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Contents

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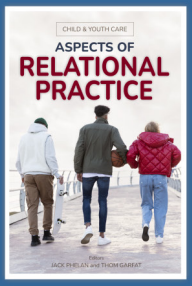

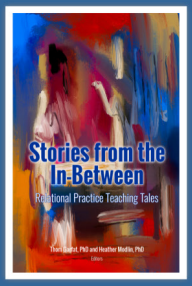

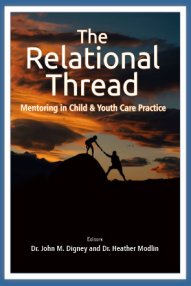

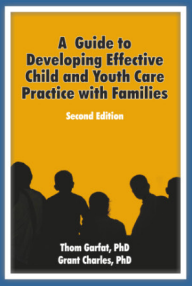

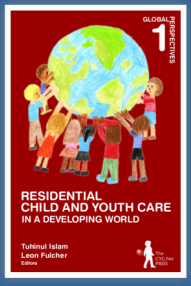

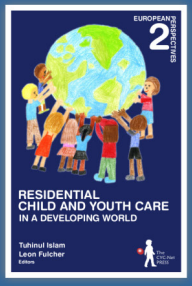

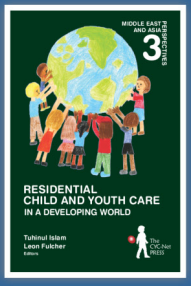

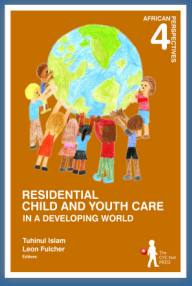

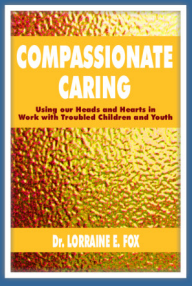

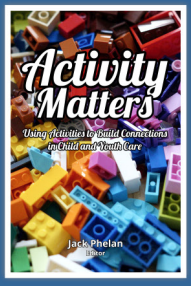

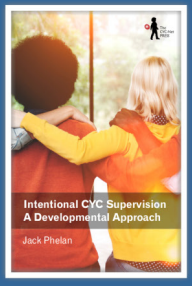

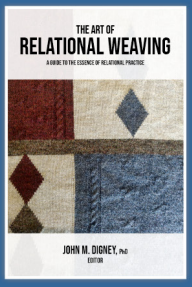

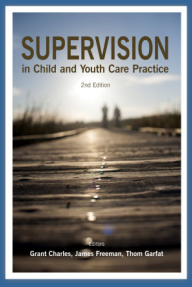

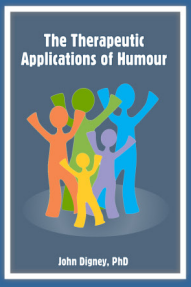

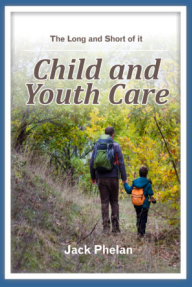

Editorial Comment

5th CYC World Conference

Martin Stabrey

I've just returned from the 5th CYC World Conference, "Healing Through Connection" in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

What to say? Wow! What an occasion. What an event. What a gathering. And what organisation! 586 attendees. 165 speakers. 105 sessions. At times it all seemed too much to take in. I could go on and on about these three days, but I think some pictures would do a better job of capturing the vibe of our family gathering. Until next time. Enjoy!

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Healing Through Connection

2026 World Child & Youth Care Conference

June 24 - 26 | St. John's, NL

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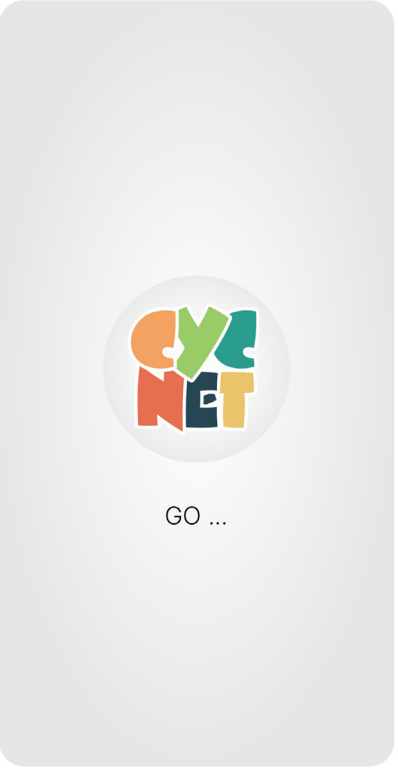

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Reflections on “Healing through Connection”

Agustin Castante III

I would like to share a reflection that has stayed with me following the recently concluded 5th CYC World Conference “Healing Through Connection” and a recent volunteer activity at a local mosque.

A young person I currently support joined us as we volunteered in our community. Also present were members of his current and former care team. Watching them interact was more than a reunion. It was a powerful reminder of what relational Child and Youth Care truly means.

This young person has experienced significant trauma throughout his life. He has struggled with fear, mistrust, loss, and uncertainty. There were times when the world did not feel safe, when adults were not always sources of protection, and when trust had to be earned one moment at a time. Because of those experiences, building relationships with adults has not always come easily.

As I reflected on the day, I found myself thinking back to the CYC World Conference and how it reshaped my understanding of our work.

One of the keynote presentations introduced the concept of the PersonBrain, emphasizing that healing begins when young people experience relationships in which they feel safe, significant, respected, and relevant. Looking at this young person, surrounded by trusted adults, smiling as he volunteered and contributed to the community, I realized that this was

exactly what we were witnessing. He was not simply participating in a volunteer activity; he was experiencing what it feels like to belong.

I was also reminded of the presentation, *The In-Between Us*. It challenged us to recognize that healing does not happen only during formal interventions or treatment sessions. It happens in the everyday moments between us. In our conversations, shared experiences, consistency, patience, laughter, and simply being present. Those ordinary moments become extraordinary because they communicate, *"You matter, and you are not alone."*

The experience was a living proof of that philosophy. The trust this young person has developed was not created overnight. It was built through many moments of showing up, staying present, and believing in him even when progress seemed slow. Seeing him reconnect with familiar caregivers while embracing current relationships demonstrated the lasting impact that genuine, caring connections can have.

The conference theme, *Healing Through Connection*, resonated deeply with me, and that day I saw it come alive.

As I looked at the photos we took together, I couldn't help but think of hiking a mountain. Everyone admires the breathtaking view at the summit, but few see the steep climbs, the exhaustion, the obstacles, and the perseverance required to get there. Healing is much the same. The smiles we captured that day represent the view from the top, but behind those smiles were countless difficult days, setbacks, moments of doubt, and the unwavering commitment of many caring professionals who chose to keep walking alongside this young person.

Those photographs are not merely memories of volunteering. They are a testament to the power of relationship-based care. They remind us that every conversation, every act of kindness, every moment of patience, and every opportunity to connect matters more than we sometimes realize.

The CYC World Conference reminded me that connection is not simply one of the tools we use; it is the work itself. As Child and Youth Care practitioners, we often wonder whether our everyday interactions make a difference. Days like this remind us that they do. The relationships we nurture become part of a young person's healing journey.

Healing through connection is rarely dramatic. It is found in the ordinary moments of everyday life, repeated over time, until trust begins to replace fear and belonging begins to replace isolation.

Thank you to every Child and Youth Care practitioner who continues to walk alongside young people, even when the path is steep, and the destination is not yet visible. The journey is not always easy, but moments like these remind us that every step is worthwhile.

Agustin Castante III graduated in English and Literature, pursued legal studies, and worked with UNICEF serving out-of-school youth, street children, and vulnerable communities in the Philippines. Since moving to Canada in 2023 they have worked in leadership and youth care roles and now support young people at Amal Youth and Family Centre.

La Dolce Vita: A Life Fully Lived

Remembering Our Dear Friend, Frank Delano

October 30, 1950 – July 03, 2026

Frank chose this photograph, writing:

"When the time comes that I die, if someone chooses to write an obituary of me, this would be the picture I would like to be included."

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Frank Delano lived a life defined by curiosity, generosity, and connection. His world stretched across continents, cultures, friendships, conference halls, classrooms, neighbourhood restaurants, sunsets, baseball stadiums, jazz clubs, and conversations that often lasted far longer than anyone intended. Yet for someone whose life reached so widely, he remained remarkably grounded. He was never interested in collecting accomplishments for his own sake. Instead, he collected experiences, relationships, and moments that deepened his understanding of people and the world around him.

