

The Field of Child and Youth Care: Are We There Yet?

JAMES FREEMAN

*Casa Pacifica Centers for Children & Families, Camarillo, California, USA, and
Child and Youth Care Certification Board, College Station, Texas, USA*

This article presents a brief history of organized child and youth care in North America, reviews contributing factors to the growth of the field as a profession, and explores the motivation of practitioners and organizations to contribute to the ongoing development of the field. Included is a panel discussion with four leading experts on contemporary themes regarding the current status of the field, benefits and potential disadvantages of professionalization and recommended next steps for advancing the field of child and youth care.

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The care of young people is an enterprise as old as the existence of the family. From parents to extended family members to others in the community, children and adolescents are impacted by the ability, or lack of ability, of adults to connect with them. Developing relationships and creating environments that engage young people and promote the optimal development of their capacity as human beings is the center of child and youth care. The fact that it is difficult to find a commonly agreed upon definition of child and youth care is, perhaps, a sign that the field is in a distinct emerging phase in its history, one in which it is critical the field learns from its rich and unfolding history and takes action to move to the next developmental phase. Only when the field is aware of its heritage, resources, and opportunities can it take ownership of advancing to the next stage. This article presents a brief history of organized child and youth care in North America, reviews contributing factors to the growth of the field as a profession, and explores

Address correspondence to James Freeman, Casa Pacifica Centers for Children & Families, 1722 S Lewis Rd., Camarillo, CA 93012, USA. E-mail: jfreeman@casapacific.org

the motivation of practitioners and organizations to contribute to the ongoing development of the field. Included is a panel discussion with four leading experts on contemporary themes regarding the current status of the field, benefits and potential disadvantages of professionalization, and recommended next steps for advancing the field of child and youth care.

EARLY ORIGINS OF ORGANIZED SERVICES IN NORTH AMERICA

The field of child and youth care “has grown up in the service of others [as] a field that has straddled the boundaries between professions in child welfare, medicine, mental health and education” (Lochhead, 2001, p. 73). Surveying the origins of organized services provided to children and youth in North America provides a sense of historical context and highlights the variety of needs these developing services were designed to meet.

The roots of child and youth care work as a distinct field in North America have been traced through the development of institutional homes of the 1700s, camps and clubs of the early 1900s following the industrial revolution and growing immigration, and contexts of residential care, hospitals, and juvenile justice programs. It is “within these orphanages, industrial and training schools, residential schools, and community-based recreational services that child and youth care was born in North America” (Charles & Garfat, 2009, p. 19). The following four examples highlight the range of needs and opportunities for which communities were becoming aware:

- *YMCA (1850s)*: The Young Men’s Christian Association grew out of the need to provide healthy activities for young people following the industrial revolution. The first YMCA in North America was in Montreal, Quebec and the second was in Boston, Massachusetts, both of which opened in 1851. The YMCA also operated the first residential camp in North America when it opened Camp Dudley in New York in 1885.
- *Juvenile courts (1890s)*: The first juvenile court was established in 1899 in Cook County, Illinois. Behind this programmatic shift from detaining adults and children together, there was a growing understanding that children were different from adults and that the system had a responsibility to protect and rehabilitate juvenile offenders.
- *Boys and Girls Clubs (1900s)*: The Boys and Girls Clubs of America formed in 1906 based on the desire to provide young people “roaming the streets” with more positive alternatives to foster their development.
- *Boy and Girl Scouts (1910s)*: The goal of the scouting movements for both girls and boys is getting young people out into the community and nature. The Boy Scouts of America was incorporated in 1910 and reached one million members by 1925. Cub Scouts for school-age youth began in 1930 and Webelos for pre-teens began in 1954. Girl Scouts of the USA

began in Savannah, Georgia in 1912 with the belief that girls should be given the opportunity to develop physically, mentally, and spiritually.

These examples emphasize that early organized child and youth care services were focused on the unique needs of young people and shared the common factor of promoting their optimal development in a variety of ways. The way in which these early child serving organizations identified existing needs of young people and took action to promote their development serves as an important moment in the history of the field. As child and youth care continued to develop across practice settings, this focus on needs and opportunities unique to childhood and adolescence would continue to evolve.

RISE OF ORGANIZED CHILD WELFARE AND TREATMENT PROGRAMS

In the United States, a national campaign called The Children's Year of 1918–1919 was aimed at promoting the development of child welfare programs by state governments (U.S. Department of Labor, 1919). In a positive way, the goals of this initiative included increasing medical care for infants, increasing opportunities for healthy developmental play, and ensuring children stay in school. Not all of these goals were entirely altruistic, however, as keeping children in school also kept them out of the workforce and opened jobs for adults returning from military service in World War I.

