CYC

# PRACTICE HINTS – II

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

The CYC-Net PRESS

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# Foreword

A long time ago, in a website far far away ...

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

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

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

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

about their experience of being cared for and about.

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

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

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

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

So, thank you again Brian.

**Max Smart**
*Lothian Villa, East Lothian Council, Scotland*

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

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

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

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

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

youngster to our program at all.

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

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

References

Redl, F. and Wineman, D. (1952). *Controls from Within*. New York: The Free Press, pp.59-62

Beedell, C. (1970) *Residential Life with Children*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. pp.60-63

# Watch that behaviour

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

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

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

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

# Understanding what to do

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Information – the easy gift

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tell them.

# The final test

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Walk a mile in their shoes

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Nobody owns one

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

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

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

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

Nobody owns a child.

# A good time

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


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