Frank's extraordinary professional career spans more than five decades in Child and Youth Care. Equally revealing are the hundreds of reflections he shared through social media, where he chronicled travel, friendships, music, history, meals, conferences, sunsets, and the everyday moments that brought him joy. Read together, these two records reveal something far richer than either could alone: a life in which the professional and the personal were never separate. The values that shaped his work with children, families, colleagues, and students were the very same values that shaped how he moved through the world.

Travel was one expression of that philosophy. Frank's posts were rarely about checking destinations off a list. Instead, they reflected an appreciation for his love of history, culture, landscape, and the people he met along the way. Whether standing before the Taj Mahal, reflecting at Hiroshima, wandering through botanical gardens, or sitting in a café watching the world pass by, he found opportunities to learn. As he wrote, *"Travel is such a wonderful thing that enhances so much of our understanding of life."*

His favourite expression, *La Dolce Vita*, became something of a personal philosophy. It was never about extravagance. Rather, it reflected an appreciation for the simple pleasures of life: a summer thunderstorm, a long

Sunday walk, music shared with friends, a conversation over dinner, or another sunset that seemed as breathtaking as the first. He reminded people, *"It is a La Dolce Vita way to live. It doesn't take much everybody. The simple and small things in life are free!"* Throughout his reflections there is a quiet invitation to slow down, pay attention, and appreciate the ordinary moments that so often become the memorable ones.

Just as important as the places Frank travelled were the places and people who first shaped him. He never forgot where he came from. Throughout his reflections, he returned often to his childhood neighbourhood in Port Chester, New York, not with nostalgia alone, but with gratitude. He spoke with deep appreciation of parents who, although they had little materially, gave him something far more enduring: unconditional love, encouragement, a strong work ethic, humility, compassion, and respect for others. As he reflected, *"Their caring and loving. That was the real 'wealth' I grew up in."* Those early lessons never left him. They travelled with him through every role he held, every country he visited, every friendship he formed, and every practitioner he mentored. Perhaps that is why, no matter how far he travelled or how influential he became, Frank remained remarkably unchanged. The values learned in his family and community became the qualities for which he would later be known throughout the Child and Youth Care profession.

Those same qualities shaped his work.

Frank's career spanned more than five decades and touched nearly every corner of the profession. Beginning as a child care worker, he became a supervisor, leader, university instructor, consultant, writer, and international trainer. His concepts of *Money in the Bank* and the *Professional Package* influenced practitioners across North America and beyond. His writing on supervision, leadership, and relational practice continues to shape the profession, as do the countless presentations,

workshops, keynote addresses, and mentoring relationships that extended throughout the world.

Yet his greatest influence was often found in quieter moments.

Time and again, those who have shared memories of Frank speak not first about his expertise but about his generosity. They describe someone who listened without judgment, noticed potential before others saw it in themselves, encouraged emerging practitioners, and celebrated the success of others with genuine enthusiasm. Looking back on his career, Frank reflected, *"I have often said that perhaps my biggest talent in my career has been an exceptional ability and instinct to somehow identify people with unusual intelligence, talent and drive."* That instinct, combined with his generosity, helped shape countless careers and strengthened the profession he cared so deeply about.

His love of Child and Youth Care was inseparable from his love of people. Conferences became reunions. Colleagues became lifelong friends. Professional conversations naturally blended into discussions about family, travel, books, sports, music, history, and life itself. He believed deeply in honouring those who came before while encouraging those who would come next. As he reminded us, *"We have to move forward in the CYC field, but we should never forget the Giants whose shoulders we are standing on."* At the same time, he found genuine hope in younger practitioners, seeing in them the possibility of a profession that continues to evolve while remaining grounded in Relationship.

One of the striking qualities that emerges through Frank's writing is his humility. Despite presenting internationally, serving on national boards, publishing widely, and influencing practice across continents, he rarely focused on his own accomplishments. More often, he wrote about the people he admired, the places that moved him, or the friendships that enriched his life. Gratitude was a recurring theme. Whether reflecting on his

work, his travels, or the people around him, he described himself not as successful but as fortunate.

Perhaps no reflection captures his perspective more clearly than his decision to leave accounting for Child and Youth Care. Others told him he would never become wealthy. Looking back years later, he wrote, *"There are many different versions of 'rich'. Letters like this* [from a youth he supported] *make me feel like the richest man in the world."* It is difficult to imagine a better description of how he measured a life.

Reading through years of Frank's reflections, certain themes appear repeatedly. Stay curious. Learn from other cultures. Honour history. Make time for conversations. Celebrate the achievements of others. Notice beauty. Keep learning. Be grateful. His posts chronicled travel, meals, music, sport, friendships, and professional life, but beneath each of these lay a consistent appreciation for relationships and for the opportunities life presented.

Near the end of one reflection, he offered a simple reminder: *"Tomorrow is promised to no one. Always try to take the time to slow down and 'smell the roses'. Each sunset is magical in its own way."* It is advice he not only offered to others, but one he seemed to follow throughout his own life.

While none of us can speak for Frank, reading across both his professional writings and the reflections he shared throughout his life suggest several enduring messages he might leave with the profession he loved.

He would likely remind us that Child and Youth Care is never only about techniques, interventions, or programs. It is about becoming the kind of person who is genuinely interested in other people and in the world around them. He might encourage us to remain endlessly curious, with a desire to learn from children, families, colleagues, other cultures, history, art, music, and travel. Professional growth, he seemed to demonstrate, begins with personal growth. The practitioner who notices beauty, asks thoughtful

questions, values relationships, and remains open to learning brings those same qualities into practice.

He would almost certainly encourage us to mentor generously, celebrate the success of others, and create opportunities for the next generation to flourish. He believed deeply that our profession moves forward by honouring those who came before while making room for those who will follow.

Perhaps most of all, Frank would remind us not to postpone living. Slow down. Notice the sunset. Have a long conversation. Travel when you can. Listen more than you speak. Be grateful for friendships. Find richness in experiences rather than possessions. Build *Money in the Bank* not only with the children, youth, and families we serve, but with the people who share our lives.

Frank often wrote that *La Dolce Vita* did not require wealth or extravagance. It required paying attention. That may be one of the greatest lessons he leaves our profession: the qualities that make someone an exceptional Child and Youth Care practitioner are often the very same qualities that make for a deeply lived life.

Frank's contributions to Child and Youth Care will continue through his writing, his teaching, and the many practitioners he mentored. Equally enduring is the example he offered through the way he lived. He showed that professional excellence and a meaningful life are not separate pursuits but reflections of the same values. Reading his reflections now, it is difficult not to notice that the philosophy he shared so often was also the one he practised. *La Dolce Vita* was never simply a favourite phrase. It was the life he chose to live.

Rest easy, Giant. Your legacy will live on in our conversations, our exploration of culture, history and travel, and in our shared commitment to serving others. We will continue to put children, youth, and their families first, just as you always did.

Academic, Organisations, Agencies, Individuals

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It's Not for Everybody: Why God Created Probation

An Essential Ingredient in Treatment

Dr. Lorraine E. Fox

At a recent CYC-Net Canada *Conversations-in-Motion* webinar with Child and Youth Care Workers from different parts of the globe there was one reality that everyone agreed on: *Child and Youth Care Work is definitely NOT for everyone.* This agreement was followed by another in shared emails after the meeting between many who participated in the Webinar. Too many treatment programs allow unsuited employees to keep their jobs, at the expense of our wounded and vulnerable children and young people. And I might add, at the expense of other staff members who ARE suited for therapeutic work with clients in programs for abused and neglected children and youth and have the misfortune of working in "teams" who are not united in "teamwork" and harmony regarding "care" and treatment.

I am a good example of someone who knew nothing about Child Welfare or Residential Facilities for abused and neglected children and teens. It so happened that friends of mine lived across the street from a very large "institutional looking" facility and they had no idea what they did or who it was for. Not knowing didn't bother them but I was so surprised they didn't care about either what was going on over there or that they didn't know

anything about it. Being the busy body that I was (even in my early 20's) I marched over there one late afternoon and rang the doorbell. That doorbell ring changed my entire life! I spent the next decades of my life as I am doing now – working with and for, and fretting about, wounded children who are too damaged mentally and whose behaviors (being angry, non-compliant, and sometimes dangerous) to be taken care of by relatives, or foster parents. These children and teens end up in what we refer to as "congregate" or "group" care. I was frankly intrigued when he agreed to hire me because I obviously didn't know much, but I had a couple of years of college, and I had experience as a Camp Counselor!