In the residential and group care context, child and youth care grew substantially in the 1950s and 1960s. As residential care and treatment programs spread, more professionals began to understand it as a unique “holistic method that with the proper skill and adequate knowledge of human development could be used to teach, treat, and nurture troubled children” (Krueger, 1991, p. 77). Today, children with a range of trauma and other emotional and behavioral challenges are served by child and youth care practitioners who engage them in their daily lives in group care and community settings alongside other mental health and social work professionals.

PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES

Child and youth care practitioners are individuals who engage with young people in the context and complexity of daily life interactions to promote their optimal development. They serve in a variety of positions and practice settings across the spectrum of human services. Even though the field has experienced a growing clarity of purpose and definition, it is the deeper sense of “the level of service provided that justifies professional aspirations and status” (Becker, 2001, p. 359). This is perhaps the most significant

opportunity that exists for practitioners, namely that the field is dependent on providing quality services and outcomes and that individuals and organizations advocate for increased recognition from the community. Other resources available to the field include such things as education and training, professional associations, ethical codes, and a growing body of identified knowledge and skills.

While the progress and challenges of child and youth care in higher education have been previously discussed (Fusco, 2011; Krueger, 2002; Wisman, 2011), it is important to note a difference between systems in Canada and the United States. In Canada there are a variety of diploma and degree options available across the provinces. Both two and three year diplomas are offered with practicum experience integrated as a part of the process. The Child and Youth Care Educational Accreditation Board of Canada was formed in 2012 with the primary goal to establish quality standards for post-secondary education programs as well as increase recognition by licensing bodies, employers and the public. In the United States there are fewer higher education programs which focus on child and youth care. As a result, many entry-level practitioners come to their work with degrees in sociology or psychology. Preservice and ongoing training of the workforce is primarily dependent on individual child-serving organizations with a resulting wide range of quality and funding.

The Association for Child and Youth Care Practice was established in 1977 followed by the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations formed in 1986 (although some provincial associations trace their history from the 1970s). Together, these two associations have jointly sponsored an International Child and Youth Care Conference. In the fall of 2012, the 10th triennial of this conference will be celebrated. In the summer of 2013 the first Child and Youth Care World Conference is planned for St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador and is being designed to include representatives from around the globe.

The five-domain Competencies for Professional Child and Youth Work Practitioners (Mattingly, Stuart, & VanderVen, 2010) are gaining increased recognition as a core body of knowledge and skills for child and youth care. These competencies, based on the meta-analysis performed by the North American Certification Project of over one hundred child and youth care related education and certification programs, focus on five specific domains including professionalism, cultural and human diversity, applied human development, relationship and communication, and developmental practice methods. This body of knowledge and skills is used by a number of growing child-serving organizations to develop and support existing employee development plans, recruiting standards, and tools for performance evaluation. There are also promising opportunities for integration of these competencies into higher education as a means to better prepare practitioners for a variety of practice settings (Curry, Richardson, & Pallock, 2011). Using this body of

knowledge and skill to unite child and youth care as one field serving among multiple practice settings not only makes child and youth care the largest human serving profession in the world, but will increase the ability of the field to better advocate and influence education and development of policies related to the field (Curry, Schneider-Muñoz, & Carpenter-Williams, 2012).

The growing complexity of service delivery in today's world requires that practitioners are equipped with common guidance to address ethical dilemmas both proactively and when they arise. The Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals provides one source of ethical guidance and is organized around the five ethical responsibilities of the professional child and youth care worker: responsibility to self, responsibility to the child and family, responsibility to the employer, responsibility to the profession, and responsibility to the community or larger society. This code of ethics, which identifies itself as a living document and is currently under revision by the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice, is designed to provide guidelines for addressing ethical dilemmas within professional practice as well as offers employers and oversight agencies a means to set and maintain ethical standards and conduct.

MOTIVATIONS TO ADVANCE THE PROFESSION

As with many other established professions, child and youth care has a rich history, organized education and training, professional associations, an ethical code, and an identified body of knowledge and skills. These components provide a foundation on which the field is positioned to advance significantly in public recognition and the quality of service to communities across North America. At the same time, it is a concern that some feel pressure to pursue careers in more established professions such as social work or education. The increase of advocacy and involvement from professional associations, along with options for professional certification, may have the potential to contribute to an increased professional identity and belongingness for practitioners and thus prevent loss of potential workers to another professional field. More adequate salaries for practitioners and increased retention for employers are also areas of need and may prove to be related outcomes of increased professional identity.

