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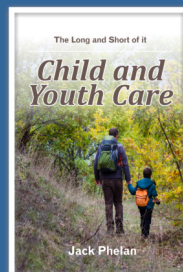
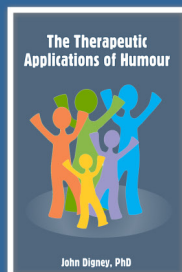
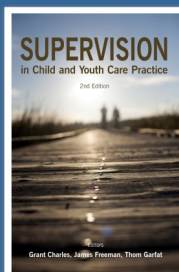
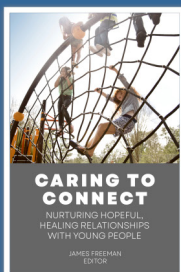
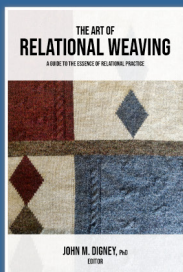
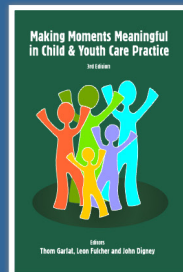
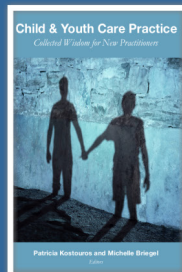
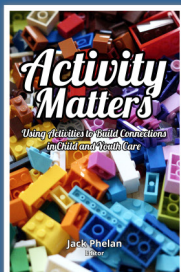
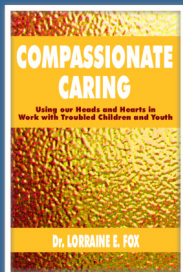
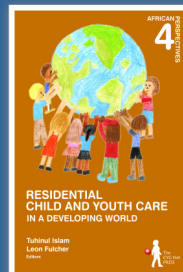
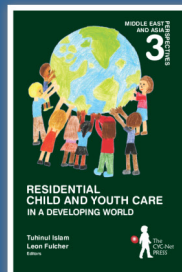
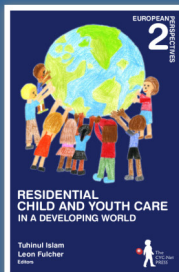
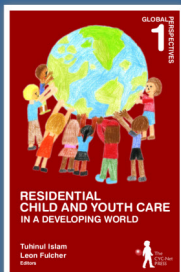
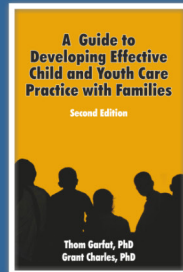
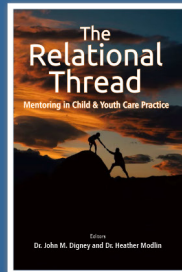
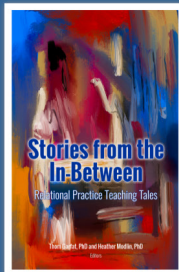
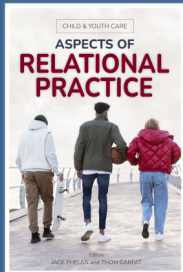
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Editorial Comment

Beyond the Checklist: Reclaiming the Heart of Relational Practice

Martin Stabrey

Prior to the CYC World Conference in St. John's in July, I attended a pre-conference summit at Amal Youth and Family Centre entitled "Keeping Relationships at the Centre". Among the many themes we talked about, one seemed to come up fairly often ...

We all know that Child and Youth Care (CYC) is about human connection and presence. It happens in unscripted moments, over a game of soccer, during a chat in a hallway, a shared meal, or in the silence of a difficult moment. Relational practice relies on building trust, intuition, and on authentic connection that is nurtured over time. And yet, more and more we hear about relational spaces quietly being crowded out by an enveloping tide of bureaucratic red tape and bean counting.

Hearing the accounts of delegates at the summit, it seems that practitioners are increasingly finding themselves spending more time



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documenting their work than actually doing the work. Their primary relationship is no longer with the young person in front of them, but rather with compliance to a bureaucratic beast of risk assessments, compliance and performance indicators that absorbs hours of precious time that could (and should) be spent on building connections and relationships. Are systems helping practitioners spend more time with children and families, or more time proving that they did?

It should come as no surprise that one the first casualties of systems designed to meet budgetary targets and ticked boxes (often under the guise of 'greater efficiencies') is relational practice. As our summit keynote, Dr Kiaras Gharabaghi noted, "Relational practice takes time". But time is rarely money's best friend. How we navigate this contradiction will go a long way to determining the future identity, and indeed the soul, of our work with young people.

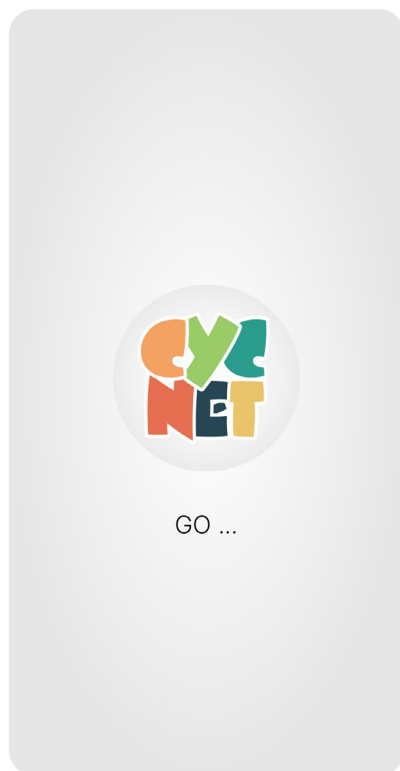
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Beyond Placement: Practicum as Pedagogy in Child and Youth Care

Jenny McGrath

Child and Youth Care (CYC) has long recognized practicum as essential to professional preparation (Cragg, 2020; Keough, 2016; Forkan & McElwee, 2002), yet we have devoted comparatively little attention to understanding how practicum contributes to students' development as CYC practitioners. Although practicum is widely understood as an important site of learning and a bridge between theory and practice, less attention has been given to examining the educational processes that make this learning possible.

Although the terms field education, placement, and practicum are often used interchangeably, this article adopts the Child and Youth Care Educational Accreditation Board of Canada's (CYCEAB) use of practicum as the overarching term. This choice reflects an understanding of practicum as more than the completion of required practice hours; rather, it is a relational educational experience that integrates practice, supervision, critical reflection, and assessment.

This paper builds on my doctoral research exploring students' experiences of practicum, in which participants consistently described their learning as a process of becoming rather than simply acquiring skills



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(McGrath, 2025). Insights from this inquiry, together with ongoing conversations with other Child and Youth Care educators, prompted a broader conceptual question that guides this paper: If practicum is central to Child and Youth Care education, what makes it educational?

Reframing Practicum as Pedagogy

Programs devote substantial resources to practicum, including coordination, faculty supervision, community partnerships, administrative infrastructure, and ongoing quality improvement. Community partners contribute expertise and create opportunities for authentic practice despite competing organizational demands, while faculty dedicate significant time and effort to supporting student learning. Students, in turn, spend hundreds of hours immersed in practice. Few components of professional education require a comparable investment of relational, organizational, and educational resources.

This commitment is reflected in the CYCEAB standards (2025), which identify practicum as a principal component of CYC education and emphasize the importance of direct relational practice, theory-practice integration, structured supervision, critical reflection, and competency development. Implicit within these standards is a recognition that practicum is defined not simply by participation in practice settings, but by the educational experiences and supports that enable professional learning.

Despite this significant role within CYC education, discipline-specific scholarship has more often examined individual elements of practicum than the processes through which it becomes educational. Existing literature has contributed important insights into supervision (Lam, 2019; McElwee et al., 2002), student experiences (Pope et al., 2025; Newberry, 2007; Beneteau, 1993), and field education structures (Pope et al., 2023; Keough, 2016;



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Snell, 2016; Ainsworth, 2016), while emerging work has begun to consider the pedagogical dimensions of practicum (McCallion et al., 2026; Cragg, 2020; Cragg, 2023). Further attention is needed to understand how practicum functions as an intentional educational experience through which students interpret practice, construct professional meaning, and develop as CYC practitioners.

This gap invites a different conceptualization of practicum. I propose that practicum should be understood as an intentional pedagogy through which students interpret experience, construct professional meaning, and develop the knowledge, judgement, and identity required for Child and Youth Care practice (Mann-Feder, 2021; Budd, 2020; Garfat, 2008; Garfat et al, 2018). Figure 1 (over the page) introduces the conceptual framework that informs this argument. Rather than positioning placement completion and accumulated hours as the primary educational mechanisms, the framework conceptualizes practicum as a pedagogical process in which experience provides the context for learning and intentional educational processes transform experience into meaningful professional learning.

From this perspective, placement provides opportunities for experience, but pedagogy transforms experience into education. Through supervision, dialogue, critical reflection, theory integration, and guided participation, practicum educators support students in interpreting experience, constructing professional meaning, and developing the ways of thinking, relating, and practising that characterize Child and Youth Care.

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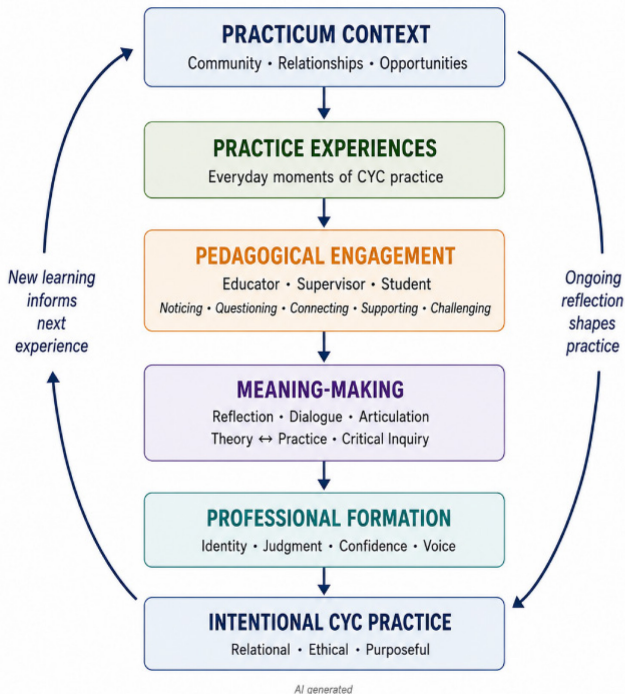
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PRACTICUM AS PEDAGOGY

From Experience to Professional Formation



Understanding practicum in this way requires moving beyond the assumption that experience alone produces learning. Educational theory has consistently demonstrated that experience does not automatically result in understanding or professional growth; rather, learning depends on how experience is interpreted, reflected upon, connected to prior knowledge, and integrated into an evolving understanding of practice. The



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following section draws on educational theory to examine how experience becomes learning and why practicum is best understood not simply as a placement, but as a distinct pedagogy.

