CYC

PRACTICE HINTS – II

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

If you're scared of the sight of blood ...

It can happen with child and youth care workers that we fully understand the kind of kids we work with and the nature of the problems they bring with them ... but we don't really want to see any of that right in front of our eyes. There may have been abuse and violence and stealing and acting out and manipulation, but we somehow expect all of that to have been left outside, and we react angrily and punitively if anything like that happens in our unit.

It's rather like admitting a seriously ill patient to a hospital and then saying "Welcome to our ward — but God help you if you're sick in here ... if you bleed on the sheets!"

Two of the required ingredients in Fritz Redl's recipe for a treatment program were "symptom tolerance guaranteed, old satisfaction channels respected" and a "rich flow of tax-free love and gratification grants". Redl expected that while we would naturally protect others from a youth's distressed and destructive behaviour, we needed to live with the hurt and rage and inadequacy in order to understand. (The word "therapy"– remember? – from the Greek *therapeuo*, meaning "to wait upon".)

Merely forbidding, suppressing or punishing, or worse, making our acceptance conditional on "good behaviour", do not help us to see what and where are the problems and the blockages and the needs. These reactions do little more than add to the feelings of frustration, rejection or guilt. If we only had to say "Stop it!" for there to be instant improvement, we would not have had to admit the

youngster to our program at all.

And Chris Beedell warned that we should take care to "admit the whole child", warts and all, not exclude the bits we don't want to see, if we are to come to know the young person we are working with. Any program for troubled kids will be filled with pain and doubt, anger and mistrust. Our work is that from within this mess we accompany kids to new possibilities, new ways of understanding, new ways of being with themselves and with others, new hopes and futures.

If you're scared of the sight of blood, you shouldn't work in a hospital.

References

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Watch that behaviour

Many of our programs focus strongly on the behaviour of the youth we work with. There are protocols for monitoring, logging, measuring and interpreting their behaviour; there are rules (and sometimes even notices on the walls) as to what should be done and what should not be done. There are timetables and deadlines, points added and points taken away. And a whole judicial system for "consequences", punishments and rewards, and guidelines as to who should report what to whom ... Some programs also have to submit to their funders precise audits reflecting reduced offences and infringements — or (gasp!) any increase in these.

As alternatives to such a scheme there are the programs which focus

more on how *the staff* behave. There is an acceptance that the youth wouldn't be here unless they had unmet needs and that this initially places the ball in the adults' court. These adults will be responsive and show developmental insight – finely judging when attention should be given to attachment and dependency needs — or should be withheld, what programmatic or personal help is necessary, what knowledge and skills will complement youths' functionality and when responsibilities must be passed back to them. The proficient child and youth worker will know what is expected at a particular stage — listening and empathy or firm guidance; support, teaching and testing or downscaling adult involvement as the youth's own independent function develops. He or she will be practised in the concrete *doing* skills of a wide repertoire of interventions; but also reliable and generous in the attitudinal and relational qualities of *being* with young people who are in need of special care.

The quality of a good program may be measured not so much by the behaviour of the kids towards the adults, but by the behaviour of the adults towards the kids.

Understanding what to do

We all carry around with us our pet theories about what intervention is working with the youth and families we work with — in which situations, with what balance of freedom and control, and as a result of which discipline or team member's input. For example, the recreation worker may feel (deep down inside, of course) that no matter what the social workers or the child and youth care workers or the administrators may be doing with a

client, it is really the recreation program which is having the significant impact.

Maybe it is natural that we need to be reassured that the work we have been doing today is significant and helpful.

But to ascribe our effectiveness to a single philosophy or method or individual, is to miss the complexity of what happens when a child or family is brought into contact with an agency such as ours.

In our practice today, we will be aware that we are influenced and supported by a particular body of theory. But be aware too that our experience and learning today will modify that theory — and the theory we all work with tomorrow will be different. It will be a synthesis of the inputs and insights of all of our colleagues, as well as those of the youth themselves. If tomorrow's theory is not different and new, then theory is a dead thing.

If we, as individuals and teams, can be open to understanding and learning from whatever we do and whatever happens today, then from tomorrow there is new power in tools like theory and team and profession.

Information – the easy gift

Ever notice how often the youth approach us because they want to know something? Are we allowed to ...? Who knows about the plans for ...? Have you heard about this or that? Will the Board decide today about ...? There are two or three sides to this.

The world is not always easily understood by kids who have been through chaotic times — moves, changes, separations and losses. (How

will I get to school? Will I still be able to see Colin?) When they have been managed by bureaucratic agencies there are sequences, reasons and delays which make them feel powerless. (How long will it take? What is in that file?) When there are decisions to be made that affect them directly they are anxious and angry when excluded. (Why can't they ...? How am I supposed to ...?)

Sometimes we withhold information for unworthy reasons — we feel important when we know things and information becomes a commodity to trade with. Or we are dis- approving of a youth's actions and we "let them stew" for a while. We are irritated by repeated questions and we fail to recognise their significance to the young person — we leave them unnecessarily in a state of distress

Sharing information is a basic quality of respect and hospitality, especially to people in difficulty. When we have house guests we are careful to point out where more towels can be found and where the nearest convenience store is. When someone on the street asks for directions we are quick to be helpful.

Our major goal in working with youth is to keep them functional. When they "don't know" they are left in a state of limbo: they cannot make a decision, let alone an informed decision, about what to do next. We often criticise the choices they make, but then as their adults we must be sure that we have provided enough raw material with which they can make better choices.

Letting kids know (as individuals or as a group) what will be happening today, tomorrow, next week, shines light into their futures and gives them less to be unsure about, more trust in the world and their place in it. And it's free! It costs you nothing more that sparing a thought.

Tell them.

The final test

You will be working today with kids who have been through the toughest times. Many of the youth in our programs feel repeatedly unheard, let down, hurt, abused and betrayed by the very adults and families they should have been able to rely on. We recognise these kids, the ones who kid around and dance away when we try most seriously to make contact and to reassure; the ones who spit our words and efforts to reach out back in our faces; the ones who are resolutely remote and compliant when we know they are raging within.

The literature frequently describes their mistrust, their generalised hostility, their "expectations of the worst", and their brittle, fragile "independence". Yet they are usually, simultaneously, in deepest conflict between wanting to trust and not willing to trust; between the tough, protective exterior and the fear to risk what is vulnerable within them. They draw us and reject us, they invite us and repel us.

We reach a point where we think we have earned their trust, but their behaviour challenges us: "Can I *really* trust you? Are you truly for real? Will you still care when I screw up again ... if I hurt you?" – and they test us to the limit. Tomorrow they test us again, and the next day, and our own beliefs begin to weaken.

There is a word of hope here: if someone repeatedly tests a bridge, this shows they probably want to use it.

So today be positive if the testing continues. Regard this as a dialogue commenced, as the first awkward steps of a dance. The two of you are already trading packets of communication (even though these may still be of stubborn- ness and defiance) and this process is always going to be more important than the content ...

There is also a word of warning here. Don't give up. Don't be tempted to weaken. You will reach the critical point where everything can be lost to both of you ... for the child, maybe forever. Or it may turn out that today's will be *the final test*.

Walk a mile in their shoes

How often do you feel that the pressure is on you to take responsibility for the behaviour and maturity of the youth you work with? We easily get the feeling that "society" (whatever that is) is leaning on us to get these kids out of their hair. "Society" here may mean the mayor and/or the politicians, the state welfare department or the agency who sent the kids to you in the first place. Closer to home, the school, and maybe the neighbours who live up and down the street where our agency lives, are leaning on us to see that the kids are not a nuisance, that they are unobtrusive and polite and pose no threat to their peace and quiet. Maybe it's the families, the moms and dads and grandparents and uncles who have been struggling with these youngsters who say to you (in reality or in your mind) "OK Mr or Ms Child and Youth Care Worker, so you think you can do better than we did, how are you managing our kid today?

Well today you can have the day off. Forget about the kids' behaviour. What difference will one day make? Today we are taking the pressure off so that *you* can devote some time to yourself, your focus, your presence of mind, your own growth.

Your task: Simply try to learn more about what these kids think and feel, listen to them, interpret their (often

harsh) words and their (often frightening and challenging) actions. See what you make of their noise and their silences. Ask yourselves. Ask them. What is it about their attacks and their hurts? Their acting big and their inner smallness. Aim today to educate yourself, to open yourself to what you see and hear, so that you end your shift with more understanding, more empathy, a more real picture of who this kid is, this kid who goes out every day to survive and manage and win or lose or hurt or be hurt ...

Imagine yourself in their position — how you would be feeling about stuff, what you would do, what you would long for. Feel and think yourself into where they are, into the choices they are making, the shreds of resources which they are drawing on, the limited knowledge and skills at their disposal, the tasks they face ... walk a mile in their shoes.

And then come on in to work again tomorrow, with all the pressure back on.

Nobody owns one

There is a well known saying among cat owners that nobody owns a cat. However vulnerable and domesticated they may appear, they are the most independent and strong minded creatures around. We may feed them, and refer them when necessary to a reputable vet, but beyond that, within the first six weeks of life, nature and their mothers seem to have taught them everything they need to know. We may pick them up and stroke them, but then we must put them back down and they will skip off into their own wholly inscrutable lives.

The kids we work with are in many ways like that. When we first meet them we have virtually no idea of their complex and tangled lives, their backgrounds, families and histories.

Just like cats, most of them came to us because they were in some sort of fight, run over — or lost. Many of us are tempted to want to "own" them in some way, to rewrite their past, manage their present, and plan their future. Knowing nothing, we are all-knowing about how they should be.

But the world they want to go back to is not our world. Most are grateful for the respite, the food and the hospitality; they appreciate that we walked alongside them through some scary times and perhaps shone some light into dark places in their lives. We pick them up and stroke them, but we remember Gibran's counsel that "your children are not your children ..." We must put them back down, and onwards they go.

Nobody owns a child.

A good time

The way each day turns out in our program is usually a compromise. We adults bring a number of expectations and requirements to the table, the kids bring along their needs and wants, and through a hundred minute transactions the river of the daily timetable finds its course. We hear each others' verbal requests and messages, whether these may be whispered, spoken our yelled, and we "read" ten times as much from the non-verbal cues – the raising of an eye-brow, the look of reluctance, the encouraging gesture, the acquiescent nod.

According to how the kids respond, we may become authoritative {"That must be done now."), we may do some horse-trading ("OK, We'll do that if you

do that first ...") or we may back down ("I can see you really don't want that.")

We know that we are often on shaky ground, because there are times when we are honestly alert to a child's capacity or lack of capacity to undertake a particular task today, and we pace the child; but there are also times when in the rush of things we relent because it will be less trouble all round; anything for a quiet life!

This may be more serious than we think. We find that there are many children and youth, especially those who suffered early deprivation, who simply look each day for stroking and satisfaction. They are 'stuck' in an infantile stage where they 'cry' to be picked up or to be fed. Of course at nine or fourteen they might not actually *cry*, but in some way (during all this busy daily timetable) they convey their neediness and restlessness, and we reach for a 'comforter'. This comforter may be candy, it may be compliance with their demands (or relaxation of ours), it may be a movie or some other "good time" which satisfies them.

There's nothing wrong with this — unless we lose sight of every child's developmental urgency — especially the child who is already "behind". Today's "good time" must never simply be followed by tomorrow's "good time", because then we are drawn into the voracious spiral of the well recognised "bottomless pit" phenomenon of the continuing needy child.

Our task lies in building today's good time into a growing sense of security and trust. If we are using the good time simply to appease, to relieve, we reach evening having not made progress. Our team has to find ways to verbalise, reflect on, debrief and consolidate the daily good experiences so that the young person makes new meaning of them, an increasingly more mature construction about the safety and reliability of his or her world, and so can move on.

If the child is still needy next week, next month, then we have not yet succeeded in this. We have more thinking and work to do.

Three's company

We talk a lot about "one-on-one" work with troubled kids. The oft-discussed notion of the "child and youth care relationship" may seem to suggest that this is strictly a dyadic relationship, but this is seldom so. Beyond conventional therapy, a child and youth care relationship occurs within the life space of children and youth – while they are getting on with life – even though the living environment may currently be more or less controlled, programmed or augmented.

A purely two-person relationship between worker and client is problematic. It is an improbable relationship which would stretch cognitive, experience and language commonalities, and exclude significant areas of the youth's life. If we were left with nothing beyond intervention goals ("let's talk about your problems") such a relationship would be awkward indeed.

An important method in our work is that of "joining". We choose not to distance youngsters from where they are living their lives, but rather to join them, their group or activity or task. This way we leave them in touch with their roles, building their own understanding, staying responsible for their functioning, earning their own growth or success.

There is a sense in which the relationship we offer should have within it the seeds of its own demise. Our participation is aimed at improving the youth's relationships with others. To whatever extent a young person may come to rely or depend on us, we will be better positioned to demonstrate and facilitate his or her capacity to sustain a relationship with others — and therefore to rely less on us and become less dependent on us.