That very first job was one of the luckiest things that has ever happened to me. The Executive Director took a shine to me and always welcomed me when I ran down to his office for an explanation for the "outrageous" stories I heard and behavior I experienced. I was told this was "the way it is". He taught me the most important lesson I ever learned for the ethical treatment of children and youth in care. As a quite young new worker with a limited education, imagine my surprise when "the children" that were being referred to during my hiring interview were actually teenagers, and not much younger than I was. I was astonished and frankly appalled at the behavior of the kids I was now in charge of. I had never heard such foul language in my life, and certainly not directed toward me. Given my very strict childhood I had never seen such belligerence and anger and refusal to comply with directions and demands. I had also never seen such grief, and sadness, and anger and bewilderment by so many people – children in this case - in one place. I had never witnessed such peculiar and outrageous behavior by children. But I was intrigued!

I would run down to the Director's office almost every day to relay my astonishment at what I was witnessing and bewilderment about how to respond. *Every time* he said the same thing: "Let's pull the file and see why

they're here". It was everything I needed to know: their behavior said nothing about me, and everything about them. To my chagrin he didn't discuss "what" they said or did without first finding out "why" they came into care. What could their behavior teach me about who they were and what harm was done to them, explaining why they were in a treatment facility. Understanding why they are with me offered some insight about how I could help them heal and deal with their pain differently.

For the rest of my career – now in its 62nd year – it has been clear to me that believing this – focusing on the "why" and not just the "what" - is the **key** to healing: and that's why it can only be called "treatment" if our responses honor and understand their internal wounds from abuse and neglect that brought them to us.

Every new CYC who is hired needs and deserves "tutors" – a supervisor, experienced colleagues – to tell from their first day on the job not only what they can expect from the clients, but why they can expect it, and what will be expected from them as a response. And that is why God made probation! New hires learn what they can expect from the clients, and why: and what. They will also learn what we will expect from them. They will not be paid to "manage behavior", but rather to understand it. Treatment is **not** taking away points or privileges or punishing them by sending them to their room or to a "quiet" room. Treatment is working with the young person to explore other ways of responding to their feelings and expectations. That's the "C" in CYC: it is care! It is treatment, and it is what provides safety for both clients and staff members. This, frankly, does not "suit" or make sense to some applicants for a job ending with Care rather than Consequences. I have been called a "Fluff Ball" more than once! But there are other jobs where you can get paid for responding with punishment to all infractions, where your anger will be understood, and where you won't have to work as hard. But it won't be "Treatment"!

Unfortunately, in my first job in residential "treatment" this approach was not popular with the staff who responded more often than not with anger, punishment, even harm (restraints were very popular). I was flabbergasted by how many times I witnessed clients being taken down and held on the floor while being told how horrible they were for doing what they did. The wisdom of the Director was somehow not practiced by my colleagues. When I noticed that the constant loss of privileges and unending lectures about "shaping up" and even embarrassing and sometimes harmful restraints did not change much. Every day was very much like the day before, and so I promised myself then and there to commit myself not to "behavior management", but to healing the psychological wounds they

displayed with their words and their deeds. With that as my "job", I could stay.

I have written dozens of articles and a book over the years. I thought I had said everything I wanted to say. But my conversation with CYC's still engaged in "my work" during the webinar resulted in a request to write one more column, addressing the world-wide problem of finding the "right people" to take care of our wounded, angry, obnoxious, sometimes frightening, often depressed and even suicidal, drug addicted, runaway, sneaky, delinquent, self-harming, quirky, mistrusting, vulnerable, traumatized but *completely innocent* of the crimes committed against them as babies, young children and teenagers. Who in heaven's name chooses to spend their life in the company of these hurt and hurting children of God? Child and Youth Care Workers all over the world, that's who. People who place their own needs for "respect" third and the clients need for healing first. Their need for understanding second, their need for satisfaction third, knowing it will come after dozens of interactions where clients believe they are cared for, and given new tools to handle their pain. The most interesting, loving, committed, courageous people I have ever met in any profession are those who have committed to "hanging in" to put the needs of those in our care first. I can't stop wanting their company. Obviously. Here I still am.

Becoming a Supervisor, Executive Director and Assistant Professor in an academic program for Child and Youth Care Workers made it immediately clear what my primary task was: Finding the "right people" to work with the kids I loved.

Trolling the field of applicants and reeling in those who are suited for the task

The worst (and unethical) thing supervisors and managers can do with new CYC applicants is not being honest about who the kids are and what we are asking them to do if they accept a job as a Child and Youth Care Worker. Hurt children hurt: themselves, and others. Sometimes with words, and sometimes with their bodies. Our commitment is to provide the training they will need to understand the outcomes of and trauma from child abuse and neglect they will see and hear: and the training they will need to keep both themselves and the clients safe. Trauma informed care convinces us that care and kindness can and does work and can be incorporated into "consequences"! We cannot commit to using applicants with our children and teens unless and until they are ready to care for and willing to accept who exactly the clients in residential treatment are. And why they are as they are. Any potential CYC Worker who cannot do this needs to be invited to look elsewhere for a career suited to them. The truth is that *wanting to do our work does not make one capable of doing it.*

The greatest gift we can give our clients and potential staff members is a trial period to become acquainted with actual clients:

- To learn the agency's practices and values.
- To understand and accept that the emotional and behavioral problems of clients we are asking them to accept and learn to love are the demonstrative proof of why child abuse and neglect are

crimes! These crimes deprive children born into homes that harm them rather than nurturing and protecting them. That is the crime. Victims of crimes do not need more punishment, but to be healed.

- To understand why hurt children hurt: themselves and/or others, both emotionally and physically.
- The components of physical and emotional trauma and how they impact both those who are traumatized and those who work with them.
- To discover the particular gifts they will bring to the program. Some clients have a lot to say and need adults willing to talk with them and help them to figure things out. Some clients want to be left alone because they do not trust interactions with adults and need adults who will be comfortable sitting quietly with them; keeping them company but not asking questions or giving lectures. Many of our young people have lost the ability to laugh. We must employ smart and caring adults who know how to laugh.
- Some of our clients never got to play and many I've met don't even know how to play. We must find and employ adults who know how to play and are willing to play … even into their teens.
- Time to receive regular individual supervision to help identify skills and challenges and feedback about how different kinds of interventions can be tried.
- Understanding that being welcomed into full-time employment will be based on observed responses to the clients, not on credentials. The inability to stop becoming angry when clients are difficult, downright nasty, or unkind and to find strong but respectful ways of addressing unacceptable behavior, suggesting alternatives, and

offering help to try different ways of expressing negative emotions.

- Being willing accept feedback from supervisors, peers, and clients and to make adjustments to interactions that are not "therapeutic" for the clients.
- And in the end, the monumental challenge for potential caregivers will be to be able to understand and accept that no matter how "unacceptable" behavior from our clients might be – often unacceptable to us in *many* ways – can the potential CYC "professional" truly accept that client behavior toward us is NOT about us – it's about them and what their experience has taught them. Anyone unable to reach this understanding and learn to respond with an aim not to "stop" the behavior, but to collaborate with the client to find other ways to deal with and express their anger, fears and feelings has rung the wrong doorbell, walked in the wrong door, and needs to be escorted out. Reminding them as we wish them well, that it's not about them, it's about the kids. Over the years I have learned, for sure, that *Child and Youth Care Work is definitely not for everyone!*

Many, if not most of us, have wanted to do something that we found we did not have the skill or talent for. That is true for some people who want to "help" people, but do not have the temperament, talent, or skills for. We love and respect our young clients by referring these applicants to a profession they are better suited for and thank them for their interest.

And so, the Creator's great love for wounded children and teens created a spark in the minds of some professionals who also loved and were responsible for the healing of abused and neglected children: "We'll provide

them time to learn about our work, and time for us to learn about them. Together, we will find a way to be sure that the people who are ringing the bell at our facility are able to care for those who may not be able to care for you in return. We'll call it ***Probation*** *and it was given as a gift to all children/youth in Care, as well as to caring, competent members of the treatment team."*

Dr Lorraine E. Fox has been working with children and young people for over six decades. While she has contributed some of the most seminal pieces of writing in our field during this time, she continues offering her learnings for all working with those living in care. She may be reached at pgfsc@cox.net

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Relational Practice Explored Further

Jack Phelan

Fritz Redl, who is a seminal author in CYC practice, had a clear understanding of the complexity of our task in CYC work. He described the easiness of listing the changes needed by our youth and families, very eloquently voiced in treatment meetings by a host of professionals. The missing link in all this verbiage is how to get these youth and families to willingly accept all this "medicine" in their treatment. Redl understood that the much more difficult task of building cooperation and self-responsibility was never addressed, which he knew was the professional task of the CYC team.

Redl described being a doctor who bringing his black bag of medicine into the youth or family's presence, and they either run away or kick the bag over. Getting the patient to willingly participate will be a major ingredient in the process.

Our focus on relational practice is finally addressing this critical ingredient in helping dynamics. Too often programs have tried to impose recommendations and changes on people without any genuine consideration for how they see their reality. Many plans foisted on young people and families are based on the personal perspective of the helper. That is, they state what the helpers would do if they were in the same situation. Program objectives are also based on safety and avoiding liability more than the needs of the young person or family.