The Pedagogical Processes of Practicum

Understanding practicum as pedagogy requires looking beyond experience itself to the educational processes that transform experience into learning. Experiential, reflective, transformative, and situated learning theories provide a foundation for understanding how learners interpret experience, construct knowledge, and develop professional identity.



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Experience as the Foundation of Learning

Experience provides the foundation for learning, but it is not inherently educational. Dewey (1938) argued that the educational value of experience depends upon how individuals engage with, interpret, and build meaning from it. Simply participating in practice does not guarantee understanding or growth because experiences may reinforce existing assumptions, remain disconnected from future learning, or fail to contribute to professional development. Dewey therefore shifts attention away from experience itself and toward the processes that enable experience to become educational.

Building on Dewey's work, Kolb (1984) explains how experience becomes learning through an ongoing cycle of reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Experience initiates learning, but reflection enables learners to examine what occurred, connect it to broader ideas, and apply new understandings to future situations. Learning is therefore not a single event but a continuous process in which each experience informs the next.

Reflection as Knowledge Construction in Practice

Reflective learning theories illuminate how practitioners develop knowledge through engagement with complex situations. Schön (1983; 1987) argues that professional practice involves more than applying previously acquired knowledge. Practitioners construct knowledge while navigating uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity. Reflection occurs both during and after experiences as practitioners notice unexpected events, reconsider assumptions, and adapt their responses.

Mezirow (1991) extends this understanding by emphasizing the transformative potential of reflection. Learning becomes transformative when individuals critically examine the assumptions and perspectives through which they interpret their experiences. Through this process,



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learners develop new ways of understanding themselves, others, and their work. Learning is therefore not simply the acquisition of knowledge but the reconstruction of meaning.

Participation and Professional Becoming

Finally, Wenger (1991) and Wenger et al (2002) situates learning within communities of practice. Professional knowledge develops through relationships, shared practice, and increasing participation within a professional community. As learners participate alongside others, they develop not only new understandings but also a growing sense of professional identity. Learning is therefore both cognitive and relational, representing a process of becoming as much as a process of knowing.

From Learning Theory to Practicum

Considered together, these perspectives describe professional learning as an iterative rather than linear process. Dewey (1938) reminds us that experience alone is insufficient. Kolb (1984) explains how reflection transforms experience into learning. Schön (1983; 1987) demonstrates that this reflective process continues within the uncertainty of professional practice. Mezirow (1991) shows how reflection becomes transformative through meaning-making, while Wenger et al (2001) illustrates how participation and relationships contribute to the ongoing development of professional identity. Rather than offering competing explanations, these theorists collectively describe complementary dimensions of how professionals learn and continue to develop throughout their careers.

From this perspective, practicum can be understood as the beginning of an ongoing cycle of professional learning rather than a discrete educational event. Experience generates opportunities for reflection; reflection shapes

interpretation; interpretation contributes to meaning-making; meaning-making influences professional identity; and that evolving identity, in turn, shapes how practitioners engage with subsequent experiences. Each new encounter is understood differently because it is interpreted by someone whose knowledge, judgement, relationships, and sense of professional self have been reshaped by previous experiences. Learning is continuous, with each experience shaping how students think, relate to others, and engage in practice.

This understanding highlights the importance of intentional educational scaffolding within practicum. Learners require opportunities to revisit experiences, integrate knowledge with self and practice, and examine their developing understandings through dialogue and critical inquiry. Within practicum, seminar provides an essential pedagogical space where students explore practice experiences with peers and faculty, making meaning of their work in relation to broader professional knowledge (McCallion et al., 2026). Practicum, therefore, is not simply a period of accumulating experience but an intentional educational process that supports the development of professional judgement, identity, and praxis (White, 2008).

This understanding of practicum also aligns with principles of adult learning. Knowles et al. (2015) argued that adult learners bring prior experiences, established beliefs, and emerging aspirations to educational settings, and that meaningful learning occurs when those experiences become resources for inquiry rather than simply background to new knowledge. Adult learners are motivated by opportunities to solve authentic problems, assume increasing responsibility for their own learning, and connect new ideas with lived experience. Practicum creates these conditions by engaging students in authentic professional contexts while providing intentional opportunities to interpret experience, develop



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autonomy, and exercise professional judgement. In this sense, practicum is more than experiential learning; it is an adult learning environment in which students actively construct professional meaning, negotiate identity, and assume growing responsibility for their ongoing development as Child and Youth Care practitioners. If practicum depends upon educational processes rather than experience alone, who intentionally supports students in this learning?

The Pedagogical Role of the Practicum Educator

Understanding practicum as pedagogy fundamentally reframes the role of the practicum educator. Unlike many classroom-based courses, practicum educators teach within uncertainty. Students learn across diverse agencies, supervisory relationships, organizational cultures, and practice contexts, each offering different opportunities and challenges. No two students encounter the same learning experiences, despite working toward common educational outcomes. The educator cannot control these learning environments, but they can create and guide the conditions through which students learn from them.

This work extends well beyond coordinating placements or evaluating performance. Practicum educators help students integrate knowledge, navigate ambiguity and personal responses, and develop professional judgement within practice situations that are often unpredictable and highly individualized. Through reflection, dialogue, and inquiry, they help students move from experiencing practice to learning through practice. They invite students to notice what is occurring within relationships and practice contexts; interpret events through Child and Youth Care theory and values; articulate the reasoning that informs their decisions; connect classroom learning with lived experience; and critically examine assumptions, biases,



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and responses. In doing so, they support students in making meaning of practice in ways that deepen their understanding of Child and Youth Care and contribute to the development of their professional identity. For example, a student may initially describe a difficult interaction with a young person as “non-compliance.” Through questioning and reflection, the educator helps the student consider the relational, developmental, and contextual influences shaping the interaction, connecting the experience to broader understandings of Child and Youth Care practice.

Community partners provide significant contributions to practicum education by providing authentic learning environments and on-site supervision. Yet community organizations are not educational institutions, nor should they be expected to assume sole responsibility for teaching the Child and Youth Care profession. Their primary commitment is to the children, youth, families, and communities they serve. Student supervision is one of many competing responsibilities, and field supervisors bring diverse professional backgrounds and understandings of Child and Youth Care practice. These variations contribute to the complexity of practicum and reinforce the need for intentional educational processes that help students interpret and integrate their experiences (Cragg, 2020).

These differences should not be understood as deficits. Rather, they reinforce the importance of the practicum educator, who helps students make sense of experience through the distinctive values and principles of Child and Youth Care (Digney, 2024; Garfat et al, 2018) while supporting community partners in understanding the profession's unique contribution. From this perspective, professional formation is possible in diverse practice settings because learning depends less on the setting itself than on how students critically engage with relationships, context, ethics, and intervention. Interdisciplinary environments can be especially valuable, challenging students to clarify and articulate what makes Child and Youth



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Care practice distinctive. For example, explaining the rationale for a relational intervention to a colleague or supervisor may require students to clarify their own assumptions about Child and Youth Care, strengthening both their professional understanding and confidence.

The practicum educator's expertise lies not in controlling the learning environment or delivering a common body of content, but in transforming diverse experiences into meaningful professional learning. Their pedagogical work provides the continuity that enables students to construct professional meaning across varied contexts and, ultimately, to develop as Child and Youth Care practitioners.

What Changes When Practicum is Understood as Pedagogy?

Viewing practicum through a pedagogical lens shifts how it is understood within Child and Youth Care education. Four interconnected conceptual shifts emerge from the argument developed in this paper.

From Placement to Curriculum

Practicum should be understood as a deliberately designed curriculum with intended learning outcomes, pedagogical processes, opportunities for inquiry, and mechanisms for assessment. The placement in a community setting provides the context for learning, but the curriculum provides educational coherence and purpose.



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From Experience to Pedagogy

Experience alone does not produce learning. Through questioning, dialogue, feedback, critical reflection, and guided inquiry, practicum educators help students interpret their experiences, connect different forms of knowledge with practice, and construct professional meaning.

From Competency to Professional Formation

Competencies remain important, but practicum is ultimately about who students are becoming as practitioners. Professional formation encompasses use of self, identity, judgement, relational capacity, ethical discernment, and commitment to the values of Child and Youth Care.

From Coordination to Pedagogical Leadership

The practicum educator designs learning, supports reflection, encourages integration, works collaboratively with community partners, and guides students through complex developmental processes. Their influence shapes not only what students learn, but how they learn and who they become.

Implications of Practicum as Pedagogy

Reframing practicum as pedagogy rather than placement invites new questions about professional education. If practicum is understood as an integrative educational process, then its design, delivery, and evaluation require reconsideration. This includes how programs prepare and support practicum educators, integrate curriculum with field learning, sustain relationships with community partners, and assess student development. Evaluation must extend beyond observable competencies to consider the development of professional judgement, ethical reasoning, relational



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understanding, reflective capacity, and professional identity. This paper does not attempt to resolve these questions; rather, it suggests that these are the questions that emerge when practicum is understood as a distinctive pedagogical endeavour.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that recognizing practicum as pedagogy changes how we think about student learning in practice. Through practicum, students learn to interpret experience, develop professional judgement, and cultivate a growing sense of themselves as Child and Youth Care practitioners. The educational value of practicum lies not only in the placement setting, but in the intentional educational processes that help students connect experience, reflection, theory, self, and practice. Reframing practicum as pedagogy shifts attention from managing field experiences to creating the conditions through which professional knowledge, identity, and ways of being are refined. In doing so, it provides a framework for understanding how students come to embody and confidently enact what it means to practise in ways that are distinctly and recognizably Child and Youth Care.