Today, instead of feeling that you must get eyeball-to-eyeball to "have a relationship" with a kid, look for a third

element which the two of you can kick around together, and which you, the worker, can leave behind when you move away. This can be an interest, a task, the family, a group, a game, a topic, a skill, an item of news, music ... whatever allows the two of you legitimately to spend time together.

It's always you and the kid ... and someone or something else.

Nice climate, lousy weather

If you're lucky enough to be able to choose where you live, one factor in your choice would probably be the climate. So you choose this idyllic place with a wonderful climate where they schedule days and days of warmth, calm and sunshine — but today there's a howling, bitter north-wester bringing pounding, stinging rain. Nice climate, lousy weather.

That's not a bad meteorological model for your program.

An essential component of any program, whether it is a long or short

term residential facility or just a place where people come, is the environment we create. This environment will have certain qualities such as the spaces and resources we need, and the people equipped to carry out the tasks of the program.

Another quality of our environment will be its *climate*. An environment is a "world" which we enter, and whether it is just the local community hall on Friday nights or a 24/7 high security youth detention centre, we are responsible for appropriate warmth, calm and sunshine. This climate will have a feel, and your program will decide the necessary levels of safety, comfort, challenge, latitude and attitude which suit your clientele. Just as we might choose where to live, so clients will find in our climate the qualities they can use and commit to. Or they won't.

We spend a lot of time planning this *climate* to suit our program goals, and no doubt the climate in your place will be essentially different from the climate in mine. But the *weather* is whatever may happen from day to day — and in most programs for troubled kids and families there are going to be north-westers, chills and storms. In fact, part of the intelligent climate we build is that it allows storms, and it makes allowances for storms, and yet holds all within the security and hopefulness of a prevailing climate which is planned and managed.

Our wisdom lies in the planning of a baseline climate which serves the tolerance levels and function of our program; our generosity and daily work lies in accepting and entering the tough weather and the storms which are a function of the struggle and hurt of our clients, knowing (both for ourselves and the kids) that tomorrow (OK, maybe the next day) our good climate will resume.

Concrete alternative beliefs

So many young people arrive in our programs with feelings of pessimism and fixed ideas of their own worthlessness or guilt. Some of those you will work with today have started their day with these expectations of the worst and a sense of their own powerlessness.

Mosak talked of the "personal mythology" which troubled children collect around them, and on which they base much of their behaviour. Examples are:

- over-generalisation ("There is no fairness in the world");
- false or impossible goals ("I must please everyone if I am going to feel loved");
- misconceptions of life and its demands ("life is so very hard for me");
- denial of one's basic worth ("I'm basically stupid, so why would anyone what anything to do with me?");
- faulty values ("Get to the top, regardless of who gets hurt in the process") ... (Corey, 1986)

Most adults respond to these messages with superficial reassurance. "Of course you're not stupid," they say, or "Yes, life is fair." But in our involvement in the life space of hurt and angry kids, child and youth care workers take these beliefs and feelings seriously. Verbal contradictions are seldom of help.

In our way of being with them, we allow children and youth really to experience fairness, worth, acceptance, empowerment, values ... They tell us that nobody ever listens to them. We listen to them. Their

negative feeling of insignificance is thus challenged. They tell us they are unlikeable. We like them. They are thrown back onto a re-evaluation of their personal value. They tell us they are useless. We find opportunities for them to demonstrate their own abilities. They feel less useless.

Beedell taught that "acceptance then is a general attitude taken up by the unit and the people in it. It is not expressed in a vacuum or necessarily verbally, but by *what people do*." Our involvement and interventions today are not to be measured by how good we think they are; the true test is *how the kids experience them.*

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Contracting: preparing the ground

We are usually suspicious of the idea of "contracts" with kids, especially when these are no more than lists of adult-imposed expectations with built in sanctions — just as I am with the so-called "consequence" when this word is clearly synonymous with "punishment".

But there is a sense in which contracts are valuable in a child and youth care program. It is always helpful to outline for young people what they might expect from our program, and what we might expect from them. From our side we will not, for example, promise a solution to all known problems, just as we will not

expect from the youngsters a miraculous cessation of the anxieties and behaviours which brought them to us.

Nevertheless our program is more than a neutral ball of cottonwool. We do have program goals, and methods to pursue them. And, however much time we set apart for respite and reassurance and for getting to know each other, we must soon enough start work on these goals.

This is where the contract idea is useful. At the outset we will indicate the issues we are going to be working at, and both staff and youth will know that in due course these issues will arise. So we say "We will be talking about this and working at this."

Often it is embarrassing to raise a sore issue with a youth, an issue which has, for example, been a source of conflict or failure or pain. We may even be tempted ourselves to avoid raising the issue, being (as we often are) 'scared of the sight of blood'.

But when we say up front "We will be talking about this, we will be working on this", the subject is already on the table. The youth will probably start working at it, putting ideas into words, preparing.

"Over-therapising"

That's a terrible word, "over-therapising", but it has appeared once or twice in the literature. It refers to the tendency of child and youth care workers (no doubt out of their concern for the best interests and protection of kids) to bustle about and be too solicitous for the young people in their programs. It refers to the possibility that kids continue to be seen for too long as being "in therapy" while they may in fact have finished with our work and now need a chance to test out their new insights and abilities in the real world.

The *real world* is a place where we (all of us) test out our new learning, where we might fail, get hurt, screw up — yet where we learn our most valuable lessons. It is also a place, when we are working through our middle and late adolescence, which is at times a necessarily lonely and personally challenging place which we have to "do" by ourselves. The demands of young adulthood usually expect of us a quality of autonomy and commitment which we earn during our individual accommodations during adolescence. We who work close to kids who have been through difficulties do tend too easily to rush in when we see them alone or lonely, forgetting that these are signs of generic adolescence just as much of troubled adolescents.

One of the most moving descriptions remembered from years of practice was that of a child and youth care worker who had walked a long and agonising walk with a young girl who had had to learn some really tough lessons. In the final stages of this struggle the worker had found it almost unbearable to watch the girl grappling with her doubts and lack of confidence in the face of a crisis; the worker longed to reach out to hug and reassure the youth – but in the final moment she withheld the hug and the support, leaving the girl to rely on herself. The worker's generosity in that moment lay in not giving, rather allowing her the space to find her own solutions and strengths — and thus achieving the better outcome.

We remember that the word therapy means "waiting upon". In our work today, instead of doing too much for them, we will prefer to watch how kids are managing, giving them opportunities to read situations and make choices for themselves, and to see how satisfied *they* are with their performance. When it is time, what we may offer will be only temporary and only what is necessary for them to function by themselves.

Why do I feel this way?

It's Catch-22 isn't it? We maintain a safe distance from hurt kids and we never get to the point where we are trusted, significant, effective; or we commit and invest ourselves in a relationship and we find ourselves getting hurt.

When we are confronted by destructive behaviour and hostility from a youth we are working with, we are commonly tempted to become defended, angry and rejecting in return. We owe it both to ourselves and to the kids to ask "Why do I feel this way?" (This level of self-inquiry is really your work, and what follows are only some ideas onto which you may want to stitch your own.)

None of us can escape having done our homework on this youngster to establish whether we are dealing with:

(a) someone who lost out on some knowledge, skills and learning and for whom we can be teacher, guide and mentor; or
(b) someone who still lives in a world of rejection, abandonment and betrayal.

Probably we are here dealing with child (b), who longs for attachment and affection – but has come to expect nothing and will take some convincing. So why are we feeling defended and angry?

One pivotal reason for our negative reaction to difficult youth, of course, is our own frustration. We are not seeing improvement in the youth's behaviour or attitudes, so our own skills and performance are on the line — and our self-image gets dented. Also we are ourselves often the target of attack and hostility — and our ego gets dented. If these things are getting at us, we are facing in exactly

the wrong way. When we are more concerned about ourselves, we have little to give. We have knowingly, as consenting adults, entered the life space of troubled youth, and we know that there will be issues flying about, many of them about adults. "So why do I feel this way?"

For one thing, this youth's rage may be stirring up our own sediment, the deeper stuff of our own human nature and experience which we thought was long buried and where we don't really want to go right now. We have to confront and recognise this if we are to reach empathy with this young person — if we're going to know how he or she really feels.

And we may realise that there is no quick fix for this kid, no words of good advice and then walking away. To really attend to this kid will mean going the distance, the long walk, with lots more tough behaviour yet to come ... also where we don't really want to go right now.

It's Catch-22, isn't it?

Who's in charge?

The phrase "locus of control" (literally "place" or "centre" of control) has been used to describe whether a youngster has internalised personal responsibility and decision-making (internal locus of control) – or whether "authority" and control are still exercised by others (external locus of control).

In the process of normal development we usually watch the locus of control move progressively through childhood and adolescence from outer to inner. A primary function of upbringing is to teach (discipline) children in developing their own inner control and so achieve autonomy, and to reduce their dependency on outer control (which reflects Kohlberg's model of moral development).

Sometimes the adults don't get this right. For example, over-controlling and authoritarian parents leave children unsure of themselves: they dominate and restrict their children, yet blame them when they don't make sensible decisions. Such children may become:

(a) over-compliant and therefore at risk of continuing to be dominated by others, or
(b) aggressive and rebellious as they reject adult influence and leadership.

In other cases, adults offer no guidelines (discipline) at all and the child lives a trial- and-error existence, struggling to make sense of people and the world at large. The children in such a case may become:

(a) hesitant and anxious, constantly looking about for guidance and for cues of approval/disapproval, or
(b) settle for their own – often fragile and ill-fitting – set of beliefs and values to guide their actions.

All of us in this work are familiar with kids for whom this process has gone wrong. And in our daily practice we are careful not to compound their problems by unthinkingly ordering them about and demanding instant obedience, or (just as unthinkingly) leaving them entirely to their own devices when they are longing for a lead from us.

Locus of control can be a helpful model when we are seeking direction with a particular child or youth. Sometimes we may have to go back a few steps and repair and rebuild some basic trust in adults so as to facilitate a healthier transition to autonomy. Sometimes we just need to be careful in our day-to-day care, making sure that we are following a considered developmental path with the youth.

> *"How can responsibility be given to the immature and to the irresponsible? There is no way out of the dilemma that unless it is granted, the child cannot learn how to exercise it."*
> – Mia Kellmer Pringle

Living life today

So many of the admonitions and corrections we offer to young people have to do with their futures. "You have to learn how to ..." , "One day you are going to have to ..." or "if you don't get good grades this year ..." Our message seems to be that childhood and youth are no more than periods of preparation for adulthood. Adulthood, in this view, is seen as the ambition and fulfilment of kids' lives.

Yes, it is true that we learn from one stage of development things which will be useful in succeeding stages. In fact we know that later stages are often tougher when we have not gained minimal learning and skills during the "work" of earlier stages. But there is no universal checklist on which we have to get 100% perfect grades before we can be admitted to the next stage. "Sorry, you cannot be enrolled in Late Adolescence 101 because you have done a lousy job of your previous grades!"

Some of the fiercest debates in education during the 20th century were about learning and examinations. "Am I learning this material because it is intrinsically useful or am I learning it to satisfy an examiner?" More to the point: "In my schooldays am I only learning *things about life for later use*, or am I *already living life*?"

Emphasising the dichotomy between childhood and adulthood contributes to the alienation of young people, to the barriers so often thrown up between us, to the feelings of hostility and exclusion so often experienced. In the modern age, because we seem to be doing such different things, we lose the *continuity* of human generations. There are mountains where there were earlier only passes, chasms where there were bridges.

But what has this to do with our

practice today?

If we expect youngsters in our programs to be doing no more than jumping through the hoops of our curriculum to satisfy some future yardstick of society, then today will be grim and joyless indeed. These kids, especially these kids, cannot be motivated over such time-scales. But if we alter our perspective to acknowledge that today *they are living life, not just preparing for life*, maybe they can go to bed tonight with some small successes and encouragements, small gains in beliefs and skills, small experiences of acceptance and belonging.

They may not yet have learned sophisticated social, educational and employment qualities — but they will have learned something far more valuable for their futures: that there is hope and that life is worth living.

Complex boundaries, complex questions

We hear a lot about boundaries — between worker and client, between work life and personal life, between this professional role and that one ... We use the concept of boundaries to maintain professional standards, to establish role clarity, to optimise our impact in the program, to avoid confusing and unhelpful "noise" in our work.

But these ideas might seem very abstract and forbidding to the confused youngster in our program who is looking for contact and support

— and with whom we as the staff and adults in the milieu we would value any opportunity to establish a relationship.

What happens if young Pete seeks out the attention of Kate who is the social worker, or young Tracey attaches herself to Gary who is an office worker, or Billy reaches out to Zane who is a child and youth worker in a different unit? Do we throw up the ramparts and declare certain people in our program to be off limits? Would we say "You may only see Kate by appointment," or "Kids are not meant to fraternise with kitchen staff," or "You can only deal with a care worker who is assigned to your unit"?

