age and condition and got a low paid job and a further after-hours job in a corner shop. She found a room to rent. An aunt helped where she could – but for only six months or so. The now fifteen-year-old mother tried to continue alone. She looked for cheap day care, hired a maid part-time to help with the baby while she kept on working long hours, and she came home exhausted to an empty life and a distressed baby who cried interminably. The young girl felt utterly alone. Her former friends were

still at school and had busy social lives in the evenings and weekends. She had none. Her family still refused to see her or help her. The finances were not working out. She was sapped of energy.

The girl soon reached a stage of despair. Through the fatigue and hopelessness she considered suicide, lost patience with her wretched and demanding baby, and one night, when she could take no more, she threw the yelling child against a wall – once, twice and again.

Of course, her child was the baby we had seen in the introductory slides.

The lesson was not lost on us. Our rage at the mother in illustration 1 became sympathy for the girl in illustration 2. We learned that before we jump to conclusions or make judgements about families or children we must know more than just one side of the story.

No such thing

There is really no such thing as a "practice hint". None of us will walk into our practice today armed with one or other of the hints in this series. Rather, throughout our careers we pick up thousands of pieces of information, ideas, illustrations, attitudes and insights, and those that are any good we might store away in a mental carry bag — some never to be used, all perhaps close at hand.

And of course *they talk to each other* inside that carry bag. They tell each other when they happen to help or fail to help; they generalise from each others' experiences; they group together and gossip when we're working with a particular kid or a particular issue — and we sometimes overhear what they say.

But any single practice hint is doomed to irrelevance. This one's not going to help us with this young person today because today –

- the kid needs challenge, not candy
- the kid needs complexity, not simplification
- the kid is physically seventeen, not seven
- the kid needs his own plan today, not ours
- the kid needs autonomy, not support ...

Equally, no doubt, it may be that today –

- the kid needs comfort, not stress
- the kid needs company, not solitude
- the kid is emotionally seven, not seventeen
- the kid needs boundaries, not risk
- the kid needs a pull, not a push ...

Every approach we make requires not a bag of tricks but an awareness of what's going on in us, what's important, what's being said, what is relevant right now in terms of the youngster's accessibility, readiness, development, duties, progress. As we take in the situation, wait for the cues, and listen to the youth, all of those things in our carry bag are buzzing away in conversation, clustering in argument, longing to be heard. (And it may be that the more things we have put into that bag over time, the better the insights we may overhear ...)

But what we are going to experience is a complex, integrated, personal, unique encounter ... We're not going to pull out a practice hint. No such thing!

Confirm the reservation

When youngsters are admitted on to a residential program, there is a danger that their "place" in their own homes can close up, be taken over. Other family members can get used to their absence. The youth can stop being missed, and we end up with added barriers to their eventual return home.

An obvious reason for this "closing up" is that the youth were difficult at home. There is a sense of relief on the part of the family that the unpleasantness associated with a challenging and trying kid has been alleviated. There is less tension around. Time and energy have been freed up. The "work" which had gone into maintaining equilibrium and handling conflict is over. There's more to go around. This is true also in terms of money and goods: it could be that the youngster's place in the family budget begins to close up, that his or her claim on the family's resources is forfeited.

A slightly more complex reason is that the young person had become a scapegoat, that the struggling family system had neurotically focused their problems in this one young person, and he or she was now "expelled" from the home along with all the family's own feelings of failure or guilt. Best forgotten.

Once we believe that there is in fact a future for the child in the family (this may not always be true), it is crucial, both in our admission routine and in our day-to-day programming, that the family's continuing share of responsibility is maintained. When the family plays a part in the admission process and understands the nature and goals of the placement, they retain a stake in the youth's

progress. The intervention is an individual and a family one. When the family are included in the week by week planning, they stay on as contributors of time, energy and resources. It is our job to work so closely with the family that they learn all the lessons along with us and the youth, and that they share the maximum possible involvement and feedback. Any tasks and any progress belongs to all.

Above all, n our practice today we will avoid situations which lead to the youngster getting relegated to the past tense in the family. Or getting pushed out so that the very goal of the placement is subverted. Don't let the family unmake the bed or let the room!

First things last

A common experience for a child and youth care worker is to walk into a shift and find four situations presenting themselves simultaneously. Our immediate task is to plan the time and set the priorities.

In the corner, four kids are playing a boisterous version of Monopoly – the rules have been hijacked, new (lewd) "Chance" cards have been scribbled, every move is an innovation and the mood is hilarious. Near the far wall, one kid is lying on her back staring at the ceiling, headphones clamped to her head, loud enough to he heard from over here. Near the bookshelves two boys are arguing loudly, some torn books lying around at their feet. And one youngster (whom we might easily have missed) is sitting alone,

disconsolately, just outside the door in the yard.

