CYC

PRACTICE HINTS – I

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

The CYC-Net PRESS

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ISBN 978-1-928212-02-7

The CYC-Net Press
An imprint of Pretext Publishing
P.O. Box 23199, Claremont 7735 SOUTH AFRICA
http://cycnetpress.cyc-net.org • cycnetpress@pretext.co.za

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Foreword

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

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

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

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

about their experience of being cared for and about.

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

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

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

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

So, thank you again Brian.

Max Smart
Lothian Villa, East Lothian Council, Scotland

Having something to say

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Value-Added Tax

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

* * *

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

Cheap at the price.

Create occasions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bon appetit!

Fools rush in

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

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

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

- The kid doesn't get to feel heard.

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

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

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

Time to be free

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

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

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

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

Attending the everyday events

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

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

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

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

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

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