In most organisations typists are hired to be typists, electricians to be electricians and janitors to be janitors. Child and youth care organisations are inevitably a little different. We hire people whom we can trust to play certain roles (including typing, electrical repairs and cleaning) as they move about through our milieu. What if we are struggling to make contact with Billy who in turn finds it uncomfortable to relate to us with our professional qualifications and degrees — yet he clicks instantly with Bob who mows our lawns and fixes the windows? Do we, even if Bob is the ideal "bridge" between Billy and his familiar culture, say No, this is inappropriate, or do we try to find a way past the obvious boundary?

Can we say to Kate, you join our team as Kate the social worker and we will all benefit from your specific training, experience and knowledge base. But you also join our team as Kate the person, and this program is about people and we all find ourselves having to walk the talk with certain kids. And to Bob, your job is to help us keep the place in good repair, but with your vocational background and skills you may also be uniquely closer to some youth in the program than any of us can be. With our back-up and supervision we would also like you to accept, when needed, the role of just being "Bob".

Task clarity is always essential. But in a program where relationships are

the tools of our trade, and where there are so many kids and adults moving about through each others' space, maybe we can (always within the intervention plan and our staff supports) be flexible about those boundaries.

Passing the ball

We often use the metaphor of ball games in talking about initiative and responsibility. "The ball is in your court", "kicking the ball into play", and "aim for the goal."

The learning of life skills has many parallels with ball games. In most games the player has to learn the generic skills (like catching, throwing, batting, kicking, trapping, hitting, passing …) as well as the strategic skills, namely using the ball as part of a team effort in winning the game. The test of our generic skills lies in our ability to use the ball in a real-time game situation.

Much of our child and youth work lies in teaching kids to generalise new learning to the wider situations of real life. The effectiveness of our teaching lies in its usefulness back home. And as their "coaches", we provide situations for youngsters to put into practice the insights, controls and skills which we have taught.

But we are careful to grade these situations so that success is achievable – that is not to say that they are so easy as to require little or no effort; nor so difficult that we set youth up for failure.

A nice analogy from the game of soccer is that a player will pass the ball – not to a fellow player – but to a point which that fellow player can reach and from where he can do something strategically useful with it.

In our practice today we will avoid setting repetitive expectations for

children and their families which require no growth beyond yesterday's levels of ability, and we will avoid excessive demands which we know they cannot meet. We will always pass the ball *just a little ahead of them*, so that they must run for the ball and be able to so something different and new and interesting with it.

Teaching empathy

When we see so many acts of violence and destruction we easily become angry and aggressive ourselves, or we despair, not knowing what to do. How can these youth, we ask, have so little responsibility? How can they be so unconcerned and callous to others? Have they no feelings, no awareness of the hurt they inflict?

Probably not. It is very likely that children and youth who have a capacity to hurt are short on the ability to discern hurt in others. This has much to do with their preoccupation with their own hurt and loss – and as much with their inexperience in reading the feelings of others.

Bruce Perry, a specialist on bullying, says that children who have trouble forming attachments lose the ability to read cues from other people, for example, signs of anger or hurt; people who can't connect with others, he says, cannot develop empathy.

Empathy is one of the buzz words in restorative work with law-involved youth. Kohn writes about children's natural feelings of altruism and empathy but notes that some children "lose touch with their natural need to help when they shut down as a result of the physical or emotional pain inflicted upon them."

One of the reasons for a lack of conscience and empathy in anti-social and aggressive youth is that they have

not built up a sense of people's significance – neither their own significance, and as a consequence, nor a sense of others' significance. Without a capacity for empathy, they have a poor understanding of the impact their behaviour has on others.

So there is something we can do with our tougher kids: More effective than moralising and blaming, punishing and rejecting, it is the hard daily work of giving them words for their feelings, acknowledging and responding to their feelings, so that they feel attended to and significant. They in turn are increasingly able to understand when we help to articulate the feelings and the significance of others — and so, able to empathise.

Sibling rivalry

In any group setting it is common for some residents to feel left out – and they let you know it. You are working towards Rick and his mother spending longer periods together, and three others are quick to challenge with loaded questions: "How come Rick gets to go home to eat some nights and we have to eat this stuff?" Becky gets a chance to join her school's senior soccer team – "How come Becky gets to go out at night and we have to stay locked up in this place?"

To quieten the arguments (and the guilt-feelings these are meant to arouse in us) we are tempted to return to the old heresy that "all of the kids should be treated the same." OK! Nobody's going to get special privileges around here any more;

every body gets the same deal. Peace and quiet!

At too great a price. At the cost of losing some of the healthy beginnings of individualising we can see happening in the above scenario.

Two things:

1. All kids are different. Their interests, temperaments, families, talents, achievements and circumstances. Whatever we do in our program, whether in one-on-one work or in groups, is ultimately aimed at the development of each individual child or youth. When we are scrupulous about attending to the needs of each individual, nobody cares whether Rick goes home to eat with his mother or Becky plays hockey at night. When we consider each youth, by name, in our regular team meeting and personalise our action plan accordingly for the coming day or week, that individual youth is acknowledged, affirmed and encouraged in his or her personal life and strivings.
2. Needy kids provide a rich soil for sibling rivalry to flourish. Listen carefully to the mumblings and grumblings in the above scenario: these are not cerebral arguments – they are expressions of deep resentment which are spilling over into all aspects of the program. Our youth easily recognise aspects of their past lives which have been excluding and hurtful, and without the maturity or skill to deal with these, they readily react with destructiveness, subversion and negative groupings – and then we have a whole new can of worms which complicates the work of our program.

Today in our practice we will make the point of looking at particular kids and asking ourselves: "Does this youngster feel that we are considering his or her life, needs and strivings personally and individually?" No matter that we may still have some way to go before things get better and manageable for them, but they know we are working with them on this.

And we are not adding to their anxiety and anger by expecting that they must enter into rivalry with their "siblings" just to gain our attention.

Understanding needs

On the day they are born, children have this remarkable built-in alarm system: when they feel discomfort they tell us. They express their need or anxiety by grunting, squirming or yelling, and from Day One we are already making and testing hypotheses about what might be the trouble: Maybe she's too hot ? ... No ... Maybe she's hungry? ... No ... and so on.

The other thing children do automatically is that when we don't trouble-shoot accurately, they increase the intensity of their discomfort alarm: it gets louder, more urgent ... or they throw something.

The children and youth we work with have mostly not been heard when they have expressed needs. And like the more desperate infant who throws things, their way of drawing attention to their distress is more symbolic than direct. They throw things. We hear these descriptors: delinquents, anti-social youth, troubled kids, behaviorally disordered students, emotionally disturbed children ...

Our task is once again to make and test some hypotheses about these exaggerated ways of expressing needs which have developed: Maybe he is feeling excluded ... No ... Maybe he is frightened ... No ... We try to decode the scrambled message in order to meet the need being expressed *so that the youth can come to trust his ability to communicate his anxieties and angers to others.*

- We might hear one youth from across a yawning chasm of

separation and despair — almost out of reach
- Another may attack us and refuse our attentions — in the hope that we will persist
- Yet another may be tapping from the inside of a cupboard door ... and we tap gently back

The responsive dialogue we set up with him can be the forerunner of more pro-social and verbal ways of expressing himself and relating to others.

The simple lesson from all this: There is an urgency — If we fail to "hear" today, the youth's messages tomorrow will be even more noisy or oblique, harder to hear, and the situations he creates less containable or repairable. Listen today.

Being consistently inconsistent

The great heresy of our trade is that we should treat all youth the same. The directive on consistency is most often made for the sake of the staff rather than the children – to protect staff from possible criticism and to save them from the expectation to act individually, appropriately and creatively. When we respond to a child we hold in our minds a number of intersecting continua, and the variables which these generate and which ultimately affect our behaviour are infinite.

The first of these is the continuum of reacting – or not reacting at all. We will walk past Steve who is berating another fellow in the most obscene

terms. We do our quick mental checksum and decide whether his verbal barrage is really a vast improvement over the physical assault of last month; whether expressing his feelings at all is far healthier than his former bottled up rage; whether this growing assertiveness is a heartening substitute for his earlier submissiveness and vulnerability; whether Steve is working at a more fundamental and urgent stage than that of cordial manners ... And so we decide whether (or not) to pay any attention to his cussing. On the other hand, for that other child six feet away in the same room, who is a different person in a different set of circumstances, we may well decide to intervene. But we could never simply treat both in the same way.

So we run through these continua which help us decide on our response on a case by case basis. We notice Marie beginning to hit out at others and our checksum may warn us that this is *deteriorating* behaviour which calls for intervention; we see Rick smuggling a cigarette into the bathroom and we choose not even to notice.

What resolves these apparent inconsistencies is that they are subsumed under more important continua of our own — we know what is going on right now with our kids ... or we don't; we have an idea of where we are heading and have agreed on our team about priorities and urgencies ... or we haven't; we've worked out that to get through the present stage we may have to make some trade-offs ... or we're stuck on no-matter-what demands.

What looks like inconsistency is in fact consistently applied thinking. If our friend Steve from paragraph two were to behave destructively at a later stage when he can (or needs to) be more mature and responsible, we will (seemingly inconsistently) respond differently. Greek philosopher Heraclitus summed it up thus: No man can cross the same river twice, because the second time it is not the same man — nor is it the same river.

Re-learning from experience

There is so much we would like to *explain* to the kids we work with. That the family break-up wasn't their fault, that they didn't deserve rejection, that they don't have to be compliant in order to avoid being beaten, that they are not evil, that they should not be forced to do things they don't want to do in order to be acceptable, that life is not arbitrary and hopeless ...

Children who have grown up in an atmosphere of blame, threat and punishment, often as targets of others' projections of their own inadequacies and failures, have not learned to understand cause and effect. And where there have been gross inconsistencies in parents' behaviour as with addictions or mental illness, life has been quite unpredictable. Their own role in their lives is minimised, dependent on the capriciousness of other people and life circumstances. Unable to associate their apprehension and trauma with something *they had done*, they easily assume the fault to be *who they are*.

Adolescents pose a particular problem in this regard as they have sought words, ideas and belief systems to "rationalise" their confusing and negative experiences. They fall easy prey to deterministic and fundamentalist ideas which further subvert their sense of individual worth and personal responsibility.

So many youngsters will tell us that they came into our program through their fault; that they did wrong. When kids feel that they are bad, useless or hateful it is not enough for us to reassure them verbally. We want to say "*Of course* you are important (capable, worthwhile, lovable ...)" We also want

to convince them by discussion and reasoning – forgetting that they have their own meanings for all the words we have been using here, as well as their frantic and tenuous grip on a philosophy which "explains" their present status and circumstances.

* * *

The essence of life-space work is that we have the opportunity to translate affection, safety, acceptance, respect, meaning, hope (fill in your own words here) into *the children's daily lived experience*. That which they expect to happen, and against which they are fearful and defensive, does not happen. That which they thought was impossible, can happen.

In our practice today we offer to children, youth and families scrupulously honest and rational communications, so that they learn to trust their perception and their judgement for when they return to live in a less than perfect world.

Generalising ... and again

A staff team was divided over the progress being made by one youth – a fifteen-year-old girl, Selma, who preferred to keep to herself and answered any unwanted approaches with abuse and avoidance. A "tough customer," thought most of the team – and her single mother matched her for unapproachability and bitterness.

Merry was a child and youth counsellor whose timetable brought her more frequently into contact with Selma. After five or six weeks, she began to make tentative inroads into Selma's defences, drawing less fire and uncovering the beginnings of mutuality. Selma began at least to look up at her when Merry talked to her, she answered with less irritation, and on one or two occasions had

chosen to come and sit near to her in the girl's rec room. Merry had made room for these small gains and reciprocated with understated acceptance.

It was at the evaluation that the team differed. Merry insisted that there was change and growth in Selma. The rest of the staff, who still experienced the prickly Selma, were not prepared to agree with this more positive appraisal. By majority vote Selma was still seen as uncooperative and anti-social – and several of the staff saw the girl as manipulative and devious since she appeared to be playing one care worker off against the others: clearly she was behaving one way for Merry and another for the other staff.

It is common for children and youth from troubled social backgrounds to generalise from their limited experience with one parent to adults in general. It is probable that Selma's school teachers might also have fed into her negative image of adults, so that Selma would have come to see adults generally as disapproving and rejecting.

* * *

It is a central element in the child and youth work relationship that youngsters are presented with additional and alternative experiences of adults and that these can challenge the old generalisations and hopefully enrich kids' knowledge of adults, thus allowing for more realistic pictures.

We cannot expect Selma instantly to revise her attitudes and behaviours towards adults. But what seems to be happening is that Merry is offering the girl a better model to generalise from, and is at least becoming one new potentially significant adult. A budding relationship with one adult is progress, and Merry's staff colleagues should be more concerned about confirming this new process than resenting the fact that it will take time.

Everyday events speech

We are probably all agreed that "child and youth care workers do it with everyday events". Instead of setting up a lot of high-sounding therapeutic tasks, we prefer simply to be around when kids are doing whatever it is that they do in the course of their daily lives anyway – eat, play, talk, clean, learn, hang out ...

