PRACTICE HINTS – III

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

Whose behaviour?

We can be tempted (or sometimes bullied) into believing that we are responsible for the behaviour of our group of kids. When there is "bad" behaviour we might imagine our seniors and supervisors to be looking across at us with disapproval. When a neighbour complains about something a youth has done the sub-text may seem to be "Why can't you get your kids to behave?"

This kind of thinking pressures us into regimenting and controlling our group so that we don't have to feel guilty when things go wrong. What's really wrong with this is that we are treating the kids like puppets, imposing on them some arbitrary level of behaviour, and not growing the self-value, the self-responsibility and the self-regulation of the youngsters themselves. And each kid will be at a different place along this continuum of growth – and *we must know at what point each one is*. If we don't know this, we will be offering inappropriate experiences, protection, control, sanctions and learning to them today.

And we will be *expecting* inappropriate behaviour, that is, behaviour inappropriate to their level of learning and development.

Hoghughi talked about balancing the ends of this continuum:

"The balance between directiveness and self-determination must move slowly but surely from the former to the latter if the child is to become able to function with the appropriate degree of autonomy in a society in which he cannot be eternally protected from taking the consequences of his actions."

Of course we have to provide an environment of safety and order, but beyond that, today in our practice we will be conscious of what each of our kids is working at (and on what level), realising — whatever our seniors and neighbours might think — that a child

should be able to manage what has been properly taught and will usually not manage that which he has not been taught. Today we are teaching for the child's tomorrow.

Reference

Hoghughi, M, et al (1988) *Treating problem children: Issues, methods and practice*. London: Sage, p. 44

Appearance is everything?

Great hubbub around the bathroom mirror. The three girls are frantically adjusting eye shadow, too much, too little, making despairing sounds about how awful they look, how terrified they are, asking each others' opinions, scraping everything off and starting again ... and eventually squeezing out of the front door, time-bombs of apprehension.

We worry about their seeming anxiety and their need for reassurance – but only because we momentarily forget our own teen years. Nothing new about pre-party panic or pre-date dread. We all, male and female, spent an inordinate time primping and grooming before unleashing ourselves on the world. And all of this agitation around the mirror is not a problem. Why?

Because *function* is everything. Because these three kids went from the mirror to the party or prom. Whatever their misgivings about their looks and their dress, they are getting on with their lives – attending the social occasions and taking trouble with their appearance.

It is when apprehension and uneasiness dominate or restrict normal function – as with the youngster who *can't* get out of the front door on party night or who *can't* get out of bed on a school morning –

that we may have something to worry about. Like it or not, we may from time to time have to deal with youth who despair of their body shape or have such self-doubt that they cannot get on with their lives.

Rejoice for the three girls we started with; always be on watch for the others who we may *think* are only acting as adolescents ... but who are stuck, not really *being* adolescents, growers, adults-in-the-becoming.

Function is everything.

Go normative

We may spend hours in team meetings hypothesising about what might be the issues in a young person's life. And so we should. We do need to spend time in our efforts to understand, to make sense of the confusion and disarray which he or she may be living through.

But we are well advised to pack away all but the broad brush strokes of our theories and plans when we walk on to the floor to be with the kids. Our best point of contact is always in the shared human minutiae rather than the instrumental technical interventions.

Robert Kydd tells of his first meeting with a distressed girl ...

When the doorbell rang I met a white and trembling child care officer gripping a tearful and scowling eight-year-old, who was clad in a ragged pink satin party frock and whose fuzzy hair, grey from lack of brushing, stood out in all directions. She had fought, scratched, bitten and kicked for the whole five-mile trip. I said, 'Hello, Delia, come and see what's for dinner', and she took my hand and came without a backward glance.

Imagine the heightened tension and lost opportunity if he had

focussed on the wrong things at that point. In our practice today, no matter how complex are the underlying issues, our first efforts are best directed towards the common currency that welcomes, encourages and bonds.

Take a moment

It is one thing for us "to be ourselves", to be "in the moment", when we are spending time with individual kids. It is quite another to have to string together three or four such moments and at the same time to sustain our own levels of self-awareness and spontaneity.

An encounter with one youth is not unlike a chess game. There are the basic rules, there are the gambits and the games which they imply, the attacks and defences, the moves (and the plans which must necessarily change with each and every move), the choices between conserving and sacrifice ... and the end games. It takes all kinds of energy.

Really good chess players can move on to another game immediately, and we have all watched chess masters who can play games against fifty opponents simultaneously, and win them all!

But you and I are often at risk of moving into a new encounter with a different kid too soon, too quickly, before we have allowed the previous meeting to "drain". Our exchanges with kids in our programs are more likely to be "loaded", in the sense that we are often not simply trading opinions on the weather or yesterday's ball game. The youth are struggling with experiences and perceptions and feelings which "get at" them, and which they can't easily let go; or if they manage to get on top of the worries and doubts, it is often

not without much attention and listening and *hearing* on our part.

Today in our practice we know that before we can move from one challenging encounter into a second or a third, we need to get centred, to "re-collect" ourselves. In the naughty old days we might have wanted (gasp!) a quick cigarette; today we can take a walk down the drive and back, eat an apple or have a short conversation with the cat ... anything to help us enter our next one-on-one *at our best,* with a fresh mind and a warm heart.

Our children's children

When dentists, motor mechanics and lawn mowers go home at the end of their day they usually have the pleasure of knowing that their day's tasks are over and done with. The tooth was filled, the motor car is repaired and the lawn looks great. Child and youth care workers aim for more distant goals. We know that it may be only next month – or next year – that we might have played a part in healing the pain, restoring functionality or helped to make life look good for the kids in our program.

- *We need the patience* to know that we will not achieve instant results.

We so often work with young people whose development has been derailed or who find themselves stuck in an emotional logjam, and it takes time to help with the loosening of hurts, fears and conflicts – and the rebuilding of vision and hope, and the restoration of growth and mastery.

- *But we also need the sense of urgency* to catch up with the inexorable passing of years so that coming developmental milestones can be approached with more confidence and ability. It is as though a young child has fallen from a train and we are wanting to get the child back on the train at the next station ... or at least, hopefully, at the one after that.

So the dentist, the mechanic and the gardener fulfil their short-term goals today. We may only know that today's work has proved effective when a kid manages his middle childhood tasks reasonably well, or makes a fair showing at the work of early adolescence ...

It is a mark of his integrity and insight that Erik Erikson dedicated his landmark mid-20th century book *Childhood and Society* "to our children's children". There are those who would expect us to "fix" the children and youth in our programs by dinner time tonight. Demand instant obedience and compliance. Tell them to get their act together right now or else ...

Today in our practice we will recognise that child and youth care tasks must be done thoroughly, care-fully, and will take a little longer. But we will also know, with Erikson, that sooner rather than later our kids will themselves be parents and that before that day arrives we have much to do. Their (yet unborn) children are also our clients.

Large group, bulk discount

Youth care workers and teachers often feel "outnumbered" by the large groups or classes they work with. Troubled or difficult kids are challenge enough when they come in packages of one; groups of ten, twenty or even more, ask us to dig deep.

"How can I keep this group helpful and effective when I need to have eyes in the back of my head?" asks the child and youth care worker. The teacher may wonder "How do I do my job of teaching the curriculum when I have so many needy, untrusting, disruptive students in my group?"

And it is, of course, exactly when we feel up against it, that we tend to be at our worst – when we cut corners, pull rank or go all controlling and authoritarian. Also, it is true that if we had to devote hours of individual attention to every difficult kid, we would simply run out of time.

But the benefit of the group is that it offers to its disparate members a variety of healing and learning opportunities. And we get get bulk discounts. Consider this. One youth behaves in an fractious or defiant manner. When we as the the care worker or teacher deal with this behaviour in a responsive and constructive manner, remaining non-punitive, respectful and goal-directed, all of the *other* potentially difficult kids see this, and are impacted by our behaviour: The hostile youth now has less reason to be so; the fearful youth sees grounds for hope; the attacking youth is disarmed ... all by a single intervention with one kid. The group leader puts the stamp of fairness and reason on the milieu which now can

be seen as more supportive.

This is, of course, not the end of the "war", but an inch is won — and the balance moves towards engagement over confrontation, trust over suspicion, dignity over humiliation, confidence over despair ...

Today in our practice we remember that when a single member of our group is sensibly and sensitively handled, *any kids who are simply present, may gain*. They can discern the promise of our program; either by being directly involved – or simply by seeing, hearing or experiencing good practice.

Time will tell

We go through stages in our relationships with the young people we work with. Initially it's the kid gloves stage with us being sensitive to their needs at a time of crisis or transition – or maybe cagey and suspicious when a kid comes in with a scary history. Once we know each other better and the ground rules are set, we move into the routine stage when we try to keep going those aspects of the youth's life which can keep going, while we work at the rough edges. Much of the work now is what good parents would do – getting going in the morning, getting to school, managing (as well as anyone can) going out and coming back times and maintaining reasonable socialisation tasks.

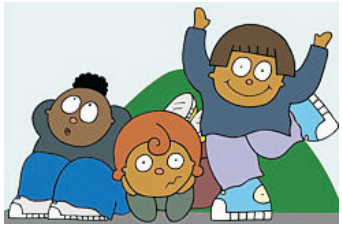
Later we get into what Berne would have called a more adult-adult relationship as we can work together on such things as career and accommodation issues – and then we reach the ex-worker/ former-client relationship where we might bump into each other more or less regularly or amicably.

The above sequence is, of course, greatly sanitised. Along this route there is often much blood spilt, there have been storms and disasters as well as reconciliations and deep learning – on both sides! But what's the betting that as you and a client have moved on through the later stages, the two of you have reminisced over earlier stages? "When I first met you, I thought ..." and "Remember the day you said I couldn't ...?" or "I recall you being very apprehensive about moving on to ..."

I often think that this later reminiscence process is an under-used tool for assessing our current practice. Wondering how we are remembered today by kids who have "passed through our hands" can be a sobering exercise ... are we remembered as as admonishing or encouraging (did we get the mixture right?), as too remote or over-identified, as accepting or rejecting ...

An equivalent exercise is to ask how today's *sixteen-year-old child* will judge our interventions ten years hence, when he or she *is 26 years old*. For *what we are doing now*, will we be remembered for being petty and punitive, or will it be our genuine concern and wisdom that is recalled?

In our practice today we are alert to the possibility that we might be prissy and right and hindering rather than empathic, committed and courageous; we might be controlling as against guiding, over-accommodating as against responsible. These can be tough calls.



Real people

Carl Rogers saw, as a major goal of therapy, that persons should accept responsibility for their own values and recognise where they are living by the values of others. He looked for a client to move away from façades, "away from a self that he is not" while beginning to define, however negatively, what he is.

Aichhorn believed that we should refuse even to respond to the tough exterior of aggressive kids, even if this caused them to suffer a crisis when they realised that their current *modus operandi* wasn't working.

Redl was more tolerant in his acceptance of current "symptoms", and recognised that a youngster was at his most vulnerable when letting go his old ways of functioning before mastering new ways.

We know that kids will construct a "front" behind which to hide their insecurity or doubt (whether the front is one of toughness or weakness); and we know that the only way youngsters can change is when there is least *threat* to their sense of self and *maximum acceptance* of whoever they are right now.

We adults often collude in the building of false fronts, for example, when we demand external compliance in kids' attitudes and behaviours, even when these are not built on the real foundations of their own skills and wills.

The message they really need to get from us is the same message we needed from our own parents: "No matter what, we love you." In our practice today we give kids new goals and beliefs when we convey this message. "You don't need the facade or the pretense of being something you are not: you are worthwhile as you are." Again: "Where you are right now is a good enough place to start with the rest of your life."

Give them space

One of the tensions between troubled kids and adults is that they often have a complicated story to tell ... and we are eager to get on with whatever it is we're supposed to be doing with them. Think of a youngster who is late for school and who, anxious and breathless and trying to catch up with the clock, is mentally preparing the stories over and over — the reasons, the excuses, the explanations — for a teacher who probably won't have the time to listen to them anyway.