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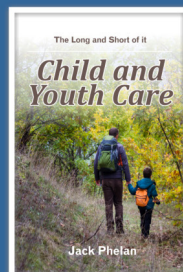
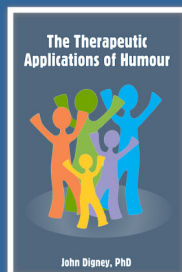
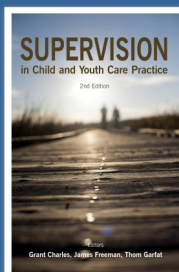
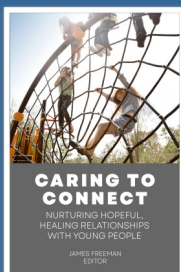
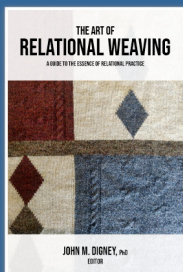
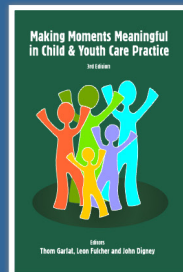
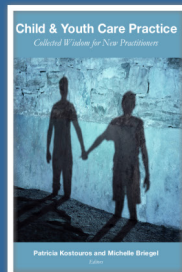
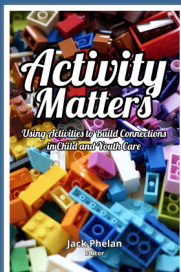
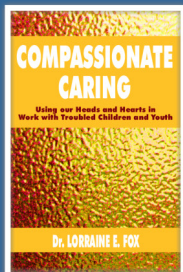
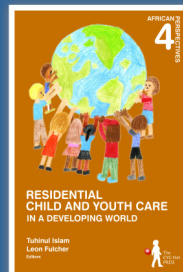
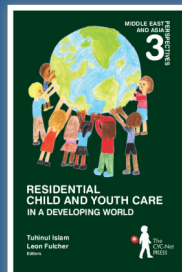
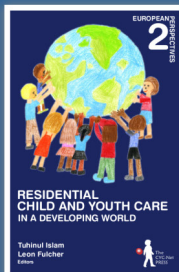
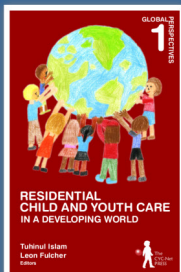
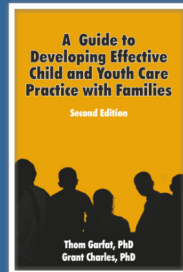
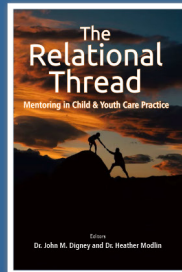
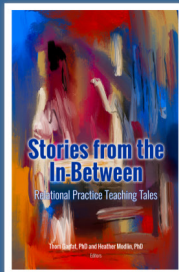
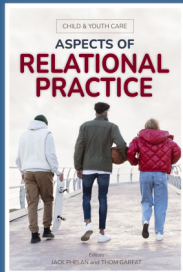
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Thinking Differently about Residential Care: What is Normal?

Kiaras Gharabaghi

One reason residential group care has been subjected to much critique in recent years, and even to calls for its abandonment altogether across many jurisdictions, is that in comparison to the mantra that ‘every child deserves to grow up in family’, any suggestion that institutional or quasi-institutional care could be a reasonable substitute or even be reflective of family and family dynamics, seems like a stretch. Embedded within this critique is an absurd binary that pits narratives of family against narratives of institution. I consider this absurd for three reasons: First, all narratives constructed around binaries are absurd and empirically if not impossible then at least highly implausible; second, because family is an institution, and therefore pitting family against institution is nonsense; and third, because neither family nor institution are monolithic concepts, and therefore, phrases like “family-based care is preferable to institutional forms of care” don’t actually carry any inherent meaning.

The argument itself is also ahistorical and runs counter to the hegemonic movements over the past 2000 years (at least) toward shifting concepts such as relationship and belonging away from family and toward



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institutional entities, such as the state, the head of state, the Party (particularly under communism), the religion and its institutions, and, in these times of unfettered capitalism, the corporation, the brand, and the product. One might argue that particularly in the rhetorically most conservative and family-oriented contexts and geographies, such as the evangelist fanaticism in the United States, for example, the movement is hardly one toward family relationships and belonging and much more oriented toward finding one's place in patriarchy, racism, white supremacy, ableism, and socio-economic status (or more simply, class).

At the same time, however, I am growing a little weary of simply rejecting the arguments against residential care and asserting its usefulness and value. In truth, a great deal of residential care I have come across over the years is in fact destructive and harmful to young people, and young people themselves have consistently and repeatedly expressed serious concerns about this form of care. Currently, the response to these concerns has been centered around the concept of quality standards. Essentially, the argument is that while there have been major issues and problems in many residential care settings, these are the result of poor practice and a lack of organizational commitment or competence (including profiteering from and exploiting the vulnerabilities of young people in need of out of home care). If we raise the quality standards of residential care service provision, bad actors will fall by the wayside, and good actors will not only remain but become even better actors.

I worry that this is not a particularly innovative position to take, and perhaps more problematically, it is a position that may not fully capture what is actually difficult about being cared for in residential care. The family-based care lobby is not entirely wrong; it is in fact true that



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residential care settings are 'hard places to call home'¹. While we may not like to acknowledge it, residential care are spaces in which power is imposed quite significantly on the young people who live there, and all the relational practices in the world cannot undo this. All residential care is imposing, containing, and includes strong surveillance and control cultures, even if there are huge variations across different settings. All these settings are 'expert-driven' settings, and the experts are generally adults ranging from rarely seen psychologists and psychiatrists to the ever-present child and youth care practitioners. And all these settings construct young people's lives by narrating them through clinical and behavioural reports, daily logs and incident reports, and ultimately discharge reports that come with recommendations (by the professionals) about what the young person might need next.

It is of course also the case that residential care settings are physical settings, surrounded by walls, doors and windows that create a clear separation between the world 'out there' and the world 'in here'. To the extent that relational practices can mitigate the security apparatus that is ever-present (through control, programs, and expert judgment of behaviours, needs, vulnerabilities and strengths), this does not really address the structural context of the setting. Quality measures are good and we hope for the experience of young people in residential care to be positive at the inter-personal level (relational practice) and in material ways (good food, comfortable beds, nice aesthetics). But in the end, increased quality simply means that sites of control and surveillance become more palatable and less exploitative and destructive.

¹ In the interest of full disclosure, this is the title of my 2019 book *A Hard Place to Call Home: A Canadian Perspective on Residential Care and Treatment for Children and Youth*. Canadian Scholars.



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What if one were to re-think the possibilities associated with residential care from an entirely different perspective? What if we were to suspend our ideological commitments to longstanding concepts of containment, and we moved on from the idea that the only 'normal' way of growing up is in family, or, if family is not available, in settings that attempt to replicate the dynamics of family life as much as possible?

Sketching out some alternatives can help us to move away from core assumptions that typically are based on fairly white and fairly liberal, and most certainly very gendered concepts of safety, security, social values, and economic productivity. What if, for example, youth were to be placed not in one residential setting, but across a range of residential settings, with the ability to spend time in whichever one feels right in the moment. What if care giving relied much more substantially on the relationships between youth themselves, as well as between young people and community members, and professionals were in place simply to guide and foster possibilities in the development of such relationships. What if there were no time limits at all on how long young people spent in residential care (multiple sites), and instead their 'discharge' were a function of them no longer choosing to be there (even better, what if we just never discharged them)? What if the relationships between child and youth workers and young people were primarily driven by considerations outside of the setting rather than the focus on helping young people conform to programs? What if young people paid rent for living in residential care? What if young people's education were based on their connections to community members and the sharing of their wisdoms and skills rather than school or school-like classrooms in the basement of the setting? What if all training and education for child and youth care were to be offered jointly to young people and those hoping to become child and youth workers? What if all residential care settings offered ownership shares to young people and



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their families to the physical resources based on family participation in the experiences of their young people in residential care (multiple settings)? What if all residential care settings had to be responsive to a circle of advisors of parents and caregivers of young people?

One might ask a thousand more questions of this nature. The point is that the question we should all be considering more carefully is ‘what is normal’? Why do we assume that a substitute family setting is the most normal way for young people to grow up if they cannot grow up physically in their original family? And to what extent is this suggestion that family-based care is more normal than group care (in whatever form) really just an artifact of times long gone? Almost nothing these days is place-based; between virtual relationships and online counselling, migration patterns and online learning, and so many other things (banking, shopping, playing, etc.), the patterns of the 21st century clearly is one in which place-based and static institutions (such as family) are hanging on, but not always successfully. Why then do we accept residential care at best as a temporary placement option but with a view of finding family-based care instead?



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Normal means different things to different people. One way of living a normal life for young people we typically have placed in residential care settings as a placement of last resort may be to live their lives through much more differentiated, dispersed, and fluid relationships that allow them to become whatever they need to become. Such relationships don't have to be tied to a singular place or a particular kind of institution (family). Meaningful innovation in residential care is not about quality standards; it is about questioning whether the things we aim to expose to quality standards are part of the solution or part of the problem. Surveillance, control, professional impositions, and contained and performance-based relationships can surely be improved with higher standards, ensuring safety for young people better than before. And yet, one wonders whether safety in the way we think of it has any liberating potential embedded within it. Perhaps this version of producing safety is the problem, not the solution.

Lots to think about and ideally we do that thinking before we commit to yet another round of fortifying our oppressive systems with an aesthetic of 'quality care'.

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Platform Two

James Freeman

We spend a lot of energy in our work with young people planning activities and accomplishing shared tasks. Yet sometimes a moment can arrive unexpectedly out of nothing more than circumstance. This story is about one of those unexpected moments. A cold night, a delayed train, and a brief encounter in the space of ordinary life.

* * *

When I first arrived from my flight at the nearby airport to take the train home, I expected a half hour wait. I sat on the ground leaning against the fence away from the crowd down the way. No intention other than to have a quiet minute alone.