In circumstances like these we usually think in terms of *urgency and importance.* And we think in terms of short-term and long-term. If we have an hour with this group, we know that the hour is important in itself as a chunk of time which can be fun and fulfilling – or unpleasant and destructive. We also know that the hour is another brick in a larger wall — and for some youth it may well have more enduring significance. What to do?

You decide. I think of a lesson from Bruno Bettelheim's Orthogenic School in Chicago. A teacher working with a group of severely troubled and needy students can do several things at once. She can affirm activities which are on the go; she can set up some plans with kids who don't know what to do; she can turn a blind eye to what she doesn't need to notice; she can head a disaster off at the pass; she can do some first aid in the trouble spots – so that *she is free to spend time on what is really important*.

Often what seems most urgent takes all our time; often we tackle the important things without regard for the milieu ...

I am the adult

We are all familiar with the 'domino effect'. Boss scolds worker – worker snaps at wife – wife shouts at kid – kid kicks dog – dog bites cat ... and so on. We are even

more aware (because it is often part of our basic training) of the conflict cycle (Long, 1991) whereby we have an insecure or scratchy youth – impacted by a stressful incident – has anxious or angry feelings aroused – then behaves in an inappropriate or hostile way – draws the disapproval and censure of both peers and adults – and is left with a more fragile self image, just waiting for the next occasion of stress ...

The singular privilege of child and youth care workers is that, working within the life space, we get to *participate* in these processes and cycles; we get to be links in these chains of anger and anxiety. What would happen to the falling dominoes if one domino was glued to its place, refused to be pushed over by the others? The collapsing process would stop. What would happen to the youth in the conflict cycle if his destructive behaviour drew not reactive anger or insult, but engagement, support, teaching? The vicious circle of deteriorating self-image would be slowed. Instead of the usual downward spiral, *something different would happen.*

One of the central practice guidelines of the great pioneer August Aichhorn was that no worker should meet anger with anger, force with force, insult with insult. By refusing to react in kind to young people's destructive behaviours, the adults left those kids without their maladaptive ways of interacting with others. Aichhorn recognised that this was a serious challenge to the youth, possibly resulting even in breakdown, but it was the beginning of new learning. This, of course, is the key to the conflict cycle model: adults customarily reproduce the feelings and behaviours of abusive youth, but when, in the cycle, the adult's "turn" comes around, the adult chooses not to add to the momentum of the cycle, refuses to "join the fray" but rather to encourage more mature strengths, build greater responsibility for behaviour.

Today we will face difficult and challenging young people. When it might seem that the natural reaction is to hit back, we will remember that

our role is to reverse negative cycles. We will remind ourselves ...

Reference

Long, N.J. (1991). What Fritz Redl taught me about Aggression: Understanding the Dynamics of Aggression and Counter-aggression in Students and Staff, in Morse, W.C. (Ed.) *Crisis Intervention in Residential Treatment: The Clinical Innovations of Fritz Redl*. New York: The Haworth Press.

Why is this kid here?

Common enough question when we start with a new youngster in our program. But it is really two questions – which have two very different answers.

Most people answer the question historically. "He's here because of what happened in the home and family and how the youth was affected by this and how he or she reacted to this ... The question being answered here is "Why is this kid here (for what reason)?" And too easily we may be satisfied with this answer – "Oh, so *that's* why the kid is here."

Trouble with this question and answer is that it tells only the end of a story. These things happened, so "the kid ended up here."

But we have to ask an altogether different question: "Why is this kid here (for what purpose)? This is the forward-looking question, the start of a new story. It is not closure we are seeking, but new openings. When we ask why (for what *purpose*) the kid is here, the answer is going to define our task. We are asking what is expected of us all (the program, the youth, the family, the child and youth care workers) while he or she is here, where are we heading, and what is it that we hope will be achieved?

This is a crucial question. For example, in a juvenile detention setting, if we ask only the first question – for what reason – it may seem that the youth has been sent here *to be punished*. "He did all these bad things so he was sent here!" We have to get that right: a judge may send a man to prison as a punishment but not in order to be punished. So for the youth being admitted to a youth detention setting: that is not the end of the old story, but the beginning of a new story.

Next time you are busy in any way with a youngster in your program – whether assessing, planning, engaging, talking, playing – your best guide to action is to ask yourself the right question ...

If we don't let them say ...

We often set standards of conduct for kids in our programs. Usually these are individual standards, related to the developmental status of particular youngsters, to the progress they are making on issues and problems which brought them to us, and the attitudes and new behaviours and skills they are learning.

Sometimes the standards we set are program-wide and eminently sensible, for example, in rules relating to everyone's safety and to the protection of certain basic rights. But sometimes (and with the best of intentions) we try too hard on the program- wide standards. We state

expectations of politeness, neatness, abstinence, prosocial behaviour, self-control — and we impose sanctions when these are transgressed — forgetting that the kids came to us precisely because they were having difficulty in areas of their lives, and we are meant to be teaching and working at these, not simply demanding compliance.