Think of youngsters who find themselves in care or in some sort of treatment or juvenile centre, as they long to preserve their dignity, hold on to their individuality, insulate themselves within the context and memory of their own families and neighbourhoods, what stories they have to tell! How much they want to say before they slide into the anonymity of the program, into the possible stigma which labels the whole nameless group.

"Come along," we say, believing that we are involving them and reassuring them, "it's time for school/dinner/group/games/bed" ... whatever, forgetting that they *need to be known* for who they are and what they like and what they need. And what they miss and how they hurt. And how they feel regretful and guilty and angry.

In our work we talk a lot about the *life space*, but this phrase is really wider than it sounds. It is not only a matter of *working with kids where they are* (space) but also of *being with kids who they are* (life space) and making room (space) for them to be and to express their historical and existential and ontological selves.

I know colleagues who work alone with three or thirty kids at once. The irritating and attention-seeking behaviour of these kids usually has

but one goal: please know me and understand me, the real me, in whatever confusing and foreign context I now happen to be.

In our practice today we will use whatever practical and creative and organisational skill we can, to give our kids the chance and the time to be listened to and to be heard — and thus to be acknowledged and respected. To tell their stories.

Looking ahead

It's a natural reciprocal process: our field moves towards more accountable practice at the same time as society increasingly holds us more accountable for our practice. The media (and the advocacy groups, the litigators, the responsible government departments, our administrators — everyone in this food chain of accountability) watches to make sure that we who work with troubled kids and families, dot every 'i' and cross every 't'. And when something goes wrong, the fingers of blame come wagging.

We are tempted in such circumstances to adapt our practice in such a way that we will be able to exonerate ourselves when the fingers arrive. "We met all of the requirements," we will say. "We went by the book." But when we find ourselves looking over our shoulders in order to satisfy potential critics, we are in danger of limiting our goals and doing no more than the minimum — just covering all the bases. And what results can be sterile, negative and defensive work.

Christopher Beedell reminded us that child and youth care workers should hope to be able to provide "not only good ordinary *experience* for their charges but also some good *extraordinary experience*." He also worries about us merely "providing"

care, as if care is a commodity to be delivered. Rather, he maintains that the child must truly experience what we do as caring.

In our practice today we recognise our responsibility for such secure knowledge of our subject and proficiency in our practice that we can trust ourselves to be acting in the best interests of children. That what we do with young people and families remains real, committed, creative — and *extraordinary*.

Reference

Beedell, C. (1970). *Residential life with children*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 20,26

Back me up, Scotty

Karen de Sá once wrote in a California newspaper: "Reforming a dysfunctional juvenile hall typically comes down to one basic question, according to professionals across the country. Staffers should ask themselves: If my kids were locked up, how would I want them treated?"

Backing our knowledge and skills, this is a question for all child and youth care workers and needs no further elaboration when it comes to our *attitude* in doing this work. But it does suggest a further disturbing question: "How could we *fail* to feel this way about the kids we work with?" It is true that care workers do run out of patience; we sometimes dig in vain for more inner resources when the going gets tough; in the face of

on-going hostility and abuse from some angry and untrusting youth, we can be tempted to give up.

Karen's question is reminiscent of Urie Bronfenbrenner's famous dictum that every child needs at least one adult who is crazy about him — which we should be careful not to read too sentimentally. For Bronfenbrenner (writing in the context of the family) went on to say that the "crazy" adult needs *another adult* from whom to receive support and encouragement.

In our business we are talking here about team backing, astute administrators and supervision.

In our practice today we know that we want to do for our clients what we would do for our own kids. But we will also be conscious of our right to know where our "other adult" is, to expect supportive administration and teamwork — and to receive quality supervision.

Upending role-models

We child and youth workers are often expected to be role-models. Many would say that it's part of our job. I suppose it is true that for impetuous kids we could model patience and for biased kids we could model tolerance ... and so on for all of the deadly sins and the godly virtues.

But a simple energy paradigm would tell us that there are too few of us to go around if we were the only role-models. And anyway, who would want all the youngsters in our programs to be like *us*?!

I can think of any number children and youth I have worked with to whom I could have said in all honesty: "You are *my* role-model."

The twelve-year-old who played such brilliant chess while I groped to

see just one move ahead; the nine-year-old who genuinely sympathised with me when my car had a flat; the fifteen-year-old who had in her head the guitar chords for hundreds of songs; the fourteen-year-old, his body crippled and twisted by osteomyelitis, who faithfully travelled with the soccer team so that he could "fetch the ball" when it was kicked out of play; the brave 16-year-old who disarmed his drunk father when his family was in danger ... the dozens of kids who demonstrated untold generosity and forgiveness and courage ... and who persevered against all odds to reach quite unexpected heights.

Today in our practice, role-models though we might be, we will look amongst our clients for signs of their gifts and strengths, and perhaps change their trajectory for ever by telling them, with all honesty, "You are my role-model."

The quiet ones

In our work we always expect the needy, demanding, clamorous kids. As unmet needs impact on youngsters' experiences of rejection and failure, their frustration and anger are compounded and their attention-seeking behaviour becomes distorted and aggressive. We dig deep to respond positively.

So we easily miss out the quiet kids.

These kids do not impose on our sight and hearing. In the absence of any significant relationships they have lost faith in themselves and in others. They no longer expect their world to be responsive or supportive; they have stopped asking for attention. And kids who have lost hope and feel that they have no influence in their own lives are at

great risk of depression.

In our practice today our attention will be grabbed by the dramatic things that happen. We will be prepared to be just as alarmed by things that don't happen at all. And we also know that to respond to signs of despair and depression is far harder than dealing with the fireworks.

Looking back ... and forwards

After many years in the field one has the unique opportunity to see young people the way they are *today* – twenty, thirty, forty years after the days when they were "clients". It is always of interest to hear the story of their lives over the intervening time. Given the tapestry of human interactions, it is almost always true that no single person can feel responsible for any successes or failures over such periods, and one is never so crass as to consider these later meetings in terms of how a person "has turned out".

But it is nevertheless true that we as child and youth care workers join the lives of other people, whether children, youth or families, at times when they are experiencing difficulty or crisis, and thus at times when important life choices are being made. And, like it or not, we are in positions of influence and responsibility as we walk alongside people for shorter or longer distances at this time. We have opportunities for interventions of generosity, insight and courage which can affirm people and build strengths and skills; and in the face of challenging or angry attitudes and behaviours, we are also tempted to avoid where we should engage, control where we should teach, defend ourselves when we should risk ...

Today in our practice we will be conscious of the cost of short-cuts – and as we look into their *today* faces will also consider the potential usefulness of what we do with our clients — over the next twenty, thirty, forty years.

Yesterday's work today?

During a recent morning workshop a teacher came up and asked "How do you handle a child who hits out at other kids?" I said I didn't know; that there was probably no answer to such a question, and that it was rather like asking "How long is a piece of string?" Needless to say, after some clarification, we then hung around for a further hour wrestling with the question.

There was a time, 20 or 30 years ago, when child and youth care workers got together over tea at regional association meetings asking similar questions — "How do you handle a child who lies, steals,

masturbates, bullies, overeats, truants ...? The expectation was that amongst all of our members there was an accumulated wisdom for solving all the problems we encountered in group care settings — that each problem had a solution, and that once we had "learned" them all, our lives would be incomparably simpler.

Today we know that there is no unitary "cure-all" for kids who present with troubled or troubling behaviour, and that usually "the shortest way home is the long way around." We have to know a lot *about* the child and we have to know *the child*; we have to know what the child has experienced and learned; we have to know the context of the behaviours, the meaning which kids attach to circumstances and events, the abilities and skill levels at their disposal, their attitudes to their world and the people they interact with ... and after a lot of listening, relating, observing and hypothesising we may be able to start assembling and scheduling a set of environmental controls, family and community links, teaching models and interventions ... and even then, who knows? Certainly there are no quick "tips" — and what "worked" with one child (or any other child) yesterday (or any other day) is unlikely to be appropriate for this child today.

Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus who taught about the complexity and fluidity of events had something to say about this: A person can never cross the same river twice: because the second time it's a different river ... and the second time it's a different person. In our practice today things may look much the same as they did yesterday – but today is entirely different: these are today's kids and we are today's adults and we're all doing today's stuff.

Faulty beliefs

It is distressing when young people grope for possible meanings behind their experiences of failure and feelings of inferiority. "My Dad always told me that I would amount to nothing." "I know that whenever I really want something badly, I'm not going to get it." "It runs in our family: We're all losers." "My Mum says 'Always expect the worst – that way you get what you expect.'"

When confusion, rationalisation, justification, half-truths, excuses and denial have been the stock in trade of a struggling family, the children understandably get to believe that they are up against a whole malevolent system which is negative, withholding and capricious.

"Things will be OK," we try to reassure. "Yeah," they reply, relying more on their real experience than on our thin slogans.

One of the by-products of the seemingly boring things in our programs like routine and consistency is that the kids can experience rational sequences between schedules and events, between plans and fulfilment, between promises and reward. They help move youth from resignation to control, from blame to responsibility. We don't want to substitute a cold and mechanistic ethic. Enough that we cast doubt on their own negative and deterministic philosophy. So we create small successes and achievements; we celebrate gains and good times; and, yes, with an unexpected treat we show that chance is not the sole preserve of the bad news.

Today in our practice we look for developmentally appropriate (with troubled kids this is not the same as age appropriate) opportunities to demonstrate that events are reasonable rather than arbitrary, that they are in our hands more than under the control of some pessimistic

system or superstition, and that good things are at least possible.

Candy

While visiting a rural group home some years back to do some workshops with the staff, I observed a young girl, maybe nine or ten years old, walking around by herself, looking very dejected. I found myself routinely wondering what might be wrong; she appeared so alone and sad. It looked as though much time was needed and much work was to be done to bring her back out of her seeming depression.

Her care worker noticed me watching, and explained: "You can see," she said, "that there is still a lot of work ahead, but Minnie is making good progress. At this stage we are often tempted to pick her up and 'hug her into happiness' but she is at a point where she is taking more control of her feelings and her decisions – and where she can do some of the healing work for herself. She is at a critical point where if we indulge her and make a fuss of her she could easily relax her efforts at autonomy and slide back into the (easier) position of dependency."

I was deeply impressed by the team's understanding of development, of something which parents practice naturally when they tell their child to "Do it yourself," but where agency staff often think that their job is to do everything "for" a child.

The child's care worker went on: "All we are doing right now is lending her a bit of encouragement when she is struggling beyond her means, so that she can go forward with this stage of her growing by herself."

In our practice with troubled kids today, of course we will want to 'hug children into happiness', but we know that when they are ready we must withhold the passing pleasures which can keep them from achieving the

maturity and independence which is our goal.

This is where the violins really play in our work: not at the easy and simplistic images of laughing children which the media would portray, but at the deeply moving courage and trust which we can draw out of children as they reclaim the reality and significance of their own lives. Our job is to give young people food for their journey, not merely candy for the moment.

Approachability

We made the point in a previous practice hint *(If we don't let them say ...)* that if we don't let youngsters say how they think and feel ... *we may never know how they think and feel!*

Some adults protest that "the youth may come to me at any time". But giving permission to kids to say what they think and feel isn't always as easy as saying "It's OK to ... "

Making sure that we are *experienced* as approachable is an important practice skill.

Being busy or in a hurry is not conducive to easy talk. Our posture and facial expression must say "I am available, you have my attention."

- The space we are in may be too public, noisy or distracting. We must at times be found in a space which conveys comfort and confidentiality.
- Our relationship may not yet be familiar or trustworthy enough. We must have passed beyond the formal roles of relative strangers.
- Any reactions of surprise or disapproval cause kids to clam up. We must show that we at least accept the feelings and ideas expressed.