However, the primary motivation for advancing the field must remain the benefits child and youth care offers to young people, their families, and the community at large. Child-serving organizations and individual practitioners have the responsibility to provide the high quality services that benefit young people. While there has been a growing clarity of the definition of child and youth care as a unique and integrating field that exists across a variety practice settings, more evidence of the impact of professionalization is needed as the field moves forward. This current developmental

stage of the field presents a unique opportunity for individuals and organizations to take responsibility to find new ways to optimize the development of young people and demonstrate the value of child and youth care to their own communities.

To capture a current sense of this opportunity across practice settings, the following panel discussion presents insights from experts in the field on the status and tensions the field is experiencing in this current phase of growth. The individuals represent practice settings from juvenile justice, foster care, residential care, and higher education. Included in the discussion are:

- Pam Clark, MSW, LSW, CYC-P, an adjunct professor at Indiana University–Purdue University and independent consultant for youth development and juvenile justice. Mrs. Clark is a Program Associate for the National Center for Youth in Custody and serves on the strategic planning group for the National Partnership for Juvenile Services.
- Mark Krueger, PhD, the Director of the Youth Work Learning Center, a research and education center for youth workers in the School of Continuing Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Dr. Krueger is a past president of the Association of Child and Youth Care Practice and has over 35 years experience in youth work.
- Heather Modlin, MSc, PhD (cand.), CYC-P, Provincial Director for Key Assets Newfoundland and Labrador, one of the largest providers of specialized foster care in the world. Mrs. Modlin is a past president of the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations and a founding board member of the Child and Youth Care Educational Accreditation Board of Canada.
- Karen VanderVen, PhD, professor emeritus in the Department of Psychology in Education at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. VanderVen has over 50 years of association with the programs in Applied Developmental Psychology and has received a number of lifetime achievement awards, most recently from the American Association of Children's Residential Centers in 2012.

There has been an increasing amount of energy and effort to advance the professionalization of child and youth care as a distinct field of practice. What do you hope is gained through this process?

Clark: Today, more than ever, child and youth workers in America are making a significant contribution to the development and rearing of our children and youth. Professionalizing the field of child and youth work is critical to ensuring an educated, well-trained workforce that can provide the highest quality programs and services to children, youth, and families. Professionalization affects how child and youth care workers feel about themselves and the work they do, the level of compensation available to them, and the support and respect afforded them by the American public. The field of child and youth work needs

and deserves the credibility and recognition that comes with professionalization and certification.

VanderVen: I hope ultimately that care work or developmental care work as I have previously referred to it (VanderVen, 1991, 1992, 1996), attains the status of a full profession and has as much respect and inclusion in the human service professions as others, both psychosocially and medically oriented. Furthermore, I think the child and youth care profession should be viewed as the integrating profession, that is, the one that considers its clients holistically and works to attain all needed supports and services so that the total experience of clients in their life space or milieu is experienced as an integrated whole.

Krueger: In general, my hope remains the same as when many of us worked together many years ago to form local, national, and international associations and/or collaborations for professionalization. This includes a continual improvement in the quality of care provided for children and youth through the development of a knowledge base, education programs, standards of practice, and associations of workers. Also, greater recognition of the powerful roles of child and youth care workers in the lives of children, youth, families and communities. Both increased incentives and career opportunities for child and youth care workers and networks for working together across borders and continents are vital as well.

Modlin: Ultimately, I hope we gain higher quality care for young people and families. The lack of standards for child and youth care practitioners has always distressed me. Everyone who works in the field knows how damaging it can be to pair uneducated, untrained, unsuitable and inexperienced workers with vulnerable young people, especially in residential care, and yet it still happens in organizations across North America all the time. Professionalizing the field won't address all of the issues in child and youth care, but it would certainly help. Even if it's just by enhancing the credibility of practitioners, by sending a message that this is an important job and you have to have certain credentials to be allowed to do it. What does it say about how much we value the young people and families when there are no standards about who can do the job? Leaving this up to individual practitioners and organizations is like playing Russian roulette with children's lives.

It seems that a lot of this work toward professionalization of the field has already been achieved. At what stage in the process do you think we are in at this point in time?

Krueger: Considerable progress has been made internationally in organizing workers for professional development, and in development

of curricula, standards of practice, and a knowledge base for child and youth care.

Modlin: I think we've made a lot of progress towards professionalism in the past twenty years. In Canada, the number of child and youth care education programs—diploma and degree—has really increased. Every province across Canada has at least one Child and Youth Care education program. Many organizations have high standards for practitioners, and I think that has also been increasing. The Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations, and the provincial Child and Youth Care Associations have all been looking at the issue of standards and professionalism, to varying degrees, for many years and some progress is being made. Dr. Carol Stuart of Vancouver Island University (formerly Ryerson) has definitely spearheaded a lot of this work in Canada. And there is a Child and Youth Care Educational Accreditation Board of Canada that is working on establishing an accreditation process for Child and Youth Care education programs. So, there's a lot going on!