The train was running late. That wasn't out of the ordinary, but the departure board kept nudging the delay out only twenty minutes at a time. It was now three hours later and a bit disorienting.

The sun had long since set and now the overhead lights cast long, thin shadows across the concrete. The open-air platform had emptied out slowly, one frustrated traveler at a time, until three remained. A man sleeping in his jacket on the other side of the tracks, someone sitting down



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the way in an area with benches, and me, trying to pass the time by working on notes under the flickering lights.

I was tired, a little numb from the cold, and focused on getting through the wait and getting home. Then I felt the shadow approach me. I hadn't noticed the individual from the benches was a young person.

She didn't drift over accidentally. She had the kind of courage it takes to walk up to a stranger when you're anxious and alone. She initiated the contact and from the beginning I sensed that choice carried its own quiet strength.

Her hair was choppy and uneven, tinted blue to match her eyes. Thick glasses caught the overhead lights in quick flashes. Her voice was tentative but steady. Like the voice of someone who felt anxious but wasn't afraid to take up space when she needed to.

She told me she had needed to use the bathroom for a while. She was freezing and hungry but hadn't eaten her packed dinner because she didn't have a fork.

The bathroom was a pressing need, and I said I knew there was one about a block away.

"Would you watch my bags if I brought them over?" she said as her eyes lit up.

"Of course," I said, "But you don't have to bring them over, I'll walk down and sit with them."

We talked a bit more about where exactly the bathroom was. She was worried about being allowed in or if there would be someone there who would question her.

"Look confident, like you know where you're going," I said.

She smiled and took off, and I went and sat by her luggage.

When she returned, she was limping with a twisted ankle and propped her foot up on the suitcase with a small wince. She brushed off the injury



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and told me she was really flexible, then demonstrated double-jointed elbows and fingers. She talked with her hands, animated and expressive, as if her body was helping her words find their way.

It was at that moment something shifted. Subtle yet unmistakable. Any tension dissolved and we had moved from strangers on a deserted platform to two people sharing a moment.

She settled on the bench, close enough to talk without raising her voice. As we sat together, her voice shifted from shaky to calm. Her shoulders dropped. Her breathing slowed. She began to talk. Not in a rushed or frantic way, but in a steady stream, as if she'd been holding these stories in her chest for too long.



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She went on to explain she had a lot of social anxiety. She had spent the day with friends, she said, and left them early to get to the station on time. She'd been rushing, anxious about missing the train, and now here she was. Stuck, cold, hungry, and alone in a place that felt more like the Twilight Zone than a train station.

She told me she was autistic and nonbinary. She told me about the medications she'd been put on as a child so she could manage school; medications she never wanted and believed had shaped some of her current challenges.

All I had to say was 'that sounds interesting' or 'you're a strong person,' and she opened another door.

She wore large headphones to block out the noise of the planes that roared overhead.

"It's like my body is trying to climb out of itself," she said, describing the noise.

Her parents didn't accept any of her challenges, Not the sensory overload, not the anxiety, not the identity.

"Just deal with life like everyone else does," they told her.

She mentioned them because it had gotten so late, they couldn't pick her up at her destination anymore. So, she had asked her grandparents to pick her up and felt guilty about it.

"They're old," she said. "They go to bed early."

She told me about her eyes. She was born with cataracts and had to have hard lenses implanted when she was really young, which caused several vision challenges. And then she lit up about virtual reality headsets. She knew everything and taught me all about visual fields, field depth, cognitive load, and memory residue. She spoke with a clarity and intensity that made the cold fade for a moment.



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There were moments of silence between us, too. Not awkward, but full. The kind of silence where two people simply exist in the same space, breathing the same cold air, letting the night settle around us. We were on a train platform but felt like we had been stranded on the moon.

In those pauses, I felt something shift inside me too. I realized I wasn't just keeping her company. She was keeping me company too. I realized that maybe this was why the train was delayed. The reason we'd been stranded on that cold platform for hours. The universe had arranged a moment of connection between two strangers who needed it more than they knew.

We were simply being together and the mutuality of that felt grounding.

It was all the things we talk about and do in our work. Presence, acceptance, connection, intentionality, meeting others where they are. There was no trying too hard and no preconceived agenda.

The twist is that it wasn't as much me supporting her as her supporting me. And maybe that gets close to what we mean when we talk about things like mutuality and shared experience.

The train finally arrived with its blinding headlight. We scrambled to grab our things and climbed aboard. The warmth of the train car felt almost unreal as we had adapted to the cold of the platform. The car was quiet, everyone half-asleep. Only single seats remained, so we sat a few rows apart.

I saw her once more before my stop. She had retrieved a fork from the café car and was finally eating her dinner. When my stop came, she looked up and waved a warm goodbye.

I stepped off the train feeling I had received something I didn't have at the start of the journey. And whatever that something was, had now settled somewhere deeper than I expected.

* * *



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Relational practice can thrive in quiet spaces. In moments where presence matters more than expertise and listening matters more than instruction. Both on and off duty it's easy to hide behind roles or preconceived goals. But that night there was no script, no planning, no outcome to aim for. So much can unfold when we simply sit with another person without agenda or urgency.

In that unstructured, uncertain space, something meaningful emerged. I can only speak to how the moment felt from my side, but her openness nudged me to notice my own capacity for stillness and curiosity. She reminded me that connection is something we allow, not something we manufacture.

We never know which small gestures will become anchors for someone else, or which brief conversations will shift something inside us. Sometimes the most meaningful connections happen not because we planned them, but because we allowed ourselves to step into the unknown and be available when the moment arrived.



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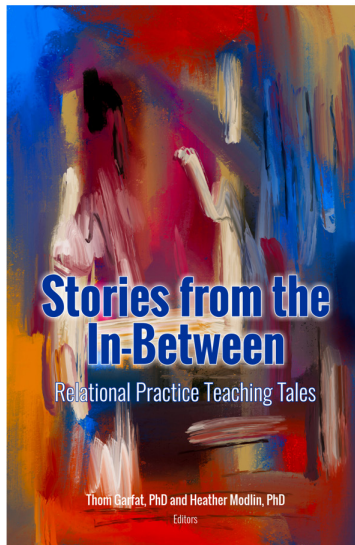
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Reflective Questions

- What elements of relational safety emerged in this moment, and how did they form without shared history, role, or expectation?
- Where did mutuality show up, and how do you recognize it in your own practice?
- What inner stance helps you connect without agenda, even when your role carries expectations and pressures?

James Freeman is a lifelong Child and Youth Care Practitioner. Learn more about his leadership training at www.training-grounds.net and about Open Doors at www.opendoorstraining.org where he is a senior facilitator.

This is the third of six chapters being published in CYC-Online from the new book [Stories from the In-Between: Relational Practice Teaching Tales](#). (Garfat and Modlin, eds. CYC-Net Press)



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A Trauma-Informed and Relational Approach to Complex Trauma in Children and Young People

Harrison Dax Nash

Introduction

Complex trauma in children and young people arises from chronic, interpersonal adverse experiences, often occurring within caregiving relationships. The very relationships that are supposed to be the most secure in a child's life.

Unlike single-incident trauma, complex trauma disrupts neuro-development, emotional regulation, identity formation and relational capacity, with long-term implications for mental and physical health. It is therefore highly significant for us to be cognisant of this within child and youth care.

Recently, I have reflected on what I feel to be the first case of true complex trauma that I worked with intensively. This was a young boy who had experienced every type of abuse by the age of 12. This was both in and out of his home, as the familial mistreatment led him to seek solace in a gang who then abused him through substance use coercion to maintain dependence and misuse him.



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Having embarked on vital relational building work within the first hours of him arriving at our children's home, the drug withdrawal ended up so extreme we were together at a hospital 24 hours later with him trying to throw himself off the top floor car park. While I somehow was able to prevent this, there were years of ups and downs, ongoing therapeutic interventions, strengths-based approaches and, vitally, trauma-informed relational-based support that helped him to flourish.

For him to have ultimately finished school with the highest standard of passing, and being a multi-sport first team player and school prefect, and then commencing university and embarking on a career in the community, is testament to what is possible if we always have hope – no matter the circumstances. We supported the development of his own resilience and self-belief that helped him to envision the future he was always capable of achieving. For me, such incredible stories are what I always hold onto throughout every tenet of my practice.

This article synthesises contemporary trauma theory with practice-based insights to examine how complex trauma presents across developmental stages and how trauma-informed relational approaches can support recovery. Emphasis is placed on understanding behaviour as an adaptive survival response, the role of sensory and emotional regulation and the centrality of safe, attuned relationships for healing. Implications for child and youth care practitioners will be discussed.

Understanding Trauma

For many, the actual term 'trauma' has only started to become more prevalent within the last decade. Perhaps historically we would hear about 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs), but certainly in the UK, the term 'trauma-informed practice' has become common language across children's



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services and wider social care and educational services since 2020 onwards.

Childhood trauma is a significant public health and social justice issue, with evidence demonstrating its pervasive impact across the life course (Shonkoff et al., 2012; Forkey et al., 2021). There are many findings I wish were not true – and that inspire me to challenge outcomes through practice – but we cannot ignore the link between ACEs and an increased risk of premature death. The mitigating factors for this are the associated increased risks of poorer physical health, mental health difficulties, risky behaviours and chronic illnesses throughout life.

While many children experience distressing events, those exposed to chronic, repeated interpersonal trauma – particularly where their parental figures are the source – are at heightened risk of complex trauma. Such experiences fundamentally shape how children understand safety, relationships and themselves (Cook et al., 2005).

Trauma-informed practice offers a framework that moves beyond ‘behavioural management’ towards understanding the meaning behind behaviour, centering safety, dignity and relational connection (Marsac et al., 2019). And while it may appear to be a ‘buzz word’ to many, we cannot underestimate the importance of applying a trauma-informed lens across the whole scope of our practice. This extends from foster care through to youth justice.

Conceptualising Trauma and Stress

Trauma is defined by the experience of threat rather than the event itself. It refers to experiences perceived as overwhelming and inescapable, with lasting adverse effects on functioning and wellbeing (American Psychological Association, 2022).