Today in our practice we recognise that letting kids talk includes making it possible for them to talk.

The individual and the group

A school of fish are following a course through the sea. Guided by instinct or their leaders, or both, they are moving to a place and to fulfil a purpose which they "know" is right. The formation in which they swim is part of this instinct — it is a formation which keeps them safe, on proper course, and conserves energy. They are acutely attuned to the movements of the fish ahead and alongside, and they accommodate to any change of course or depth in an instant.

Suddenly, a fish in the school is taken by the hook of a fisherman. Its personal instinct is to survive, to avoid this threat, and he begins to thrash about trying to rid himself of the hook — of which his fellow fish are unaware and which he does not himself understand. The other fish react instantly. The hooked fish is behaving irrationally. The others see his behaviour as a danger. It threatens to break the cohesiveness of the group, to slow them down, to scatter the group and expose its members. Their response is to attack the "rogue" fish and to neutralise its threat. Their instinct is to sacrifice the "troubled" fish and to restore the equilibrium of their safe formation.

In our practice today we know that we will come across "rogue" kids who are struggling with stuff which we often don't know about and which we find hard to understand. Only that they know they are in serious trouble or crisis, and are struggling to survive. More, they become rejected, scapegoated and attacked by the rest of the group who have troubles

enough of their own. Our task is on two fronts: one, to find meaning for the troubled individual kid, and two, to maintain the function of the group — so that we can eventually get everyone back together again.

Do it yourself?

"I wish I could get the whole thing of acceptance across to Robert," said Elsabe. "I'm going mad trying to work out some program or experience which might penetrate his skull!"

"Why do it yourself when some film company spent ten million dollars making a movie which will do it far better than you can?" asked her colleague Mike. "Get out the DVD of *The Cure*. It's exactly about that — and the kids in the cast are just about Robert's age."

Excellent idea. Robert might not respond to the movie as positively as Mike has done, but Rome wasn't built in a day ... and there are plenty of other movies in which others have spent thousands of man-hours and millions of dollars saying what we want to say to Robert. At our next staff meeting we could find ourselves skipping the "choice of an appropriate technical intervention" stage ... and just asking who knows a good movie!

Of course it isn't as simple as that, but there's no danger in adding powerful movies to our repertoire of "techniques" in child and youth care work. Better still is to take a couple of kids to such a movie in a theatre where everyone gets to share the feelings of those present. Sort of like a positive replication of Solomon Ashe's experiment!

* * *

The idea does not apply only to movies. Often when we are racking our brains for an activity to occupy the kids

and hopefully provide some good "secondary gain" we completely forget the standard activities invented decades ago by other people, far cleverer than ourselves and empirically tested in tens of millions of homes and families since — games like Checkers, Scrabble, Hangman, Monopoly and Chess. These games (think of more of these) have all survived because they are so successful in engaging people of all ages. On the next cold "indoors" afternoon, have some of these at the ready. Jot down some of the positive experiences which they generate and you may be surprised.

Your move.

What is being asked? –1

No self-respecting group of kids is going to offer us 100% co-operation and compliance today. Whatever group or activity we have planned, a number of the children or youth will be unsatisfied and will expect something more or something different. Some will withdraw their participation, others will interrupt or distract us. We may feel irritated oreven angered by these challenges (after all, we came here with the best of intentions and the least they could do is ...) or we could feel outright failures.

But take heart. No program director, principal or supervisor would really be happy to see a report on your group which states blandly that "All enjoyed a

successful period of reading (or discussion or crafts or soccer or math or first aid or woodwork or whatever)." They would far prefer a report which showed that individual kids were engaged where they were at *their own skill* level and emotional level and social level – and somehow led along through a period of their own day and their own development and left somewhere new, somewhere different.

Probably most of the group will participate, but this kid is going to be bored and is looking for stimulation; this one is angry at some rejection or wound and needs support (or maybe to be left alone for a while); this one is looking for group approval (at your expense) and will pick at your role and your authority; another's mind is on an altogether different subject which is far more urgent than today's group.

It is in the nature of our work that we are dealing with needy kids. Today in our practice we will be aware of the individual differences. We will know how to break the large group down into larger and smaller sub-groups and even pairs and individuals. We will know how to break down the allocated time into longer and shorter periods which we can devote to this or that activity – time just to play, time to teach some skill, time to attend to the attention-seeker. We will choose opportunities to lead – or to let others lead while we follow-up some other task-within-the-task of managing our group.

At the end of the period, hopefully, each participant will have had a different experience, something which they expected and wanted. Including us.

What is being asked? –2

We talked in the previous hint about meeting needs – and noted that in any group there are likely to be several different needs being expressed. It is, of course, also true that some "needs" ought not to be responded to. And it's a tough call (when we work with a population with so many unmet and urgent needs) that there are some needs we should disregard.

Consider the youngster who "succeeds" by manipulation and who tries a line like "but you and I have a relationship – surely you would take my side in this?" Or another who takes the "sick" role (in the Adlerian sense) to excuse himself from making his own effort or take his own risks to achieve some goal. Or yet another who seeks your "protection" when he gets into a scrape of his own making.

Consider the youngster who initially needed "holding" (in the Beedell sense) but who wants to remain in this regressed, more comfortable position. Or another who should be moving on but who plays the "poor orphan" role when he cannot get his instant gratification "needs" met.

In a CYC-NET discussion on whether we should have snacks always available for the kids, one writer commented: "These youth have so much taken from them ..." True, but the danger of such a view is that it groups all of the kids into this condition, and would imply that they will forever deserve this solicitous attitude. It fails to individualise those who may well still need this level of care – and *those who should be moving on*.

(We remember the child and youth care worker in an earlier hint, *Over-therapising,* whose real

generosity lay in *withholding* the hug which might have distracted a girl from the efforts she was being called on to make.)

Responding positively to what is being asked is not simple. Knowing when *not* to respond is even tougher.

Stay connected

The thing about life space work is that while we can offer what Redl called "therapy on the hoof" — we would always prefer kids to get on with their lives as soon as possible. A scuffle may break out during a game. A youngster may receive a physical or ego bruising and a worker will stop by to offer running repairs and a word of encouragement. If there is no serious damage, we spoon the kid back into the mix of the life space.

Of course there are times when respite is indicated, and we would not unnecessarily risk a youth's well-being in the program, so the time out is used to re-gather forces for re-entry.

As the group was ready for school someone started to tease Gregory about the clothes he was wearing. These had been a gift from his mother the previous day, and the calls of "Pretty boy" and "Kiss, kiss" upset him. He broke into tears and lashed out at the guilty party. Grace, the Child and Youth Care worker, drew him aside to settle him, just as the school bus was approaching. She had to make a choice: keep him back from school to help him over his agitated state — or reassure him quickly and send him off. The disruption of missing time at school often makes things worse, so she decided on the latter course, straightened out his clothes and saw him onto the bus ... but first said "If you like, come and see me when you get home," and also

"You know my number. Give me a call if you need to."

These two strands of continuing contact were helpful "transitional objects" for Gregory to take along to school. He was rejoining the normal group, but took with him the bond of available support if needed. Grace, though absent, stayed connected.

How was your day?

Child and youth care work is not a peremptory service which we dish out on a "like it or lump it" basis. We don't simply do the bare minimum so that a supervisor or senior can check that we have "carried out our duties". If we ever find ourselves feeding such attitudes into the spirit and mood of our program we will richly deserve the unpleasantness which results – and indeed we can generate cycles of hostility and retribution which can destroy us all.

Daily, hourly, minute-by-minute, we are self-aware to the point that we are aware of our motivations and attitudes, of how we react to the people and situations we work with, and of how they experience our work with them. The proof of the pudding in our profession is not that we did our work, but how our presence, leadership and interventions are experienced by the children, youth and families we work with.

We work with children, youth and families with a number of anxious needs, and there will always be criticisms of how we meet (or fail to meet) these needs. But springing to our own defence is a an unpromising response, for it doesn't really matter what we did as much as *how our clients experienced* what we did.

The Minimum Standards often found in our field are worded in an interesting way. For example the

Standard relating to emotional care states that "Young people receive emotional and social care which enables quality interactions with adults and peers, and which promotes positive sustained relationships at school, and with families, significant others, and friends." So far, so good. But it continues like this ...

In practice this means that *young people confirm that*:

- they are encouraged to identify and express emotions appropriately
- they are taught effective, positive ways to express and manage emotions and relate to others
- they have opportunities for positive interaction
- they experience interactions with service providers as positive and respectful
- service providers model healthy, effective ways to express emotions
- they are encouraged and assisted to restore, maintain and enhance relationships with family and significant others
- they are encouraged to build, and maintain appropriate relationships with friends and service providers
- service providers support them in coping when relationships break down
- service providers support them in coping with the impact of having contact or not having contact with family and/or significant others
- they receive adequate information on routines (such as meal times, wake-up and bed-time) in a manner which facilitates their understanding and cooperation, and they are assisted to participate within routines in a way which supports their individual development
- they receive, own and can wear appropriate clothing for their age and activities

So it is one thing, when you get home at the end of a shift, to complain of the awful day you had. Far more important is to have some sense of what sort of a day your clients had, *how they experienced your time with them*. And the chances are that there

is an almost perfect correlation between what the kids and families will say about *their* day – and the way you feel about *your* day!

Unlock the force

A worker in an 'inclusive' classroom comments: "I've heard children 'prompt' others in a way that they've heard an adult model. Children offering each other reminders that 'it's your turn,' or even giving phonemic cues or touch cues for children who are working on specific sounds. Children are so helpful to each other."

The central ingredient in this anecdote is the *adult model*. Where teachers and programs are resistant to including 'different' children, or where they are controlling or forbidding or blaming or irritable, the other children are not free to be generous and helpful.

Child and youth care programs are meant *always* to be inclusive, because we *exist* in order to be of service to youngsters who are not managing, who are difficult or struggling or awkward or developmentally backward. Unless we are very careful and self-aware, we can wreck this inclusivity: we can unwittingly set up amongst the kids hierarchies of compliance, 'normality' or achievement whereby we favour those who satisfy our expectations or our comfort zones. By so doing we lock our groups into judging the 'different', competing with the less successful, and ultimately targeting and excluding those who don't gain our approval.

In our practice today we realise that this work is not about us — it is about the troubled and hurt young people who long for experiences of attachment and achievement and growth. It is we who set up the gates

and fences and obstacles that keep these kids at arms length and deny them the acceptance and belonging which can turn their lives around. And it is our warmth and openness and generosity which sets the tone for the whole group — which in turn is encouraging and helpful for all of its members. Only in this way does the life space we create for our kids become what Bloom, fifty years ago, first called "the powerful environment".

Unlock the force.

Reference

Bloom, B.S. (1964). *Stability and change in human characteristics.* New York, Wiley.

Short gains, or long benefits

Be honest. How often do you plan to "see a kid" or "talk to a kid" when all you really want is compliance or some decrease in an unwelcome or scary behaviour? "How about easing up on the aggro?" we loom, or "This truanting of yours is now going too far." In short, we meet with the kid with the message to "Shape up" and hope to buy instant success — and maybe an extra day of peace and quiet.

It is fair enough for us to stress program rules or treatment goals, but, deep down, we know that real change

will only come when the youngster starts to see things differently and makes an own decision for pro-social and positive functioning. And this is 'slowly, slowly, catchy monkey' work.

We do know that kids need to believe in us and we need to believe in them to get this process under way. Doing no more than "seeing" them or "talking to" them isn't enough. Also, kids aren't easily going to figure out what lies behind their own attitudes and behaviours unless their experience gets into the negotiable currency of words. So we must spend time listening and showing that we understand. And that in any event we care about them. We get to be believable and of influence when we have been the long way round ... and when kids get to take from us something new and different for their lives, there is hope for long-term benefits.

When youngsters eventually leave us we should be able to write more than "obedient, punctual and courteous" on their report card. Like "left with some new questions, some new insights and some new hopes about being able to cope in the real world." Or something like that.