We do this so that youngsters can remain engaged upon normal life tasks, and thus collect experiences which will continue to "work" back home – where we all still have to wash up, iron clothes and pick up after us.

But how often do we subvert this "everyday" principle by using words which make what they learn in our programs less portable and transferrable back home? Even for the word "home" we use words like treatment centre, campus, cottage or unit. Instead of domestic words we use rec room, lockers, dorms and classrooms. For Norm and Claire we use carers, staff, houseparents, therapists. For household tasks we use cafeteria duty, janitorial fatigues, ablutions!

We must remember that we don't want the kids to clean up our facilities; we want them to pick up values around the health, comfort and order of wherever they stay. We don't want them to obey our supervisors and overnights; we want them to see the value of what people do and recognise what others contribute. We don't want them to be loyal to St Mary's or Forest Glade Group Home; we only hope that they will want the best for their families and siblings in their homes – and in the homes they will eventually make for their own families and children.

It is when we are washing dishes or sorting socks that the really generous actions about sharing home and living together are clearest – and (for our kids who are with us now) will continue to be for the next fifty years.

Intervention version 1.0

"But," said Mike at the team meeting, "I specifically remember our agreeing that in such circumstances we should first bear in mind what the community might feel about that."

Stephanie, team leader for the current term, replied: "Mike! That was three years ago! At that stage we were relatively new to this, and since then we've all grown heaps."

That happens in the child and youth care business. Something that "worked" for us, way back when, might have been appropriate at the time, but it tends to stay on in our repertoire of interventions even if it is no longer appropriate for us.

In our early years in practice we often shared "tricks" for achieving certain goals with difficult groups or individual kids. When we look back honestly we recognise that those "goals" were not always the most worthy: they were often to bring groups under control or to exert pressure on certain youth to do what we thought best for them — often to reduce our own anxiety or help us avoid the tricky tasks.

Today we have grown more mature goals — like giving kids the opportunity to have their say rather than shutting them up, or allowing them to have a shot at solving problems their way instead of prescribing our "better" ideas — but we have kept some of our old tools lying around which we are tempted to use when we are tired or irritable or less inclined to risk. (What might some of these old tools be?)

What old interventions do we have lying around? Let's trade them in for later versions which fit with more integrity into our current practice.

Critical mass

A birthday party for a six-year-old is just not going to work if there are only three guests. The thing won't get off the ground. You need enough kids to merge everything into a collective noun. A cacophony of kids.

A residential program for children and youth is also not going to work if there are only three guests. One of the factors which helps us decide between family care, foster care and residential care is the type of program needed, and residential care is geared to the benefits of *group experiences* as a way back to smaller family-scaled living.

For example, some kids may need a period of respite from in-your-face parental figures, and will appreciate the relative anonymity which a period in a group care setting offers. Others may need a regimen of regularity, or activities or peer exposure or learning opportunities which can be "economically" provided in group care. Within a properly managed group, children and youth will often gain in abilities, inclusion, tolerance. co-operativeness, belonging, assertiveness, achievement ... you will have your own items for this list.

Within the living group we can create areas as needed for special attention for children and youth, making allowances for incremental learning and "catching up" with their age group. In the daily program we can include "normal" activities like games and sports, whether monopoly or chess, soccer or basketball. It is important that kids learn some universal participation skills like these to take away with them into

their adult lives. Yet our kids are often "not good enough" for school or club teams: they may not have developed the skills to be chosen for a game, or they may not have the stability or frustration tolerance to see it through. So again, we create areas for special attention, making allowances for "catching up".

But residential programs today often have very small enrolments. What if we don't have enough kids to make up a team? How can we reach "critical mass" to get something going? It only takes two to shoot hoops, but we need more than three kids for a soccer game. This is where child and youth care workers can show their ingenuity. How about setting up a "learners' group" at the local school which can include some of the community's kids as well as ours? Or how about renting that field down the road or the local scout hall once a week, and including local kids in an activity group?

We will be there to integrate and facilitate our own kids and our own program goals. The local kids will get something out of it. Our kids get a chance to mix with others who also need to learn new skills. And we will come home afterwards with a group of kids who all played some, learned some and achieved some.

Waiting for attention

Have you ever watched people sitting in the waiting room of a public hospital? They generally fall into three categories ...

First are those who are untroubled about being there. They take the hospital visit in their stride, they don't mind having to wait a while, and understand that they are there in the interests of their health.

Second are those who are anxious about the visit. They look up

expectantly whenever someone enters the waiting room. Is it my turn now? Have they come for me? Is this the moment? They may be trying to read a book or play with a game, but they are only half concentrating on these, and are easily distracted by any movement or change in the room. They watch the eyes of the newcomer, wanting to signal their need, attract attention, anxious not to be left out or to miss their proper turn.

Then there are those who are afraid – maybe the dentist's waiting room is closer to this third scenario! They would rather not have to go through this appointment. They experience apprehension when the door opens, they would happily slouch down in order to be missed when their turn comes or become fiercely "engrossed" in the book. They may wander down the passage – or happily go home with some story about the hospital being too busy or the doctor didn't turn up.

* * *

In our practice today we are keenly aware of the levels of expectation of those we work with. The untroubled are those who are coping satisfactorily. They have come to trust the environment, understand its purpose, and can wait until their appointment at 4.00 pm. We have, between us, reached the point where we are operating on a reasonable, verbal level, and are probably looking ahead to re-entry into family and/or community.

The anxious ones we immediately recognise for their need for attention. Is it my turn now? We often have no idea of our acute significance when we walk as adults into the company of needy children and youth: that they long to be noticed, acknowledged, included – not as a treat or a kind tidbit, but as a means to engagement, an opportunity for a real encounter. Is it my turn now?

And those who are hardest to reach, the reluctant and unwilling, who look the other way or hide their presence from us. They often seem to be busy with their own thoughts, even at ease.

They are at pains to be unobtrusive, neutral, not warranting an intervention. They are 'keep-your-distance kids' who most need us to drop down beside them, to slide into the next seat. Tangled in their least wanting us, they most want us to reach out.

Time to relax

No such thing. If we have a group of six or sixteen young people in our group, then every minute is precious, and when we are on duty, we are on duty!

Trouble is that in our work there are so often the crises, the tense moments, the dramas. There is always someone aggressively staking out his domain or high as a kite or too sick to go to school or barricaded into her room or terrifyingly depressed ... When we have spent time with these situations and the intensity has (for the moment, at least) passed, we are tempted to make some tea and wait for the next episode. We call this the "putting out fires" mode of child and youth care work. And the worker who only puts out fires is damned forever only to put out fires.

Today, instead of asking ourselves what horrors need to be fought, ask what assets and strengths need to be added to the lives of our kids. Ten minutes listening to one child's opinion adds ten minutes to her sense of self and can buy ten minutes of better frustration tolerance for her tomorrow; ten minutes of empathy with one child today adds ten minutes of understanding and tolerance for him today and a ten minutes longer fuse on his need for resentment and revenge tomorrow.

We know that when there is no stress and rage, kids are more receptive to what we have to offer. So grab the good times when you can.

When we have attended to the drama we have time, not for relaxation, but for some of our best work.

One size fits all?

In many residential centres the levels of noise may be loud, very loud or @#$%*& loud. Similarly the activity level may range between rough, boisterous and *wild* man! A derivative of Parkinson's Law might state that noise and activity will expand to fill the space provided.

So the people who designed your centre thought it would be nice to devote generous space for recreation where there's a table tennis table, a snooker table and a football machine – and the scale of the room gets to dictate the scale of the action and the racket ... big.

The down side is that in large spaces behaviours (in order to make some impact) must be exaggerated and communications must generally be shouted, not spoken. Also, everything gets to happen in public: arguments draw crowds, breakdowns happen in public, in-groups and out-groups are emphasised, and the kids (and staff) are generally over-stimulated.

The people who designed such a centre were wrong. Especially for kids who must be in our centre. When it comes to spaces, it is always a good idea to have *a progression of sizes* — from the small and private ... to space for small group interactions ... and eventually to larger areas. Kids will choose spaces which are comfortable for what they want to do. We know that anxious kids need a sense of "control" of their spaces and they are overwhelmed when they are living in a ratio of 1:10 or 1:20 or worse. We also know that kids who always pick the crowd scenes need scaled-down

human experiences. (Much of our work involves moving unconfident and defensive behaviour outwards towards being more assertive and expressive; and moving aggressive and destructive behaviour inwards towards being more co-operative and other-oriented.)

So for staff. Life space work is difficult when it becomes a spectator sport. We should not have to bring a youngster "to the office" every time we need to communicate something personal. Drawing a youth aside needs a place aside. Practising a new behaviour does not always need a large audience.

If we have inherited a centre which has a limited range of spaces – industrial rather than human-scaled – our next project may be to buy some timber, boarding and doors, hammers and nails, then hire some kids and design something more useful.

The person next to you

You are on duty in one of the tougher units where there is often hair-trigger tension amongst an often hardheaded and competitive group. One of the leading tasks of the unit is to work at non-violent conflict handling – and this group certainly provides enough material to work on!

A situation arises where you have to make a tough call. Two youths are squaring up over a billiard cue that one of them has broken in frustration. These two are key members in two distinct groups in the unit, and the stakes of this clash can quickly spiral. You decide in the moment to put the immediate circumstances above the

unit's general goals — you quickly close off your section of the unit to dampen down any possible spread of disorder.

* * *

It's at time like this that we are reminded of our accountability to the team as a whole, and specifically of our association with our staff colleague on the floor. The person next to us may be any or all of ...

- Our co-worker with whom we consult and share decisions, who may or may not always see things as we see them and who may agree or disagree with our actions.
- Our back-up on whom we may decide to call – or not – depending on the circumstances, and the person who may just as well call on us for support.
- The staff member with a specific role in this group such as arbitrator, crisis intervener, group leader.
- A team member with longer service, more senior position, further training and to whom you would normally defer ... or a less experienced colleague whom you should be exposing increasingly to wider experience.
- Your role-model to whom you look up to and who mentors you in your occupation — or vice-versa, the person who models on you and relies on you.
- Your practice critic who, simply in the role of colleague, participates in your team supervision and shares responsibility for your professional growth.
- Your personal friend with whom you share a degree of your after-hours life, and which you have to scrupulously monitor insofar as private and working life can interfere with each other.

All this in the blink of an eye as we do our difficult work. We could lose this quality of collegial presence by closing ourselves off from this awareness — but certainly both we and the young people we work with gain immeasurably when we share our practice, in trust and openness, with our fellow care workers.

The hygienic environment

It is true that when youngsters are referred to our program because of some behavioural or emotional "problem", we don't want simply to suppress or deny the expression of that problem. That does not help with a problem; it only hides it. If, for example, there is an issue of hostility or aggression or drug use or over-dependent behaviour, we will understand it better if we can observe the circumstances in which such problem behaviours arise.

But this is not to say that we should *permit* or *create* an environment which provokes or exacerbates a problem. It is our obligation always to maintain a milieu which is normative and hygienic – in the sense that it allows no contagion or aggravation. We also owe it to the milieu to ensure that (in a less dramatic sense) it doesn't convey any generalised denial of needs or frustration of goals which can "raise the ambient emotional temperature"– such as a chronic lack of fulfilment, reward or approval; the limiting regimen of arbitrary rules: you can't do this, you mustn't do that; shallower relationships with adults, less recognition of growth, less sense of personal achievement — all of these contribute to a frustrating and denying environment which is essentially unhygienic.

Also unhygienic is the absence of adequate management of escalating situations in the moment. Adult presence, facilitation, mediation, early intervention and, where necessary, physical manipulation within the life space are crucial. The presence of adults who can avoid escalation and teach constructive resolution is always assumed in an hygienic environment.

Today in our practice, apart from

considerations of safety, we are careful not to suppress, deny or hide the behaviours by which the kids (however inexpertly) express themselves; at the same time we do not permit situations which worsen or further distort clumsy or troubled behaviour. There is a sensitive art in maintaining an environment in which we can observe and engage young people, yet not further spread problems around.

Through fresh eyes

We are often reminded by our friends that we are losing our values – if not our minds. A friend was visiting our program and we had picked one of the small sitting room corners for a cup of tea. Two or three of the kids joined us there, just hanging out. 15-year-old Andrew picked up a magazine, made himself comfortable, and rested a heel on the coffee table. "Take your foot off that table, at once!" I reacted. My visitor laughed. I looked at her. "I was just imagining you," she said, "talking to your next-door neighbour like that – or to a new child!"

She was right. Familiarity can breed contempt. Unless we stay alert to the children and youth we work with, and to our roles with them, we can easily get used to them, tire of them, forget to respect them. Of course Andrew mustn't put his foot on the furniture, but I mustn't treat him like a piece of furniture!