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When I deliver training on this topic, I often ask if stress is always a bad thing (I caveat the question with the fact that our own lived experience can affect our response to it). Stress can be a normal part of life and, in the right circumstances, can even be helpful. Research in developmental neuroscience distinguishes between:

- **Positive stress** – which supports growth;
- **Tolerable stress** – which can be buffered by supportive relationships; and
- **Toxic stress** – involving prolonged activation of stress systems in the absence of protective caregiving (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Toxic stress, often linked to chronic abuse, disrupts brain architecture, immune function and emotional regulation, increasing long-term risks for mental health difficulties, chronic illness and social adversity (Shonkoff et al., 2012; de Magalhães Barbosa et al., 2021). Positive stress may help us to perform, such as when needing to write an examination (and not discrediting the effects of ‘test anxiety’), whereas tolerable stress is buffered by the support we receive, for example, when experiencing bereavement, it is essential for young people to receive a supportive response.

Types of Trauma and Complex Trauma

Trauma exposure is commonly categorised as:

- **Acute trauma**, resulting from a single incident;
- **Chronic trauma**, involving repeated exposure; and



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- **Complex trauma**, characterised by multiple, pervasive interpersonal traumas beginning early in life (Cook et al., 2005).

Complex trauma, especially, is distinct in its depth and breadth of impact. It is strongly associated with disruptions to attachment as it affects regulation, cognition, self-concept and biological systems (Cook et al., 2005; van der Kolk, 2014). This is not by any means taking away from the impact of other forms of trauma; however, it is often children and young people who have experienced complex trauma who are referred to residential care, as it may be difficult for foster and kinship carers to meet their needs.

Importantly, studies suggest that a substantial proportion of developmental trauma occurs within caregiving relationships, reinforcing the association between trauma and relational mistrust (Cook et al., 2005). This again has wider implications in that such children (and, in response to this, the adults entrusted to care for them) may encounter barriers to forming positive relationships. However, as practitioners, we must move away from thinking that “the child is difficult” or that “they should be grateful” and instead value their lived experience, because even in the most heightened of crisis – as my earlier case reflection demonstrated – the relationship matters. It must always be a primary focus.

Developmental Impact Across Childhood and Adolescence

Trauma manifests differently across developmental stages, reflecting variations in cognitive, emotional and social capacity.

- **Early childhood (0–5 years):** heightened separation distress, regression, sleep disturbance and self-soothing behaviours.



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- **Middle childhood (6–11 years):** emotional dysregulation, learning difficulties, behavioural challenges and somatic complaints.
- **Adolescence (12–17 years):** depression, substance use, risk-taking behaviour, dissociation and identity difficulties.

These responses are best understood as adaptive survival strategies, rather than wilful misconduct (van der Kolk, 2014; Forkey et al., 2021).

A more comprehensive list can include the following:

Ages 0-5	Fear of being separated from parent
	Crying, whimpering, screaming
	Immobility and/or aimless motion
	Trembling, excessive clinging, frightened facial expressions
	Regressed behaviors (thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, fear of darkness, etc.)
	Self-soothing (rocking, head-banging, etc.)

Ages 6-11	Extreme withdrawal
	Disruptive behavior
	Inability to pay attention
	Regressed behaviors
	Nightmares/sleep problems
	Irrational fears
	Irritability
	School refusal
	Anger outbursts
	Fighting
	Somatic complaints
	Poor academic engagement (schoolwork suffers)
	Depression, anxiety, feelings of guilt, emotional numbing

Ages 12-17	Flashbacks
	Nightmares/sleep problems
	Emotional numbing
	Avoidance of reminders
	Depression
	Substance abuse
	Problems with peers
	Anti-social behavior
	Physical complaints
	Suicidal ideation
	School problems
	Confusion
	Guilt
	Revenge fantasies

Trauma, Memory and the Body

Trauma is frequently encoded in implicit memory systems, particularly when experienced in early childhood. As a result, traumatic stress may be expressed somatically or behaviourally rather than verbally (van der Kolk, 2014). In terms of the somatic, it can be that physical symptoms are experienced even when there is no obvious injury or medical cause. It can

be easy to overlook that in practice without acknowledging the link to psychological trauma. Perhaps it might make us reexamine our own reaction towards the young person in our care who keeps complaining of pain despite there being nothing medically wrong.

Emerging evidence also highlights the intergenerational transmission of trauma, mediated through biological stress pathways and relational patterns (Shonkoff et al., 2012). This underscores the need for approaches that address both body-based and relational aspects of trauma recovery. Most commonly, intergenerational transmission is understood through learned behaviours, attachment patterns and relational dynamics within families. However, there is also a growing body of epigenetic research exploring how trauma may impact stress-response systems and potentially create biological changes that affect how future generations respond to stress.

Sensory Processing and Trauma

There is growing recognition that trauma significantly impacts sensory processing, with children demonstrating patterns of hyper-responsivity, hypo-responsivity or sensory-seeking behaviour (Matson et al., 2023). Recent studies indicate strong correlations between sensory modulation difficulties and emotional distress in trauma-exposed children (Liberman et al., 2026).

Sensory dysregulation may increase vigilance, impair concentration and exacerbate behavioural responses, particularly in environments that are unpredictable or overstimulating. Supporting sensory regulation is therefore a critical component of trauma-informed intervention (Matson et al., 2023). As practitioners, we also need to be actively engaging with the educational providers of our children and young people to ensure that such factors are given due consideration within the classroom environment.



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Trauma-Informed and Relational Practice

Trauma-informed practice represents a paradigm shift from asking “What is wrong with this child?” to “What has happened to this child?” (Forkey et al., 2021). Core principles include safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment and cultural humility.

Relational approaches emphasise the healing potential of consistent, attuned relationship, recognising that many traumatised children fear closeness because relationships may have previously been unsafe (Cook et al., 2005). This is where it requires practitioners to go the extra mile, to ensure that we are the people in their life who do not give up on them.

The PACE framework – Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy – developed by Hughes (2017), operationalises trauma-informed relational care by supporting emotional containment and connection, particularly during moments of dysregulation. This framework remains intrinsic to our work in residential settings.

Practitioner Wellbeing and Reflective Systems

It is also important for all of us – especially those in a supervisory capacity – to understand that working with trauma-exposed children carries a risk of vicarious trauma and emotional exhaustion. Trauma-informed systems must therefore extend care to practitioners through reflective supervision, organisational safety and cultures that tolerate uncertainty and emotional complexity (Marsac et al., 2019). There can be no room for toxicity within the management culture of the settings in which we are providing our services.

Sustainable trauma-informed practice requires addressing both individual and systemic factors, recognising that practitioner wellbeing



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directly influences relational capacity. If we are not all collectively looked after, then how are we meant to provide the best level of support to the children and young people who need it most?

Conclusion

Complex trauma exerts profound effects on children's development, relationships and sense of self. However, recovery and healing are possible when systems and practitioners respond with understanding, compassion and relational safety. It is important that we celebrate our examples of this for inspiration.

Trauma-informed, developmentally attuned practice reframes behaviour as communication and positions relationships as the primary vehicle for healing. For children whose early experiences taught them that the world is unsafe (such as the young man we met at the start of this article), consistent and empathetic care can restore trust, agency and hope.

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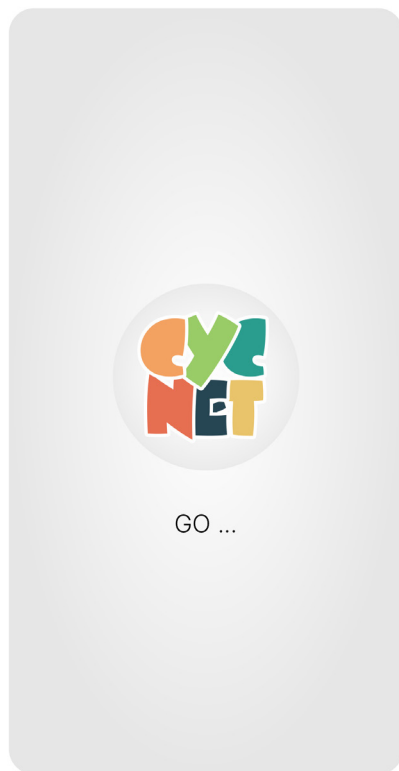
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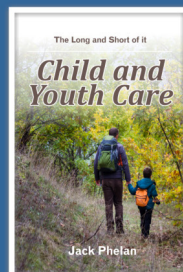
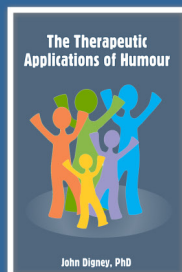
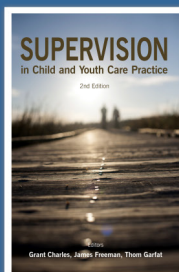
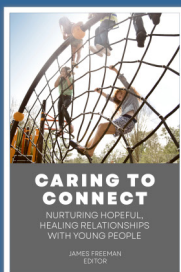
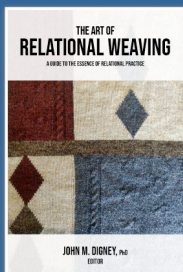
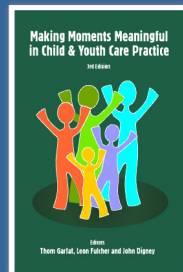
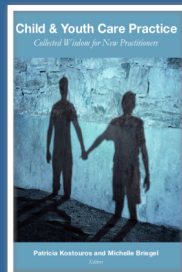
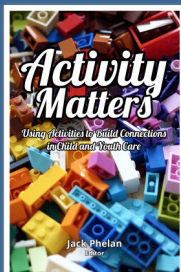
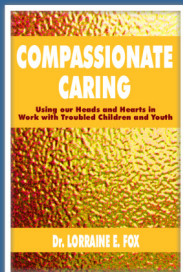
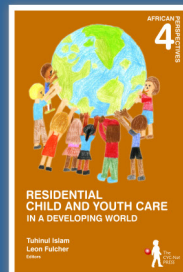
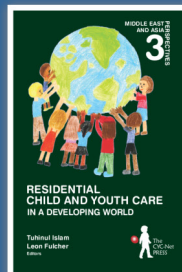
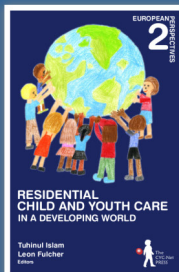
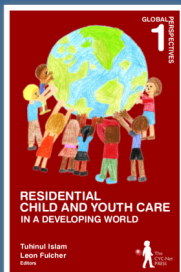
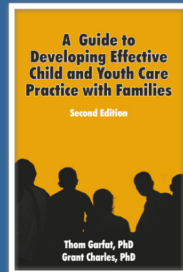
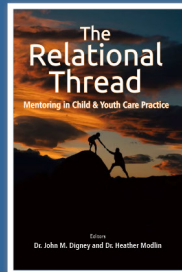
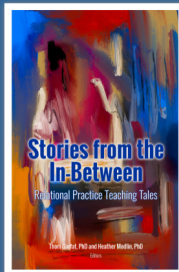
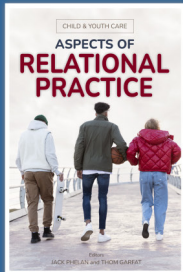
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When Brains Sync: Positively Shaping Child Development

Parent-child brain coupling benefits
socioemotional health

Michele K. Lewis

For decades, psychologists have known that children are influenced by the emotional climate of their homes. What is becoming increasingly clear is that this influence may extend beyond behavior and into the moment-to-moment synchronization of a parent and a child's brains.