Often we are offended by the *language* which youth use – whether to our minds this is loud, gratuitous, insolent, obscene, hostile, threatening or just culturally uncomfortable. But if we demand verbal politeness and respect, we may just lose the one thread of contact which we have with troubled kids.

From a developmental and functional point of view, direct verbal communication (however raw) is highly symbolic, more mature and better ego-mediated than reactive aggressive behaviour, than neurotic detours or anti-social "statements". Whatever "language" they may speak, If kids are able to express themselves verbally, we're better placed than we might be. We remember this when we are tempted to say: "Don't you dare speak to me like that!"

What they say may be unwelcome or discouraging, but if we are to know and understand them, it is crucial that we hear what they say. The logic is simple ...

If we don't let them say how they think and feel ... we may never know how they think and feel.

The next step

Where are we heading with this youth? What are we trying to achieve? What is the aim of our intervention with this family? Young people and their families often find themselves far from the beaten track as they experience misfortune

or neglect, as they struggle with loss, poverty, unemployment, addictions, or become involved in crime or violence. We usually meet them down one of the blind alleys where they find themselves, and it's not always immediately clear where the next step should be.

We are easily seduced by the obvious solutions to the "presenting" problems. This person is scared so we offer protection, hungry so we feed them, short of rent so we find money, homeless so we accommodate them ... These solutions may or may not be the immediate priorities, depending on a dozen different variables, but it is important that good choices are made as to the next step ...

A helpful start is to take a compass bearing on the general direction we should take, the final destination we are aiming for. And most people would agree that the ultimate aim of our work is that people should get back on to the high road of development – towards maturity, independence, self-determination, autonomy, adequate function.

So we have a guide. With each intervention we can ask ourselves "Is what I am doing now building maturity – or is it feeding into immaturity? Is my action moving the person towards independence – or is it creating dependency? Is this intervention encouraging self-determination – or is it expecting only compliance with our ideas? Is our client resuming a degree of function in his or her own right – or are we still doing too much of the work, too much of the decision-making and motivation?

Whatever our intervention, it must lead onward. Perhaps there will be some undoing and repair work to do, some retracing of steps and finding of new choice points. But then we will move on, to another stretch of the road towards the ultimate goal ...

The persona of a program

The central tool of our trade is the relationship we offer and fulfil with the youngsters who are our "clients". Child and youth care workers, in the process of their own growing awareness and becoming, add a critical dimension to the awareness and becoming of the youth alongside whom they live and work.

But there are inevitably gaps and boundaries in this relationship. Care workers may be off duty, on leave, busy with other youth or other tasks; physically or emotionally "unavailable" – or not adequately representative of the customs or culture of the youth. So there is a need for the agency itself (its philosophy, its practice and its team) to embody and represent the qualities and values of its individual staff members – to back them up, complement them, substitute for them. There are a number of aspects to this ... which you will surely be able to add to:

1. When I, as a child and youth care worker, am away from the program and the youth I work with, both the youth and I need to know that the work being done, the presence being exercised and the interventions being applied, will be reliably sustained (qualitatively and quantitatively) in my absence.
2. While I am on duty, I know that I have responsibilities, that I have things to do, something to say, attitudes and philosophies to represent. It is therefore necessary that, when I am not there, the agency similarly has "something to say", and values and procedures which accord with my own practice.

3. To the extent that I may be a positive identification figure for the youth I am working with, the agency, also, must be a model of integrity, trustworthiness, respect, success ...

I know that my relationship with a child is temporary, that the experience of the relationship must in due course be loosened and generalised to his or her other relationships.

One of my responsibilities as a child and youth care worker is to engage in this dialogue with my agency (my superiors, supervisors, colleagues) to ensure that my relationship with a child corresponds with, is backed up, supported and matched by a parallel persona ...

Anxiety and aggression

Someone once said that the youngsters we work with either repress their feelings and instincts and thus inflict great pain on themselves – or they fail altogether to control their feelings and instincts and thus inflict great pain on their peers and on society. It was common to classify children's problems into these two broad categories, the under-reactors and the over-reactors; the inwardly hurting and the outwardly hurtful — the anxious and the aggressive — and we may find that these groupings generally still apply today.

But these are extremes. We should always be concerned when youth are too anxious or too aggressive. A rule of

thumb is that anxiety and aggression are undesirable when they are incapacitating to a person's general function — when they become roadblocks to our happiness or ability to relate positively to others. Under these circumstances there is nothing wrong in declaring these conditions to be problems which need help and attention.

However there can be "good" levels of anxiety and aggression. Anxiety serves to "warn" us when we are having trouble fitting our values with the real circumstances of our lives, when we need to make choices or be more sensitive and aware of our own needs and expectations in relation to those of our families, friends and loved ones. Similarly, aggression serves to stimulate us to action, to stand up for ourselves and attend to our own needs. Assertiveness, which is a form of aggression, is generally regarded as a positive in our society today, as a protection and motivator.