In our practice today there is an exercise we can do. As we approach each child, for whatever purpose, imagine that he or she is a newcomer or a neighbour. Let's remind ourselves of how differently we often treat newcomers. Forget that Jackie is a bit of a whiner, that Greg is scratchy in the early morning, that Henry has a way of hijacking all conversations or

that Sheila is going to argue about her turn to clean up after breakfast – and remember that we have a way of building immunity to these kids' irritations, that we become less sensitive and responsive to them. In a way we anticipate their tiresome behaviours, we expect the worst. And, sure enough ... (And then, when you're alone with yourself, ask why.)

Today, imagine they're the neighbours' kids. Imagine they're newly-arrived kids. See them through fresh eyes.

Fact or ... fact?

Listen in: Margaret (the supervisor) says to Lisa (child and youth worker): "Here's a new fact we have to deal with: Sharon (youth, 15) feels that you are beginning to dislike her. She feels that some days you are impatient with her and even avoiding her."

Lisa: "But that's not true! I don't know how she can say that – and how can you call it a 'fact' when it's obviously not?"

Not an uncommon reaction on our part as child care workers when a client's feeling or opinion is reported to us. When we commit to work with a youngster and spend time and energy on the relationship, we are tempted to oversimplify our own expectations of the relationship. When we see signs of reciprocity and rapport we smell

success – but when the reports sound negative we find ourselves protesting and being defensive.

The child and youth care work relationship is more complex than "things are/are not going well". Here is a common difficulty: It may not be true that Lisa is beginning to dislike or become impatient with Sharon. *But that Sharon feels this way is a clinical fact.*

This report from her supervisor is not a criticism of Lisa's relationship with Sharon, but important objective information about how Sharon is feeling in this relationship. Within the process of working with Sharon this may mean any of a dozen things, for example:

- To feel more secure in her relationship with Lisa, Sharon may have spawned this rumour to secure more of Lisa's attention;
- Sharon may for the first time be using this relationship to deal with her issues of rejection, and the relationship may be entering a critical period;
- Lisa may be working at loosening some over-dependency on Sharon's part, and will learn from this report to take this stage more slowly ...

We listen carefully to what our clients say. The words may or may not be literal truth. But the fact that they say these words is true and of profound interest to us.

Redefining for objectivity

Do we ever hear a dentist berating his patient because she has sprung another cavity in her molar? "I'm sick and tired of you Mrs Jones. As a consequence I am not allowing you to eat for the rest of this week!" Or a teacher to her pupil: "That's it! How dare you fail yet

another test in climatology? No more playing in the sunshine for you!"

Our child and youth clients don't come to us because of dental caries or to be taught Geography. They come to us needing help with things like neglect and abuse or learning to handle frustration and hurt. Yet the signs of their distress, instead of challenging our professional and practice skills, so easily evoke our anger and judgment. We evaluate their actions as "bad" and "unacceptable" and we assume our clients are being willful and incorrigible. We take their behaviour moralistically or personally and respond with criticism and threat. We order them to "stop this behaviour".

(Hear the dentist: "Mrs Smith, this cavity is inexcusable and you are a bad, bad person. You must stop this symptomatology immediately, and fix that molar before coming back to see me!")

In our practice we try to avoid the angry and accusatory language which conveys judgment and hostility. We retain responsible contact with a client when we try to describe troubled behaviour *neutrally*.

"That made you very angry ..." (implication: "We still have a lot of work to do on managing anger.") instead of "Your vicious and barbaric attack ..."(implication: "You are an animal"). We can never allow situations to stir up our own sediment, and turn us into attackers.

And instead of focusing on the "bad behaviour" (swearing, failing grades, breaking curfews) try to use an objective behaviour category (effective communication, school achievement, time-keeping) within which the youth will at least have made some progress.

In fact our chief role in child and youth care work is to be *the mature adult* in the milieu and in individual situations; to be the neutral ally of the youth, the objective reflector, the strengthening encourager, the experienced coach ...

Tangibles and intangibles

Sometimes kids are referred to our program because of very specific "problems" for which we are expected to find "solutions" Usually these solutions are simply that the kids will *stop doing* the problems. This can hook us into the cycle of "What's a good antidote for stealing, drugging, disrespect, failing grades, aggressive behaviour ...?" – and we can then burden ourselves and the kids with the belief that all their waking hours should be filled with appropriate remedial activities.

Of course it may true be that there are specific problems which do call for specific management or treatment approaches. And it may please our funders when we can demonstrate that today young Archie or Charlie received x hours of problem-specific therapy. But it is seldom true that the "problem" we deal with in our practice is as straightforward and obvious as a wart or a tummy-ache.

Our problem more often arises from extended experience of neglect, loss, rejection, confusion, anxiety, abuse, tension, despair ... and usually the quality of the milieu we create — its ethos, climate, relationships, possibilities, containment — will contribute more to healing and growth than specific treatments.

At the end of the day we might more legitimately ask (less quantitatively and more qualitatively): "What kind of day did Archie or Charlie have? Did they enjoy experiences of attention-getting, engagement, respect, acceptance, meaning, reassurance, safety, calm and hope?" And if they did have such positive experiences, can they *fail* to be (however slightly) different people tonight? Of course we have to address the tangible issues the children and

youth bring with them; but are we just as good at the intangibles? If we are, then we will very often find that their specific "problems" are "unnecessary".

Looking forward

The children and youth we work with very often have the feeling that things don't go their way in life, and they suffer from a pervasive pessimism which expects the worst from most situations. They have lost trust. Putting on a bright face and telling them to "cheer up" is not convincing.

One of the significant "gifts" we can offer is to discover and/or create things for them to look forward to so that they can learn to experience for themselves cycles of expectation and positive outcome. Pessimism means that nothing worthwhile can be seen up ahead. Optimism (or hope) is the idea that something interesting or rewarding will happen tomorrow — and this makes today infinitely more bearable.

As with most youth programs, we work at both the individual and program levels.

We look for future personal events in their lives which we anticipate with them. "Oh, yes, this weekend you're going to see that movie ..." or "Tomorrow's pocket money day when we all get rich again!" The depressed or pessimistic kid will not normally respond to these prospects with animated joy, but we are planting small points of light in their darkness. We are not doing a facile "count your blessings" exercise; we are, for the moment, doing something for them which they are unable to do: lifting their eyes.

We do this at the program level too. "Don't make plans for Thursday, I thought we'd go and do ...)" "I've been thinking about painting your

room next week — what sort of colours do you like?" "How about meeting me after school at Kids Inc. and you can pick out some new stuff?"

This is not spoiling or buying kids. It is doing what we would be doing anyway, but consciously setting up sequences of promise and fulfilment so that the intervening hour, day or week has an ingredient of expectation, something worth waiting for and looking forward to, to vary the data on which they are judging their lives.

In our practice today with kids who have lost hope, we look for ways to articulate their own lives for them, or to build short (and then increasingly longer) forward-looking time frames into our program.

Temptations of the self

Today, as we step into our program, group, ward, class, team, club ... wherever we work ... the greatest temptation we face is to feel proud and self-satisfied when someone thanks us, acknowledges us, defers to us, admires us, appreciates us. We probably feel that we worked hard to get to the point where we are trusted to be a counsellor, child and youth worker, teacher, mentor, mental health professional, whatever, and it feels good when someone looks up to us, honours us or relies on us.

Red warning signal. As much as we might deserve the trust of our clients, students or colleagues, we know that it is in *their* interests that we do the job we do. The doctor asks "Tell me where it hurts" in order to identify possible routes to follow to restore the

well-being and good function of *the patient* – not in order to be recognised as a good doctor!

Our main responsibility for self-awareness is related to knowing our skills, knowing our sensitivities, knowing our biases and blind spots. Nothing to do with self-satisfaction and self-congratulation. Our professional successes are when others manage their lives and relationships more successfully. Our self-awareness is not self-consciousness; rather, it frees us to be other-conscious and other-aware.

So, today, when someone tells us how wonderful we are and we are tempted to bask, we recognise the warning that we have failed to pass on the light. It is, rather inappropriately, shining on us.

The middle course

Those of us who work with difficult kids are often enticed by two opposite responses: *stop* them doing what they're doing; or *force* them to do what we think they should do. Such authoritarian and external controls fall into the "quick-and-dirty" category of child and youth care interventions. They tempt us because they *look* so efficient and effective. Bad behaviour banished, perfect behaviour performed – and the results last for between three and seven minutes.

In cases of assaultive or otherwise dangerous behaviour we will naturally have to respond at once, in the interests of the immediate situation.

But these *in situ* actions seldom contribute to long-term solutions.

No, our only real choice as child and youth care workers is the *middle* course: that of working, painstakingly and sometimes over long periods, at the issues which underlie the difficult behaviour – from the point of view of the youth, his or her needs and perceptions, the context and circumstances, the consequences on all concerned, and so on.. This middle course is the hard choice. It means observing and trying to understand the meaning and intention of the behaviour. Our focus is on aspects such as maturity and immaturity, emotional arousal and self-control, cognitive grasp of one's actions, accountability and responsibility, options and choices, laws and values ... (Simply stopping or enforcing changed behaviour doesn't allow us any time to do this.)

Our aim is not simplistically to make the behaviour disappear. Rather it is to work with the youngster towards the next occasion when more mature self-management and more pro-social functioning is called for ... and so to work towards the time when we are no longer around to offer mediation, protection and teaching.

In our practice today we will realise that continuing inappropriate behaviour is a sign that more needs to be learned and mastered.

Fun and laughter

It is so often under unhappy and troubled circumstances that we meet the children and youth we work with. As a result, we can be hesitant to introduce levity and humour into our shared lives. Rather like laughing at a funeral, we fear.

Yet it is a cliché that the highest qualification for child and youth care work is a sense of humour. But too

often we regard this as an ironic quality of care workers – in the sense that it is we who might be able to tolerate the tough times if we have this sense of humour. We can lose sight of our duty to cultivate laughter and humour in the kids.

Humour is at the heart of the emotional immune system. It is a necessary part of human completeness that we have the capacity to laugh and have fun. For children to leave us without it would be as bad as their going out into the world without love or music or a sense of beauty.

The laughter of troubled children is often destructive (at the expense of others) or strained (as part of sensation-seeking). These are brittle, usually ugly, kinds of laughter. Such children find it as hard to experience and express feelings of fear and anger as of fun and humour – as if these are all feelings against which we must defend ourselves.

One of our fundamental tasks as child and youth care workers is to help young people to be comfortable with their feelings: to allow and identify their feelings and to express them appropriately with spontaneity, fulfilment and effectiveness. We often say "It's OK to cry" or "It's understandable that you feel angry" as part of putting kids in charge of their own sorrow and rage. It is equally necessary that we show them that "It's OK to laugh". These are all part of the curriculum of life which we are teaching them while we work with them at the problems or issues which trouble them and their families.

Today in our practice we are careful not to be too solemn in the face of the kids' difficulties or "difficultness". We are careful not to take ourselves too seriously, or allow our "sense of humour" to become sarcasm or derision (literally "laughing to bring down"). We will look for the fun and laughter we can create, find, communicate and share together with the young people in our lives.

Scraps

One of Janusz Korczak's student helpers was finishing a group activity when two boys started to fight. The other children sat down to watch, and so did the helper. Later that night Korczak asked about the fight and the helper replied: "I didn't stop them because I was as tired as the rest of the kids and was glad to sit down – and I knew the boys wouldn't kill each other." Korczak approved, saying it was "best not to intervene as long as the children are evenly matched and they aren't harming each other. Stopping it only forces children to continue it later in another place."

Sometimes we are tempted to overdo our ideas about protection and safety – either because we have utopian ambitions for our program, or because we are afraid of what the neighbours or media will think if they see what's going on.

We will always protect the vulnerable – initially – because our aim is to build strengths and self-sufficiency in them; and our aim is not to go on protecting them. We betray children when we misrepresent the world they will live in, and more so when we turn them, innocent and unprepared, into the realities of that world.

Childhood fisticuffs and a bloodied nose will prove to be the least of their hurts as they grow through life, and seldom will a man with a badge step in on their side when they hit rough waters. Better that they learn this now while we're there to debrief and reflect with them – and to offer what Redl might have included in his idea of "umpiring services"!

Your way, our way

In coming to terms with a new youth in our program, do we ever find ourselves seduced by the false comfort offered by external compatibility? When we're going to spend a lot of time together, as in sharing living space and eating meals together – and especially when we are going to play caregiver, educator or adult roles – does surface familiarity with our own cultural and familial habits seem to put less "distance" between us — and draw more "approval" for the youngster?

When we find ourselves voicing our own preferences in manners and habits (I prefer no elbows on the table, I've never liked that kind of music, we always say grace before meals) we are (perhaps unconsciously?) wishing away the rough edges of difference which separate others from PLUs (people like us). We may be feeling anxious about working closely with people who have different values and customs from our own. And however subtle or polite we may think we are, the flip-side of approval is disapproval, and kids coming into programs are especially sensitive to this. And (again unconsciously?) we make more difficult the *getting alongside* which is fundamental to the relationship which would help us to understand and motivate the youth.

Our programs, like us, can unthinkingly set cultural values and expectations (in the menus we plan, the dress codes we impose, the language we use, the recreation we offer) which fail the first test of child-centredness — along with all the other tests like family awareness, diversity, respect.