Garfat has an elegant description of relational dynamics, he calls it joining together in "the inter-personal in-between" (Garfat, 2012). This space expects that both people will be able to see past their own personal life logic and accept other ways of seeing things. By stepping outside of one's own framework, it allows us to hear another explanation for how things are. Hopefully this will happen for both the helper and the other participant.

Each of us is controlled by what we call common sense, which is different for everyone. One of the reasons that young people and families resist our help is that they believe that the helper's way of seeing the world would not work very well in their lives. Basically, the good advice offered so confidently by the helper is rightfully rejected as unrealistic.

Relational practice occurs in this in-between space, and it expects both parties to have respect for opinions different than their own, while still maintaining their own perspective. Helpers can only be effective if they believe they have something to offer, but young people and families must hold onto their lifelong values and beliefs which have served them well. There will be behaviors proposed by both sides that will be challenging to accept as legitimate and listening for the values expressed rather than the method of expressing them will require good faith by everyone.

Reference

Garfat, T. (2012). The inter-personal in-between: an exploration of relational CYC practice. In Bellefeuille et al (eds.). *Standing on the precipice,* 2nd edition. Edmonton, AB. MacEwan Press.

JACK PHELAN is emeritus professor at MacEwan University and the author of several books and chapters on CYC practice. He has been a CYC practitioner for many years and has thoroughly enjoyed his career.

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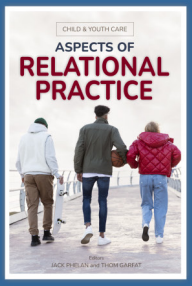

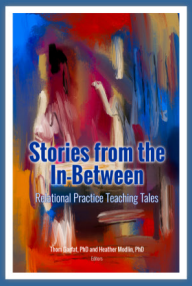

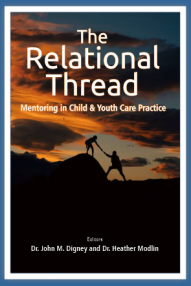

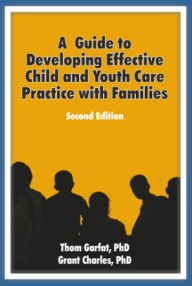

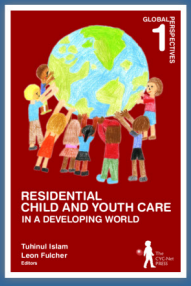

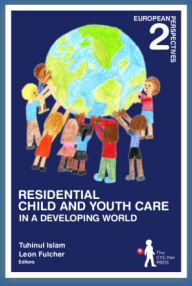

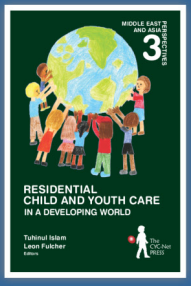

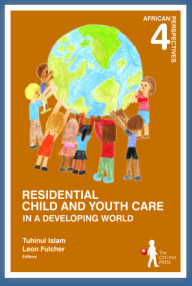

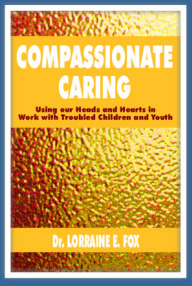

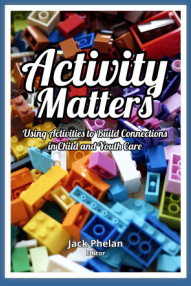

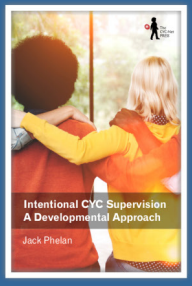

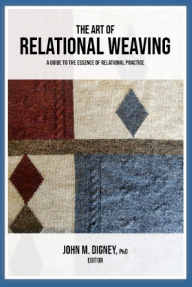

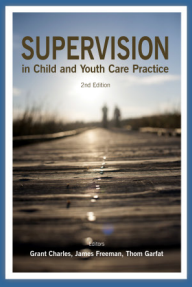

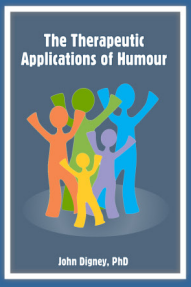

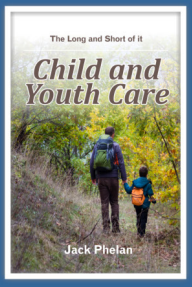

Stories Series #3

The Pancake

Vanessa Hillier

Much of Child and Youth Care work happens not in planned conversations, but in the shared routines of daily life. Cooking, cleaning, walking, and waiting together can create spaces where young people feel safer to engage on their own terms. These moments may seem small, but they often carry the greatest potential for connection and growth. The following story reflects one of those moments. An everyday interaction that quietly shifted a relationship I had nearly stopped trying to name.

This is a story about a nine-year-old boy, a kitchen, and a pancake. It's a story about waiting, about not being chosen right away, and about how relationships sometimes arrive sideways, through batter and heat and timing, rather than words.

I tell this story because when I forget what relational practice really looks like, I look at a photograph of a pancake and remember …

* * *

Theo was nine years old and did not trust many people, least of all women. At least, that was the story his body told. He didn't say it outright. He didn't need to. It lived in the way his shoulders tightened when I entered

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a room, the way his eyes tracked exits, the way conversation stopped just short of landing. Theo tolerated me. That was about it.

I worked in a residential setting then. We were taught, formally and informally, to pay attention to relationships, to notice where we were welcomed and where we weren't. With him, I wasn't. Not really. Theo would sometimes help me in the kitchen. 'Help' might be generous. He hovered. He lingered. He picked at tasks and drifted away. If I asked him questions, he answered with shrugs or silence. If I tried to fill the space, the space would get bigger instead. So, I learned to stop trying so hard.

We sometimes cooked together in parallel, me on one side of the counter, him on the other. No pressure. No agenda. Just the rhythm of breakfast, lunch, and dinner in a house that needed feeding. He cracked eggs. I stirred batters. He washed his hands three times. I waited. That was the pattern for weeks.

Then one morning, it was pancakes. The pan was perfectly heated. Batter sat thick in the bowl. I poured the first few. Easy, practiced flips. Theo watched on closely. I could feel it, even without looking.

"Can I try?" he asked.

I stepped back.

He poured too much batter. The pancake spread into something more like a blob than a circle. He waited too long. Then not long enough. When he finally tried to flip it, the pancake folded in on itself and tore. He slammed the spatula down.

“So stupid,” he muttered. I didn’t rush in to fix it.

Instead, I asked, “What do you think went wrong?” He shrugged.

We stood there for a moment, heat rising from the stovetop, the smell of batter just beginning to burn. Then Theo asked, almost quietly, “How do you know when it’s ready?”

I told him what I knew. Not as instruction, but as shared noticing. “You watch for bubbles,” I said. “The edges start to look dry. It kind of tells you.” He nodded; eyes locked on the next pancake.

This time he waited. He leaned closely, face inches from the surface, watching. Tiny bubbles appeared. The edges changed color.

“Now?” he asked.

“Whenever you think,” I said.

He slid the spatula under and flipped.

It was perfect. Golden. Whole. Exactly right.

He froze. Then Theo screamed.

“I DID IT!”

“I DID IT!”

“I DID IT!”

He jumped up and down, arms in the air, voice echoing through the house. He grabbed the pancake, held it up like a trophy.

“LOOK!” he shouted to no one in particular. “LOOK WHAT I MADE!”

He made me take a picture of it. Not of him, of the pancake.

“I’m showing everyone,” Theo said.

And he did.

Every staff member who came on shift saw that pancake. His social worker saw it. He retold the story repeatedly, how he messed up the first one, how he figured it out, how he flipped it himself.

Theo didn’t say my name much in those retellings. It didn’t matter. What mattered was that something shifted. Not dramatically. Not all at once.

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But from that day on, he talked to me more in the kitchen. Asked questions. Showed me things. Sometimes he still pulled away. Sometimes he still went quiet. But there was now a shared moment we could stand on together, something solid, something earned.

I kept the photo. I still have it.

On those hard workdays, I look at that pancake and remember that connection doesn't always arrive through conversation. Sometimes it shows up when someone is trusted just enough to try again.

I hope this story reminds us that relational practice often unfolds in ordinary moments, not always grand interventions. That trust may grow quietly, through 'doing with' rather than talking. Patience, presence, and shared activity can create spaces where confidence and connection emerge naturally.

I also hope it invites reflection on how success, especially for children who have known a lot of failure, can become a powerful relational bridge when it is truly theirs.