Brain Coupling

A current line of research on brain coupling suggests that human beings are not isolated minds operating independently. Instead, our brains continually align with one another through communication, emotion, attention, and shared experience (Wang et al., 2026).

More than a decade ago, neuroscientist Hasson et al. (2012) proposed a bold idea: many aspects of human cognition emerge not within a single brain, but between brains. They argued that communication works because neural activity in one person becomes coupled to neural activity in another person through speech, facial expressions, gestures, and social interaction.



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In their view, successful communication depends on the creation of a shared neural world.

Fourteen years ago, their contribution to what we know was largely theoretical. It drew upon studies showing synchronization between speakers and listeners, mothers and infants, romantic partners, musicians, and individuals engaged in cooperative tasks. The central claim was that human relationships are supported by a dynamic process in which brains become aligned through interaction.

Parent-Child Brain Synchronization

More recently, other researchers have begun testing this framework directly in families. For example, Wang (2026) used hyperscanning technology to measure brain activity simultaneously in mothers and daughters during emotionally engaging interactions. They found significant synchronization between mother and daughter for brain regions involved in communication and social understanding. Even more intriguing, they saw that stronger mother-daughter brain coupling was associated with fewer emotional difficulties in daughters. Maternal marital satisfaction also emerged as an important predictor of children's emotional well-being.

The newer study advances the field in several important ways. First, Hasson and colleagues focused primarily on establishing that brain-to-brain coupling exists and may be a fundamental mechanism underlying communication. The more current research moves beyond existence to examine developmental consequences. It asks not just whether brains synchronize, but whether that synchronization matters for children's social and emotional health.

Second, the newer workplaces family relationships at the center of the story. It suggests that the quality of the parental relationship may influence



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the emotional environment in which parent-child neural synchronization develops. In other words, marital satisfaction may indirectly support children's development by fostering conditions that allow healthier emotional attunement between parent and child. But how is healthy emotional attunement among children impacted by parents' and youths' usage of screens?

The Digital Age

The current research raises an important question for the digital age. Human brain coupling evolved in environments rich with face-to-face interaction. The mechanisms described by Hasson and colleagues depend on eye contact, vocal rhythms, facial expressions, turn-taking, and shared attention. These are precisely the signals that allow one brain to become aligned with another.

Our brains continually align with one another through communication, emotion, attention, and shared experience.

Today, however, many families spend increasing amounts of time interacting with screens rather than with one another. Family members may occupy the same room while attending to entirely different streams of information. Notifications interrupt conversations. Shared meals compete with digital distractions. Emotional exchanges become shorter and less frequent.

The concern is not simply that people spend less time together. The deeper concern is that opportunities for neural attunement may be reduced. Brain coupling research suggests that healthy development may depend on repeated moments of emotional synchronization: shared laughter, attentive listening, storytelling, comforting touch, eye contact, and responsive



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conversation. These experiences help children learn emotional regulation, social understanding, and interpersonal trust.

When such moments become less frequent, the developmental consequences may extend beyond relationships to the neural systems that support them.

Fortunately, the same research offers hope.

Brain coupling is not a fixed trait. It is a process that emerges through interaction. Every meaningful conversation, shared activity, family ritual, bedtime story, or moment of emotional presence provides an opportunity for minds to connect.

The lesson from both the older and newer research is remarkably simple: healthy human development may depend less on what happens inside an isolated brain and more on what happens between connected brains.

Perhaps the future of child development research will increasingly confirm what parents have sensed all along: when relationships are healthy, minds grow together.

Key points

- Emotional regulation, social understanding, and interpersonal trust can stem from neural attunement.
- Healthy human development may depend on what happens between connected brains.
- Stronger happy mother-daughter brain coupling was associated with fewer emotional difficulties in daughters.



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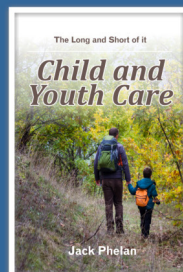
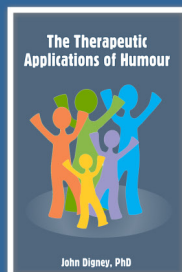
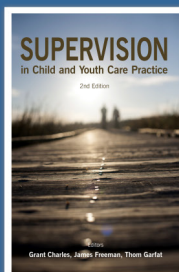
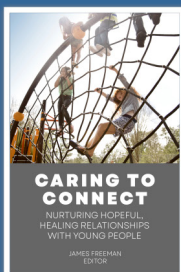
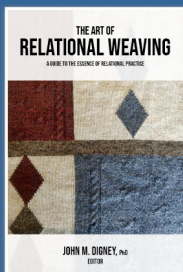
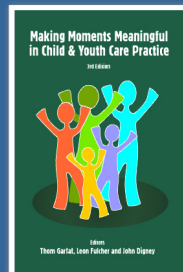
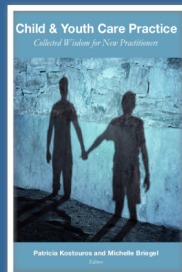
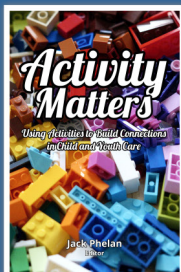
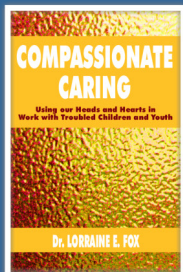
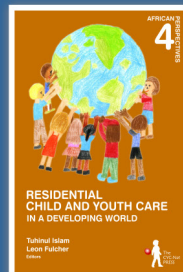
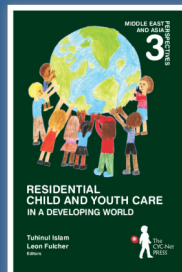
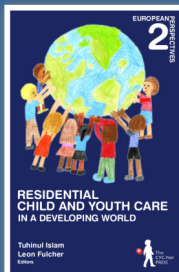
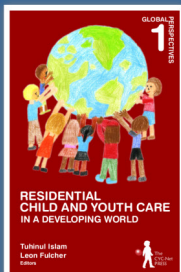
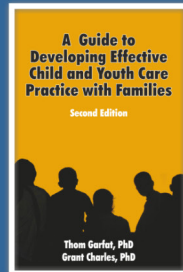
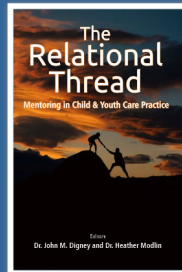
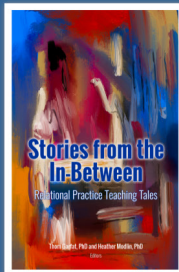
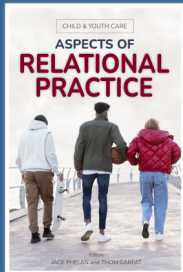
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About the “Radical” in Radical Youthwork

Hans Skott-Myhre

In an interview for Shemine Gulamhusein’s excellent podcast, [“Where Care Learned to Speak,”](#) I was asked why I used the term radical in Radical Youthwork. I responded with an answer tied to the conditions of the field two decades ago when I coined the term. In my writing today, however, I propose that the term radical is even more urgent as a way of describing the work of youth and adults working together for common political purpose in our contemporary milieu.

The key word here for me is political. In using that term, I should note that is not entirely common to frame CYC work as political. We tend towards seeing our work as clinical or remediative, built on working with individual young people to assist them in becoming less problematic for adults in their lives. To be fair, that doesn’t mean that we don’t take their concerns or their pain and suffering seriously. We absolutely do.

But generally, we don’t think of our collaborations as political. Of course, there are notable exceptions such as the [Kinship Rising project](#), or the Radical Youth Work programs and projects of [Wes Robbins](#), or the writings of Kiaras Gharabaghi or [Brian Belton](#) among others. But these examples remain at the edges of the field with considerably less acknowledgement than traditional diagnostic models, psychological approaches, developmental thinking, humanistic psychology, trauma-based care,



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relational work, care-based practice, various behavioral approaches, and an abiding fascination with the architecture of the brain of young people or their neurology.

Over the past twenty years or so there have been significant political critiques of all these approaches, but such critique has really failed to have any real impact on their popularity and persistence as frameworks for understanding young people, their families, and communities. It is important to note that just because we don't call something political doesn't mean that it is neutral as a political force. All the approaches I have named above have political implications and, in most cases, have been responsive to specific historical moments and political struggles.

Developmental psychology, for example, emerged at the time of the industrial revolution. Before this radical shift in the organization of society, there was no real concept of childhood or even the child per se. The emergence of the concept of the child, as the foundation of the developmental approach, was related to social and economic changes in that historical period and laden with political implications. Scholars of childhood such as Aries have noted that the figure of the child came about in response to changes in the economies of Europe driven by European colonization. As [Beckert](#) points out, the increase in the imports of silver created massive increases in wealth for the emerging capitalist class and the demand for textiles to clothe those enslaved in the Caribbean significantly altered the modes of production and daily activities of families in Europe.

