



CARING TO CONNECT

NURTURING HOPEFUL,
HEALING RELATIONSHIPS
WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

JAMES FREEMAN
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ISBN 978-1-7764028-2-3

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An imprint of Pretext Publishing

PO Box 23199, Claremont 7735, Cape Town, South Africa

<http://press.cyc-net.org>

info@press.cyc-net.org

CONTENTS

Introduction	5
1. Canaries in the Coal Mine	7
Hans Skott-Myhre	
2. Searching for Hope	13
Heather Sago & Aurora De Monte	
3. Space to Tell Their Story	18
Thom Garfat	
4. Child Rights and Human Tragedy	22
Tara Collins	
5. Wounded Healers.....	28
Maxwell Smart & John Digney	
6. Messages of Love and Connection.....	35
Jack Phelan	
7. Caring for One Another.....	41
Kiaras Gharabaghi	
8. Rituals of Encounter that Guarantee Cultural Safety	44
Leon Fulcher	
9. Trauma and Calming Co-Regulation.....	57
Howard Bath	
10. Relational Repair and Shame	63
Laura Steckley	
11. The Power of Feeling Safe.....	70
Mark Freado	

12. Trauma-Informed Emotional Warmth in Public Care	78
Colin Maginn	
13. Unsuspected Influences Between Children and Support Staff..	85
Werner van der Westhuizen	
14. Connecting Across the Generations	92
Mark Smith	
15. Measuring the Qualities of a Relationship	97
Doug Magnuson, Priscilla Healey, Ashleigh Martinflatt and Jenny McGrath	
16. A Manifesto of Hope.....	103
Gerry Fewster	
Study Guide for Personal or Group Reflection	107
Contributor Biographies	113

INTRODUCTION

The world today is not an easy place to grow up. I suppose there are unique challenges for every generation, yet today's kids and families face the impact and aftermath of a global pandemic, war and violence, poverty and inequity, and social injustices in endless forms. Having worked in child and family service settings for nearly the past thirty years, I've found that for many there are seemingly unsurmountable barriers to finding and nurturing hope.

The way in which we show up for one another remains critically important. Authentic human connection is not just a luxury, it is the solution to so many of our troubles. Disconnection brings discord and discouragement. Connection brings healing and courage.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child reminds us that "...the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up...in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity." This is a spirit which we aspire to and we each play a vital role in that journey.

This book exists to encourage you on that journey – and renew a shared understanding that the future is determined and dependent on how we connect and interact with one another now.

Some of the chapters in this book appeared in part or in earlier forms in issues of CYC-Online, the online journal of the International Child and Youth Care Network. For five years I served as editor of the monthly journal and deeply enjoyed working with those who wanted to share their understanding and life experiences. Other chapters have been selected or written especially for this book by friends and colleagues. The editorial exchange is a relational process, and it has been a pleasure to support these voices into this format.

Chapters one through four get our attention by highlighting the clear and present warning signs kids are sending us and the necessity of hope, hearing them, and defending rights.

Chapters five through eleven are about who we are and what we do with specific attention to the context of trauma, healing, and safety in relationship.

Chapters twelve through fifteen provide examples of hopeful connection in the context of public care, support roles, and the shifting dynamics as kids (and us) grow older.

Chapter sixteen gives us a summary of ten principles and tasks to carry forward in our efforts to build connections that nurture hope in a world that desperately needs it.

The study guide in this text provides a format for individual or group discussion and exploration. Prompts and questions for each chapter, as well as a beginning and follow up are included.

As you read, you'll be reminded of the reasons why the experience of childhood is important and how human connection is what we all need to live and thrive. You'll be challenged to attune and listen to the signals we all send to communicate we need each other and need hope for the future. While it may question some perspectives you hold, it also carefully walks us through practical ways in which we can support child rights, care for ourselves, create connections, heal one another, and keep us steady on the path of care and hope.

Caring to connect is a decision about how to be and live in this world. It's about choosing to seek and kindle sparks of hope, making the world better one connection and one conversation at a time.

STUDY GUIDE FOR PERSONAL OR GROUP REFLECTION

This study guide provides questions for deeper reflection, discussion, and application of the chapters in this book. It's intended for individuals or groups seeking to journal or explore further how to integrate learning into practice. The questions serve as effective journal prompts for those who want to express their learning through reflective writing.