In our practice today we try to get less hung up about preferred things that we don't see, and more concerned about the important things we do see. We get to understand the kids through the observations we make, through

the empathy we practise. How youth see their world and function within it is of clinical importance; regretting that they don't function within our world is of no value.

Tonight we will either be further apart or closer together. Take your pick.

Teach in the doing, not in the talking

It is such a cliché that we get tired of hearing it – "lead by example, not by precept". A precept (a command, an instruction, a moral maxim) is always easier, isn't it, and it lets us off the hook: "I *told* her to do it; I *taught* him that he should do it like that; I *said* to them that 'the devils finds work for idle hands'."

But these are a pathetic substitute for following through with solid teaching which really takes responsibility for helping kids to develop new values and attitudes. It is not true that when "we have told them so" we have done our work. We need to show that we have truly been "friends with influence."

One of the most powerful ways in which we teach children is when we accept that we ourselves might be subject to the same failings and errors which we usually see only in the kids. How often do we (gasp!) *apologise* when we have behaved insensitively or rudely? How often to we admit that we forgot to make an arrangement or an enquiry? Do we react only with defensiveness when the kids (or someone else in their family or in the program) accuses us of some short-coming?

How powerful it would be if we were to model the honesty or the regret we

feel about some of our own poor behaviours! Imagine admitting that "I completely forgot that I agreed to telephone your teacher this morning and I am very sorry – I will do so first thing in the morning and will let him know that it was my fault it was forgotten." Or, "I must admit that I have too easily seen the negative qualities in your family, and failed altogether to see the positive things which are important to you ..."

One of the seminal texts about the work we do in groups of troubled kids in programs like ours, is that of Maxwell Jones who, in a hospital setting, virtually invented the "therapeutic community". In one of his books he wrote:

> " ... And the doctor, in order to understand and to use the forces within a social situation, must be willing and upon occasion to become *the subject* and have his performance scrutinised by his colleagues, and *even by the patient* when this seems appropriate."

In our practice today we will be powerful models and motivators when we get down from our high horse of authority, and present (by our behaviour within our group) simple positive qualities of humanity. Read that last sentence again before you meet with you kids today and before you reach for another of those precepts.

Reference

Jones, M. (1968) *Social psychiatry in practice: The idea of the therapeutic community*. Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, p.14

Kickstarting kids

Kids usually measure themselves against the norms of their communities. They allow themselves quite wide latitude, and when they feel that they measure up reasonably close to the average (give or take two standard deviations, the statisticians might tell us) they will comment: "No sweat!"

This leaves the 5% of kids made up of the supercallifragilistics at the top end and the "also rans" at the bottom end of the distribution.

A good proportion of youth who come into our programs find themselves in this bottom group. For one reason or another, they are the developmentally slow, the experience deprived and the opportunity dispossessed. They missed out on the rich verbal milieu, the cognitive-socially enhanced environment and the tennis courts. What happens with kids like this is they end up inexperienced and unconfident, or they compensate with behaviour which is aggressive and over-confident.

What you and I do with these young people is to discover skills which they have and which they can build on, teach them new skills with which they can hold their own, and track down opportunities in the normal world (in their family, neighbourhood, school, community) where they can demonstrate their "averageness".

In our practice today we will discourage the dependency and self-defacement which says "I am no good" and the boasting and bullying with which they claim false superiority. We do this by acknowledging their small gains and their giant steps, by grouping them intelligently, and by progressively involving them in activities and participation in ever-widening circles, knowing that one day they will value

some negotiable proficiencies in the real world.

It is for reasons like this that we *think* about our charges every day.

Early intervention

Life space work does not mean simply "letting life happen" in the group or the family. Otherwise why bother to learn interventions and bring in a child, youth and family worker? The life spaces in which we work are by definition problematic, with one of more of the "cast of characters" at any time being unhappy, feeling unheard or excluded, remaining unvalued and unfed, experiencing frustration or anger, enduring criticism or abuse, believing themselves to be unfairly treated, dependent, less capable ...

The difficult *behaviours* which we observe in the group usually spring from these *negative feelings* of helplessness and unfulfilment. The bully, the subversive, the complainer, the verbal attacker ... all are attempting to redress the balance in their lives, to seek attention, to express their resentment, to gain advantage, to get their share of what's going.

When we wait for the negative behaviours to kick in, the situations we have to deal with become unnecessarily more complex and more demanding.

Scenario

Andy comes into the group frustrated because couldn't find a book he needs for school. He is feels (and looks) very irritable.

If we deal with this feeling first (Did you find the book? Come let's have another look.) we may be able to cool down a frustration which Andy is not handling well. If we find the book, perhaps Andy will experience entering his day on a better level, perhaps have learned some problem solving ...

- If we don't deal with this feeling first, he may express his frustration by hitting out at the nearest target in the room. Now he has moved beyond feelings, and there is a more tangible situation, so we move quickly to dampen it.
- If we don't move quickly to dampen this new situation, the aggrieved person's own latent negative feelings will be triggered and he may react by hitting back at Andy — and now we have a complex three-level situation to untangle, maybe with others joining in on grounds of "unfairness', their own attitudes to Andy, etc.
- The observant words "Did you find the book?" might make the difference between a brief learning event and an outright brawl.

In our life space practice we are acutely aware of people's feelings and we try to interpret these as early as possible, helping kids to acknowledge the feelings, manage them, and do something positive with them. In Andy's case we spot the frustration, name it, acknowledge it, challenge it, and so use the pent-up energy in solving the problem, leaving Andy with a sense of responsibility and mastery.

Mental snapshots

When we work regularly with certain kids, or see a lot of them during a day, we can *get used to them* and therefore perhaps not see what a casual visitor might see at a glance.

Muriel (15) has had the mutters for the past day or so, so when e comes in to breakfast this morning looking rather sulky we don't notice – she just looks the way Muriel has been looking for a while.

Here is a quick – and wholly unscientific – exercise. Before you start your time with your group, go through their *names* in your mind, and for each one pull out the *current mental snapshot* you have of them. When you look at this snapshot, is the youngster smiling or not, happy or not ...

When you think of James here and imagine his picture, what do you see? Think of three or four words which describe his snapshot: "worried", "unsure", "down" ...

When you think of Sharon, what do you see on her snapshot? Some words: "comfortable", "OK", self-assured" ...

And then when you think of your mental snapshot of Muriel? "Irritable", "short-fuse", "ill-at-ease" ...

If we regularly use our objective observation skills, we will have realised that Sharon is doing fine, and that James and Muriel need our special attention. But in a busy program we may be too group focussed or activity focussed to notice. Check them out before you get immersed in the work — look through your mental snapshots.

Words, body language – and thoughts

Everything we say and do in the company of kids is communication. We are not let off the hook (when we have been dismissive, discouraging or rejecting) by protesting "I didn't say a word!" The way we stand, the expression on our face — and even the thoughts in our head — may have "said" more than we expected.

A common example in our work is the persistent, attention-getting, clingy kid who tends to raise the same questions over and over. It is easy for us to become irritated by the repetitive cycles which don't get resolved and move on — and we show it. Even as the youngster approaches us, we may let our shoulders drop, our mouth tightens, perhaps we sigh. These actions translate easily into "Not again!" or worse, "Not *you* again!"

Two things.

- In our difficult encounters with young people, we can give too much freedom to our thoughts. We just have to *think* frustration and impatience for these attitudes to show in our body language. And needy kids have a ready facility for "reading" these thoughts — even, when we get into a habit of responding impatiently to a specific youngster, for *anticipating* them.
- When we find our body language or mental attitude presenting as abrupt or distancing, we are probably avoiding or denying some responsibility of our own. We are,

perhaps, failing to follow up a task in relation to this kid — to engage with the family, to spend time listening to the child, or even to raise our own reactions in supervision.

In our practice today, maintaining a good level of self-awareness on our own part, makes us more open to facing professionally some unfinished business relating to the kids and their families. When we don't read the signs for ourselves, expect our clients to read them for us — not only in what we say or don't say, but also in our body language, and in our very thoughts.

Flash points

Sooner or later every child and youth care worker is going to have to deal with an "incident" – in which a frightened, sad or infuriated young person is going to go over the edge. This sort of incident will see a youth behaving irrationally and dramatically, being overwhelmed by tragic unhappiness or expressing rage in an alarming outburst or destructive attack on person or property.

We all know that this is a situation which needs to be de-escalated, that is, in which harm or damage must be limited and controlled, and when the protagonists most need our targeted and skilled support. Our priority is to see that nobody is hurt and that the out-of-control youth is maximally "cushioned" — by being presented

with minimal threat (whether physical or emotional) and maximum resources (whether physical or emotional). You and I know that we ourselves can lose control and make mistakes when we are most 'down' and vulnerable, and to recognise this condition in the 'troubled youth' we work with, is to target most accurately the responses we make.

There is another factor. When we are faced with a situation in the life space, it may be best to move the action away from the group to where there is least exposure/embarrassment for the young person concerned. To be seen crying or losing control can make even harder for her/him to maintain an already fragile self-image. "Let's go and sit in here," is often the least kindness we can offer.

But also, there are times when we feel confident in our ability to be useful in these "public" circumstances, and our sympathetic and constructive intervention can be of great help to the *other* kids in the room. The theory of projection tells us that the kids who may tease and attack the unhappy youth who has "lost it" are themselves the most likely to have similar feelings of distress and helplessness. When we allow an "incident" to play out in front of others, we give them affirmation and hope in seeing that their pain and feelings are legitimate and can be met with understanding and support.

In our practice today we may want to shield hurt individuals from the public gaze; on the other hand, if we have the gifts and skills, we may just as well wish to share, in the life-space, an intervention that may show that there is hope and healing available for kids who are pushed to the limit.

Between the children

We think a lot about the relationships between ourselves and the kids we work with. However, the relationships which exist *between the youngsters and each other* demand moment by moment attention. Their relationships with each other are far more numerous, complex and unrestrained, and while we may be thinking about our personal relationship with one child, our dyadic connection, tenuous as it is, is likely to be outnumbered one hundred to one by the real interactions happening within the group.

We know that each youth has come to us with a cluster of issues, together with their associated attitudes and behaviours. Think of the anxiety, hurt, inadequacy, failure, resentment, anger contained within even a small group of five or six kids — and imagine the hostility, revenge, blame and destructiveness — not to mention the despair and depression — which might attach to their experiences and perceptions. Into what an explosive interpersonal minefield we may introduce the next youngster admitted to our program!

While we (perhaps self-indulgently and romantically) consider the beneficial impact of our own role in the program, the kids are already using the social milieu they inherit and inhabit, sorting out the pecking order, giving expression to their immature survival strategies, trading their strengths and vulnerabilities in short-term accommodations, wreaking who knows what havoc in needy minds and souls ...

Add to this the fact that in most programs we dilute our adult potentials by being present for eight hours before going off for sixteen,

expecting the young people desperately to stitch together our brief shifts, our periods of presence, in the hope that we will remember where we left off, while they cope with the abiding reality of their peer group of fellow-strugglers and sufferers ...

In our practice today we will be careful to recognise what is inevitable in a group of troubled kids, and careful to recognise our own lack of continuity and unity and training and skills in helping to make this bearable, safe and hopeful for their future.

Goals: Looking beyond the present

It's a truism to say that whatever we are doing, we need to keep in mind our goal — even if we are only reading a book in the sun. Likewise, wherever we are heading, we need to keep in mind our destination — even if at this exact moment we are taking our ease over lunch at the roadside.

In child and youth care work it will happen that our goals and destinations are often obscured. Things happen often, fast and loud,

and we are easily drawn into dealing with the immediate while forgetting where we are headed over the long haul.

Example: James, ten, has come to our program as an extremely anxious kid with problems around attachment and impulsivity. He is often under our feet looking for attention and this prompts some of us into irritability; equally, he is over-demanding as a compensation for his many unmet needs. Our team has decided to stick with a sustained program of containment and reassurance, so that over a number of months he will be less dependent and more responsible for himself.

Suddenly down the passage there is a loud crash with sounds of alarm and breaking glass. We rush out to see what has happened. James has come into the kitchen for his milk but we have forgotten to get it ready for him. He has gone into a rage, grabbed Jean's tea and thrown it against a wall. Jean is screaming, part in anger, part in fright. Several other kids have collected and all are shouting the odds. With high drama playing out in front of us, it is easy for us to forget the "plan" outlined in the previous paragraph. We go for James who has shredded our well-organised afternoon. Really, this is too much! James gets yelled at, told to move away from the mess, told to come and clean it up, told to apologise, and again told to move away ... We calm Jean, clear the crime scene, clean the mess — and then we see James huddled against the wall of the garden shed , tight in a ball, frightened, sobbing.

The stories may be different (and less dramatic) but we often replay scenes like this. Acting in the moment, often out of our own anxiety or sense of order, we lose sight of the way ahead which we have planned. Too late we realise that it may take us another week or month to get James back to this stage his journey — the journey we momentarily lost sight of in the "storm in a teacup" we have just stilled.