Long benefits, not short gains.

Clogged arteries

Rumour and anxiety feed off a lack of information. Managers know that a failure to be transparent and generous with information causes unease and resentment down the line as staff members feel untrusted and excluded. It is amazing how often we are tempted to play our cards close to the chest – but equally amazing how much information should rightly be in the public domain anyhow.

Destructive as information meanness can be for adults, it eats

away at young people in our programs. Kids who have been "removed" and "placed" easily feel impotent and dependent. We often hear youth in care asking questions like "Are we allowed to ...?" or "When will we be able to ...?"or "Do we have to ...?" just as we hear the adults saying "Not until I say so," or "I will let you know about that." Good information-sharing is like the oxygen in our blood, part of an organisational vascular system which maintains the health of our program and community.

A sound rights culture includes the right of people, young and old, to know their rights. But it goes deeper than this. Withholding information to retain power and status is less than fair when we are at the same time expecting young people to learn to be responsible and to plan ahead. The resources to be competent include not only skills but also knowledge. We enrich kids' lives when, rather than dispensing pieces of information like candy rewards, we inform them fully about coming events, about opportunities and facilities at their disposal (in our program as much as in the neighbourhood and the town at large), about their rights and responsibilities, about any changes currently being considered ... and about those things on which they can continue to rely as they think ahead.

Today in our practice we will be aware that the greater the knowledge people have, the more independent they are — and that (in case we have forgotten this) it is to independence that we are supposed to be leading our youth.

No clogged arteries.

Handing them back

We hear a lot about the "rescue mentality" of child and youth workers who feel that their task is to "save" young people from the circumstances in which they are living and to "bring them home" . Of course we would want to offer safety where there is danger and nourishment where there is hunger ... but there is a more universal game plan under way that involves those who would rescue kids from the dangerous territory of youth itself.

Adults often find themselves out of their comfort zones when kids move away from the influences of home and parents to explore youthdom and their peer group. In all young people's lives there is that tug-of-war period when they vacillate between at-home and out-there, between parents and the rest of the world — and simultaneously parents waver and fret about whether their child is ready or not ...

We in child and youth care are no different. The kids we work often have not been through the normal and healthy tug-of-war period, or they have been thrust ill-prepared into the "out-there" and gotten into difficulties and in some sense been "rescued" . But the rescue does not mean that they are now back home, safe and protected from the real world; it means only that we have some time to prepare for relaunch.

We know the feeling: A young girl at the beach gets into difficulty with some big waves. We may give her a hand and pull her to safety, but she doesn't cling to us in eternal gratitude; she turns back to the waves, because this is what she is busy doing. Similarly, the kid in your program has not arrived home; he is still in the process of leaving. We do not all relax because the struggle is over; the struggle is just beginning, and he will turn back to the waves,

because this is what he is busy doing. In his mind he is already out there, and it is for him to succeed out there that we have this extra chance to help.

In our practice today we remember that we are not running a hotel or a retirement home. We are running a way station, an information centre, a first-aid post, a supply depot, an overnight stay ... for a traveller who is on an important journey — the journey of a lifetime. We are focussed on what the traveller may need before setting off in the morning.

Biographical sketches

Imagine that you are due to give a talk, write an article, go on a camp, meet a new group ... and you are asked for a brief two- or three-point biographical sketch of yourself. What are you going to write? Chances are you will pick two or three things by which you would like to be known. You got that degree, co-authored that guide, are good at that game, led that group ...

The kids we work with often get two- or three-point biographies by which they would prefer not to be known. They have to take that medication, that are aggressive or addicted, they have to be in that program, we must watch out for his or her ... How they must long to wear some name tag other than those which reflect their failures and limitations.

We also know that some kids will pay any price to get a name tag (no matter how negative) which at least recognises their individuality – "Kath is the group dummy", "Mike is our 'slave', he will always go to the shop for us." So in this wretched way some kids will perform to satisfy others, but not for themselves. (See *http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0900-casebook.html*)

In our practice today we look for opportunities to affirm even the smallest individual gains and "becomings" which our kids achieve so that their identities gather some real positive qualities. Peter is good at fixing things like that, Janice helped make this dessert, LJ has good taste in colours. We never give false or indulgent tags (like John is the fastest runner or Mary is a good girl.) But real acknowledgements build positive identities and add value to kids' sense of self.

And they look good on those biographical sketches.

Downward spiral

The well-known conflict cycle model places *the self-aware adult* in the otherwise destructive spiral of tough relationships with youth. Young people who are insecure and hurting perceive their world as hostile and rejecting, and they relate to others in a defence and attack manner. True to form, the others in their world react to their behaviour in turn with hostility and rejection ...

The worst thing about this cycle is that the attitudes and behaviour of the youth are continually adjusted to deal with this increasingly hostile world, and so we ratchet up the mistrust, aggression and ill-feeling. The young person is moving away from trust and the ability to interrelate constructively and

rewardingly with others – instead of getting closer to these ideals – and is honing ever sharper and fiercer tools to live everyday life.

Aichhorn observed, in fact, that such youth *lost* their normal pro-social skills and that *when adults treated them with kindness* they were plunged into crisis because their whole repertoire of living and survival skills was thereby rendered irrelevant and useless. Having travelled this dark and unfriendly course, and for which they had collected their own set of weapons and tools (Aichhorn called them *wayward* youth), they had to experience themselves as lost to be drawn back into ordinary human discourse.

In the conflict cycle, instead of being hooked into the youth's feelings as we so easily are, the self-aware adults recognise how these feelings are evoked in themselves but decide to respond differently – with respect and affection rather than with anger and rejection – and the young person moves on into his or her next encounter (with whoever) with less resentment, less vengeance, less self-depreciation, less embarrassment, and hopefully with some change of course, however slight, away from conflict.

We do not aim for dramatic conversions or sentimental reunions. We know the youth must still be strong, must manage a difficult life stage in difficult families and a difficult world. We aim to soften the black-white, good-bad, for-against dichotomies of the world they experience into the more complex grey realities of humanity where one can both love and criticise, both affirm and correct, both value and challenge.

In our practice today we are careful not to respond in kind to the anger and offensiveness of our 'wayward' kids. We offer them something different. When they expect meanness in return for their meanness, we offer kindness; when they expect censure for their discourtesy, we offer respect; when they expect rejection for their rebuff, we offer acceptance and nearness.

The spiral turns upward.

The best theory

The best theory is the theory we haven't yet fully understood. Any one of us who believes that he has all the theory needed to work with young people and their families, is a danger both to his clients and himself. He is, literally, not playing with a full deck.

At the beginning of each day, of each shift, or each encounter with a youngster, whatever theory we have thus far gleaned is down-graded to the status of hypothesis, amenable again and again to testing, exposure to reality, and measurement against our experience. Unless we accept this, then we limit the possibilities inherent in each meeting with another child, colleague or family member. We are in danger of bringing our same old viewpoint and understanding to each new meeting.

The exhilaration of our work is that as we approach, on the very edge of openness and anticipation, an encounter with another person, that person in turn is aware of new possibilities shared in the co-creation of a new moment. Otherwise why bother to get out of bed in the morning?

This electricity and energy in our daily work results from theory which is as yet incomplete and unwritten – the best kind.

And the best practice?

Matching resources

In a program for troubled youth we will always have a "better than ordinary" array of resources. For starters, there will be more people around to meet the needs of the youth – both the normal developmental needs and the special individual needs related to why a particular youth came to our program in the first place. There will be *back-up* staff to call upon when one staff member must undertake prescribed tasks with single or small groups of kids. There will be *spaces and materials and equipment* available for whatever projects and activities which we may consider necessary. There will be a compendium of *information, theory and knowledge* easily accessible, through staff colleagues and supervisors, library, internet access, etc. And there will be money – maybe not an awful lot, but always enough for food, clothes, staffing, transport, etc.

As we work with children, youth and families, we constantly ask ourselves where our clients will find for themselves the kinds of resources which we are calling on and using in our work. Conversely, we constantly aim to bring our clients to the point where they can manage with the kinds of resources which can generally be found in the communities where *they* live. Again, when we are drawing on inner resources of our own, we constantly work at building within our clients similar resources within themselves which they can take away with them.

It is ultimately dis-empowering for the families we work with to feel that we might be succeeding with their children purely because we (as an agency) have more money or more time or more people than they have. "If I could afford the food or clothing," they might say, "or if I had the same amount of time to spend on this, or if

I weren't alone and had all this help ... I would also be able to succeed."

Today in our practice we are specially conscious of the circumstances of our kids and their families "back home". Where would they be able to find this opportunity or this activity or this information? How can we teach them to do by themselves what we are doing in our work with them? How can be help them to be *resourceful*?

Decisions

Sandra came into the office to tell Graham (unit manager) that some of the kids were outside smoking again in the car park. "Well," replied Graham in frustration, "Just tell everyone that from now on nobody is allowed outside at all after dinner."

This is the kind of decision we are often tempted to make in child and youth care programs. When we study it in retrospect, it was not a quality decision. It *seemed* to be addressing the problem (whether it was the smoking or the gathering in the car park) but all it really did was to avoid facing the problem and dealing with it positively. Graham may have argued that it was "in the interests of the children" but if we are honest, it offered nothing to the learning and growth of the kids, and merely saved Graham the bother of having to make such decisions in future. It also saved him the bother of engaging the issue of smoking, or of dealing with why he didn't want the young people to gather in the car park ... whatever.

As child and youth care workers, we are constantly called on to make (often challenging and difficult) decisions which promote the developmental and treatment goals of the youths we work with. We rack our brains with problems like "How do we make it possible for George to have such-and-such an experience or

enable him to pluck up the courage to say ...?" or "Where can Susan do that (practise the trombone or write private letters)" or "Who will go with her to deal with this issue she has with her Mom?"

(There are times when we have to take decisions for the benefit of staff! Yes we will, time and again, take decisions which involve us going the extra mile, but when we repeatedly take decisions which are beyond our capacity as a team (in terms of time, numbers or skills) we risk the well-being and safety of staff members and this can compromise our whole program.)

But Graham might have solved his problem differently: "We'll probably never stop everyone smoking, but we need to spend some time working out what more we can learn and do about the health and education aspects of smoking?" or "It seems that some of the kids do need a space where they can be out from under the feet of the adults – what changes can we make?"

Today in our practice we monitor the quality of the decisions we make — to see that they encourage progress in our kids, and not merely help us to avoid the brainwork or legwork which is part of our job.

Grouping in residential care

How do we group youngsters in residential settings? If we are a specialist program, for example, for teen drug abusers, then our program is already grouped. But if we are not a specialist program and young people of various ages are admitted for various reasons, then we can decide on how we group them.

A common tendency is to group youth by age. The argument is that we

can then concentrate on age appropriate needs in each living unit, with an obvious focus on young kids here, older kids there. It is true that some careworkers are "better" at younger or older clients, and also that different age groups have different time schedules – little ones are in bed earlier, for example.

But grouping by age sacrifices the normative experience of life in a "family" group where there are older and younger children. It also places young people in essentially competitive groups, where several young people present similar needs at the same time.

It often happens that programs "separate off" the older kids into a "teen" group because it is hoped that their "negative influence" will be contained and thereby removed from the younger ones. While this might be seen as a positive idea, it is often a case of *force majeure*, when we feel defeated by the older kids and simply wish them out of here.

It can be scary for a teenager to be admitted to a group of other teenagers, for while there is already enough family and adolescent and school "stuff" to be dealt with, he or she must now also cope with the politics, intrigue and rivalry of the peer group.

Separating our living units into age groups also loses for us the potential of the "hierarchy of care" whereby older and younger kids often meet each others' needs.

* * *

In facing choices about grouping, a frequent mistake is to assume that the living group by itself can provide for all of a young person's needs. For example, if we have an adolescent in a mixed group and *we fail to make provision for all of his or her adolescent needs* (like normal opportunities to mix with similar aged friends both inside and outside the program, not to mention normal opportunities to behave like a normal teenager within the unit!) then we are failing in developmental youth care work anyway.