Reflective Questions

- How does patience and waiting function as an active part of relational practice?
- In what ways might everyday activities create safer entry points for engagement than direct conversation?
- How do we hold patience when relationships feel one-sided or slow to develop? What helps you stay present when your efforts don't seem to be 'working?'

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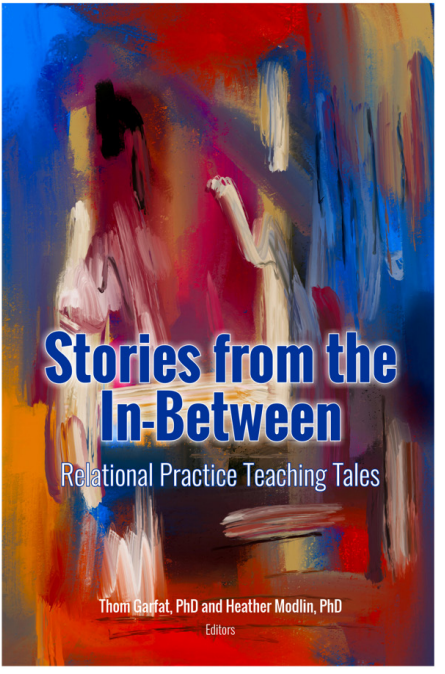
Vanessa Hillier is a Child and Youth Care instructor and faculty coordinator in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. She holds degrees in sociology, psychology, and post-secondary education and previously worked in out-of-home care. Her teaching centers on relational practice, trauma-informed care, inclusivity, and ethical decision-making. Vanessa is especially passionate about helping students build self-awareness and reflective practice as foundations for meaningful work with children, youth, and families. She is committed to preparing practitioners who are both professionally competent and authentically present in their relationships.

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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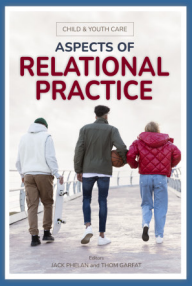

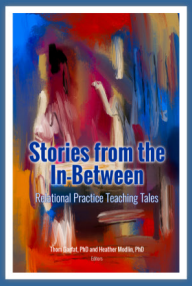

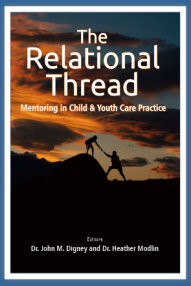

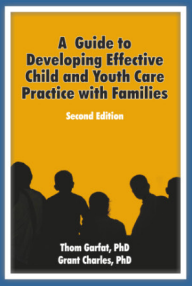

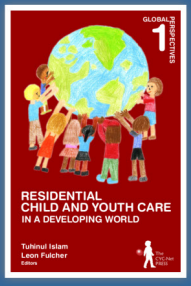

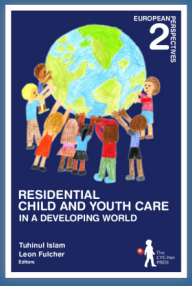

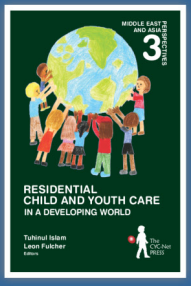

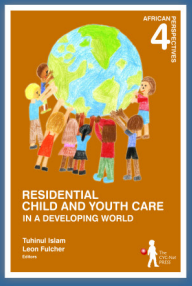

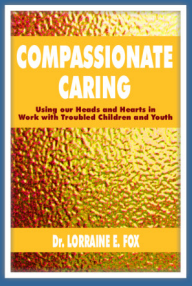

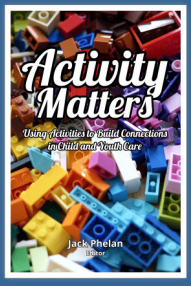

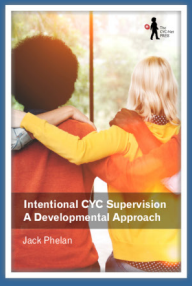

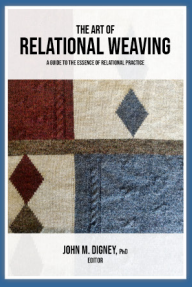

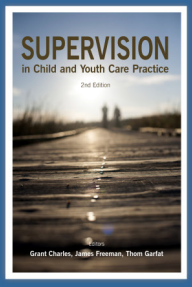

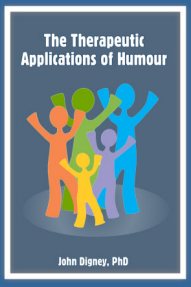

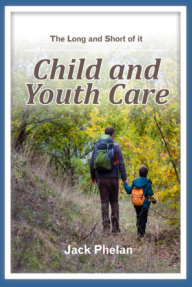

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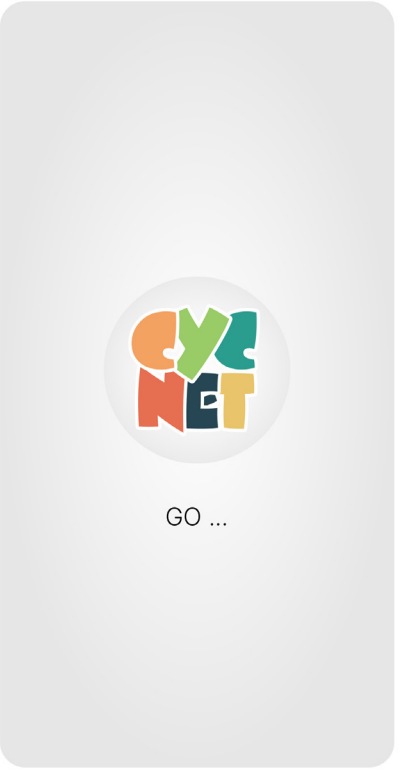

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Some Foundational Thoughts for Child and Youth Care Practitioners

Erin Manning

When I first stepped into the field, I thought the work was mostly about being kind, patient, and empathetic. I believed that if I showed up with good intentions and a big heart, everything else would fall into place. Those pieces *do* matter. They matter more than people realize.

Over time, through hard shifts, beautiful breakthroughs, and plenty of humbling moments, I learned something that changed everything: Child and youth care is not simple work, as James P. Anglin (2002) reminds us, "it's not rocket science; it's far more complex than that."

This work is deeply relational, grounded in nervous system awareness, and shaped by grief, identity, and attachment. It involves navigating complex systems, responding to crises, repairing ruptures, maintaining clear boundaries, and holding hope for those unable to do so themselves.

And most of all, child and youth care is work that changes you, whether you're ready for that or not. It shakes up your beliefs, invites you to look inward, and reveals how relationships can spark the most profound transformations.

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If I could go back and sit across from my younger self in my first week in the field, I wouldn't give myself a list of rules or policies. I wouldn't try to scare myself out of it or pretend I needed to be "tougher." Grounded in developmental and experiential perspectives in child and youth care (Phelan, n.d.). I would simply tell myself the truth, the kind of truth that often only becomes clear through lived experience.

Here's what I wish I knew when I started.

Your presence matters more than perfection

Early on, I put a lot of pressure on myself to "get it right." I thought good staff were those who always had the perfect response, the right tone, the perfect intervention, and the perfectly structured conversation.

But youth don't need flawless adults.

They need consistent adults, because, as Henry Maier (1987) emphasized, consistency is not just helpful, but foundational to building trust and meaningful relationships.

They need adults who show up, stay grounded, and don't fall apart when things get messy.

Some of the most powerful moments in child & youth care aren't the ones where you say something brilliant, they're the moments where you stay calm when a young person is spiralling. Where you don't match their chaos. Where you hold steady. Where you're regulated enough to create safety in a room that feels unsafe.

Presence communicates something youth can't always name, but they feel immediately: *"I'm not too much for you." "You can handle me." "You're not leaving."*

That calm, intentional presence does more healing than any scripted intervention ever could.

Behaviour is communication, and often, it's survival

One of the biggest shifts in my perspective came when I stopped seeing behaviour as something that needed to be "managed" and started seeing it as something that needed to be *understood.*

Behaviour is communication, yes, but more than that, it's adaptation.

Youth in care are not behaving in a vacuum. Most of them are responding to years of instability, unmet needs, inconsistent adults, unsafe environments, rejection, neglect, betrayal, violence, or loss. Their behaviours may look irrational, manipulative, disrespectful, or explosive… but many of those responses were once the best tools they had.

Some youth learned that yelling was the only way to be heard. Some learned that anger protected them from feeling vulnerable.

Some learned that refusing everything was safer than being disappointed again.

Some learned that attachment always ends in pain, so they push people away before it happens.

And often, the strongest pushback is not "defiance." They're youth checking whether you're safe enough to stay.

Because connection is terrifying when you've learned that people leave you or hurt you in other ways.

