

# AS\*IF: A Model for Thinking about Child and Youth Care Interventions

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**ABSTRACT:** As the knowledge base in the child and youth care work field has grown, front-line workers are increasingly able to govern their professional behavior by establishing standards rather than depending solely on *ad hoc*, intuitive responses. This article proposes and describes the process of intervention, offering an integrated, five-stage model (Assessment, Selection, Pause, Intervention, and Follow-up), with appropriate sub-activities specified for each. It is noted that the model is not linear but encompasses continuous cyclic interaction among the five stages.

In the early days, before the introduction of training opportunities, academic degrees, conferences, and the development of a body of child and youth care literature, most front-line workers had no alternative but to intervene with children without any models to guide their actions. They were expected to do the job *as if* they knew what they were doing. With the increasing complexity of the field, it became evident that this was not an acceptable way to proceed and, in more recent years, the field has responded to the need. There is now a wealth of literature specifically addressed to the work of child and youth care workers (Krueger, 1991).

Like all professionals, child and youth care workers need to develop a way of thinking about the process of their work (Ricks & Garfat, 1989). It is not enough to understand content; one must also have a way of organizing his or her interventions with children in a clear manner. Although the literature is successfully addressing the content of child and youth care work, there is little that addresses process, and that which does tends to focus on a specific type of interaction such as relationship development (Brendtro, 1969), discipline

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(Fox, 1987), or praise (Gudgeon, 1989). A notable exception is provided by Eisikovits, Beker, and Guttman (1991), who focus directly on the process of intervention.

In 1991, in the course of developing a series of training videos for staff, the authors had the opportunity to discuss ideal child and youth care interventions with a group of experienced front-line workers. As an outcome of this discussion, the group identified the process that a worker might go through in intervening with a child. Further work allowed us to identify specific, inter-related stages in this process. In the end, we articulated a model for the process that a competent child and youth care worker goes through in making an intervention.

In recognition of our developmental history, we decided to call this model AS\*IF. It offers a simple method for child and youth care workers to organize their thinking about their interventions with youth in care—the process they should go through. The model is applicable whether the interventions are immediate and short-term into daily life events or of a more considered, long-term nature.

### **The Intervention Model**

AS\*IF consists of five distinct but inter-connected stages that are inherent in every effective child and youth care intervention: *Assessment, Selection, Pause, Intervention and Follow-Up*. (In its acronym, AS\*IF, the asterisk is to remind us of the “Pause.”) We believe that an adequate intervention involves an assessment of the situation, the selection of an intervention from a range of options, a reflection on the process, the act of intervening, and adequate follow-up. In the absence of any one of these stages, or when one of these stages is inadequately carried out, the likelihood of the intervention being successful is reduced. The following provides an overview of this model.

#### *Assessment*

In our work with troubled children and their families, too often we intervene without adequately evaluating the situation. When we do so, we set the stage for the intervention to be ineffective. Three important activities are involved in any adequate assessment:

*Attend to the Situation.* The worker must be focused on what is happening, on ‘being there’ in the present, and must ensure that she is attending to the behavior and the interconnected variables in the immediate environment to the degree that that is appropriate to the situation. If the worker allows her focus to be either too narrow or too

broad, she will miss information which might be essential in choosing the most effective intervention. The worker's observation skills must be finely attuned to the individuals involved and the context within which the intervention is to occur.

*Assess the Immediacy Required.* The worker must judge the immediacy of action required. In making this judgment she should consider the degree of immediate danger to the child, herself, or others. If, for example, a child's life is at risk, a more immediate intervention will be required than if there is no physical danger involved. She must also consider the possible outcome, either positive or negative, of an immediate or a delayed intervention. Sometimes we intervene too quickly, thereby denying children the opportunity to learn and grow from their experience; at other times, we wait too long before intervening, and the behavior of one child 'contaminates' the rest of the group or the child has a negative experience that could have been avoided. The primary consideration about immediacy must be the possible impact on the child or children, except in those situations where danger is an overriding consideration.

*Analyze the Context.* The worker must analyze the dynamics of what is occurring before intervening. She must consider the how, when, where, why, and with whom of the behavior that she is observing; both the individual and the group (if applicable) must be considered in this analysis. When there are others involved, the child and youth care worker must evaluate the patterns of interaction of which the behavior is a part.

The worker must also consider the child's typical patterns in this analysis: Does the child, for example, frequently act in a way so as to cause others to take control? Is the behavior typical for the child or is it new? Is the child's behavior a habitualized response to a known stimulus? Is it something that the worker has seen before? Can it be understood in the context of the child's family history or cultural environment? These and other questions form an important part of the worker's analysis of behavior in context.

All behavior serves some purpose (Garfat, 1992), and part of the analysis must be a consideration of the purpose, including the question of "purpose for whom?" In this connection, the child and youth care worker must include an analysis of the role she is playing in the behavior she is observing. How she is feeling at the time she is about to intervene must also be a part of the analysis as it affects her ability to intervene effectively and her perception of what is occurring.