The need for children of the emerging capitalist class to attend schools where they could learn to read, write, and handle accounts became critical to the new form of capitalist economy. In addition, changes in governance that included coalition between the monarchies and capitalists required new laws and court rulings which called for scribes and legal professionals to



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manage governance of the colonies, the infrastructure of the slave trade, and the emergent textile industry.

All of this required young people to go to school. Where children had previously been seen as simply members of their family with no real distinction from adults, now they began to develop a new identity as a child in need of external training. Over the next 200 years this would have immense political ramifications in the development of the social identity of the individual separable from the family who had rights of their own and could overthrow governments. My point here is that if we simply accept the developmental scientific definition of the child as a foregone biological construct, we can lose the historical social construction of the social category of the child.

Another example is the way that developmental stages entered our understanding of children's development. Stage theory is another given for many of us in CYC as a framework for understanding the capacity of children as they face life's challenges. However, I would note that the theories of developmental stages also reflect the industrial revolution as it manifested itself in factory production. The idea that childhood is teleological and progresses towards the idealized goal of adulthood is deeply tied to emerging models of industrial production.

As [Wasiak](#) points out, the ostensible father of developmentalism Piaget did not include teleological stage development in his explorations of children's becoming. It was the developmentalists that came after him who applied the logic of Henry Ford's assembly line to children's growth and development. In doing so, childhood became standardized and measurable with newly established norms and related pathologies. Children were inherently incomplete adults and as such, needed shaping and control.

What is important to note is that the parameters for how children should develop were intimately tied to the logic of the society in which they were



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imbedded. There was no real scientific basis for what constituted normal development, particularly in the areas of psychological and emotional development. Because development was determined by the parameters of “normal and healthy” adulthood, the measures of childhood development were shaped to produce such adults.

Of course, what constituted normal and healthy adulthood was shaped by the demands and normative standards of industrial capitalism. For the capitalist system this meant measuring all growth and development against the capacity to participate in the accrual of wealth. Healthy growth and development is measured by how well a child is prepared for their role in producing and consuming within the parameters of a capitalist economy. This implies that developmental psychology is deeply entangled within the political project of capitalist development. Indeed, [Erica Burman](#) makes the case that because of developmental psychology’s deep entanglement with capitalism as a social and economic system, the field has little to offer by way of liberatory projects that might challenge the existing system.

Similar arguments could be made about the other “non-political” approaches in our field. In fact, I would argue that any approach to human suffering that begins with a description of the sufferer is riddled with the politics of the dominant system of rule in any given historical period. When we begin with what is wrong or right in the constitution of the child or young person we encounter, we narrow our field of vision in such a way as to blind ourselves to the vectors of social force that create and perpetuate what we see as wrong (pathology) or right (assets or strengths). What we actually see is the effect of the society in which that child lives, rather than the society itself. It’s a bit like the old Zen saying about the finger that points at the moon. If we focus on the finger we miss the moon.

Similarly, if we focus on how well or poorly a young person is adapting or failing to adapt to the social system in which they are imbedded, we fail to



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ask ourselves whether adapting to the system is something worth doing. This is an element of relational care that often gets missed. Certainly, building a trusting relationship with a trustworthy adult seems a worthy endeavor. But what are the investments of the adult in that situation? Of course, CYC workers strive to be the kinds of adults that can offer unconditional care with integrity. However, can that be done by an adult deeply invested in the current political and economic system? When we as CYC workers collaborate with young people to succeed in their lives, how deeply-related is that to our own definitions of success as indicated by the aspirations we have for the good life? Are we unconscious missionaries for capitalism as a system that values the accrual of wealth over quality of life? How invested are we in our own lives in fitting in and making a living by staying politically safe? Are we worried about failing or succeeding according to a scale set by the society in which we live?

All of which is to say that the idea that we can somehow elude the political in our work with young people, their families and communities is an impossibility. The political forces that shape our society cannot help but shape the social services operating to the ostensible benefit of that society. There is no space in human relations that is free of the politics of a given historical period. The only real question is our relationship to the forces of domination and control that shape who we are and what we believe we are capable of doing. Is our work supportive of the logic of the dominant system and its effects? Or can we shape our work in such a way as to begin to develop an alternative form of society?

The question of how we relate to the politics of our age is crucial to everything we do in our work as CYC providers. The very definition of what it means to care is shaped by the definitions of what it means to care in our society. Is “care” unconditional or is it limited by ideas such as merit? Do we think that care is largely emotional support and psychological intervention,



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or do we understand care as meeting the material needs of everyone we encounter? Does a young person need to earn the right to such things as housing, food, and medical care? Do we only provide material support and a sense of belonging while they are associated with our programs or institutions or do we have a commitment to support young people as long as they need us? Even when they are in our care institutionally, do we teach the lesson that we care for one another unconditionally or do we only show demonstrable care if young people behave according to the rules and expectations we have set? Will we withdraw support and expel them from care if they behave in ways we find unacceptable?

As we enter the ever-shifting terrain of virtual global capitalism with its erosions of care at all levels, these questions become ever more pressing. It seems clear to me that the current system is showing itself to have less and less investment in any kind of real-world caring. All life is being threatened, with our children being no exception. Under such conditions I would argue that accommodation is not an option. To continually compromise with the death drive that is contemporary capitalism has real effects on the capacity of young people to survive much less thrive.

When I defined radical youthwork as youth and adults working together towards common political purpose, I hoped to imply a project that would investigate what conditions would need to be met for us to work together. For me that would include defining what we hold in common under conditions of mortal threat. Finally, we would define this work as political. That is work that is intended to shift the balance of power towards affirming life and all living things. I used the word radical to indicate that such a project would appear to be extreme within the context of accommodational politics that hopes to sustain the existing system, but in a kinder and gentler form. If I ever thought that was possible, I certainly do not see that as a possibility now.



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The new forms of capitalism are extreme and radical in their own right, I would argue that our response needs to be radical in contradistinction. If there was ever a time for radical youthwork, it is now before we lose even more of us. It will take a collectivity to build a society that affirms life over death. It is a radical project whose trajectory is not for me to predict. That is up to future generations of all of us working together towards a radical shift in how we will live.

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From Our Archives

The Lost Commandment: Don't Try to Give What You Don't Have

Gerry Fewster

"You can't give what you don't have" may seem like a logical and reasonable statement. I can't give you the details of Plank's Theorem if I have no training in mathematics and I can't give you the cash to pay your rent if I'm down to my last ten bucks. Alternatively, as a seasoned net-surfer, I could show you how to get the information online and, having worked for a bank, I could lead you through the mechanics of securing the most favorable loan or making arrangements for debt consolidation. So, while my limitations are clear and understandable, there are many things I could do to be of assistance.

But once we sink into the murky depths of human relationships, what is logical and reasonable can become deceptively blurred and distorted. Time and again, I've watched parents struggle to give their kids what they didn't get from their own parents, only to pass the same deficits on to their offspring. Time and again I've heard practicing and would-be Child and Youth Care workers tell me how they "understand" what the kids need because of their own childhood deprivations. Invariably, their heart-felt



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efforts to 'make things right' end up in frustration and rejection. Some decide to abandon their noble cause to become more "professional" while others soldier on to their destiny with disenchantment and burn-out.

Please don't get me wrong. I'm talking about caring, sensitive and well-meaning folks who genuinely want to enhance the well-being of young people for all the right reasons. The essential problem is not their intention but their confused belief that by trying to give something they've never had, the missing pieces will miraculously appear and all will be well. So, rather than settle for the gifts they could bring to the party, they bring only empty packages that have no intrinsic value for either the giver or the receiver. It's a futile exchange and the more intense it becomes, the greater the let down and resentment on both sides. But, for the most part, it's the caring adult who suffers the most. However difficult it is for self-respecting professionals to admit they are looking to remedy their own deficiencies through the kids, that possibility is always somewhere in the mix. In this case, the work is being clearly driven by the needs of the practitioner who is prepared to sacrifice his or her Self to a hopeless cause. The answer is not to eradicate the sin or punish the sinner: the real professional will recognize what's happening, take responsibility, and steer a different course. He or she will know that it's simply another step along the way.

The Confessions of an Undercover Giver

If this still sounds critical or judgmental, let me acknowledge my own complicity. As a young child, I felt abandoned by parents who, after my father returned from his duties in the second world war, became preoccupied for eight hours a day and seven days a week with their small retail business. With the exception of my paternal grandmother, who died when I was eight, I felt unseen and unheard by the adults around me. In



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school, I always made sure I had one or two 'special' friends and jealously guarded these relationships for fear that I might be betrayed and abandoned again. From the outside, I was considered to be just another run-of-the-mill working class kid, passively resisting the expectations of my teachers and occasionally brushing up against the moral and legal authorities in my grimy and dreary neighborhood. But, on the inside, I struggled to contain deeply rooted fears about my competence, acceptability and worthiness. To my friends I was a rebel and a leader, but whenever I delved beneath this carefully constructed image, I came face-to-face with a lonely kid, full of self-doubt and ready to do whatever was necessary to secure a place in an indifferent world.

Getting into a university did nothing to assuage my doubts or bolster my esteem. On the contrary, having attributed this unlikely outcome to a series of random events, I found myself isolated among cliques of toffee-nosed achievers constant reminders of my inferior status and unacceptability. Resorting to a well-practiced strategy, I found another couple of working-class misfits and together we dreamed up ways of rejecting the oppressors and sabotaging their pretensions whenever the opportunities arose.

By this time, I'd committed myself to working with kids – kids who, through no fault of their own, were left to roam unattended and uncared for in the barren wastelands of the city slums. I knew exactly what needed to be done. I would come to know them as special and unique human beings; I would listen to what they thought and how they felt, assuring them of their inherent worthiness and supporting them in moving beyond their personal, economic and cultural limitations. And, above all, I would be there for them through thick and thin – no rejection, no abandonment no sir.