The youth isn't "giving you a hard time": they're having a hard time

This seems obvious until you're deep into a shift and someone is escalating over something that feels small. The temptation is to make it personal.

But child and youth care is full of moments where the external reaction doesn't match the situation … because the situation isn't really the situation.

The food isn't the problem.

The phone limit isn't the problem.

The “no” isn’t the problem.

The issue lies in how that moment triggers the nervous system, activating brain-based threat responses like fight, flight, freeze, or fawn, connected to feelings of loss of control, fear, shame, abandonment, trauma reminders, or a deep belief of insignificance.

When you can recognize that, you stop battling the surface and start responding to the underneath.

That doesn’t mean there are no expectations. It doesn’t mean the youth gets a free pass. It means you’re leading with curiosity instead of control.

Repair is not optional: it’s the work

You will get it wrong sometimes. You’ll misread a moment. You’ll respond too quickly. You’ll assume something. You’ll come in with the wrong tone. You’ll miss a cue. You’ll be tired and reactive. You’ll hold a boundary and realize afterward that you handled it in a way that escalated the situation rather than de-escalated it.

That is not a sign that you’re an ineffective worker.

That reflects the realities of working in complex environments. What matters is what you do next.

In child and youth care, repair is everything. Trust doesn’t come from never making mistakes, it comes from being willing to own them.

Repair sounds like:

- “I didn’t handle that the way I wish I had.”
- “I raised my voice and that wasn’t fair.”
- “I hear how that landed for you.”
- “I’m sorry for the impact.”
- “Can we try again?”

Many youth have never experienced repair in a healthy way. They've experienced blame, punishment, gaslighting, or silence. They've learned that conflict means the end of the relationship.

When repair occurs, a new lesson is taught: "We can have rupture and still come back." "I can be upset and still be cared for." "Mistakes don't mean abandonment."

That's life changing.

Boundaries create stability: not distance

Many people confuse boundaries with coldness. We think boundaries are what you use when you're "done being nice." Or that setting limits will harm rapport.

But boundaries don't ruin relationships, they protect them.

Youth need to know what to expect. They need consistency, structure, and predictability. A boundary isn't a punishment; it's a framework for safety.

It tells the youth:

- "This is what is safe."
- "This is what is allowed."
- "This is what I can offer."
- "This is what I can't."
- "This is how we protect each other."

And boundaries protect *you*, too.

Without boundaries, you become emotionally depleted, resentful, or overextended. You start giving from an empty place. And youth will sense that, because youth always sense it.

A worker without boundaries often becomes inconsistent, reactive, or burnt out. A worker with boundaries becomes stable, grounded, and trustworthy.

Boundaries don't mean you care less. They mean you care enough to stay in the work long-term.

Trauma-informed doesn't mean trauma-focused

Being trauma-informed doesn't mean every conversation needs to be about trauma. It doesn't mean we have to excavate someone's past, or label everything as a trauma response, or treat youth like a list of symptoms.

Trauma-informed means you're thinking about what safety looks like, in behaviour, tone, environment, relationships, and routines.

It means you recognize that regulation comes before reasoning. Learning does not occur in states of dysregulation.

The ability to process consequences is limited during fight-or-flight activation. Information is not effectively received when the nervous system is overwhelmed.

Sometimes, the real work is creating conditions where youth *can* access their thinking brain again.

Sometimes trauma-informed care is:

- Stepping back.
- Reducing the audience.
- Giving choices.
- Naming the emotion.
- Co-regulating through presence.
- Focusing on grounding before problem-solving.

That's not lowering expectations. That's skill.

Coping skills cannot be effectively taught without modelling them

Youth don't learn emotional regulation from posters or worksheets. They learn it from watching adults regulate themselves.

Learning occurs through:

- How frustration is managed.
- How responses unfold under overwhelm.
- How self-regulation is demonstrated.
- How tone, body language, and the nervous system are maintained.

Sometimes, youth will push you until you react, not because they want you to suffer, but because they are trying to answer one big question: *"What happens if I'm too much?"*

When you can hold your grounding in those moments, you're not just getting through a shift. You're teaching safety through your body.

Identity and culture are not "extras": they're core safety needs

A youth can't feel safe if they don't feel seen.

Affirming LGBTQ2S+ youth is not a bonus feature of good care, it's foundational. The same is true for cultural identity, racial identity, spiritual identity, and disability.

Remembering pronouns isn't "political," it's relational care. Respecting cultural practices isn't "optional," it's part of belonging.

Understanding systemic barriers isn't an academic exercise, it shapes how youth move through the world and how services respond to them.

And many youth are not just navigating trauma, they're navigating inequity. They're navigating stigma.

They're navigating assumptions. They're navigating stereotypes.

When we dismiss identity as a side issue, we miss the context of their pain and their resilience.

Team health shapes youth health

This is one of the biggest things I wish someone had said out loud sooner: Strong teams create safe environments. Weak teams create instability that youth feel immediately.

Youth don't need employees to be perfect, but they need employees to be aligned. They need consistent expectations, predictable routines, and workers who communicate with each other.

When teams are healthy:

- Employees support each other.
- Communication is clear and respectful.
- Concerns are addressed directly.
- Support is offered before burnout hits.
- Standards remain consistent.
- Accountability exists without shame.
- Youth get consistent messaging.

When teams are unhealthy:

- Gossip spreads.
- Resentment builds.
- Expectations change shift to shift.
- Youth learn which staff to manipulate.
- Staff become reactive and isolated.
- The environment becomes emotionally unsafe.

Youth care is not solo work. If you treat it like it is, you'll burn out, and you'll miss the power of collective care.

Self-care is discipline: not indulgence

Self-care isn't bubble baths and candles (although sure, if that helps). Real self-care in youth care looks like:

- Debriefing complex incidents.
- Asking for help instead of pushing through.
- Saying no when you need to.
- Getting therapy if your own triggers are activated.
- Building a life outside of work.
- Not making youth care your entire identity.

Because this field will take everything, you're willing to give. If you don't set limits, you will start to confuse martyrdom with dedication. Burnout doesn't happen because you care too much. It happens because you care deeply *without boundaries*, support, or recovery time. Self-care isn't a luxury. It's how you stay in the work.

Small moments are big interventions

It's easy to think the work only matters during big incidents.
But the truth is that youth change through tiny, repeated experiences.

- A warm greeting.
- Noticing their new haircut.
- Sitting beside them when they're quiet.
- Respecting when they say, "not right now."

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- Checking in without prying.

These moments create safety. They build attachment. They soften shame. They show youth they matter.

And for youth who have learned they are disposable, that kind of care is revolutionary.

You can't save them, but you can support them

This one can hurt to accept, especially when you're new and full of hope. You can't rescue youth from their pain. You can't undo the systems that failed them. You can't force healing.

But you *can* be a consistent person in their world. You can be someone who doesn't give up. Someone who still sees the good when they can't. Someone who holds boundaries without cruelty. Someone who keeps showing up. And sometimes that's the difference between a youth giving up … and a youth trying again.

This field will change you, whether you want it to or not

Child and youth care expands you. It challenges assumptions you didn't know you had. It forces you to confront your triggers, biases, and patterns. It teaches you how to sit with discomfort. It humbles you. It strengthens you. It breaks your heart a little.

And it helps you grow in ways you didn't expect. You will learn resilience.

You will learn patience you didn't know you had. You will learn what love looks like in action, not just words. And you will learn that being a safe adult isn't something you do once. It's something you practice daily.

Growth isn't a bonus in this work. It's part of the job description.

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Final Thoughts

Child and youth care is messy. It's beautiful. It's exhausting. It's deeply human. Some days you'll go home feeling like nothing mattered.

On other days, you'll see a youth smile for the first time in weeks.

Some shifts will take everything out of you. Some moments will remind you why you chose this field.

Whether you're new or experienced, here's what I hope you remember: This work is a marathon. Stay curious. Stay grounded. Stay humble. Stay connected to your team. Keep learning. And when you feel like you're not doing enough, remind yourself: Consistency is the intervention. Presence is the foundation.

And in child and youth care, showing up with integrity, again and again, is what changes lives.