Still, the worker's final analysis of the situation will be affected by her lens (Ricks, 1988), which includes her values, beliefs, and orienta-

tion towards life and child and youth care. If, for example, the worker values family, she will include her understanding of the child's behavior in the family context as a part of her analysis.

### *Selection*

In order to intervene, the child and youth care worker must select the intervention she feels is the most appropriate for the situation. Again, this part of the process can be broken into three segments:

*Study the Available Options.* In any situation, there is more than one potential intervention available to the child and youth care worker; often there are many. In order to consider options, the worker must generate a range of possible interventions: she must explore the domain of alternative responses. In doing so, she should allow free rein to her creativity so as to consider options different from the "norm." Too often we have a tendency to rely on habituated intervention-responses that are both unfair to the child and ineffective in achieving the desired outcome. A search for the unusual often leads to the most effective choice.

Sometimes it is wise to reject the first intervention that comes to mind, as it is frequently the most habituated. Sending children to their room, for example, is an unfortunately common response to a child's undesirable behavior in child and youth care. If we reject this response, we may find ourselves forced to come up with an alternative that is both more creative and more effective.

*Screen the Options.* Not all interventions can be carried out by all child and youth care workers, and not all are appropriate for *this* staff, for *this* behavior of *this* child, at *this* time, in *this* context. Having generated a range of possible interventions, the child and youth care worker must screen them in terms of her own values and beliefs, appropriateness in terms of values and beliefs of the agency within which she is working, the physical and psychological context within which the intervention will occur, her ability to carry it out, and the possible outcomes for both the individual and any others involved. Options must also be screened in terms of previous interventions with the child, their effectiveness, and what the child and youth care worker knows about both the child and herself.

*Select an Intervention.* Once the child and youth care worker has generated a number of options and has screened them according to the variables that are important in the immediate context, she is ready to select the intervention she intends to use. Through a process of

weighing the information generated in the previous steps of this process, the child and youth care worker is in a position to commit herself. Whatever her choice of intervention, she must now discard the other options and focus on the one she has chosen. While this sounds simple, it is often difficult to focus on one choice without thinking about those that have been discarded. It is, however, an essential part of the process.

### *Pause and Preparation of Self*

Having made her choice, the worker is advised to pause briefly before she actually intervenes. Time permitting, this brief pause allows unconscious material to surface that may cause her to reconsider the selection she had made. This reconsideration may be based on memories of previous interventions, concerns about her ability to follow through with the chosen intervention, momentary changes in the context, or “flashes of insight,” which are usually reflections of something remembered that had not hitherto surfaced or clues from the environment that had not been recognized before.

This brief pause also allows time for the child and youth care worker to prepare herself for her intervention. Such preparation may be mental (e.g., discarding previous options), emotional (e.g., calming herself to intervene in a tense situation), or physical (e.g., positioning herself appropriately). It also allows the worker to consider possible outcomes of her intervention and what she is going to do if things “go wrong.”

Sometimes as a result of this pause, the worker finds herself choosing another intervention. If such is the case, she should review this intervention following the previous steps, to assure herself that the new selection is as valid as the one she is about to set aside. Minimally, the pause avoids the likelihood of spontaneous interventions that come immediately to mind and are frequently not the most effective.

### *Intervention*

Having assessed the situation, chosen the intervention she believes to be the most appropriate, and prepared herself to intervene, the child and youth care worker is now ready to proceed. The intervention should be carried out from a position of caring for the child and should reflect this at all times. Again, we have highlighted three primary areas of focus:

*Interest.* Any intervention should be made with the best interests of the child as the guiding force. To intervene with the best interests of

the worker or the institution in mind, on the other hand, sets up a situation where the intervention is not *for* the child and is therefore more likely to meet with resistance. Additionally, the worker should try to engage the interest of the child before intervening, so that the child, as well as the worker, is attending to what is happening. While this is not always possible, it should be attempted because an intervention is more likely to be successful when the child is focusing on the worker's actions. Sometimes the process of gaining the child's interest is powerful enough to render the chosen intervention unnecessary.

*Integrity.* All interventions should respect the integrity of the child and the worker. They should be delivered in a way that respects the child's developmental ability (Maier, 1987), is consistent with the child's communication style and capabilities, and does not ask of the child something that is inconsistent with who the worker knows the child to be. They must be delivered in a way that suggests that the child will succeed and not in a way that causes the child to sacrifice an important part of his self. They must also be delivered in a manner that is congruent with the worker's experience of herself.

*Intention.* The child and youth care worker should intend that the intervention will succeed, and this intention must be conveyed in the delivery, which needs to be clear in terms of language, expectations, and goals. Ultimately, of course, intention is a question of belief. The worker must believe in what she is doing, believe that it is best for the child, and believe that the intervention will succeed. Without this intentionality, the worker conveys to the child an uncertainty that allows for avoidance, manipulation, confusion, and "game-playing."