Today in our practice we remember that we are in the process of bringing

young people towards the goals of more security and self-confidence, better coping and function, greater autonomy and responsibility, and that whatever we do in a particular situation is more helpful if it is aligned with such goals.

Expressing feelings

It was suggested during a meeting with teachers that girls are able to express their feelings more readily than boys, and that in a school setting it was harder for teachers to get to know the boys, especially when they might have issues and hurts on their minds.

Whether this boy-girl difference is changing is uncertain, but it has been "a boy thing" that one keeps one's feeling to oneself. Indeed, the male group at school level often imposes some strong sanctions on the sharing of feelings. Martino (1995) suggests that "boys in their peer group might police masculinity ... through a series of put-downs at throwing into question a boy's sexuality." Whatever, reticence in sharing feelings can prove a difficulty for child care workers, teachers and others who fear that they are not "hearing" kids in difficulty and may be dealing with these kids harmfully or unhelpfully.

One solution is to redefine the "space" in which adults meet with children. A colleague who runs a program for difficult boys sets aside an obligatory twenty minutes at the end of each day when the unit careworkers and their groups of boys meet to talk about their day. The regularity of this more intimate and "umpired" period sets it apart as a safe and sympathetic

grouping, quite in contrast with the normally "male" activities of the day. The class teacher, similarly, might establish such safe "spaces" in terms of certain topics which the class can discuss: "John has had this worrying experience ... " or "The class has this problem ... which I think we need some help with and some of you may have some ideas." Such an opening allows a teacher to say next week: "Remember we discussed that worrying issue the other day ... "

One of the important issues we are discovering about crime and violence is the lack of empathy amongst youth, and we are seeing more and more attempts to remedy this. Listening to each others' feelings is central to these attempts. We need to create ways to facilitate this process.

Reference

Martino, W. (1995) It's not the way guys think. In Browne, R. and Fletcher, R. (eds.) *Boys in schools: Addressing the real issues*. Sydney: Finch Publishing, pp. 129-130

Blamers and responsibility

Troubled kids who get themselves into scraps – with other kids, with teachers, with care workers – are very often blamers. "She started it ... I only ... He won't let me ... You're always on their side." When the situation has been quietened down we don't always have to pass an instant verdict and sentence. If we do, the blamer, let's call him Robbie, will continue to be cross, he will strongly resist any suggestion that the conflict was his fault, and he will be just as likely to repeat his performance tomorrow. We should be able to draw more benefit from today's scrap for Robbie's growth.

In our kind of work we will almost always want to *debrief* after an upset ... to check that everyone is alright, and to move from hot blood to cool head, and hopefully to "make sense" of the episode.

But with blamers there is an added possibility. When we are all calm again, we use an objective narrative process beginning with "Now let's see how all this got started and ended up in such an battle" – and then we sit down with the kid and we write everything down, making sure that we include *all* of the cast of characters.

Robbie begins: "Mrs Brown accused me ..." OK, we write that down, and then? "Then Mary chipped in and she said ..." OK, we write that down. And with all of his statements being accepted at face value and readily recorded, Robbie will sooner or later include his own words or actions into the story. "And I said No ... " OK we write that down. Now the aim of this listening and recording is *not to gather evidence to convict Robbie*, and there is no come-back when we finish. What's done is done. The aim is only to get Robbie's name and participation objectively included in the story. When we look coolly and non-punitively at the story, he is there as a character in the play, with at least an acknowledged role in the plot – and as part of a cognitive intervention, we don't really need to go further today ...

This is no magic or instant cure. It is a process we repeat as needed until Robbie "gets" the fact that he plays a role in all situations which arise in his life — which implies that (a) not everything can simply be blamed on others, and (b) that he has some control in what happens.

Counterpoint

If, like most of us, you have only one voice, then you can sing a melody – a line of single notes which make up a tune. If there are two of you, you have two voices to play with. With two voices ...

(a) one person can sing the original tune and the second person might join in with the *same* tune, which just makes the whole performance louder. We call this singing in *unison*, like when we are singing together to cheer on our sports team. Or ...

(b) the second voice can sing a *different* tune, a tune which balances the first, or contrasts with it, or supports it, or adds interest to it. If you have three voices, then the music we can make becomes even more complex and fascinating — or (gasp!) four voices ...

In music composition, this art of adding new tunes to an original theme is called *counterpoint*. It allows two or more people to sing together, and although they may sing different tunes, we say that they are singing in *harmony*. It offers a good analogy for child and youth care practice.

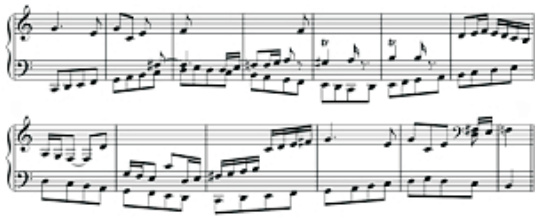
We easily recognise some of the familiar "tunes" which kids "sing" in our program, like: Nobody cares about me; I'm feeling great today; I'm sick of the whole darned place; I'm gonna make the team; I don't care what you tell me; I wanna be left alone ... If a youngster is singing the *I'm feeling great today* tune, we can simply add our voice in unison and sing alongside and make it louder. We "sing": Me too, buddy! The *I'm gonna make the team* tune is the same: Let's hear it for Trish who is feeling confident about her chances.

But when things are less positive, some kids might sing the same "tune" for weeks on end, and others don't

quite know how to deal with this. We can add *counterpoint* by adding a second "tune": our tune may not be exactly the same as theirs, but we have been through tough times and we know what it's like and our tune can be an accompaniment for the lonely kid or a support for the scared kid. When someone is singing the *I wanna be left alone* tune we can sing (by our words and deeds): Hey I know what that feels like and how would you like me to bring you something to eat in your own space today? We may be tempted to sing You've got the words and the music *wrong* there — here is the *right* way to sing it, but this fails the empathy test, the *harmony* test. Humming alongside passes the understanding test and the reassurance test which sings: Yes, people do get to feel that way, don't they?

One kind of counterpoint is the *fugue* where a strong and simple melody starts out alone, but then spawns echoes and increasingly intricate reverberations. So, when occasion demands, it is *we* who can start a new direction and proactively introduce the fugue theme: when the group is down we can "sing": What shall we do Saturday? What shall we eat tonight? Who'd like a run around the field? If we can get a three-part fugue going out of that, we've done well.

A major purpose of building relationships with kids is that we get to spend time alongside them, where we can listen to their tunes and add new voices, sustaining voices, alternative voices; where we can counterbalance their sadness with lighter rhythms, and trade in their minor chords for major chords. In our practice today we will listen to the melodies, and know when to sing along in unison, when to balance harsh dissonances with softer and slower voices; when to offer new and different possibilities of harmony and counterpoint.



Forever

Forever didn't last that long
and let's be honest,
the eons lovers promise one another
seldom come along,
and we were no different..
– Lionel Bastos

Longings for forever are never mature positions. It is when we are most down that we seek everlasting solutions. "I wish this was finally over. I never want to go through this again. I would like to spend the rest of my life ..."

The desire to escape, to run away and hide, is common when someone has been through sustained tough times. Many of the youth we work with will express similar feelings when they have been through some trauma or prolonged family trouble, a loss or a separation. During their time of respite we can allow them their wish for permanent peace, no hassles, and indeed this is what respite is for.

But to remain in a state of forever, of no change, is unhealthy. All will agree that a healthy state of mind is characterised by openness to new information, the willingness to be changed by new experiences, being in constant engagement with and accommodation to the real world.

In our practice today we are conscious of kids who are in need to some time out, whether it's half-an-hour after a difficult incident – or a week or two after a more threatening personal or family experience. But we will also be conscious of kids who must move on with their lives, who needed to hang loose "forever" but whom we must now encourage and challenge to re-engage. In a while they will know themselves to have had the time and space to re group and be refreshed.

Forever didn't last that long.

Door-keepers and door openers

For a whole lot of reasons we child and youth workers are in danger of becoming doorkeepers. We make close arrangements (rules?) about where children should be, for what reasons, at what times; there are other arrangements (rules) about where they should not be, whom they should not see, what they should not do. We have been known to keep them away from "unsuitable" family members, friends, places and activities. It is true that in these times of increased threat we do have a responsibility for keeping young people safe and protected. But not over-protected. I have seen competent adolescents reduced to contrived inadequacy by arbitrary, controlling rules. Tragically, they are heard to ask questions like "Are we allowed to sit here? Is it OK for us to go to the shop on the corner? Do we need permission to phone our mum?"

Particularly for children and youth in care, we must more actively open doors for them, and link them more healthily with themselves, their interests, self-knowledge and skills; with their families and neighbourhoods and social realities; with the wider world, its services, opportunities and attractions; and particularly with the groupings which will give them life-long membership benefits, wherever they go – for example, to sports clubs, civic amenities, social centres, churches, special interest societies ...

In our practice today we remember that the young people alongside us will one day (in two years, five, ten, twenty years) be members of a family, a community, a society, and their fulfilment and happiness will depend on their ability to connect with others, interact with others, belong with

others. The more activities, social opportunities, transportable skills and general street smarts we expose them to and introduce them to now, the more securely they will be networked and connected as they grow up.

In our program they may be safer, and our lives will be easier. But just imagine if the unconfident and awkward kid alongside you now, in ten years' time will have discovered that he has some potential skill in table-tennis[1] and that most neighbourhoods have a table tennis table in some local hall, where others who enjoy the game gather and enjoy the game and each others' time together. And think of the value-added personal and social benefits which would have accrued.

Just because we found a door to open.

Note

For 'table-tennis' substitute any one of the two-hundred-and-sixty-three alternative activities, interests or pursuits you might think of to 'fit' with the kid who is with you now.

Listen to the motives

"You didn't come to watch me play – because you didn't want me to win!" This is the double whammy. Not only are we reproached for missing Sally's tennis game, but an ungenerous motive is assigned to us. Ouch! Missing the game requires no more than an explanation or apology; the assigned motive is harder to answer.

Young people in care are usually very sensitive about what we *think* of them. Their experience has most often been that people *didn't* care or were not on their side. Our verbal assurance carries little weight. "Of course we love you" has in the past proved hollow in their significant relationships. And so "Of course I

wanted you to win" isn't going to buy much credibility for us today. But *we listen to what the child has said*, for we learn that, however untrue, Sally thinks we didn't want her to win. This is critical information for us as we continue to work with her. True or not, what Sally thinks is a clinical fact.

We know that our motives may be challenged by a youth as a means of manipulation: "If you cared about me you'd let me go to the party tonight." We may know that it is because we care that we are not going to allow this, but it is nevertheless important that we listen to what is said, for we can learn much about this youngster's vulnerable style of negotiating. More, we know that our positive motives will be accepted only when we *prove them so by our deeds*. Words are not enough. Had we been at Sally's tennis match today, we might have shifted the odds a little from her distrust towards trust.

Instead of verbally protesting the negative motives assigned to us, we get an idea of what we have yet to work on in our relationship.

There's more. We also have to examine our *own* real motives. So often we hush a tantrum or an argument – and we have to ask ourselves: was this for good process reason, or did we simply not feel like getting into the hurt or the conflict at that time? There's a squabble over a ball. We step in, claim the ball and throw it to one or other group. Was this because we knew to whom the ball really belonged, or did we hand it over to the stronger or more difficult group just to buy some strategic credit for ourselves? We protect a youngster from a verbal attack from a group. Was this a considered action based on treatment goals we were working on for the individual or the group – or was this just an easy "peace-at-any-price" solution because we had the power to act peremptorily?

The thoughts, feelings and actions of the young people we work with are the feedback data in the daily life space work and the interventions we initiate. In our practice today we take seriously the motives assigned to us (however hurtful or untrue) and

examine them in terms of the future interventions we must plan. And we are just as attentive to our own motives for acting the way we do.

Spontaneity

One of the attractive qualities of people whom we enjoy being with is spontaneity. We may describe such people as fresh, alive and free. At a more serious level, spontaneity is one of the trademarks of mental health, and for many it is a hard quality to achieve.

People are "spontaneous" when they can respond naturally and without inhibition or anxiety to things that happens around them. They can laugh at what is funny, sympathise with what is hurtful, consider appropriately what is serious.

Many of our clients, whether children, youth or families, show less spontaneity. They have to *think first* when they are presented with some idea, query or event. A history of conditional acceptance, or worse, of punishment or rejection, leaves them more watchful, more self-protective, less self-assured in responding in their day-to-day environment. Will it be safe to agree or disagree, to answer or not answer, to laugh or remain non-committal? Our very role in the life space of our clients is to provide a rational environment, a *reasonable* environment, which has no hidden threats or arbitrary and unpredictable consequences. It is to build self-knowledge and self confidence by relating, responding, informing. It is to generate responsibility by teaching, permitting, expecting. It is to build self-acceptance by acknowledging, reflecting, loving.