Student cohorts, work groups, or interdisciplinary teams may decide to read each chapter and gather to share reflections as a way to promote further learning. Course instructors might also find them helpful as class assignments or discussion prompts.

If time permits, browsing over the questions before reading each chapter can also help in identifying key takeaways or points for further reflection. Returning to the questions after reading can help in reinforcing what was learned and opening up further elements for exploration.

Before You Begin

1. As you look over the table of contents what topics are you most looking forward to exploring?
2. What aspects of your own life and relationships do you want or expect to be challenged or strengthened?
3. Who do you want or need to bring along with you on this experience of learning and growth?

Chapter 1: Canaries in the Coal Mine

1. In what ways do you see the experiences of young people as a symptom of societal indifference?

2. Do you believe relationship is a transformative, healing force? If so, are there ways your action aligns (or might better align) with your beliefs?
3. What will it cost us if we don't move from our denial or indifference to action?

Chapter 2: Searching for Hope

1. Why is hope necessary?
2. Describe in your own words the concept of meaning making. In what ways is meaning making a mutual or collaborative process?
3. How did providing Mazy an experience to give to someone else empower her and help her see herself differently?

Chapter 3: Space to Tell Their Story

1. How does creating space for others to tell their story connect to the process of healing?
2. What causes us to want to fill moments of silence? What happens when we do this?
3. What can you do this week to listen to others with more intent?

Chapter 4: Child Rights and Human Tragedy

1. Why is it important to ensure kids have access to news of local and global events? What age or other factors should be part of facilitating that access?
2. In what ways do child rights shape (or should shape) our relationships?
3. What benefits are experienced when young people are engaged as full participants in society?

Chapter 5: Wounded Healers

1. What personal life experiences helped you prepare for working alongside people facing pain and adversity? What changed in habits, patterns, or beliefs have changes for you in your journey?

2. How is helping others heal and experiencing your own healing intertwined? Is this a good or bad thing?
3. What does it mean to tend to our own wounds? What strategies have been helpful to you in doing this?

Chapter 6: Messages of Love and Connection

1. What experiences might help a child feel cared for? In what ways is this different or similar for a parent?
2. In your own words, how do you describe the difference between the two messages: “I care for you” vs. “You deserve to be cared for”? What is the consequence of each message?
3. What are some other examples (such as with the child playing chess) that might create an experience of safety without being unmanageable or threatening?

Chapter 7: Caring for One Another

1. In what ways is the act of caring at the heart of healthy relationships?
2. What real pressures or temptations have you faced (or are facing) to stop caring?
3. How are you responding in a way that is uncompromising and creates a safe place to celebrate difference and diversity?

Chapter 8: Rituals of Encounter that Guarantee Cultural Safety

1. What are some of the elements of cultural safety? Why are they so important?
2. In what ways does our experience of culture shape our understanding of family, place, and life events?
3. What role does openness and presence have in learning and adapting rituals of encounter? Why is it important to look beyond prescriptive checklists or competencies when engaging in cultures different than our own?

Chapter 9: Trauma and Calming Co-Regulation

1. In what ways do coercion, threats, and punishment cause harm? Why do such practices remain so common?
2. What elements or forms of co-regulation have you used or experienced?
3. Describe a process you experienced or witnessed where co-regulation supported the learning of self-regulation?

Chapter 10: Relational Repair and Shame

1. What drives the impulse to respond to certain behaviors with punishment and blame?
2. How do you explain the role and process of relational repair in your own words?
3. Which of the actions suggested in the chapter would you like to do more of in your relationships? What difference do you expect to see because of it?

Chapter 11: The Power of Feeling Safe

1. How does building trust and listening help give voice to others? In what ways did the adults in the example lend power and control to Angelique throughout their interaction?
2. What factors may keep us focused on managing what is on the surface when something else may be more important to the other person?
3. What are the three conditions for healing from relational trauma? Which ones are more easy or difficult for you to support or facilitate?

Chapter 12: Trauma-Informed Emotional Warmth in Public Care

1. Where do we learn the idea of maintaining “professional distance”? What potential harm can it cause? What does it mean to build attachments that are fun, protective, and reassuring?