Another, more sinister, mistake is to assume that a youngster in our program is not going to improve, to make gains and move on. This is to expect the worst of a youth, and is similar to stigmatising kids or creating self-fulfilling prophecies. If we place a young person into a living group for hopeless cases, we dispute the efficacy and hopefulness of our own program.

In grouping youth in our programs we try to retain the maximum possible normative experiences and opportunities for kids, never being seduced by what is lesser and "easier".

Connecting

As a supervisor one so often has the privilege to share in moments of superb practice. Enjoy the insight and creativity from a session this past week.

Tony is eight and a handful. A recent immigrant, having been "shipped" across the ocean to be with one of a pair of deeply divided parents, feeling a bit like a football, not really wanted by either parent and "pleasing" them only by going away, his behaviour is dominated by his feelings of helplessness and rejection. His Second Grade teacher has little patience with his disruptive and over-active behaviour and brings him to Carrie, the school child and youth care worker. "I am just not able to have him in my classroom, I have thirty other children whom I have to teach!"

Tony has come with a cut-out sheet,

a writing book and a pair of plastic scissors. He stands in the middle of Carrie's room, trembling, and starts to slash at the cut-out sheet with the scissors.

Carrie: Let's not spoil what you have already done in your book. Here are some old magazines which you can cut out ...

Tony kneels down and rips out two or three pages, and tears them into shreds.

Carrie: Those are old magazines, you can tear them into bits. It's OK.

Tony pauses, and then tears out more pages and this time cuts them up with the scissors, roughly and seemingly aggressively. The boy still kneels, rigidly and tensely, and doesn't sit when Carrie herself sits on the carpet near him. He continues to wield the scissors rapidly, pieces of paper falling everywhere.

Carrie sits, her eyes on the scissors and the magazine pages.

Carrie: You're very quick with the scissors ... (a pause) ...

Carrie: *What else are you good at?*

Tony: I'm good at dancing ... you want to see me dance?

Carrie: Dancing! Very much, yes please.

For twenty minutes there is the extraordinary 'dialogue' of Tony's frenetic dancing and Carrie's 'listening'. He is clearly skilled and has picked up the steps and routines somewhere. Eventually he stops.

Exhausted, he lies on his back on the carpet and laughs.

They talk.

Today in our encounters with anxious and hurting kids we aim to connect rather than reproach, to lift rather than put down, we arrange our space and style so that we can allow rather than suppress, acknowledge rather than reject ... and above all to create climates for activity and exchange. Well done, Carrie.

Enough to take away?

What characterises the helpful child and youth care intervention is that the young person is enabled to resume, as soon as possible, his or her activity in the life space. The worker, on the sidelines of the game so to speak, may play the role of coach, consultant, encourager or referee (one of Redl's images of our work) before leading the youth back into the current activity.

The idea is not to disturb the momentum by too much of an interruption. The fact that the young person was already involved in some activity was a positive: there was participation, interaction, learning, satisfaction — whatever the goals or benefits of the activity might have been — and if we have had to intervene because of some difficulty, we want the youth back in the activity quickly. It is always better to offer kids to the possibility of success and satisfaction where this is likely rather than withdrawing them from the very milieu which may promote this.

An important concern, however, is whether we gave the youngster enough to be able to resume the activity. Our on-the-floor judgements are critical in these life-space interventions. Sometimes we are tempted to cheat at this point, for example by pulling rank to get quick compliance ("Don't you ever let me see you doing that again ... now off with you ..."). At other times our perception of what is needed gets blurred: where we needed only to encourage, we give a lecture; where we needed to demonstrate or teach something, we give only a warning; where a knowing look might suffice we send the youth to his room.

The skill lies in the background knowledge we have of the kid (how he

or she is managing current learning and developmental tasks) coupled with our assessment of what has just gone wrong and what is needed at this point — a skill, new knowledge, a resource, confidence ... or just a reminder of something we have previously worked at.

If we feel we have done enough in our intervention, then returning youth to their current activity is will be positive. If we have done too much, we are unnecessarily interrupting their lives. If we have not done enough, we only set them up for further trouble or failure and we compromise their sense of achievement and self-confidence.

Hurt feelings

Kids are often angry with their parents, frustrated with them when they can't get their own way before they are two years old, so on through all stages of growth, and seriously at odds with them as they play out the edges between freedom and compliance during adolescence. And when they are angry they reach into their quiver of arrows with knowing accuracy. They may scream and refuse to eat when they are young; they may tell us to get a life and say that we don't care about them when they are older.

It is little help saying that all this is normal, part of the territory. We are in turn frustrated, embarrassed and angered by our own children from 0 to 18 and beyond. And hurt. After an altercation (do we even *remember*

what they were about?) we are thrown into self-doubt (did I do the right thing?) or recrimination (that will show her that I mean what I say) or detachment (I just don't care anymore). And because of our attachment, we hurt.

And then we reach out again. After an hour or two of appropriate seething and a restorative cup of tea we know that between us and our children there is something bigger than the dispute, bigger than the hard words and the slammed doors. Probably the greatest gift we ever give to our children is this knowledge that, *after all,* they are still our children. The shape and content of our love changes over time, but they are still our children.

The children we work with in our programs are not our children. The futility and fear they experience is exponentially greater than that of our own kids. The pain and rage they direct at us is undeserved and meant for someone else. They are already beyond those fringes of connectedness and alienation. Their quiver of arrows is more poisoned and their use of them more unreasoned and elemental. And we are not on the familiar ground of the parent who has known the kid from Day One.

And because we have looked for the positives and cranked up our hope and made the commitment and gone the extra mile ... we can be deeply hurt. But after the cup of tea we do not naturally have that "something bigger than the dispute". We have not lived the history. We have not traded twelve or sixteen years of *minutiae* which are the glue of the parental relationship. In fact we rarely share to any depth the culture, language or values – and we may not even *like* this kid.

Yet it is as child and youth care workers that we step into this confusion, however great the self-doubt and risk, and with a mix of skills, generosity and courage unknown in other professions, try to offer something better than "consequences", greater than "discipline", more noble than "impartiality" – those neutral words

we easily put into self-justifying incident reports. We look for that "something bigger". Just as we may reassure our own child that no matter what has happened you are still my child, so we reach deep into ourselves to find something for this "other" child which subsumes the tears and shrapnel of today's battle: the promise that we are still connected.

In our practice today, we know that the young person's experience of us at critical moments is always a potential watershed: confirmation of cynicism or surprise at continuing hope. And, as we have often had to remind ourselves, *today this may be our final test*, the last time that our relationship may be tested and therefore accepted or rejected.

Expectations of health

I remember our discussion on CYC-NET about having food available at all times for the kids in our programs. The debate was hot and went on for weeks. Out came the healthy food lobbyists, the stick-to-mealtimes folks, the go-for-fruit-not-cookies crowd, the let-'em-eat-cake brigade – along with a whole heap of related opinions. Great fun.

One reply worried me. A writer had just warned about unhealthy eating habits like youngsters being able to eat as many cookies as they like, and someone replied "*... yes but these kids have been through so much*." The suggestion was that by being liberal with food through the day, we were making up for their earlier privations. Unwittingly, and

seemingly from the best of intentions, this writer was committing one of the cardinal sins of our field ...

Suggesting that, because "these kids" had been through tough times and were in the program, they were entitled to unusual benefits — thereby labelling them as different from other kids whose caregivers would not allow indiscriminate eating, making it comfortable for them to live in an over-compensated care environment, without considering the longitudinal, developmental view which necessarily connects kids where they are now with a future in which they will hopefully be able to function in a reasonably normal way.

An analogy of our work will help. We might look upon a youngster newly admitted to our program as having fallen out of a train. The train has sped onwards, and we are asked to help.

Our first task is to attend to the shocked and injured child. Our immediate concern is whatever the youth has suffered arising from the fall from the train. We will be interested in comforting and reassuring, tending to wounds and healing, seeing to nutrition, strength-building and restoring to an ambulatory and (as far as possible and appropriate) independent state.

Our next task is to get the young person back on the train. The journey has been interrupted, but the train timetable (like the normal pattern of human development) is inexorable. Our initial solicitous role now becomes one of encouraging, training, engaging ...

The point is that we pass the stage of saying "this poor kid fell off the train"! It is probably fair to say that our sole and entire goal in child and youth care work is to accompany kids (who have somehow crashed out) back towards mature, independent function. By expecting more from them than is reasonable when they are in trauma or crisis is to destroy their hope and their self-confidence; by expecting less from them than is reasonable when they are convalescing is to encourage dependency ...

We can never run a program for young people without distinguishing between these two positions: knowing when they should be in intensive care, and knowing when they should be mending and doing more for themselves. So no. We do not allow them unfettered access to cookies because "they have been through so much". That is not only simplistic, but is also treating kids with less consideration than we owe them.

In the company of kids

Just in front of us as we walked into the mall was a well-dressed woman with her son (nephew, neighbour's kid, we couldn't be sure) who was perhaps fifteen or sixteen. She turned to him and said sharply: "I told you, with those stupid pants and that silly thing in your ear, you're not walking next to me!" – and quickened her pace as he looked down in embarrassment. Half an hour later we came across them again, she striding stylishly ahead, he, downcast, a few yards off her starboard beam.

I remembered a member of my Board in a program I ran a quarter of a century earlier. "All that these young people need," he assured me, "is to be taught how to speak properly!"

How many millions of youngsters come adrift from their families because they don't measure up to expectations of appearance, of superficial acceptability? Bad enough for the average youth who is in any case going through the doubts and risks of the transition to young adulthood; how much more serious for the kids who are already pretty convinced of their own unacceptability and worthlessness?

So with the kids in our programs. How complex and rich needs to be the

human contact and communication between us and them if we are going to confirm for them the worth of who they are thus far, so that they have something positive to build on for the future? How much listening do we have to do to "learn" them and know them – so they feel that they have something worthwhile to leave behind and something good to look forward to when they go?

In our practice today we know that we are so easily distracted by the superficial expectations which life places on our kids – that they are on time, they have done their hair, their rooms are tidy, they are "behaving" – so we may have to remind ourselves that it is they in whom we are interested, and we have this unique opportunity to be alongside them for so limited a time before they get back into their often unimproved and difficult lives. So, with those stupid pants and that silly thing in your ear and your awkward manners and foul mouth and scratchy moods and provocative behaviour ... it's great to have you along. What do you think of that comfortable-looking couch ...?

Restoring circulation

Brendtro used the phrase "establishing relationship beachheads", Beedell talked of "remedial ego building" and Redl of "massaging numb values". These are all images of regaining territory which has been lost, rebuilding something which has broken down, of restoring circulation, feeling and function which have somehow been cut off.

Relationships, awareness, growth, sensitivity – all of these retreat in the face of hurt, anxiety, ineffectiveness or simple non-use. "What's the use? Why should I try again?" asks the scared, angry or withdrawn child.

The child and youth worker's main role is, through being alongside the young person, to represent ordinary humanity in its normal responsiveness, its usual interest, its

standard tendency to explain and assist, its average capacity to share, to commiserate, to laugh. Previously the child's normal explorations and interactions have been met with absence, unconcern, ignoring, silence, ridicule, forbidding, threat, punishment ... and in our daily work we simply normalise our responses to the child's normal expressions of self.

The only part of this which is artificial is that a child and youth care worker is interposed as a player in the child's life so as to increase the probability of an everyday human response to what the child says or does.

The more serious the withdrawal, the longer this may take ... and this is the magic of child and youth care: if it takes a while to restore the circulation and function, then we're there for the duration; we make utmost use of our learning and special skills, our patience and commitment. But equally, we have all had the experience of the kids who, finding themselves in a rational and responsive human environment, are reassured and recover spontaneously, can pick up from where they left off and can get on with their lives. And we are trained to know the difference — when the extra care is needed or when over-solicitousness will be unhelpful.