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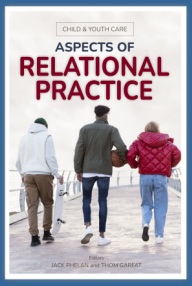

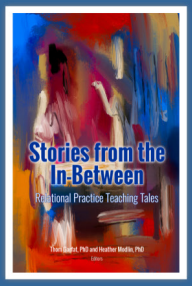

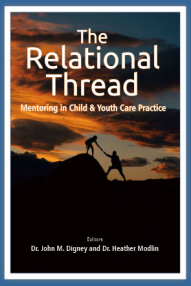

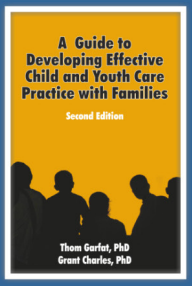

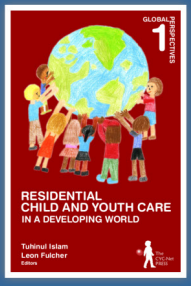

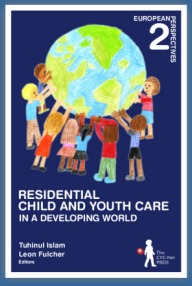

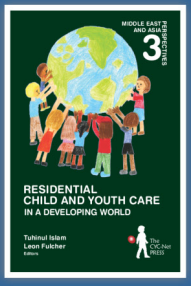

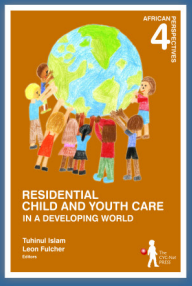

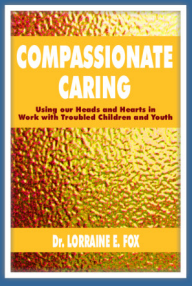

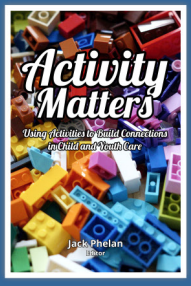

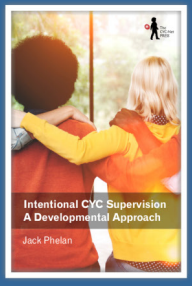

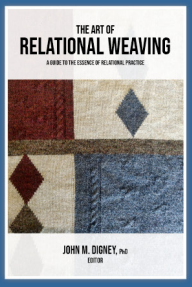

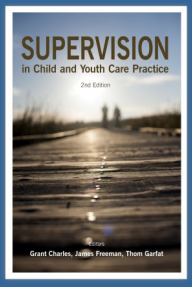

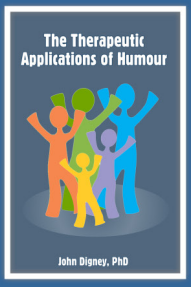

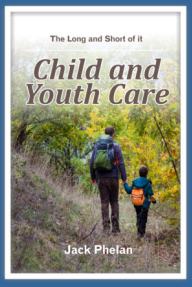

What is Teaching Teens About Love?

Lessons about love are everywhere, but new research supports parents stepping in

Cheralyn Leeby

One mother noticed her 15-year-old son, Ethan, watching videos about becoming an "alpha" male in dating. She heard advice about status, emotional detachment, and dominance. Another mother saw her 13-year-old daughter, Chloe, spending hours deleting and reposting photos on social media, trying to decide which version of herself looked "hot."

Neither situation is about love, but both show the misdirected lessons in it.

Earlier generations learned about love and intimacy gradually, through friendships, heartbreak, handwritten notes, awkward conversations, and “going out.” The face-to-face fumbling *was* the education.

Today, the teachings arrive faster and from many sources. Tweens and teens absorb frameworks for adult love through social media, pornography, dating podcasts, and algorithm-driven content that never stops. They adopt the vocabulary of “insecure” or “avoidant” attachment styles, red flags, and toxic relationships without much opportunity to practice the underlying skills

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to avoid these things. Young people now learn more about emotional and physical intimacy observationally, not through lived experience.

The question is what this is doing to them.

Adolescence as Identity Marketing

The developmental goal of adolescence is identity formation, essentially figuring out who you are, with the contrasting pitfall of role confusion (Erikson, 1968). Today, many adolescents strive for *identity marketing* instead, figuring out how to optimize outside perceptions. Trends like "looksmaxxing" push boys to focus on physical appearance and social clout. Girls face similar pressure through hypersexualized beauty standards and appearance-based validation. Males and females learn to *perform* themselves rather than working to *know* themselves.

For many teens, the primary teachers of intimacy are online sources that treat it as performance, transaction, or risk. Pornography, which is now widespread, accelerates this. A 2022 survey found that the average age of first exposure to porn is 12, with 73 percent of teens between 13 and 17 having viewed it (Robb & Mann, 2022). This means that most teens learn about sex from content that is often violent, aggressive, or degrading. As a report on pornography from England's Children's Commissioner put it: "A lot of it is actually just abuse" (Children's Commissioner for England, 2023).

The messaging from pornography and manosphere sites is harmful. Vulnerability is either a weakness or a means for control. Emotional detachment signals that strength and aggression toward females are normalized. Teens learn that appearance and followers determine worth, and partners are disposable when someone new comes along.

A countercultural curriculum is largely missing. It is more difficult to find reliable guidance on how to build or sustain genuine connections, repair

conflict, tolerate disappointment, or be emotionally present with another person.

The Better Influencers

There is good news. Parents can make a difference. According to two new studies, the parent-teen relationship is the strongest predictor of whether a young person will have healthy relationships later in life.

A 2026 study tracked over 2,600 adolescents in Australia and the Netherlands from their teenage years into young adulthood (ages 19 to 28), measuring the quality of their relationships with parents and peers and then assessing their intimate relationships as adults. (Marabel-Whitburn et al., 2026). Teens with high-quality relationships at home and with friends were significantly more likely to form healthy adult relationships. Bowlby predicted this decades ago. According to attachment theory, early relationships shape our deepest expectations about love, trust, worthiness, and the safety of closeness (Bowlby, 1988).

A separate U.S. study followed more than 7,000 people from adolescence into their late 30s and found that strong family connections during the teen years more than doubled the likelihood of meaningful social connections in adulthood (Whitaker et al., 2026). This held across every dimension measured: close friendships, community belonging, emotional support, and relationship satisfaction with an adult partner. Close, nurturing relationships with parents during middle and high school were associated with a variety of positive social outcomes, up to two decades later (Whitaker et al., 2026). Importantly, the family structure mattered less than how connected teens felt to the family they had.

These two independent studies, from opposite sides of the world, confirm that healthy parent-child relationships matter. While the importance

of early relationships is not new, there is new urgency. For the first time, the primary source of relational education is more accessible, vivid, and persistent than any other human relationship in a young person's life.

Parents can counter the powerful messaging their children receive by modeling empathy, mutual care, and honest communication. They can also teach teens the skills that pornography and social media miss, including accountability, boundaries, and critical thinking. Parents can use conversation and key questions to help teens shape their own ideas about love and intimacy, drawing from values rather than their social media feeds.

What Adolescents Actually Need

Open-ended questions can help young people think critically about what culture teaches them. These are not one-time conversations but starting points for ongoing dialogue. With guidance and support, they can build their own blueprint for love, sex, and healthy relationships.

To start the conversation, parents might ask:

1. *What makes a relationship feel safe?* This helps teens understand the difference between attraction and safe connection. Parents can ask this about both friendships and love relationships.
2. *What do social media, movies, and TV get wrong about love?* Teenagers are often more critical of media than adults think. This question positions them to thoughtfully assess and talk about what they might otherwise passively consume.
3. *Who loves well in real life or in a book or film?* This may be the most important question for discussion. It asks young people to identify healthy role models and compare them with what they encounter everywhere else.

Ethan and Chloe's parents did not think to ask them what they truly want in relationships or what they believe about love, dating, and performance culture. Asking these questions gives teens a space to reflect on their experiences and develop important boundaries. This may be the most countercultural thing parents can do because nonjudgmental inquiry gives young people the permission to explore their own values and visions for what love is to them.

Key points

- Teens are absorbing unhealthy frameworks for intimacy from social media and porn, before lived experience.
- New studies confirm that the parent-teen relationship is a strong predictor of health in adult relationships.
- Parents can counter the cultural curriculum by asking teens open-ended questions about love and relationships.

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From: https://www.psychologytoday.com/za/blog/consciously-creating-your-soul-life/202605/what-is-teaching-teens-about-love

Grief and Nihilism

Hans Skott-Myhre

For those of us who work with and care about young people, the question of their sense of agency is a crucial factor in determining how and if they will engage life on their own terms. The ability to see the future as malleable within the scope of our ability to act is deeply implicated in the ways in which we see ourselves in relation to others and the world around us. For all of us, the question of our ability to exercise our creative capacity in ways that we find fulfilling is central to our sense of well-being and optimism about the future both personally and collectively. As CYC workers, there is nothing more daunting than being faced with a young person who has lost their sense of agency to the degree that it seems almost impossible to engage them in any kind of active relationship.

Of course, there is an almost infinite literature about how to motivate recalcitrant young people. There are many approaches and strategies to be found in any of the fields where adults and young people encounter one another. Embedded in these approaches is the underlying belief that such young people can be shown that they can change their lives and even the world around them. There sems to be a belief that the young person's lack of motivation is rooted in an error in perception that can be corrected through rebuilding trust in adults and by inference trust in the broader society. With that increase in trust there will be an increase in optimism about human relations and through the development of unconditional positive regard, an optimism about themselves.