### *Follow-Up*

Once the intervention has been carried out, the child and youth care worker must follow through in a variety of ways. Three important areas of the follow-up are identified below:

*Follow-through on the Intervention.* Too often even the most carefully chosen of interventions fail to reach the desired outcome because of a failure to follow through to the conclusion of the intervention. Once committed, the child and youth care worker must follow through to the point where the natural harmony of the situation is restored and both the youth and the worker can turn their attention to other business. This is not to suggest that the worker should continue persistently with an intervention that is not working; rather, we must avoid the tendency to ease off once the child has started to show some ini-

tial response. We also have the responsibility to follow through to the end of the interaction with the child, so as to offer as much support as possible for the child to succeed. We must also be sure to follow through on everything we have committed to during the process of intervening.

*Feelings.* All interventions generate feelings that require attention. They may be the feelings of the child, the worker, other children, or colleagues. Debriefing the intervention with all concerned provides the opportunity for further learning and integration from the situation. Attending to the feelings generated by and during the intervention also assures that these feelings are not simply suppressed, to arise again at another time. Sometimes, as well, the feelings which the child experiences are an important part of the child's treatment, since an intervention can arouse feelings that are integral to the child's experience of himself in the world. For the child and youth care worker, the intervention can also stimulate previous experiences to which she will need to attend.

*Feedback on the Intervention.* Following (or during) an intervention, it may be either necessary or appropriate to engage in a process of feedback with the child, co-workers, team, supervisor, agency, or others. The timing of such feedback will be determined by the nature of the intervention, the availability of the child, and other organizational variables. However, it is our experience that while we are frequently good at providing feedback to our teammates and the organization, we often fail to engage in a feedback process with the child. Such a process allows us the opportunity to help the child understand why intervention was necessary and gives the child the opportunity to help us learn how our interventions could be more effective in the future. When we fail to attend to the necessary feedback, the intervention may be momentarily effective but insignificant in the long term.

Feedback is, however, not only a process in which we engage once the intervention is finished. It is also a natural process that is occurring at all times as we go through the intervention process. As such, feedback may, at any point during the process, cause us to evaluate our assessment, selection, intervention, or follow-through. The worker must be open at all times to the feedback she is receiving, and willing to modify her thinking and actions accordingly.

### **A Word of Caution about False Linearity**

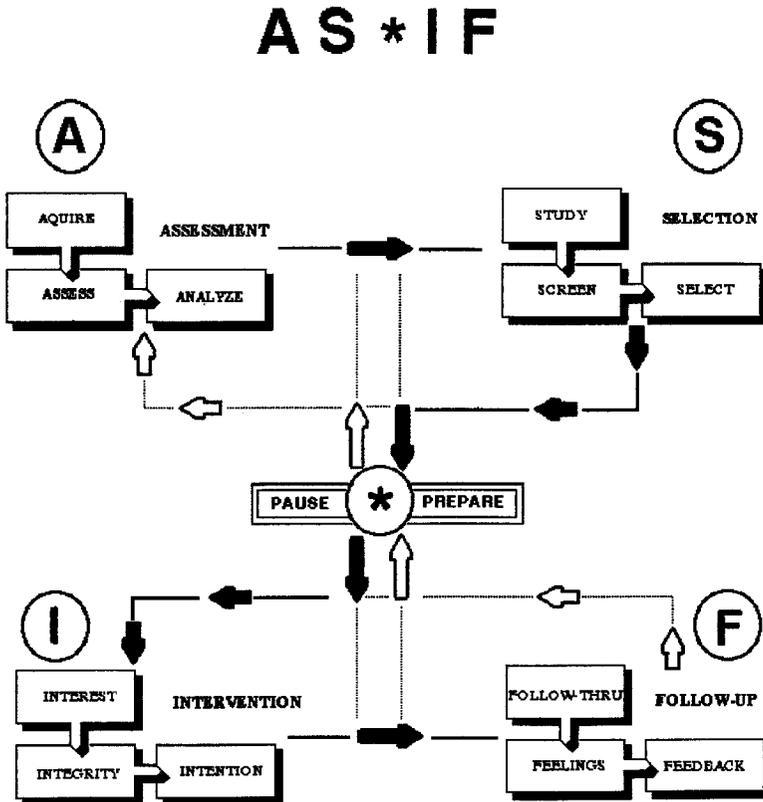
Looked at simply, AS\*IF can appear to offer a simplistic, linear approach to our interventions with children in care. In reality, how-

ever, all parts of the process of intervention are intricately related in a continuously cyclic fashion as indicated in Figure 1. As can be seen from the diagram, it may be necessary or advisable at any point in the process to return to a previous step. It is also clear that any step has a direct effect on the steps that follow. The process of intervening with a child is a dynamic one that requires constant modification based on the feedback one is receiving. This feedback may come from the child, the environment, and/or the child and youth care worker herself.

### Conclusion

AS\*IF offers a way for child and youth care workers to think about their interventions in the context within which they occur. It is a

Figure 1



simple model designed to assist child and youth care workers to become more effective in their work, but it reflects what often occurs and, as such, is consistent with quality child and youth care practice. It comes from the field and is offered to the field in the hopes that it might help a few workers think more effectively about their interventions into the lives of troubled children. With AS\*IF, we move from intervening *as if* we know what we are doing to intervening *because* we know what we are doing.

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