In our practice today we answer by our actions those questions "What's the use? Why should I try again?" Our job is to represent humanity — to re-present humanity — we are attentive, concerned, responsive, articulate, affirming, encouraging, optimistic, teaching.

Stories of heroes

David Copperfield, in the very first line of the Dickens book, wonders "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life ..." Few of the young people we work with would consider themselves to be heroes in their lives – chiefly because other people and circumstances have exerted the major influences which they have been subject to. The family members will say that "things got on top of them" or that they "started off with a minus score".

And yet, when a group of kids is shooting the breeze, most have stories to add and can hold the floor from time to time – telling of their own adventures and escapades, coincidences and romances, laughs and tears. And all of those stories, *whether literal or just fancies, are the chronicle of the life of the hero.* Our interest is not in whether the stories are true or not; it is just to listen, and to facilitate the telling. We are hearing about remembered times, about relationships and identifications, about enjoyed moments and scary things.

When we acknowledge and receive all these, we affirm the youth's valued and significant experiences, the belonging and camaraderie felt at times with friends and family – and, important, the young person's capacity for storytelling and sharing with the group.

Today in our practice, we listen to stories — whether they happen spontaneously in groups or we have to tease them out in one-on-one sessions. This way we all get to understand each other better, and the youngsters themselves fill out their life stories and get their own ducks in a row.

Intervention

You are walking with your child on the mountain. It is quite steep, rocky, and the grass is long, but she keeps up, determinedly, a yard or two off the pace, enthralled with this altogether new and different experience. Occasionally you think she is struggling with a thicket or a climb and you turn towards her, arms outstretched, offering to help. But she swings not just her head but her whole body with the firm message "No, leave me." You comply, keep your distance – but also your closeness.

Then there appears a ridge across the path, fully a metre high, which even you are going to have to negotiate with care and maybe a little loss of dignity. She arrives at the ridge. Walks a little to the left and then a little to the right to see if there is a way up, but this ridge is taller than she is. After a minute, you turn once again to her, offer your arms, and without a second thought she allows you to grasp her around the waist and heave her to the top of the ridge. She resumes her walk without so much as a "Thank you" while you, on hands and knees, scamper up the ridge yourself.

Adjust the above scenario for age, task, and the child's developmental status (whether physical, cognitive, emotional), and you have a good analogy for the child and youth care intervention. We see the futility of adopting a "Shape up or else" mentality. In our walk alongside troubled kids and families we give them space to carry on by themselves as far as possible, to show themselves what they can do, and we show our tacit acknowledgement. We may have had a say in adjusting the difficulty level of the current task, the ruggedness and challenge of the terrain, but beyond that we keep our distance – and our closeness.

In our kind of work, our *actual* intervention might have been no more than a reassuring touch on the

shoulder, or it might have been a three-week concentration on a difficult problem-solving issue. The intent and process is the same.

The essence of this whole story is, of course, contained in the very first sentence at the top of this page: You are present, doing something, in challenging circumstances, in a relationship. You have already done much of your work even to have arrived in this situation. When the youngster reaches an obstacle, our intervention is natural, mutual, in the interests of the current task – beyond which hardly a word needs to be said. Both of us come out the other side of the experience *different*.

Contagious affection

Daniel Monti starts his 1994 book* with the following sentence: "It really helps to like young people when you do research on a subject like gangs, because sometimes teenagers are little shits." At first reading, a rawly stated opinion, but there is a truth in there, and all of us know that it is not always easy to *like* the kids we work with. Some kids, in their withdrawal and self-protection or angry retaliation against their life circumstances, make themselves unlikeable; they frankly do not welcome advances of warmth and the risks of closeness — and they repel.

"Keep your distance" is the untrusting (and often knowing) rebuff. Other kids are just plain hard to like. These barriers to affection

often cause the making of relationships to be a slow and awkward procedure for us who work through the medium of relationships. And we all have our own styles of working through this, of being realistic about the nature of relationships with troubled and hurting kids — and eventually reaching through to them.

Our colleagues are having the same difficulty. Maybe not in a case meeting where others are listening, but certainly in the halls and over hasty cups of tea during breaks, we get to know who is struggling with whom. "That kid gives me a hard time/gets on my nerves/is plain trouble ..." and so on.

Something akin to labelling is happening here, or maybe Goffman's "spoiled identity". A characterisation is being attached to somebody, and this may spill out into a number of negative side-effects: others may "catch" pessimistic expectations of the kid; the self-fulfilling prophecy is a possibility; there may be implied permission to dislike, differentiate or marginalise the youth. Make no mistake, troubled kids will live up to any pejorative impressions we utter or allow, and then we are all heading south.

And, of course, there is an opposite process. Child and youth care workers are trained to work with strengths – to identify, promote and grow strengths. When, in our work with difficult youth, we observe and comment on a positive attribute, we allow for new possibilities for their identities. "That kid can kick a ball/impressed me with his patience/has guts ..." Expressions of admiration or liking go towards building an altogether different reputation, and, again, kids will live up to positive expectations.

In our practice today we avoid contributing to youths' negative identities, however difficult they may be, knowing how this can add to a downward spiral; and we seek out genuine positive qualities and let them be known. Whether we are working in a community, family or residential setting, when a young person experiences respect and

approval from you and me – and then feels this attitude complemented or reflected by others in his or her immediate circle – we are truly contributing to "the powerful environment".

* Monti, D.J. (1994) *Wannabe: Gangs in Suburbs and Schools*, Oxford: Blackwell

Self-determination

Like caregivers forever, we were tearing our hair out over school grades. It always seemed that we were doing all the pushing and the kids were doing all the resisting – and little energy seemed to be left over for actual study! Norman, one of our tutors, said he thought we should be awarded the good grades at the end of the school year rather than the youngsters because we seemed to be doing all the work! As usual at our staff meetings, the chalkboard was covered with words and ideas, numbers, arrows, and hieroglyphic-looking diagrams representing motivation, carrot-and-stick models, graphs of low grades, correlations with this and that, all of which left us ... nowhere.

It was Norman who eventually had the idea. "Think about it," he said. "Here we are treating the kids like cattle that we want to pass through a gate, prodding, threatening, cajoling. Let's try instead to treat them like reasonably sensible high school kids." Dumb silence. "I have this idea," he went on. "We should write them a letter!" Dumber silence. But he persevered and developed his idea, and soon we were all working at it. An hour later we were ready to try out a pilot scheme.

All of our high school students were given a personalised, objective report which listed their school subjects, their latest grade and the

grade they would need to reach by the end of the coming term. For each subject we noted how far they had progressed so far (strengths approach!) and the "gap" which needed to be covered. For most subjects we could say "You are not far behind the grade average here and you will no doubt be able to make your own plans for this subject." But for the many subjects where they were lagging behind or failing we offered tuition, groups and other opportunities. "Several students are doing Hardy works this term so we have asked Tony Gallagher from the local College to run a reading group one evening a week. If you are interested in joining, what day(s) would suit you?" or "You have quite a way to go in Math or Biology or whatever; let Janet know if you would like us to arrange some private tuition for you." ... that sort of thing ... and "If you have some other ideas which you think would be useful, talk with Sam or Mike ..."

As expected, the delivery of these "letters" produced some loud guffaws and bawdy retorts, but in nearly all cases there was a positive uptake. Instead of going nose-to-nose with them, Norman's idea had us taking up roles as supporters, tutors and encouragers, and this showed in the results of most of the kids.

All this is perhaps not such a new idea in the modern Child and Youth Care world, but today in our practice we can remember that when we want youth *be* responsible we can create real opportunities for them to *take* responsibility; instead of prescribing goals for them we can instead offer signposts and let them choose their own goals; and instead of the soulless work of trying to manage group behaviours ("silence in the schoolroom and get on with your work") we can listen to individuals, acknowledge the progress they have made so far, indicate (or create) possibilities – and then support them in their choices.

Roles to play, tasks to contribute

I was visiting a residential drug program in New Hampshire. There was a strong monitoring/confrontation/support element to the program with very clearly set out procedures and rules – and yet, as long as they were accompanied by another more advanced in the program, youth were allowed quite liberal leave in the town. And seated at the main entrance to the building, one of the "inmates" controlled and recorded all comings and goings.

In our programs we have considerable opportunity for assigning tasks and roles which keep the youth empowered and feeling significant. "Institutional" programs, by contrast, are those which expect the worst from the kids, keep them in restricted and dependent roles, very much under the thumb of the staff and administration. Such an existence does little to prepare youth for any responsible or contributing role when they are discharged.

There is a lack of courage in programs which seek no more than law and order, compliance and "no trouble". Effectively, staff undertake to do themselves all the "behaving" which they expect from the youth, and they leave no leeway for trial and error, for learning, for discovery and self-knowing. We misunderstand society's expectations of us when we nail kids to the floor for six months or more and then return them unchallenged and un-extended.

In our practice today we seek out in our children and youth any individual interests and skills they may have, however rudimentary, and encourage their capacity to amuse, to play, to fix, to manage, to care. Our aim is that, not in six months' time but by *tonight*, they recognise some new value in

themselves, that they are connected to some person, group or routine, that they made some difference to our day as much as to their own lives. Thanks for repairing that lock, I loved your story about ... , Patty appreciated your help with that reading, I didn't know you followed football ...

Social competence: Learning formality and informality

Many, many years ago, R.A. Harris, who was Headmaster of Moorland House, a school for troubled children in Yorkshire, wrote distressingly of a boy who had been encouraged to write home.

The boy started his letter: "Dear Sir or Madam." When asked about this, the boy explained that he didn't really

know who would be at the house when his letter arrived, or even whether they were directly related to him. The boy had been moved from placement to placement so often that he really didn't understand who his real parents or where his real home might be.

In our work we often quote the old platitude that troubled kids have to *unlearn* much of their behaviour before we can teach them better. We forget how many youngsters come to us with great gaps in their lives of *things they didn't ever learn*. The touching formality of the boy in our story, writing home to "Dear Sir or Madam," illustrates a child who didn't learn 'home' and didn't learn 'Mom' or 'Dad' – neither the myriad and complex nuances of home and family which comprise the building blocks of a nine-year-old's most rudimentary social competency: When it's OK to laugh or cry or remain silent; how to have fun and how to apply oneself to a task; how to discriminate between busy, less accessible parents (for example when there are visitors or family business being done) and parents as friends when we're all lying around and playing on the sitting room floor; when to "let go" and when to practise politeness; and so on.

While we may be aiming for "good behaviour", we realise that there is no such thing. Any behaviour may be good behaviour, depending on the circs. And kids growing up in reasonable homes with Moms and Dads learn to comfortably interpret the circs.

In our practice today, we don't think of unlearning behaviour (some of it may be culturally and familially deeply significant) but of things the youngsters *didn't* learn. We enrich their environment by exposing them to a diversity of situations and behaviours so that they lose their hesitancy and awkwardness and relax into a social milieu which they come to understand and where they can make their own reasonable decisions about how to behave. And in all this we are never judges or critics; only teachers and companions.

The ball, not the man

It was an unpleasant afternoon. It started as a small thing. One of the football periods with a group of the older boys was just ending when Jack Maxwell made a referee's call against 18-year-old Jerry Green. Jerry questioned the call and Jack told him to be quiet. Jerry said something, no doubt abusive, under his breath and Jack stopped the game. He confronted the boy, warned him never to speak to him like that again – and then grounded him for two weeks.

The campus was abuzz. The boys claimed that he punishment was excessive and personal. Jack Maxwell was unrepentant and in the staff group claimed that one couldn't let kids get away with that sort of thing. Both the staff group and the boys' group were divided about the issue.

In a program for difficult older boys it can happen that any conflict may turn physical. It is one of the 'languages' spoken in such a group (though we bear in mind that similar peculiarities are common in all groups).