Our job as child and youth care workers is to distinguish between "good" and "bad" anxiety and aggression. We must recognise "bad" conditions. But when we are tempted to sweep away all anxiety and aggression, we may have lost sight of the subtleties and discrimination required of us and our thinking. We have to understand anxiety and help clients to interpret and tolerate it. We have to understand aggression and help clients to manage it positively and not destructively. These are two conditions which could be enemies and they could also be friends ...

Giving kids candy

The education students are observing a small junior class through the one-way mirror. The teacher is reading a passage to the class on which they will have to answer "comprehension" questions. As she is reading, the students distinguish two entirely separate patterns of behaviour: some of the pupils are hanging on every word, making frequent eye-contact with the teacher; the others are staring out of the window, doodling in their jotters or resting the heads on their arms.

When the comprehension tests are being scored the education students are informed that half the class comprises children from the surrounding neighbourhood and the other half are children from a nearby children's home. They are asked to suggest which half is which and to predict the results of the comprehension test. They all identify the intense listeners as the children from the local suburb, and that this group would achieve the better scores.

They are 100% wrong.

As it turns out, this wasn't a comprehension test at all, but part of a study of deprivation and its affect on learning. Something very tragic was happening in the class. The local children were listening quite adequately while they relaxed and looked around; those from the children's home (this was in the 1950s) were not learning anything at all. Their attention to the teacher was being rewarded by frequent, reciprocated eye-contact, acknowledgement of their presence ...

What the children in care got from the language class was a pitiful level of human contact and validation for which they paid a terrible price: they learned nothing.

It's an extreme story from another age, but when we have been on shift we might do well to look back and

distinguish between those children and youth with whom we were working at appropriate personal and developmental tasks – and those whom we merely 'stroked' and 'patted' because that seemed to satisfy their need today.

And when we look back, did we know the difference?

Silence

The twenty-something child care worker was sitting with a youngster who had brought a particularly difficult and painful problem. At one stage the worker was struggling with the question of what to say next, what would be most helpful, how to phrase it ... then discarding this idea and starting again – when the youngster reached across and patted his arm reassuringly, and said "It's OK."

A reminder that we don't always have to say something.

Of course there are unhelpful or unkind silences – the ignoring or angry silence, the withholding silence. Our care worker was creating a stressed and unsettling silence. But the youngster in our story would have been happy enough with the generosity of silent time given, of quiet support, of availability, listening.

We all remember the times when we were ill as children, and a parent or family member came simply "to sit with us" for a while. No words might be exchanged; the company alone spoke volumes.

Young people who are worried or hurt — or even angry — don't always want words. Often they are grateful for the space we give them to grapple with a problem or grieve over a loss for themselves. Our presence at such times is often our relationship at its most intimate.

Respond, don't react

We are all warned in our training about *responding* to situations rather than *reacting* to them. Responding suggests listening, understanding, and then replying; reacting sounds more like knee-jerk counteraction. Responding is personal and is about mutual communication; reacting is shoot-from-the-hip and too easily looks like attack.

An attitude of *responding* presupposes some sort of continuing dialogue. When we have understood John and talked with him about the aims of his placement, an incident of offensive behavior deserves an "alongside" response of "Hey, we've talked about this; we've been learning this and trying that ..." and then, later, more work on the current intervention plan. The response style aims to keep the conversation going, to avoid going backwards to raw command-and-obey stuff.

An attitude of *reaction* suggests a one-size-fits-all measure of control or suppression. John's offending behavior evokes from us an in-your-face "Hey, don't do that!" which will sound like "Don't *you* dare do that *here*!" Precisely because reaction is more visceral than cerebral, it becomes impersonal and loses the momentum of any relationship which we may be building.

Of course it's not that simple! We will have been working at relationship building with the youngsters from Day One. We will have been talking about what brought them into the program and where they want to get to. We will have earned our privilege to use the word "we" with them. We will also know that when we are able to "respond" we have reached a goal of our own – and when we find ourselves falling back on mere "reacting" that we still have a lot of work to do on our relationships with them.

There are wider implications. When

new kids see the way we relate to those who have been here for a while, we are already building something new for them. We model our relationship and our responsiveness to those who don't yet know us. We challenge their own ways of behaving and inter-relating, and we give them hope.

A mantra for our practice today: respond, don't react.

Stick with the plan

In the previous practice hint we talked about responding vs. reacting. Not only are individual child and youth care workers tempted to react rather than respond – our whole program (that means all of us acting as teams and groups) is often similarly persuaded.

A new youngster arrives in the program. We make a sober assessment and set out what we consider to be sensible treatment plans – with realistic time scales attached. Then one day the school (or the neighbours or the family or the police) arrive with some serious complaint and we forget the plan: we react! We drop the carefully thought out intervention with its time scales — and clap the kid in irons. We add curfews and consequences, time-outs and threats. Like those who complained, we demand instant compliance, leap-frog developmental progress, and, as if by magic, an end to all problems.