So, immediately after graduation, off I went to work at a Youth Center with the most deprived and downtrodden kids in the most deprived and downtrodden part of the city. Here I felt at home. I understood these kids –



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they were just like my old school buddies – the way I used to be. While the other youth leaders seemed to spend their time teaching, preaching and screeching, I was there to listen to whatever the kids had to say. While it was all so familiar and predictable, I wanted them to know that that I cared and understood. I used what I'd learned in my final academic year to enhance their self-esteem, particularly the social-reinforcement stuff, but my primary focus was to 'be there' regardless of whatever else was going on. I never kept count of my hours of 'service' and my mission became my life. If anybody could help these kids, it was me. I was their hope and nobody was going to question my dedication.

It took me well over a year to admit that things were not working out. I began to feel drained at the end of each shift and less enthusiastic about meeting wayward kids in homes, schools and parks on my own time. Without listing all the signs and symptoms, I reluctantly came to the conclusion that my interventions were not having the impact I'd hope for. Certainly the kids accepted me, but more as one of them than someone who could help to bring hope and meaning into their troubled lives. I grew tired of listening to their repetitive stories, their unwillingness to think beyond the clichés of their 'sub-culture' and their tedious methods of avoiding responsibility by presenting themselves as victims. In short, I found myself losing my empathy, patience and commitment to a cause that had been driving me from the inside. And, along with this, came the old familiar feelings of being unappreciated, unseen, incompetent and alone. When my supervisor suggested I should stop "all the fancy counseling stuff" and use my athletic abilities to put together a team in the City Football League, I told him I hadn't gone to university for four years to become a bloody soccer coach. When he went on to suggest that my frustration was more about me than the kids in the program, I told him to go to Hell.



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Of course he was absolutely spot on but I wasn't ready to confront the obvious at the time. Yet somewhere behind all the determination and bravado was the sneaky unacceptable belief that if I could make the kids feel seen and heard, then they would see and hear me in return, we would come to know each other. If I could get them to change their ways and feel better about themselves, then my efforts would be rewarded and I would begin to feel better about myself. Surrounded by needy kids and dedicated youth care workers, I would have a place where, at last, I would feel wanted, competent and appreciated.

Coming to recognize my delusions was a long and painful process, but looking back to that time, I can now say, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that I needed the kids at the Dingle Youth Settlement far more than they needed me. But I no longer condemn myself for my early delusions. This was a critical period in my personal and professional development and as I think about them now, and listen again to what they were telling me, it's abundantly clear that those youngsters, including the ones in my soccer team (we came second in the division championships) were actually my teachers. So I really did need them and, in a strange roundabout way, they really did deliver.

It's Not a Game of Give and Take

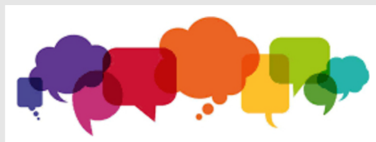
Trying to give what we don't have is not, in itself, a selfish, destructive or pathological act. On the contrary, it's a natural ingredient in the development of all personal and caring relationships. Consider the greatest gift of all – love. Children who grow up receiving constant unconditional love may come to know that loving others is an expression of Self that seeks nothing in return. But even the briefest sense of being loved can open the heart and create a longing for more. When love from others is conditional,



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children will strive to meet the conditions of the provider. If the provider needs to be loved in return, then love becomes a commodity to be traded back and forth in a game of give and take. In the most primary case, a mother may look to her baby to give her the love she didn't get as a child. Obviously, no infant is able to provide this service. The child may learn to say "I love you mommy" twenty times a day, but mother's needs will remain constant and unsatisfied. This situation won't change until mother let's her baby off the hook and finds another source of loving. And herein lies the crux of the matter.



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Developmentally speaking, our needs to feel loved, seen, accepted and valued cannot be met from the outside beyond the age of three or four. From that point on, the Self becomes the internal source and manager of our thoughts and feelings. If, for example, we come to define ourselves as ‘unlovable,’ loving messages from the outside will not be received as intended. From this point on, we have to find these gifts in ourselves before we can accept them from, and give them to, others.

This doesn’t mean we should withdraw from relationships until all our childhood longings have been satisfied. Quite the opposite. It’s only through relationships that we come to identify and acknowledge our unmet needs, learn how to look after and value ourselves, and come to experience and share the fullness of our being. In other words, once we become aware of our missing pieces, we must somehow find the resources within ourselves rather than expect our friends, lovers and partners to fill the void.

Can you imagine a relationship in which both parties are looking to each other to provide the impossible? Well, strange as it may seem, through my own life and many years of working with couples, I’ve become convinced that this dynamic exists at some time, and to some extent, in all personal and intimate relationships. Without awareness and intervention, this charade has the power to stifle the personal growth of both parties and strangle their relationship in a web of repetitive and meaningless rituals. But if the cause is understood and each person gradually begins to let the other off the hook, both selves are released from bondages of the past to create a bond between equals ... and the relationship blossoms. This is what I mean when I say it is part of the journey.

Having fessed-up to my own complicities, I’m also convinced that this same delusion is equally prevalent in relationships between helping professionals and their clients. And again, I believe that, through understanding and sensitivity, this awareness can transform the relational



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contract from “helping-you” to “growing together,” regardless of the chronological and developmental differences between the parties. In other words, I think this is something that applies as much in the practice of Child and Youth Care as it does in social work and psychotherapy. To this end, I invite you to consider the following suggestions ...

Finding the Elusive Gift

As always, awareness is the bottom line. As I’ve said many times before in this series, being aware of your own childhood experience is essential for you to understand where you end and your ‘client’ begins. Discovering the residual longings from your early life is part of that process. You might begin by asking yourself: “To what extent did I feel wanted, loved, cared for, appreciated, worthwhile, understood, competent” – and whatever other questions might arise from your research. But, before going any further, it’s important to let your parents off the hook. Remind yourself that there are no perfect parents and whatever they did, or didn’t do, is now in the past. They also had their own stuff to deal with and, chances are, they did what they thought was right at the time. So, give them a message of appreciation; it’s time to move on to take charge of your own life.

To identify the missing pieces don’t just rely upon what your adult mind has to say. Take a breath as you consider each one and go to that place where the earliest memories are contained – within your body. Focus on the one that draws the most feeling and stay with it. How is that need playing out in your current life and relationships? Is there someone you’ve been hoping will meet that need? If so, let them off the hook too and consider ways for you take charge by giving that missing piece to yourself? There is no prescription for this – different people have different ways – but the



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following are a few random examples taken from my own life and from the lives of folks I've worked with over the years:

Seeking love, yet feeling unlovable

- Some people find adopting “I Love You” as a personal mantra serves as helpful declaration of self-love. But, remember, love is also a verb.
- There are endless possibilities for treating oneself in a loving way but taking the time is always the first step. It means you're worth the effort.
- Sensual acts directed toward Self, rather than Other go to the deepest levels of loving but be prepared – you might have to deal with some guilt along the way.

Seeking connection, yet abandoning the Self (often in the service of others)

- Create an ongoing dialogue with yourself. A personal journal is a very effective tool for recording and reflecting upon your conversations.
- Find a way to explore and express your creativity – for your enjoyment only.
- Listen to your ‘inner voice’. Breathe and pay attention to your feelings and sensations. Keep in mind that all authentic feelings are equally important.



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Seeking a sense of self-worth, yet judging ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ through the eyes of others

- Make a list of your daily activities and identify those that have the most value, for you. Increase the amount of time you spend with these, without telling anybody.
- Engage in activities ‘for their own sake’. Yoga and meditation, for example, are likely to enhance your inner sense of well-being (the somatic core of self-worth).
- Listen carefully to your ‘critical voice’ and put it back where it belongs – in the minds and hearts of others.

Seeking to be seen and heard, yet presenting a false self (image) to the world

- Find ways to explore and express your authentic thoughts and feelings. Practice saying your real “yeses” and “nos”. and to hell with the consequences
- Work with boundaries as a felt sense in the body and learn how to create the physical, cognitive and emotional space you need
- Carefully select someone you trust and invite him or her to be your ‘mirror’.

These are some general ideas for you to consider as a general framework, not a prescription. The real challenge is to create your own strategies for meeting your own needs in your own way. Remember, you have all the resources you need to become the author of your own life, so be gentle with yourself, be creative and use only what fits for you.



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Using the Gifts You Already Have

Knowing what you're not yet ready to bring into a relationship is a significant step forward, but it's equally important to be aware of all the valuable gifts you can bring to the party. My supervisor had the right idea when he suggested I should form a soccer team at the Youth Center.

What he failed to recognize were all the other qualities and talents I had to offer and, in my own self-deprecating way, I was devastated and angry. I felt unseen and unheard, unappreciated, unwanted and unworthy. But all that was in place well before he came along why would I expect him to know of things I hadn't even disclosed. So, with all this in mind, I offer the following suggestions for your consideration.

- When you're in a positive mood, take a look at what you are contributing within your current personal relationships and make a list
- In similar mood, make a list of the gifts you bring to your professional relationships
- Look at the differences between these two categories and notice where you might be holding back, and why
- Taking each 'gift' in turn, explore ways of enhancing its qualities and effectiveness
- Notice the 'value' you place upon your contributions (if you don't value what you offer, chances are that others won't either)
- Examine your notion of what it means to be 'professional', paying particular attention to how your qualities and abilities can be more effectively incorporated into your work with young people



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- Review all your 'gifts' and ask yourself what you want in return. If you are asking for the unreasonable or the impossible, it's time to take another look at what you're not ready to offer.

Don't be Selfish – Be Self-full

If you're like me, you'll find it easier to focus on your deficits than your contributions – a revealing piece of self-information from the get-go. Even to this day, I tend to begin my personal audit by focusing upon the assets before moving to the liabilities. Examining and fine-tuning the gifts you bring will almost certainly enhance your personal and professional satisfaction and, as you begin to take responsibility for giving yourself what you didn't get, that satisfaction can only increase along with the quality of your relationships. In the final analysis, it seems to me that dissatisfaction, frustration and burn out are more likely to arise from our futile attempts to give what we don't have, rather than embracing all the wonderful gifts that we do have to offer. I firmly believe that my best way to be in relationship is to live my own life to the full, knowing that I can share my experience with others without losing my Self along the way.

To conclude with a new version of an old adage: It's better to give and receive – as long as one doesn't demand the other.

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