

CYC

# PRACTICE HINTS – III

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





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# Foreword

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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](http://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**

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Scotland*



# Whose behaviour?

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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

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

## Appearance is everything?

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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

---

**W**e 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

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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

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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 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 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.





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