But there is one line that we may never cross in tough exchanges with kids. Making it personal. Letting our own ego get in the way of our job of building ego-strengths in the kids. Adopting win-lose tactics to save our own face.

In our practice today we *expect* that troubled kids will take their frustrations and hurts out on us as the only available adults. Any conflict which says "Your fault – no, your fault – no, your fault" (and this was a perfect example) will evoke past hostility and can light fires. We are particularly careful to play the role of the secure adult who can de-escalate the situation, lighten the mood, and keep the positive activity going

towards treatment goals – at whatever cost to our image! (Our colleagues can soothe that for us later when we look back on a successful afternoon.)

(This story had a happy ending. Jack went to see Jerry and acknowledged that he had over-reacted. By supper time all was well.)

Did you hear about that ... ?

In any program for children, youth and families, our stock in trade is *talk*. We use to talk to engage, to cheer, to inform, to teach, give meaning, comfort, warn and reassure. And like anything else in our work, we have to find the time – or make the time – to do the talking.

What we talk about has always been a controversial issue in our field. For example, it has always been off-limits to proselytise young people into our beliefs, for example, political or religious. We remember that they belong to their own cultures and inevitably return to their own families and communities. Masud Hoghughi is helpful here when he reminds us that the purpose of treatment is to *enhance* that which is good, to *reduce* that which is harmful, and *conserve* that which is none of our business.

Yet we are not meant to be only "pals" to our clients. We do engage with them and enter their worlds, and as Redl suggested, we should not remain '*friends without influence*'. In our time spent with people we are concerned not only with clinical issues but also with informing, teaching, building, enabling, enriching ... and this certainly involves filling in the gaps of general knowledge, of ways of thinking about and dealing with the impact of the

world at large.

For example, many people whose life is a struggle from day to day don't get the opportunity to rise above their circumstances to get a long view of things. They become the victims of what Adler called "basic mistakes" and the "irrational beliefs" identified by Ellis in his system of rational emotive behaviour therapy. People draw conclusions from limited evidence, exaggerate out of all proportion the meaning of an event, see things simplistically as good or bad, and so on. With *more information*, people are less likely to draw faulty conclusions (this always happens to me, it's our 'family blood', I am a failure, the only way to win is to cheat, I have to get a perfect score in this, I know I should be doing this, it's no use trying ...).

In our practice today we make maximum use of the gaps in our program, times spent waiting for the next thing on the schedule, sitting-down times for a rest or a drink and a bite to eat – and in residential programs meal times and the period before bedtime – to discuss *stuff*. So what happened in the news today? Did you hear about that guy who ...? I wonder how we would have reacted? Do you think people always ...? What choices did she have? How did they achieve that?

Quite simply, we aim to send kids to bed with more to think about. By exposing people to a wider sample of events, they are less likely to be limited by the conclusions they draw from a few. More talk increases the grey area for people who only see things in black and white. Not to mention the colour.

Children teaching children

There have been a number of demonstrations in the education world in which school children have been enlisted to help in the teaching of another child. For example, a youngster in Grade 10 is asked to help a child needing more fluency in a section of the Grade 9 mathematics syllabus. These ventures had mixed results – usually for obvious educational reasons.

But there was one very common and interesting outcome: while the child being taught may or may not have shown significant improvement, *the child doing the teaching made great strides in knowledge and understanding of the subject matter.* In helping another to get over obstacles to understanding, the "teacher" was clearly having to explore the subject more deeply and from different angles – trying to understand why the younger "pupil" wasn't "getting it", having repeatedly to put things into different words, constructing new mental models to show "how", and so on.

In our work with disadvantaged children and families, their grasp of ideas and concepts has often been only rudimentary and tenuous. We often try to "teach" alternative perceptions, interpretations and behaviours in the complex arena of human and societal relationships. And the kids may be "getting it" – but from very fragmentary and limited examples and experiences. Their internalisation of what they are learning, their construction of the meaning of new and different ideas, and the reliability of their generalisation across different life situations are initially very fragile and accident-prone.

We are often tempted to consider a "problem solved" at the first signs of

"compliance". Wrong on both counts: remember that we are not aiming at compliance but on a youth's ownership of his or her own more prosocial accommodation with others and with society; and these things don't come easily. Redl taught that kids will generally not let go of their old ways of doing things until they have thoroughly tested the stability and safety of an alternative. And we are used to the idea of giving youngsters opportunity to "practise" new ways of seeing and new behaviours they are learning.

In our practice today we look for opportunities through which our "pupils" can round out and *realise* their changing perceptions and responses. We comment and we invite comment; we talk, discuss and argue; we give opportunities for trial and error; and we complexify by giving youth both credit and responsibility for their new growth, acknowledging them as having something worth sharing with others, something to teach.

Prioritising

I remember an exercise from early days of training. A scenario would be set rather like this: In your living unit's "common room" a child is climbing up a ladder left by two workmen who have gone off to tea; two youth are fighting loudly over an expensive library book; another is sitting on the floor against the wall, crying. The exercise: What would you, as the child and youth care worker, do first?

Students would debate the issue, including questions about things which are important as against things that are urgent .. but the answer was always: "It depends". And it is true, throughout the day care workers are constantly making judgement calls ... based on what they know about the kids, on what they observe, on what is safe and what is fair — and on what the treatment team is aiming for.

In our practice today we prioritise *between* kids and between situations. Having a sense of which events are critical and which are less so, helps us decide where to put our energies and time. In the scenario above, for example, we may know that the kid up the ladder is perfectly competent and safe up there; we may also be aware of the youngster on the floor who is crying and that she needs a little space right now — and that we were planning in any event to go along and sit with her in a minute or two. When we choose to rescue the library book, an impartial observer may think that we are being unduly concerned for agency property at the expense of two far more important issues ... but we know.

But we are also expected to prioritise *within* particular children. That is, when we engage them, knowing what are the important issues for them and which are less important. These decisions are often more difficult – and harder to defend to our colleagues, supervisors and superiors. Like, for example, whether it is more important for us to spend some time on an issue or that the child is on time for school; whether the child needs some urgent time with her mother right now or it is more important that her bed is made. Or, more tricky, whether we should be supportive of a kid right now (when we are working at making him more self-sufficient) or whether we should discipline a kid over some rule infraction (when we are working with her at a sensitive stage of an altogether more critical story ...

Of course it is always preferable for decisions like this to be taken in consultation with our team or supervisor, but circumstances may be such that these people will not be accessible or get together again for a couple of days. Then it's our call. The more accurate our observations, the fuller our knowledge, the better our relationship with the child and the family and the deeper our learning, the more reliable will be the priority we choose.

Our own feelings

Many young people are referred to our programme because they are distrustful and hostile towards adults, they react to abuse and neglect with an anger easily triggered by further perceived threats, in their insecurity they are touchy and self-centred, they often to not comprehend their own feelings and have little skill in expressing how they feel, they are in turns awkward, sulky and rejecting or critical, defiant and attacking.

In our minds we know all this and in our training we gain some understanding of these behaviours and skills to work with them. But this doesn't protect us from being in the firing line day and night and finding ourselves the recipients of kids' scorn and rage.

Some find their protection in the "professional" role. We are reminded that doctors don't sulk when a patient haemorrhages and mechanics aren't outraged when a car's brakes fail. But our relationship with young people is never one which is objectified by definitions and diagnoses; it is an engagement in their real and direct human intercourse and we are real people in their milieu. The fact that Amy broke down and sobbed at breakfast or Ralph was on a hair-trigger all afternoon and lashed out at others are not just entries in a log book; they were personally experienced events of which we were part. The moment when Tracey yelled at us "I hate you, get out!" cannot be reduced to a dispassionate report ata staff meeting. No matter how much we may process her exclamation in terms of our knowledge of her, we were on the receiving end of her desperation and rancour. In the face-to-face clash, one of the faces was ours.

In our practice today we accept that we must be present with hurting kids.

We cannot say "I understand" unless we know, personally, that hurt and pain – or, of course, at other times, that joy and pride – which kids share with us. But we bring with us to these moments a disposition which allows us to be useful: a willingness to be present, an open mind to learn, a generosity to receive the feelings, an empathy to participate in the moment, knowledge (both general and specific) not so much to rationalise but to realise the meaning of what is happening ...

Any good adults

We know well that an authoritarian attitude does not sit well with kids – any kids, but especially with those who for some reason feel unsafe, untrusting or let down. The authoritarian adult does not only demand compliance on the part of a child; he wants power and control for himself. Authoritarianism is quickly recognised by its frequently *arbitrary* demands. "Do whatever I tell you" feeds the need of the controller – but is ultimate exposure and dis-empowerment for the victim.

In the cultures in which most of us live, there is respect for the rights and the wishes of others. One prefers to ask, invite or recommend rather than command or order. Much of our skill in engaging with young people lies in seeking their acquiescence in our

presence and in the roles we perform, and generally we *earn* that acquiescence by demonstrating good will and trustworthiness.

But there are times when we have to decide what is best for kids – when we are expected to be (not authoritarian, but *authoritative*.) Times when, in terms of our understanding of a youth's circumstances and of his or her developmental status, of the nature of a particular problem and the youth's current way of interpreting and reacting to a situation, we may have to step in and make decisions. In short, there are times when any intelligent and reliable adult would take charge of a situation – when a kid was in danger or at risk, however those terms may be defined.

In our practice today we will demonstrate the appropriate respect for the preferences and rights of those we work with. But like any adults acting in good faith, there may be occasions when we must insist on a course of action. Indeed (as long as we are not seeking obedience for its own sake, or for ours!) we will act like any good adults as we share the space and lives of others.

Listening diagnostically?

The experience of our predecessors in the field is fragmentally recorded for us in their books, articles and teachings, and we, in turn add to this from our own experiences and the ways in which we share these and discuss them with each other. Thus we build for ourselves an amalgam which we might describe as our *current understanding* of child and youth care work – and, seldom enough, researchers will add a little fibre to the mix.

In reality it's more individual than that, for each of us will have (to borrow the metaphor from Oakley) our own

personal *collage* of child and youth care theory and practice. And it is true that we need this accumulation of knowledge, for it gives us some categories to understand what we're dealing with and what are some of the possibilities for intervention. Together with our teams we get to recognise certain clusters of issues and behaviours so that we are not constantly reinventing the wheel.

But we are best advised to keep that theory and interpretive activity in the background, even unconscious, when we are directly engaging with young people and their families. If we try to do a sort of egg-dance amongst the minutiae of an encounter (classifying, recording, scrutinising, interpreting) then we are at best listening with only half an ear. We are listening and analysing at the same time. Listening diagnostically. In our meetings with clients we are failing to meet them. In our listening we are not really listening. We are not hearing. They are not being heard. They are not feeling heard. And we are limiting our resources to what we already think we know – not remaining open to the possibilities offered by what we don't yet know.

In our practice today we remember that we seek to understand our clients, to discern the meanings which they attach to people, events and situations, to ascertain the feelings which lie behind their words and actions – and to do all this we must trust our selves, our presence, our senses – full time. So often we say that kids are 'looking for attention'. We must give them all our attention.

Reference

Oakley, M. (2001) *The Collage of God*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

Freedom to express

All cultures have complex rules and limits about manners and politeness. As they grow up, children and youth get to learn the nuances around what is acceptable and what is not. Moreover, they learn to fine art of being able to discriminate between people and situations where the laws about these things may be more or less flexible.

Or they don't.

In troubled families it may be that there has been too much changeability, too much unpredictability, too much extreme emotion being expressed, too many raw words being tossed around, so that the kids haven't learned the subtleties – and indeed have picked up much of the family patois.

In our programs, probably more often in residential programs, there is often some emphasis on manners and politeness – often there are senior staff or (gasp!) actual board members or donors walking about – and there may be strong sanctions against insults and expletives. When young people's strong opinions and harsh language is also interpreted by staff members as defiance and impertinence, we may pull rank on them and order them to "Be quiet!" or even need to shore up our egos with threats like "Don't you *dare* speak to me like that!"