In our more grounded moments we know that there is often a long road to travel to bring kids through their current difficulties to more mature development and function. For some we recognise that we must rebuild painstakingly on long-ago attachment issues; for others we know that there is a process of teaching and learning to get through. We are right to map out a course of intervention, to prioritise interim goals and staging

posts, with expected time scales – yet abruptly we expect 'performance'.

We are reminded of the parents who claim to have "tried everything" with their troubled child – implying inconsistency and indecision in their upbringing. We are often no better. If we have worked out a treatment plan, we must all work within the context and time constraints of this plan. Give the plan a chance. Give staff colleagues a change to implement it. Give the kid a chance to catch up.

On whose side?

Here is a list of kids whom you may find familiar from your experience so far in the field of child and youth care:

- attention-seeking
- moody
- lazy
- impulsive
- pushy
- noisy
- acquisitive
- aggressive
- self-righteous
- voluble.

Here is another list of kids whom you may also recognise from your practice:

- rejected
- sad
- unmotivated
- frustrated
- excluded
- unlistened to
- deprived
- physically abused
- blamed
- ignored.

Actually, if you place the second list alongside the first list, you will find that there are not two lists here, but one. The kids are the same; only the words used to describe them are different. The first list is from the viewpoint of irritated and tired adults; the second is a group of unhappy kids.

We're on the side of the kids.

Getting to know you

Much has been written about professional boundaries and self-disclosure. Many of us who trained in earlier decades had it drummed into us that there were firm lines to be drawn between our professional and private lives, and that strong limits (especially regarding destructive and assaultive behaviours) applied in even the most permissive types of therapy.

Well, the bad news is that in child and youth care today most bets are off. When we choose to work with troubled youth (that is, spend time with them, engage them, listen to them, relate to them, challenge them, walk the talk with them) we know that we put ourselves at risk to their deep-seated hurts and rage. A central message we want to communicate to

them is that no matter what they may do us, we will not reject them, that they are worth-while, that relationships can transcend the ups and downs.

A prerequisite to this is trust — the trust youth place in us as they come to know us, and the growing trust we place in them as they grow bigger than their pains and angers.

From our side we demand huge levels of knowledge about the youth, what with our intake reports, histories, our assessments, our daily logs, our progress reports ... We may forget that in our quest to build significant relationships with these young people, our responsibility is equally *to help them to know us*. Gaining their commitment is not helped when we are doing an egg-dance around boundaries and self-disclosure. They seek the reachable real people within us. Know, today, that you must help them with a crucial task on their side of this relationship deal ...

Getting to know *you*.

Away from our comfort level

Many of us learn our craft, learn the program and learn some intervention methods – and conclude that we know quite a lot about what we are doing as child and youth care workers.

To realise how far from the truth that is, imagine now that you are having to spend a few days in another city and arrangements have been made for you to stay with a family of whom you know nothing. All you have been told is that it is a quirky family, quite large, three generations, touchy about some subjects and generally

cool towards strangers. It's a family where quite a few members have been hurt, and one in which it pays to know who's who in the zoo.

When you have imagined that for a minute, also realise that a central principle in work with children, youth and families, is that w*e are admitted to their ecology; they don't enter ours.*

It's very comfortable for us to say to new clients of our program: "This is how our place works, this is what we expect, this is what you can expect, this is the person you have to speak to about this, and this ..." It's comfortable because we know the place and the people. It's our place.

Imagine once again your visit to the strange family – and then think about how kids feel when they come to us. And then forget all about that, for you must again remember that *they have not come to us; we are going to them.* We know nothing. We are ignorant and awkward and we have a lot to learn. If we are to get to know them and understand them and respect them, we have to make a huge shift.

The deep end

Most of us, when joining this profession of child and youth care, probably served time in the "deep end". Our first day in a student placement or in a new job inevitably had us "on the floor" — in the life-space of a group of real-live youth. And because (a) these were by definition anxious or difficult kids, (b) this was an ordinary day, and (c) we were newcomers in their territory, we were no doubt put to the test. Some real or staged arguments broke out, some hair-raising ideas were flown past us, some oblique or directly subversive challenges were thrust our way. And we survived this total immersion with our own brand of doggy paddle.

We went to tea at the end of this baptismal shift feeling both

stimulated and relieved. We had needed to be on our toes, we had checked out both our cerebral and visceral armouries once or twice, and we drank our tea with rather more new questions than new answers.

How many months or years have passed since that first dunking? Do we still get that thrill when we walk in on a shift or an interview or an activity group? No? The experience of others suggests that there may be two reasons for our lessened awe and apprehensiveness.

We are more mature — we know more, we know what to expect, we are better at sizing up situations, we have learned more skills ... or,

We have become blasé and laid-back in working with troubled kids — hearts and arteries have hardened and nerve-endings are down on voltage.

Check out whether you are perhaps on reason #2. You will know. If so, you're the loser in the exhilarating kick of being in the deep end. And if you are indeed down on anticipation and alertness and curiosity and ready empathy, the kids are the losers in authentic child and youth care.