2. Why is it important to be cautious in taking away old strategies other have learned to keep themselves safe?
3. What systemic changes are needed in your context? How might you contribute to raising awareness or moving them forward?

Chapter 13: Unsuspected Influences between Children and Support Staff

1. In what ways does imposing an agenda on a relationship create barriers to connecting?
2. How do activities like hanging out and doing routine tasks help build trust, connection, and feelings of safety?
3. How often do kids in your sphere of influence experience naturally occurring interactions without agenda or expectation? How might you increase or facilitate more of these moments of co-creation?

Chapter 14: Connecting Across the Generations

1. What does it mean that roles in a relationship can shift and that certain elements dissolve and are replaced with mutuality and reciprocity? Is this a moment-in-time shift or a process?
2. What kinds of encounters and interactions are described in the chapter that were still felt as significant even decades later? Have you experienced anything like these?
3. In what ways can our role and the frames we bring to it create barriers to genuine relationships? How can we reduce or mitigate these barriers?

Chapter 15: Measuring the Qualities of a Relationship

1. What is measured in your organization, program, or school? Where do these directives come from? What's missing, if anything, from these metrics?
2. Why are elements of relationships often left out of evaluations? What are some circumstances where we would especially find such measurements valuable?

3. Which of the aspects mentioned related to how relationships operate (e.g., trust, communication, understanding) might most matter in your context? What makes these more immediately relevant or timely?

Chapter 16: A Manifesto of Hope

1. Which of the principles in this chapter are currently most challenging or stretching for you?
2. What does it mean to bring a curious, authentic, separate, and contained sense of self to our relationships?
3. What skills and disciplines are required to translate these principles into practice? How might you access or develop these skills further?

Post-Reading Follow up

1. What chapter or aspects of this book were most meaningful to you?
2. What sections or topics do you want to revisit or learn more about?
3. What next steps are you taking to integrate what you have gained into your life and relationships?

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

HOWARD BATH, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist who has been a youth worker, house parent, and agency director. He served as Children's Commissioner of the Northern Territory in Australia where he was responsible for the quality of government operated and funded child protection, youth justice, mental health and disability systems. He is co-author of *The Three Pillars of Transforming Care: Trauma and Resilience in the Other 23 Hours* (University of Winnipeg).

TARA COLLINS, Ph.D. is an associate professor in the school of Child and Youth Care at Toronto Metropolitan University and honorary associate professor at the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.

AURRORA DE MONTE, MSc, CYC-P, is a faculty member in the Child and Youth Care program at Fleming College in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada and works as an independent counselor in private practice. She has a Master's degree in Child and Youth Care Studies from the University of Strathclyde. Aurora is co-editor of *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice* and serves on the Ontario Association of Child and Youth Care.

JOHN DIGNEY, Ph.D. has worked with children, youth, and families since 1991 in direct care, manager, clinician, and training roles. He provides consultancy and support internationally to the Child and Youth Care field.

GERRY FEWSTER, Ph.D. began working with kids 1961 in the United Kingdom. He served over twenty years as director of one of Canada's largest care centers for children and families and has held teaching positions at three universities. He is author of *Being in Child Care: A Journey into Self*

(Hayworth), *Don't Let Your Kids Be Normal: A Partnership for a Different World* (Jaguar) and served as editor of the *Journal of Child and Youth Care* and *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*.

MARK FREADO, MA holds degrees in counseling and forensic psychology and is the co-author of *The Art of Kid Whispering: Reaching the Inside Kid*. He is the founder of Growing Edge Training where he provides training and consultation to an international array of public and private organizations in the fields of mental health, education, juvenile justice, and social services.

LEON FULCHER, Ph.D. lives in New Zealand and has practised in and taught residential child care across several continents for over 50 years. He is the co-author of *Sisters of Pain: An Ethnography of Young Women Living in Secure Care* (CYC-Net Press) and *Residential Child Care in Practice: Making a Difference* (Policy Press).

THOM GARFAT, Ph.D. is the Co-Founding Editor of the International Child and Youth Care Network (CYC-Net) and owner of TransformAction Consultation and Training. He has over 50 years of experience in working with young people, their families and those who care in a wide variety of different settings and countries.