We should think about this.

- Nice language may belong in loftier levels of the hierarchy of needs we are working on with specific kids. Youngsters who don't yet feel safe or that they belong cannot focus on this plane of social learning.
- We would in any event be careful not to make an implied judgement of their parents and homes by coming down too strongly on

language which fits in with their family or cultural norm.

- Much of the feelings and thoughts directed towards us are really meant for others; we just happen to be near – and conveniently placed to observe and understand these emotions.
- Our command to "Be quiet" or "Don't dare ..." may be too arbitrary and authoritarian for them to make sense of, and they will oblige by being quiet ...
- And we are still at the stage where it is important for us to know what children are thinking and feeling. Egos and sensitive feelings may best be put in our pockets for the moment while we learn what are the norms, the anxieties, the angers and the terrors of these children with whom we are working.

The axiom is simple: *If we don't allow kids to tell us what they are thinking and feeling we may not get to know what they are thinking and feeling.*

In our practice today we will be aware of what level of development and progress our children and youth have reached and what tasks are appropriate for today. We will also be aware that we do not produce sweetness and light in young people by command; those are qualities which may or may not arrive when they feel safe, significant and loved.

And while they are limited to such ways of communicating, we don't stop them expressing their feelings just because they do so in inappropriate or offensive ways. Our job is to translate the slammed door, the abusive rejection or forthright insult into a useful clinical insight which helps us to make sense of their view of their world and to work out how to move forward with them. Tomorrow is another day.

Words and meanings

In our work we have to be scrupulous with words. It is not just that words can hide or hurt or betray or confuse (and that therefore we are careful about how we use them), but that words are a common currency which admits us all into a shared understanding of the world, of each other, and of ourselves.

If you think about it, many of our clients carry around with them limited vocabularies, limited conceptual understandings and distorted meanings, due to their often isolated, depriving or abusive environments. We know, for example, that infants whose mothers leave them alone will respond with preverbal and instinctual terror. For most children, "goings" soon become associated with quick "comings-back" and in a few months phrases like "Back soon" become symbols of reassurance. But for children who endure extended absences and erratic physical and verbal attention, "goings" and lack of attention can continue to be experienced as ultimate threats.

How often do we who work with troubled kids find that we are having to work with infantile emotional and verbal developmental blockages and backlogs – even with teens. We want them not to deny or distort but to see what we all see and hear what we all hear, and fearlessly make sense of it.

The Greek word *logos* means "word" and "meaning" and even such concepts as "universal rationality" – and our work is often to provide the experiences and words which will allow children to construct less frightening meanings for earlier and unresolved events. At a non-verbal level we offer children the respite and assurance of *absence of threat,* while we help them to accept the essential symbols of words to contain their fears and dreads, and so to make *rational sense* of their experience.

Logos. Words. Meanings.

In our practice today we remember that words are the codes by which children gain mastery of their feelings and their worlds. Words are the reliable categories and meanings through which we all share our commonality with others and our insights into ourselves. We use them consciously, generously and carefully.

Vive la difference!

Amongst my circle of family and friends, what makes the children and young people interesting is how *different* they are. One is into deep-sea diving, another studying ethics at university; one is developing open-source software applications, another teaching primary school; one is doing research in a zoology lab, another is travelling around Europe earning his keep by house painting ... Moreover, all of these youngsters dress differently, speak differently, like different music, read variously, love the movies which others hate, hang out at home or hang out anywhere but at home ... We can but stand in awe at their dissimilarities – or, to use the in-word today, their diversity.

It was distressing therefore to visit a residential program recently where all the kids looked like peas out of the same pod. It wasn't just that their dorms and clothes looked like clones; it was also that it seemed to have been assumed that all of these young people would be interested in the same things at the same times, so that the provision and the programming was uncompromising uniform. And knowing ordinary kids, this all looked wrong.

This is not just about the sterility of battery-reared youth, though that is soulless enough. It's about the denial of the exciting inherent *differences* which exist amongst people. As we

grew up, how very much did we learn from people and situations that, to us, were different? How much were we stimulated, surprised, provoked, enticed, inspired, awakened by differences. We were spared the ennui and the entropy of sameness, but the course of our whole lives was doubtless influenced and changed through our exposure to diversity.

Of course we have to manage obvious threats, but in our practice today we avoid the excuses that allowing difference is risky, impractical and costly. We may have no better resource to offer our youth than the infinite possibilities personified by the group of adults and peers who comprise any good residential program. And most of all is the opportunity to be acknowledged, respected and admired for who they are themselves.

Routine

Routine for its own sake (which is what routine easily becomes when it owns us rather than the other way around) is deadly for youth – but also deadly for staff. It seduces us into devoting our lives to its maintenance, and soon enough has us believing that we are succeeding in our lives' purpose when we serve it utterly.

What books are you reading at the moment? What movie did you see this week? What new idea have you had for your work, your family, your future? What three interests do you pursue? What risk have you taken recently? What new place have you recently discovered? Having trouble answering these questions? Of course, you might not have time for these new things because you are so busy. Serving routine.

Someone said that nobody can lead or guide others beyond the point which one has reached oneself. While we are beavering away at daily timetables and chores, the kids we work with are often streets ahead. Two things can happen. They can tolerate, humour or even pity us as we become people without influence and inspiration in their lives. And we can unconsciously become resentful, even hostile.

In our practice today we realise that we might be stretching the meaning of duty and loyalty, and that our own stimulation and growth is essential for that of our wards and students. God forbid that we should believe we are helping kids when we entrap them in our own puddle of uncourageous inertia because this is comfortable to us.

"I am wondering whether I should explore this or do that." Whether this is our own question or that of one of our kids, the spirited answer would be "Why not? Give it a try. Let's see what happens ..."

The environment

The child and youth care relationship is most often (and accurately) perceived as that between the main characters on the stage: the careworker on the one hand, and the child, youth and family on the other. Particular clients are referred to us with their own issues and problems, and we engage directly with them.

However, much of our work is achieved through the way in which we create and manage the wider group and indeed the whole environment of our program. So many youth problems are a reaction to difficult or even impossible odds in their own situations, and their connection with our program is often their first experience of a rational and responsive environment, allowing

their defences, resistance and rage to subside.

If we bring young people into an up-tight program which imposes unreasonable barriers or obstacles – or worse, impersonal and inflexible criteria for acceptance, approval and experiences of success – we place them in yet another toxic environment, and we evoke the negative reactions and "rap sheets" they arrived with.

Our whole program – its routines and rhythms, its groupings, activities and styles of communication – should exude a quality of welcome, stimulation, possibility, exploration, encouragement and satisfaction – in which the central child and youth care relationship can take root.

Responsibility, not power

In their upbringing and development of children and young people, adults make a poor choice when they claim and use power to justify their imposed authority. Power is hard to argue against, is characterised by arbitrary decisions, and is usually yielded only after a struggle. Power sets up an oppositional tone between those who "have" it and those who don't, and sits uncomfortably with what we know of the child and youth care relationship.

Responsibility, by contrast, is an accountable and developmental concept. It is entrusted by a superior who delegates it, and *taught* by its holder to others who are learning it for themselves. Responsibility is handed over willingly as a rite of passage to the rising generation.

Horace Mann said that in a democracy schools provide an "apprenticeship in responsibility". (See *www.cyc-net.org/Journals/rcy-8-1.html#edits*)

In our practice today we know to avoid "Do this or else" commands, and not to use "because I say so" as a justification for decisions. Our young charges learn nothing but compliance from our arbitrary use of power. This leaves them vulnerable and without developed inner strengths, and with no experience of taking *responsibility* for their lives.

Clashing agendas

It usually starts off with our seeing kids as problems. Someone is experiencing them as a nuisance, as bullies, smoking up, failing at school, running with a gang, staying out, being hostile, aloof, doing drugs or alcohol, breaking and entering ... We are seduced into thinking that they simply need *fixing*, or worse, that we can fix them. So we strike at the presenting problem (usually along with its aura of attitude, reason, blame) and hit a blank wall. And, if we persevere enough to keep some sort of (however inadequate) dialogue going, soon enough the youth will tell us "You don't understand."

That is a good point to go back and start again.

We realise that we have come into this situation with a simplistic agenda: *get the youngster to shape up*. But he or she has come with a decidedly transverse agenda: *understand.* Which is to say, help me to understand, to get my head right, to make sense of all this hitting out, goofing off, running away.

We make the classic error of attacking the *signs* of youths' struggle to keep up with their developmental and socialisation timetables – instead of focussing on the *struggle*.

We say to the boy with an atrophied leg: "I insist that you stand up straight and walk properly!" He looks back at us and says: "You don't understand."

For the child with the physical problem we *do* understand that we are in for a long regimen of good nutrition and exercise, of physical and occupational therapy, of mechanical and even surgical treatment – and also the probability that he will never walk entirely comfortably.

Just so with the kid who is "a problem" – the long walk of listening and understanding, of reframing and reinterpreting past experiences, of exploring family and community contexts, of providing new stimulation, support, learning, encouragement ...

It was Karen VanderVen[1] who drew our attention to adults' tendency to dismiss and be irritated by young people's "attention-seeking behaviour" – rather than simply to respond with attention! A clear case of clashing agendas. In our practice today we know that all the potential energy in our interactions is wasted on divergent agendas, and that both we and the kids will be more frustrated and further apart at the end of the day. Maybe with a different approach tonight there will be no visible improvement in behaviour, but at least one youth may feel that there is a *possibility* that he might be heard and, in time, understood. That's a breakthrough.

1. *http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0202-karen.html*

Telling and teaching

I am offering a tin of biscuits around at tea. My grand-daughter, all two-and-a-half years of her,

upbraids me: "Grandpa, you must hold your cup with both hands."

"Why should I do that?" I ask.

"Because if you walk around with your tea in one hand you'll spill it and it will make a mess."

She has been taught well. God knows she has another fifteen years of socialisation ahead of her (if indeed that ever stops) but the expectations of our world are often so unhelpfully expressed that it's a delight to find it well done.

We adults do tend to take short cuts to convey our expectations. "Don't touch that." "Put that down." Even with older kids we try to get away with these clipped robotic instructions. "Turn that down." "You're not going out in that." "Pick that up."

It's more complex than that.

The process of socialisation has less to do with submission to the rules of society than with *learning to manage as a member of our society.* In our role as adults we can never succeed in programming every possible action and response into our children and youth, simply because we can never foresee the countless eventualities which may arise in their lives. Rather, we try to build *within them* their own processes for understanding society and for making personal choices and decisions in relation to it.

Consider some of the reasons we offer when children ask *why* they should obey us. "Because I say so." "You'll go to your room." "Because I'm your *mother.*" "Don't you *dare* ask me why!" Any self-respecting kid will try to decode such baffling riddles – and will either recognise the threat for what it is or be left uncomprehending and subdued.

Children and youth who come into care have often experienced limited communication, therefore limited language, and thus limited explanation about themselves and the world. The whole phenomenon of "irrational beliefs" arises from young people's attempts to draw conclusions from insufficient or erroneous data, and so they come to believe that adults cannot be trusted, that the only

way to safety and happiness is to comply with others' demands, or that "I am a bad person" ...
(See *http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0803-happierlife.html*)

With such young people, most of all, more is expected of us when we communicate. Mere commands to comply do *nothing* for them – except worsen the misconceptions upon which they are tragically trying to construct themselves and their worlds.

Consider again my lesson from my grand-daughter. Do this (hold your cup with both hands), for this reason (otherwise you'll spill your tea), to avoid this natural consequence (there'll be a mess). I may question her reading of my neuromuscular co-ordination, but the sequence which she sketches is irrefutable.

In our practice today we know ourselves to be more than controllers. We are teachers and explainers, and purveyors of information and experiences which enhance the capacity of kids to make choices and decisions in their lives, alone, with their families or with society at large.

http://cycnetpress.cyc-net.org