Team: have your say

Q*ui tacet consentire* (He who is silent is seen to consent) is an old principle of English law. It echoes the adage that "for wrong to succeed it is necessary only that good men say nothing".

Your main contribution to the team in your program is that you participate: ask for clarity, express your view, remind of mission, acknowledge mistakes ...

The team has an *essential* (in the strictest sense of that word)

responsibility in your program for coherent thought, decision-making and action. The team will demonstrate all the qualities of a mature and proficient individual. It will be self-aware, honest with itself, open to new experiences and tolerant of differences. The mature individual is familiar with complexity and tensions and change, and with that experience can make "best fit" choices. So with the team.

The only way to a healthy team is that all of its members are articulate within the team. To keep your approval or disagreement to yourself risks the integrity of the team. To carry reservations or criticisms outside of the team is to provoke denial and splitting. *Audi alterem partem* (listen to the other point of view) is another principle of law which we enable by also *expressing* that other point of view. The healthiest team decision is neither a compromise nor a simplistic majority vote: it is a resolution built from the input, trust and discourse of people serious about their work.

Each of us needs our team. It is our source of learning, energy and support. And our team needs each of us. It is only as good as we, its individual members, allow it to be. So be a team player ...

A middle course

Phillip Barker (1988) says that in our time residential treatment will continue to be needed in three circumstances: for the protection of the community; for the protection of the young person; and for those who may pose no threat to themselves or others, but whose behaviour is so disturbed as to be more than community resources can deal with.

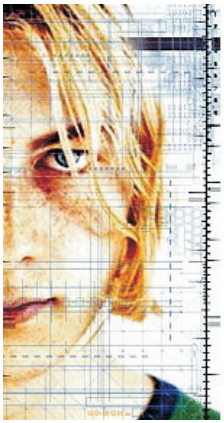
This suggests that our youth care program may on one hand be an agent of social control, and on the other hand offer individual protection — while in between these extremes it would provide training and help towards competence and autonomy. Our task, then, would seem to be to progressively reduce the need for either containment or protection and to prepare the young person for re-entry into society.

It is important for us to distinguish between these roles. For example, when society asks a particular program to admit a youth who is acting out destructively or anti-socially, we have a period in which we act *in loco parentis* when we accept responsibility for containment and training. We don't let that person out on to the streets this afternoon, but we do know that we are already working towards the afternoon when we can. Similarly, for the youngster admitted for protection against danger and abuse, we are already working towards building personal strengths and skills so that reintegration into family and community will soon be safe and possible.

Neither containment nor protection are permanent. Both are meant to lead back to life, and our job is always to steer the middle and forward driving path.

Reference

Barker, P. (1988) The future of residential treatment, in Schaefer, C. and Swanson, A. (eds.) *Children in residential care: Critical issues in treatment*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.



Taking ... and giving

We do so often end up with opposing adversarial systems in residential programs, don't we. It gets to look like union negotiations if we're not careful. The kids are pushing for later bedtimes, more pocket money, fewer rules, better food; and we are quick with privilege cuts, less TV time and groundings. Tit for tat ... all rather predictable. And it contributes to a most undesirable attitude set for kids to take into in the real world: How can I get the most bang for my buck with the least input?

We adults have more responsibility and opportunity than the kids to blur the hard edges of this contest.

Firstly, one of the most powerful things we adults offer to young people is *the experience that our affection, attention and approval do not have to be earned.* This generosity on our part is what every kid on earth needs and what so many troubled or troubling kids never yet received. It lies at the heart of the idea of unconditional positive regard. It means showing them that they are lovable and loved just the way they are.

Secondly, we can create for young people the opportunities to *give* something of themselves to others – again unearned. "The old folks home down the road needs some painting done: any volunteers?" "Chris is needing a little coaching on kicking a football: you're best at that in this

place, can you help out?" "I need some nails knocked into those floorboards: you got a few minutes to come help me with that?" "You know anything about changing a wheel — can you show me how?"

In our practice today we want to avoid the *quid pro quo* style of trading good behaviour and privileges. We are heading towards maturity and independence for our kids, whereby their behaviour is, in itself, effective and rewarding for them. We don't teach this by using unhealthy contingent rewards, puppeteering them with "if you do this we will do this" bribes. What impoverished characters we build who act only if they "get something" for what they give, or receive only because they have had to pay for something.

How nice that they find a surprise chocolate bar or movie ticket on their pillow one morning just because. How nice that kids may say "Let me fix that for you" just *because*. This is the human commerce we should be building for their futures as adults and partners and parents.

See also: *The Caring Response* at *http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0902-caring.html*

Back forever?

Thomas has been admitted to our program. He is twelve, and his recent past, over six months or so, has been chaotic. It started back in February, with what his stepmother, Ginny, called "a week from hell". He started truanting (alone and not as part of a group) and when made to return to school he gave a number of star performances which quite shocked his teachers, for he had been "normal" until then, although a year behind in his grades. The "performances" included running out of the classroom, openly defying the

teachers (“I won’t, try and make me!” stuff), swearing at one teacher who was trying to return him to his desk, and eventually running at the principal and punching him.