So often people in our field prescribe behaviour, demand conformity, expect compliance, as if this alone will achieve the goals of our program. This is no more than continued threat and conditional

approval. They forget the detailed curriculum necessary in the client's life space, the hard work, the daily *experience* of reassurance and opportunity and encouragement – without which we cannot expect healthier functioning in kids and parents.

There is worse. However unfashionable the idea may be these days, much of the fear and anxiety which prevents spontaneity is buried deep. Many people deny and "forget" their worst experiences – they can't bear even to think about them. When confronted by a situation which threatens to raise some of their horrors, they freeze or panic or run. We are no longer in the realm of social "comfort zones" or personal embarrassment, but dealing with people who have become "stuck" at hard places on their road. With "no go" areas in their minds, spontaneity is impossible for them. Their inner feelings of terror or guilt or whatever can only be untangled in environments and relationships which are ultimately safe, which pose no further threat. You and I work at this level with many of our children and young people and family members. When people can "look" at such issues in their lives and better see them for what they are, they can once again live their daily lives with more equanimity. There may still be pain and uncertainty, but they know that, and can consciously factor it into their everyday encounters and interactions.

In our practice today we recognise those who are reserved, tentative and anxious. We make sure that they get the space and time and the experiences to build knowledge and trust in themselves so that, in time, they can lower their defences and get to be present in their world — with more spontaneity.

Urgency

As child and youth care workers we are often made aware of the *seriousness* of the issues our young people are facing and having to work with. So often they are referred to us with a dominating "presenting problem", which may have to do with a particular conflicted relationship, a developmental "stuckness", a behavioural or addiction difficulty. As we focus on one or other of these, we may lose sight of the *urgency* of our work. We are generally aware of this in terms of developmental "timetables" whereby some developmental progressions may be held up while we work on others, but we may lose sight of two critical issues.

One is that as kids progress from infancy to young adulthood they become elements of more, different, larger, and increasingly complex systems. Moving from the dyadic mother-child system, though family, neighbourhood, school and peer systems, they are subsumed into larger legal, gender, societal and political systems – with all which they must reach an understanding and accommodation. And, in the nature of our work, it is common that they are from time to time preoccupied by one (e.g. school) to the neglect of others. To build knowledge, awareness and competency in their role as members of one of these macrosystems while we are still working at lower order systems is a strong challenge to the way we participate in the planning and pacing of their time with us. (There have been a number of discussions on CYC-NET, for example, as to whether we should lay charges against assaultive youth in our programs while we are working on their difficulties with anger and aggression.)

The other issue which challenges us is that, increasingly, while young people in ordinary situations are staying at home with their parents

longer, often into their mid-twenties, we are being funded out of sticking by our clients beyond their eighteenth birthday. So-called "ageing out" is a cruel deadline which too often catches us short of the mark we had hoped to reach. It also raises anxieties in the kids, making them less "accessible" during their final months and weeks with us.

In our practice today we understand that there is no time to waste. In many cases we are fortunate to return youngsters to family and community in good time so that they re-engage with their multiple roles and tasks. For many others there is so much more we would like them to have had the opportunity to know about and talk about.

Black-and-white ... or technicolour?

When we use diagnostic labels or judgmental words, we paint kids into a corner – and ourselves into another one.

Rupert and Peggy, child and youth care workers, are talking in the passage.

"I really don't trust Margaret," says Rupert. "She's a thief."

"How can you say she's a thief?" asks Peggy. "I think that's an awful thing to say!"

"Well," replies Rupert, "not only does she take other people's things – she admits it, and, moreover, she says she doesn't know why she takes them.

In my book that makes her a thief." Peggy doesn't know how to answer.

She feels this is wrong.

"I feel awkward about what you've said," she says. "Help me by thinking this through with me. For instance, you seem to have reduced Margaret to one single idea: she's a thief."

"That single ideas's probably why she ended up here," says Rupert, defiantly. "It's about the most important thing about her."

"And when would she stop being a thief?"

"When she stops stealing, I guess."

"And then she'd be a 'non-thief'?" asks Peggy.

"She would," says Rupert.

"But we couldn't, from that point in her life, forever call her a 'non-thief'", argued Peggy. "Or we would also have to call her a 'non-trapeze artist' and a 'non-Greek philosopher' and a million other 'non-things' because she won't be all those things either!"

"Mmm," thought Rupert. "It would be like black and white, one thing or the other, and I suppose people are never just one thing ..."

There was a pause.

Peggy picked up the thought. "So even though she may 'take things' now, she is also a 13-year-old girl, a good athlete, articulate, quite pretty, has been through a tough life, is humorous ..."

"Mmmm," though Rupert again. "I get it. My 'black-and-white' picture gets coloured in, and the 'taking things' as you so euphemistically put it, would be just one shadow in an altogether more complex and interesting picture."

These two care workers are really on the path of working this out for us, so we don't have much more to say!

Imagine if we were to be known by just one bad or embarrassing thing about us? Imagine if all the other aspects of our lives which we work so hard at were totally discounted because of one fault! It would be like 'One strike and you're out' – and that doesn't fit well with our field's philosophy.

In our practice today we avoid being overwhelmed by any single troubling aspect of a child or youth. In fact, we are being more useful by attending to all aspects of their

continuing development. As we facilitate their growing sense of safety, self-confidence and belonging, it is less likely that they will resort to risky and dramatic expressions of neediness and distress.

Learning continua ... not on-off switches

In the previous Practice Hint we talked about using words like "thief" to describe a child or youth – as though they were a thief, all thief and nothing but a thief. To say "Margaret is a thief" doesn't leave much else to be said. We saw how somebody could believe simplistically that a child is a thief or is not a thief, rather as if there is a switch which can be turned either one way or the other.

Nothing in life is quite that simple.

A little child who has the run of the house finds it hard to understand how we may all use the floor to walk on and a dish to eat out of – yet suddenly something is described as *Daddy's* keys or *Mommy's* shoes. The child is taught that "This is your toy or your doll", yet when a similar toy or doll is discovered in a friend's house there is the warning "This is *Jane's* doll" or "This is *David's* toy!" There is a complex system of codes and customs to be learned. We can observe this in a play school where little children are in turn thrilled to have *their* piece of paper and outraged when a similar piece of paper is definitely *not theirs*.

In work with difficult and troubled kids, we find that other confusions and disturbances in their lives have blurred boundaries and rules like this, and delayed their learning and acceptance of such lessons.

* * *

If we find that a child has "taken" something which belongs to another, we are careful not to rush for the label "thief". What is always better is to find *a neutral and objective name for the life skill* we are working at – in this case, for example, "Respect for others' property" – and then to work out how much more we have to teach before the child gets it right. As specialists in child and youth development, this is *our* job: to map out the curriculum of precept, example and experience which teaches this skill.

The neutral name for the skill also allows us to plot how far the child has already progressed along this particular learning continuum. To say "thief" is to suggest that the child has learned nothing at all, and we demand that they arrive instantly at the "not thief" end of the continuum. Nobody learns like that.

When we can reflect back to a child how much they have already learned about respect for others' property, they are encouraged, they get credit for gains already made, and can better grasp the way ahead which we are indicating.

In our practice today we will be aware of some of the "shoot-from-the-hip" words we use to describe annoying or troubling behaviour – and rather work our the neutral and objective label for the skill we are teaching. We will be surprised at how helpful it for us to move from vague descriptors ("she's a nuisance") or negative labels (he's a bully") and talk in terms of ability to gauge a social situation or ability to express frustration. When we understand this difficult role of child and youth care workers, we see the silliness of "taking away 3 points" or moving them down to a lower level!

Tomorrow is another place

"It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers."
— James Thurber

We who work with children, youth and families are probably reasonably oriented within our own life circumstances. We know our way around, we know enough to come in out of the rain, we know who's who in the zoo. We can be tempted to believe that having reached this personal zone of achievement and comfort qualifies us to be useful and helpful to others. We couldn't be more wrong.

Our clients are not us. They are not like us. They have lived different lives in different circumstances. They speak different languages, if not literally then conventionally. They will go on to live in different cultures, in different families, in different places – and in an age of which we have no experience whatever.

We betray them when we seek only their compliance with our own methods and customs, with our own adjustments and solutions. Decades ago Toffler warned us that facts are ephemeral, and that more than anything human beings must be *adaptable*. Jeffery Leach, in a review of Toffler's 1970 book, likens future shock to "the same sort of disorientation that a person experiences when he moves to a new area, or a new country, and suffers a severing of all he has known."

(Of course there are a number of enduring values and principles which we feel may inform good decision-making in the future, and we offer what we can of these, though even these may change over time.)

For us this means that rather than giving people knowledge and

information today, we prepare them to be able to find guidance and information wherever and whenever they may need it. Imagine our own youngster leaving for a far-off country of which we have only the vaguest knowledge – we would have little to offer except perhaps how to find the signposts which might help to them make sense of their new environment and adequately negotiate whatever demands and challenges they find when they get there.

We are talking here of *a style of practice* in which we resist giving kids brownie points for listening to us and, rather, teach them to develop their own questions to which they may find their own answers. "Do this" is replaced by "What do you think you could do about that?" Instead of "Here is the information you want," we say "Where could we find out about that?" Giving young people practice in evaluating situations and being able to come up with their own solutions is the truly helpful resource we can offer for their tomorrows.

Trouble-shooting

Have you noticed how modern gadgets come with a booklet which includes a section on "Troubleshooting"? If our DVD player resolutely refuses to start one day, we try the usual "play" button a few times, and then we poke around, often with increasing frustration, at a few of the other buttons – and then we reach for the troubleshooting book. "Did you turn the machine on?" is often the first inflammatory question ... and the rest follow with varying technical complexity and obscurity.

We rarely go to this trouble when one of our kids refuses to operate properly one morning. We do stab at the "play" button a few times, but we quickly descend into a range of raised voices, warnings, threats, insults, physical force and blackmail which

certainly wouldn't work with our DVD player! Our reactions at this point are usually accompanied by a simplistic diagnostic set: you are obstinate, lazy, disobedient, disorganised, pretending ...

We forget that we are working with young people whose lives have become unravelled to the point that they have had to be placed in care. Most of them have a lifetime of adverse and interrupted growth and learning experiences to deal with. This morning there may be a whole ganglion of physical, cognitive and emotional obstacles and demons facing them – perhaps all coming at once, overwhelmingly.

We are right to push the "play" button a few times, because it is always best if a kid can simply be helped over a hump in the road to continue on his way – but beyond that it is expected of us that we are more accurate. Is today a day of special significance for her which we don't know about or have forgotten? Has he been taught – or can he even understand – what we are expecting of him? Has she been drawing on emotional reserves this past while and today has run out of steam? Is there a crisis in his family about which we haven't heard? Has she arrived at a personal point of decision or despair out of all scale to the menial compliance we are expecting?

In our practice today we are aware that young people lives are impacted by a myriad of circumstances; their behaviour may be driven by a thousand hurts and disappointments, untold faulty beliefs and irrational fears; they are dependent on a collection of fragmentary learnings and sustained by fleeting and fragile hopes. When they don't perform this morning when we push their "play" button, it is seldom because of a simple, single negative motivation. We may need a better troubleshooting manual

.

Don't worry, be happy

This well known song of Bobby McFerrin should be in the toolbox of all child and youth care workers, right? Well, not really. True, we are often moved by the old nurses' formula of "Comfort always, heal often, hurt never," but comforting is not the same as making somebody happy.

The young people with whom we work are often unhappy. They are hurt, have suffered loss, carry about with them feelings of betrayal, hopelessness, and even anger and vengeance. When they are not happy, to enjoin them simplistically to be so is not helpful. We are reassured when we know that there is a real and reasonable cause for their distress (though with adolescents that is often far from clear) and we will place any unhappy kid on our "watch" list, but we cannot and should not attempt superficially to "cheer them up".

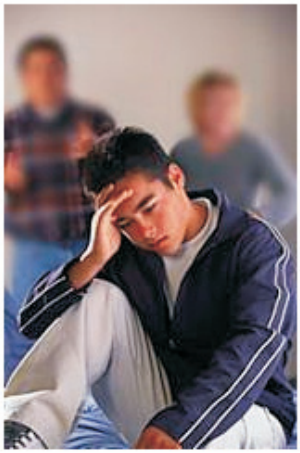
We can offer comfort and compassion – literally, our strength and our empathy — but the work of sadness and grieving we cannot do; it has to be dome by the young people themselves, and in their own time.

One of the verses in this song ends with the line "Don't worry, be happy now!" It is often our own distress that urges us to soothe the dejected client. An unhappy child or youth or family member does not fit in with our expectations of "success". We find it hard to walk away from somebody who remains troubled. We like to go to bed at night with all loose ends tied up. Our anxiety seeks a quick solution to theirs.

In our clients today we will meet disappointment, regret and even heartbreak. We may draw alongside them and lend them the strength of our company and an understanding

ear ... but we will not interrupt or distract them, nor trivialise their feelings. In fact we will respect feelings and consciously give our clients the space and the opportunity for the work they must do with these.

No matter that this is hard for us.



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