The implicit mapping of social dynamics that underlies this approach to motivational work premised in relationship, is that young people have lost trust in the adults they have known so far and that trust can be restored through encountering a trustworthy adult or group of adults. The focus is primarily individual. That is to say, it was an aberrant traumatic encounter with an individual adult or adults that has broken trust and it is an individual encounter with a CYC worker or workers who can restore that trust.

I must wonder though, if that premise holds as much significance under our current social conditions. Is the root of the kind of alienation and apathy that saps young people's sense of agency still premised in individual sets of relations with untrustworthy adults or is there a broader social malaise? Like so much of what we are encountering, as what Spinoza would call the sad passions which induce passivity, such as anxiety and depression seem to be endemic across the global populations. When these kinds of passions debilitate whole populations, it would seem to make sense to ask whether the root of the issue is broader than any individual set of toxic relations.

That is not to say that individual toxic encounters are no longer relevant or that establishing relations with trustworthy adults is not worthwhile. It is simply to ask whether either set of relations, toxic or trusting, is sufficient for an increasing number of young people today. Perhaps, a significant portion of the etiology of losing agency has its origins in the shifts and changes of our lived experience as social subjects under 21st century global capitalism.

To say that the world as we have known is undergoing a radical shift in virtually every aspect of our lives is a reality that we must contend with as we move further into the 20th century. The ecological coordinates of all living things are deteriorating at a rate of species extinction that has been called the 6th Great or Holocene extinction. This loss of biodiversity across

the planet threatens the integrity of ecosystems, global food security for humans and other species, and planetary stability.

In addition, as Felix Guattari points out, there is a commensurate loss of diversity within our social ecology. We are losing our traditional relational coordinates moment by moment, day by day. A simple example is the assertion by Elon Musk that empathy is a weakness in Western Civilization.

> "We've got civilizational suicidal empathy going on," Musk said, and while he said he believes in empathy and that "you should care about other people," he also thinks it's destroying society … The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy, the empathy exploit," Musk said. "There it's they're exploiting a bug in Western civilization, which is the empathy response."

The claim that empathy is civilizational suicide by one of the wealthiest, most "successful" and influential leaders of contemporary capitalist culture has a powerful resonance for young people. To say that we should care, but at the same time qualify empathy as toxic caring sets a dangerous template that has far reaching impacts on our social ecology. Certainly, the capacity to care for one another is a central aspect of a healthy social ecology. If caring becomes a characteristic of our lives that is at risk of extinction, that is very bad news for our ability to thrive or even survive as a species.

Other aspects of our social ecology are also under threat. Our ability to socialize and affiliate with one another is also experiencing a decline. As Maya Nguyen notes, "Social connection in the U.S. is falling for many reasons — political conflict, economic stress and technological evolution are just a few." This is echoed in recent research that notes a drop in the amount of time we spend socializing with one another. According to the American Bureau of Labor Statistics, "People were less likely to engage in

socializing and communicating on an average day in 2025 than in 2015 — 30 percent compared with 38 percent. They also spent less time in these activities in 2025 than in 2015 — 35 minutes compared with 41 minutes." According to new research in the journal Perspectives on Psychological Science, when we do communicate with one another, we are speaking approximately 300 fewer words than we did the previous day. In the fourteen years between 2005 and 2019, the number of words we speak every day has dropped 28%. According to Nugyen, this is amplified by

> disappearing social infrastructure — physical places and services that encourage social activity. Third places, the informal public gathering spaces outside one's home (first place) and work (second place), play critical roles in connecting people. From parks to bars to libraries, the nation has been losing places where friends and strangers congregate.

These losses in the robustness, diversity, and interconnectedness of our social ecology has resulted in what the U.S Surgeon General in 2023 called an epidemic of loneliness. This has immense implications for those of us interested in the importance and centrality of relationships and relational care.

The losses or degradation of key elements in our social ecology in combination with the crises in our biosphere signals a significant, if sometimes obscured, sense of loss. This loss of key ecological coordinates at all levels of our lived experience can function as a pervasive background noise that can operate just outside our conscious awareness. It functions as a kind of repressed symptom of what might be termed our collective self-destructive neurosis. This latent rage and grief spills ever more frequently into full blown psychotic violence across our social landscape.

Under such conditions it is no wonder that the latest Harvard Youth Poll cites a loss of perceived agency as one of the most defining shifts in young people's sense of themselves and the world around them. Nearly 50% felt as though they had no say in government and that they had no impact on the future. This is amplified by the sense that for young people today there is no going back to an idyllic world that used to exist. They have a profound sense that the world is driving relentlessly forward and there is no way of knowing whether what the future holds is good or bad. According to Spellman, McMillan and Collier this indeterminacy can lead to a kind of paralysis.

There is a sense among young people that whatever happens we will have to change the way we live and that whatever the promise of capitalism as embodied in the "American Dream" is over. The notion of class mobility is fading quickly as the social and financial infrastructure that has supported it is deteriorating. For the first time, in the centers of capitalism, young people's prospects financially, educationally, and in terms of lifespan will be worse than their parents. For Spellman, McMillan, and Collier the question then becomes, how do we mourn the loss of the capitalist dream? How do we grieve the loss of possibility?

We at the center of capitalist social relations do a poor job of grieving our losses. We tend to go very quickly into denial. This has certainly been the case post-COVID. We lost millions of people who we seldom if ever acknowledge. We have never created a collective space for mourning those immense losses.

This cultural and political willful denial of so much of our collective traumas over generations from, colonization, to enslavement, generations of physical and sexual assaults on women, violent homophobia, the genocide of Indigenous peoples, has left scars of unresolved grief. Much of our capacity for denial was masked by the apparent progress of capitalism.

But now that such progress is failing, more of the overwhelming grief and shame is surfacing and we have very little if any tools to manage the paralyzing grief other than nihilism. As Colyar puts it,

> And not just the massive amount of death and sickness and our own vulnerability, but we really did lose a sense of opportunity, of progress — of social progress. And because we did not deal with that, I think a lot of us were able to be peeled off by a politics of nihilism, or nostalgic nihilism, which I would say Donald Trump is very good at selling. Because it is not so much that he is going to make America great again; it is that he will do whatever is necessary to falsely inflate the sense that we once again have a 1950s economy, even though it is not real in any material sense, right?

This form of nihilistic nostalgia is deadly at all levels of our encounter with a rapidly changing world. The idea that there is nothing to be done but to retreat into a psychotic fantasy of a world that never really existed is equivalent to social and cultural suicide. Colyar argues that this kind of nihilistic politics leads to a kind of narcissism in which we become falsely pragmatic and self-involved,

> I think young people are so black-pilled and so nihilistic in a way that, yeah, there's almost no time for emotions. It's almost like, things just have to get done now. It's really every man for himself. . . I think part of the reason we would struggle with coming up with a vision, a hopeful vision of the future that doesn't reproduce the contradictions of the past, is that we have not grieved that we're going to have to be something different … But it is going to be different. You are different after grief. We are different after Covid,

> right? We are different after a 9/11. There is a before and and after when that kind of cultural rupture happens, and if you do not name it, the same thing that happens when you try to ignore the fact that you've had a tremendous loss in your personal life . . .It spills over into everything. So, the challenge, I think, in our moment is that if you don't deal with the grief, there actually isn't much positive that you can say about the future, because you'll still be talking about a past that has really already gone.

For those of us working with and thinking about caring for young people this is our challenge. We must face the actuality of the coming world while acknowledging the grief and loss associated with both our unresolved past and our impinging future. Fortunately, we in CYC are skilled in dealing with grief and trauma at the level of the individual young person. The question is can we bring that same skill set to the necessities of the collectivity of children and youth in a way that challenges the spreading nihilism of our age and opens the door to new ways of life that sustain our ability to live, love, and care? Can we find a way through the grief we must acknowledge if we are to move forward with integrity in the 21st century.

Is grief something that young people talk about when they talk about their future?

Colyar**:** I don't think so.

It is the encroachment of tech also that has ruined all of this about their lives, and just by getting out and talking to people — and maybe that's a part of the grief process, like actually having conversations with people that you know in real life — then you can start to gin up a positive vision for the future, even if you still feel a little helpless.

Spiegelman**:** I think that's very true. You can't grieve alone. And you have to be able to spend time with your friends, create art, do things you feel are

meaningful. Maybe even go to protests and dance in the street — even if you don't think it's going to do anything. You're not stopping.

I think what the generation who's entering into the marketplace now, people who are just a few years younger than them, you know, I think they feel that isolation more deeply.

We have to believe that something is better and possible, and that we are building it.

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