The school refused to keep him and he was referred to a clinic for evaluation. The reports which emerged were discouraging. His real mother had suffered a mental illness throughout the boy’s early years and the father eventually divorced her. He was a cold man who made unreasonable demands on the clearly deprived boy, and his second wife, Thomas’s stepmother, had little affection for him. In fact the father had left his second wife, and their divorce had been made final in December of the previous year. Since February the boy has been passed between a number of agencies whose main task seems to have been keeping him from running away.

Now our team is trying to put together a plan of action. It seems clear that the boy has never been mothered, and there is a general view that this is one of those rare “cases” when the adults have to go back and “begin again” with Thomas’s young life. This will, we acknowledge, be a time-consuming exercise which will take great care and skill as we try to rebuild foundations which were never satisfactorily consolidated first time around. We find ourselves talking about a year of preparation for return to school, primary caregiver figures, allowances for regression as necessary, private space ... and we are impressed by our colleagues’ readiness to give this a try.

Roger, our team leader, has been listening carefully. “I acknowledge that in many cases we are faced with this need to ”redo" the primary experience of a child, and I have been moved by your generosity in agreeing to be part of such a plan – which may well prove to be necessary – and I thank you."

Twelve pairs of eyes are fixed on Roger.

“But,” he went on, “I think there are two heroes in this story. One is Thomas, and the other is Ginny, his stepmother, who between them and

against all the odds, seem to have kept going pretty damned well until February this year. I think maybe they finally lost heart last Christmas when their family, such as it was, had finally and legally broken up, and they lost the hope which had kept them going."

"I say let's give them the credit for the twelve years or so that they have put into this, and rather than starting all over, *how about us just getting back to February*? Back to when they were managing. Let's focus on the "family" of Thomas and Ginny which, even though they're hardly related, nevertheless had Thomas getting up and going to school every day and heroically being just one year behind his age group in Grade 6."

* * *

In our practice today we recognise that we are often rebuilding uncertain foundations for families and children, but that we are really in the business of keeping kids and families *functional* – and that they often have something to teach us with their courage and resourcefulness. By providing some scaffolding and opportunities and ideas we can make it possible for them to succeed in their own ways.

One of the meanings of what is called "the strengths approach" is that we can hold back with our radical interventions (which have their own risks) and do no more than facilitate what people are capable of doing by their own strengths. Let them try. And let's give them the credit.

Root-bound

In the absence of adequate stimulation or responsiveness in their environment, many of our kids have turned in on themselves and become self-centered – in a self-dependent rather than a selfish sense. Their behaviour may look

selfish, but this is often self-protecting and self-conserving – and ultimately self-limiting behaviour. They have stopped seeking nutrition from outside of themselves and are living off what they have — and ultimately at great cost to themselves. We all know children like this whom we easily characterise as "bottomless pits" and as having a "high capacity to take". Children in this condition do, as a matter of survival, show more interest in what people have to give them than in people themselves.

To use a botanical analogy, these kids become "root-bound". We are tempted, for the sake of peace and quiet, to buy into this transaction. We "give kids candy" rather than face up to the difficult development task ahead of us — while the clock inexorably ticks on ...

We hesitate to use the word, but we are feeding into the psychopathic personality: we are heading for kids who 'relate' to others only for what they can get out of them.

When we draw a root-bound plant out of its pot, we are amazed at the intricate tangle of roots which have amassed in their limited space; roots which have obviously started off by reaching outwards and downward only to be turned back on themselves. Botanists will tell us that many of the roots we see have become too thin to function properly, others have rotted and died. Also, that to save the plant we will have to loosen this root system a little so as to start some interaction with the new soil into which we must place it.

The environment which we offer to such vulnerable children and youth allows a little more room and enough added nutrition to draw them outwards into a reciprocal relationship. They will not respond or thrive immediately, and will not easily give up their existing ways of survival until they are assured that the alternative is reliable.

This is one example of the ways in which we, in our practice today, act with thought and carefulness with each child. While we may talk globally about children and families and communities, we remember the

technical work which sometimes must take place at the borders between these systems. This is complex. While our primary concern is with the health of the plant we know that this is achieved by improving its *environment* — yet just as much by our sensitivity in understanding and facilitating the plant's capacity to let go of its existing ways of coping and yield to that environment.

Finding directions

Ralph came in and asked "Who knows where I can buy a compass? We're going on a hike with the school this weekend and I have to get one for the group." Jake was the child care worker who was getting the day group ready to go home or be fetched by parents. He knew that the Town & Country store in the village had a department with torches, fishing tackle, camping gear and things – and that they sold compasses – but he said nothing.

Tony asked "What's a compass?"

Two or three of the others turned on Tony and demanded: "Don't you know what a *compass* is?!"