KIARAS GHARABAGHI, Ph.D. is Dean of the Faculty of Community Services at Toronto Metropolitan University. He is author of *A Hard Place to Call Home: A Canadian Perspective on Residential Care and Treatment* (Canadian Scholars) and co-author of *Right Here, Right Now: Life-Space Intervention in Child and Youth Care Practice* (Pearson). He lived his teenage years in Germany before immigrating to Canada and has enjoyed over 25 years as a soccer coach for recreational children's teams and competitive youth and men's teams.

PRISCILLA HEALEY, MA is a doctoral student, Sessional Instructor and Research Assistant at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. She has worked as a Community Outreach Counsellor and Safe

House Coordinator and has contributed to a number of important research publications.

COLIN MAGINN is co-director of The Pillars of Parenting, Ltd. and co-author of *It's a Privilege When a Child in Care is Delighted it's You*. He is a guest lecturer at University College London and has been working with children in public care since he was nineteen.

DOUG MAGNUSON, Ph.D. is a Professor in the School of Child and Youth Care and the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. He is a co-author of *The Experience of Emerging Adulthood Among Street-Involved Youth* (Oxford University Press). He is a Past President of the Child and Youth Care Educational Accreditation Board of Canada and served as editor for the journals *Child and Youth Services* and *Child and Youth Care Forum*.

ASHLEIGH MARTINFLATT, MSW is a Professor in the Child and Youth Care program at Vancouver Island University in British Columbia, Canada. She has worked in various roles in child protection, adoption, at risk youth, family support, and community prevention programs.

JENNY MCGRATH, Ph.D. is Chair of the Department of Child and Youth Care at MacEwan University in Alberta, Canada. She is a recipient of the National Child and Youth Care Worker Award from the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Care Associations.

JACK PHELAN, MS got started in community youth work in 1967 and is on the faculty of the Department of Child and Youth Care at MacEwan University in Alberta, Canada. He is a regular contributor to *CYC-Online* and the author of *Child and Youth Care: The Long and Short of it* and *Intentional Child and Youth Care Supervision: A Developmental Approach* (CYC-Net Press).

HEATHER SAGO, MSW, CYC-P, is the program coordinator of the Child and Youth Care program at Fleming College in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada. She holds a Master's degree in social work with a child

and youth care specialization. Heather serves on the At-Risk Youth Justice Committee and Judge's Roundtable in Ontario as well as on the Child and Youth Care Educational Accreditation Board of Canada.

HANS SKOTT-MYHRE, Ph.D. is a professor in the department of Social Work and Human Services at Kennesaw State University. He is author of *Post-Capitalist Subjectivity in Literature and Anti-Psychiatry: Reconceptualizing the Self Beyond Capitalism* (Routledge) and *Youth and Subculture: Creating New Spaces for Radical Youth Work* (University of Toronto Press).

MAXWELL SMART, MSc is a practitioner manager of a residential programme in Scotland and has practiced in Field Social Work and Residential Care for over 35 years.

MARK SMITH, Ph.D. is a Professor of Social Work at the University of Dundee. Mark worked in direct care and managerial roles in residential child care settings for twenty years. He has also taught a Master's programme in residential child care at the University of Strathclyde and served as head of social work at the University of Edinburgh.

LAURA STECKLEY, Ph.D. is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland. She has worked in direct practice, management, and training roles in residential care for adolescents in the United States and Scotland.

WERNER VAN DER WESTHUIZEN, MA (Psych), MA (ClinSW), CHt has worked with youth and families for over twenty years, including roles as a probation officer, direct practitioner, care centre director, and crisis counsellor. He holds master's degrees in clinical social work and psychology. He is registered as a social worker with the South African Council for Social Service Professions and the South African Association for Social Workers in Private Practice. He works in private practice as a therapist, consultant, and trainer.



James Freeman - Editor

James has worked with children, families, and staff for over 30 years in therapeutic programs, education, out-of-school time, and retreat programs. He's an award-winning trainer whose work has reached around the globe. He lives in California with his wife and 3 kids. Visit his website at www.training-grounds.net

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This book will remind you why the experience of childhood and adolescence is essential and how human connection is what we all need to live and thrive.

You'll be challenged to attune to the signals we send one another and guided in practical ways to support child rights, care and connect in trauma-responsive ways, and nurture healing and hope in our world. It's what we all so urgently need today.



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