David, the oldest (and the most difficult) in the group offered: "It tells you the direction."

"To where?" This was Tony again.

With a sigh of superiority, David replied: "Well it has a needle, like a speedometer, which always points to the north."

"So?" questioned Tony. "How does it tell you where you want to go?"

This was beyond most of the kids, or at least nobody answered.

Jake asked: "Does anyone know where Ralph can buy a compass?"

General uncertainty.

Pip, one of the smaller kids, said: "Sammy's bike and skateboard shop sells things like gas stoves and trainers and backpacks. Maybe they

sell compasses?"

"I still want to know how it tells you where to go," whined Tony. "How could something do that?"

Ralph said thank you to Pip. He would try Sammy's.

It was home time and Jake herded the kids down to the centre's parking lot.

* * *

Right at the beginning of this scenario, Jake could have replied "The Town & Country store" and there the matter would have rested. Instead, by letting it ride, he allowed a co-operative and effective exchange to take place. Ralph's question was answered from within the group – a prototype of sensible problem-solving and information gathering. Then Jake had a rare opportunity to thank David by saying "That was a neat definition of a compass." He also discovered an interesting subject about which the kids could learn one afternoon in the program – he could even show them how to make their own compass – and maybe a hike might be slotted in some time for those who didn't get such an opportunity.

Small, knowing intervention. Big gains.

The future and today

"I tried so hard to be what I *ought*, that I forgot who I am." So says a young person looking back a period during his time in care. The lament raises one of the age-old debates in child development and education: Is childhood a period when we should be devoting our time to preparation for our future life? – or is childhood a period of life in its own right which kids are already living?

Another young person: "I suppose that you were trying to encourage me,

but you were always telling me what I *could* be – as though what I was was of no value." We child and youth care workers inadvertently do this all the time with our kids. "Today you should be studying so that you pass your school grades at the end of the year." "You should be preparing for the time you have to look for a job." "Save your money for tomorrow." "We're teaching you this because when the time comes ..." "There will be time enough for you to do this; in the mean time there are more important things ..." Recognise any of these?

It is true that contemporary life does lay down certain hoops for young people to jump through, certain transition periods which they have to negotiate before passing on to the next — such as moving from grade school to high school; from high school to whatever comes next. But these are *externally* imposed criteria for success (as against failure). We forget that as young people pass from primary school to high school, from school to work, they are developing and growing in themselves. They have a growing capacity for knowing their world, for knowing themselves, for identifying what interests them and attracts them, what they like and don't like – and what they would choose for themselves. And they only gain such capacities when they are already experiencing, exploring, comparing, choosing, enjoying ... They only get to make their own choices when they have experience in making choices, in weighing up the plusses and minuses incurred in taking certain directions.

Yes, long-term future planning is always important, but *today's* job is to enable youngsters to experience their world as positive and interesting and worth relating to ... and to experience themselves as competent enough and valuable enough to be worth taking care of. To kids, being seen as future high school graduates or future bank clerks is less valued, today, than being acknowledged as John and Beth.

In our practice today, and especially for young people in care who may have a whole bunch of gaps in their opportunities and experience,

we should be more interested by bed time in how they are, what (whatever) they did and felt and experienced *today*, how they are seeing themselves as *themselves* and in how they are negotiating their world.

Qualities of a child and youth worker

People often list what they consider to be the important qualities of a child and youth care worker.

Ernie Nightingale suggested this list: they have a twinkle in their eyes (as defined by Al Trieschman), they have commitment, know their territory, are eager to learn, have the ability to change and adapt, the ability to see small changes as big news, and the ability to take responsibility for their personal lives, they risk and sacrifice to support each other, and they have a spiritual depth.

Thomas Linton and Michael Forster felt that a list of these qualities would have to include the following: Idealism, pragmatism, intelligence, empathy, commitment and courage.

Varley Weisman reported that kids listed these desirable personality descriptors: strength of character, independence, physical attractiveness, sense of play, tact, style, class, genuineness ... not a front, a kid at heart, and good heart.

Ellen Bacon and Lisa Bloom listed qualities which kids looked for in teachers: Be patient; be friendly, open, and listen to what students say; have a sense of humour; have a positive attitude; be helpful; and be nice, no swearing. In addition, they said

teachers of behaviour disturbed pupils needed to: control their own emotions so they don't take it out on students at school; deal with their own anger; don't be paranoid; and don't overreact to students' behaviour.

All of which adds up to a tall order. And what about curiosity to top off those lists? In our practice today we do not want to be "know-it-alls". We all benefit from sense of discovery and wonder at how and why things happen, how we could learn more about them and how to work with them. Our curiosity is contagious — instead of the put-downs we inflict by having quick and slick answers for everything, we become partners in enquiry and models of problem-solving when we get alongside the children and families we work with — to learn more before we make decisions, and to find as much information as we can about things that affect all our lives.
Yes, put curiosity on your list.

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