VanderVen: I believe we are on the way with a long way to go still ahead. The existing competencies and certification programs are great advances as we fill in a large grid of populations served, settings in which services are provided, and forms of the service that are unique to child and youth care.

Clark: Not nearly enough has been done. The credentialing and certification of child and youth workers has been slow to gain momentum as well as the support of both practitioners and the organizations for which they work. This is at least partially due to the fact that funding to support professional level wages and opportunities for high quality, ongoing professional development for child and youth workers is often lacking.

Some would say that child and youth care work is more of a craft and not a profession. Is it important that child and youth care is seen as a profession?

VanderVen: I do believe in the professional model. I don't think viewing the work as a craft or candidate for apprenticeship training at this point is productive because the other fields and professions that it works with in the human service system do not follow this model. I do believe on the other hand that developmental care work can pioneer a blended model of a profession that recognizes artistry and personal style as well as competencies in defined knowledge, skills and attributes.

What more is needed if we are really going to see the field of child and youth care advance in significant ways?

VanderVen: Right now we need to have established levels of professional education from entry points through the doctorate. We also need recognition from other fields and disciplines serving all age and category

groups, for example, with persons with special needs, and of our special contribution of the integration of the life-space and daily experience and employment of a relational and activity-based approach.

Krueger: Much more work is needed to improve incentives and workforce practices that promote worker longevity and productivity. We are currently at a pivotal point in determining how and with whom we partner and organize ourselves for the future. New organizational structures and politics are needed to influence policies and practices that improve care for children and youth.

Clark: Child and youth care workers themselves need to embrace and promote certification, primarily by voluntarily becoming certified. Leaders in child and youth-serving organizations should seek to hire only those employees with an education, training, and/or experience that are specifically related to the work these employees will be asked to do. Families need to begin to demand evidence that those individuals working with their children and youth are well trained and qualified to do the work.

What about the diversity of practice settings in which child and youth care professionals work? Does this diversity present a challenge to professionalization?

VanderVen: We are getting well established in the child and youth area in group and residential care and increasingly in afterschool. This is great and the way to go. It's like a big puzzle with the pieces being increasingly filled in. We still need a much stronger foothold in early care and education, and direct care needs throughout the life course. Only when the work is delivered to people throughout the life course will this be a full profession. As well there is a great need for developmentally oriented caregiving for a mature population where right now training and certainly education are minimal and the approach is more medical (which of course is needed) than psychosocial (also greatly needed).

In the larger picture, what are the potential disadvantages or unintended consequences of professionalization of child and youth care workers?

VanderVen: I don't see any disadvantages. Some will say, "Well, this will lead to needing higher pay and it can't be afforded." If we don't move forward, the unacceptable compensation system for direct care practitioners will certainly remain in place as with the low status the field now has. I think we would want to continue a more open access into beginning the work than many other professions, but ultimately a person would need to participate in legitimate and nationally recognized training and education systems.

Krueger: We have struggled over time with the profession becoming self serving and losing focus on the goals to improve care. At times, effective

workers are left out, excluded, or disinterested in the work of developing a profession. As a field, we need to mentor new leaders and avoid becoming territorial. In general, more attention needs to be paid to what workers and communities are saying. Leadership development and a project focused approach to engaging workers and youth will be critical as the field advances.

Modlin: Here are my biggest concerns: (1) that child and youth care practitioners will become fully professionalized, with legislated requirements to practice, and no one will want to work in residential care anymore. And this leads to my next concern: (2) that there will be a whole new occupation of “child and youth care assistants” who will work in residential care because all of the professional practitioners consider it beneath them.

Clark: There have been few, if any disadvantages to professionalizing other fields such as social work, teaching, nursing, etc. Where certification/credentialing programs are currently in place, opportunities are being provided for experienced practitioners to be “grandfathered” in, so that they and their experience are not lost to the field. In addition, the more equitable wages that would likely come with professionalization would also help to keep experienced, well trained and qualified practitioners from leaving the field for better wages and benefits often available in other professions and workplaces.

What exactly do you feel is needed to move the field forward at this specific point in time?

Modlin: As you can probably tell, I’m partial to residential care. It’s where I began, and it’s where the field began. I think residential child and youth care is the most challenging and complex work in the field. This is where our most educated, most skilled, most experienced, and most gifted practitioners should be working, and I believe strongly in professionalizing child and youth care so that this can happen. We need to raise the status of residential care, within the field and in public, so that the practitioners doing this job, and doing it well, will be valued and appreciated for what they are doing. Of course, before this can happen, we also need to stop hiring unqualified people and running dysfunctional programs. It’s a bit of a chicken and egg thing, really. I think being aware of the potential dangers is key here. And that needs to come from us, within the field.

VanderVen: I think we need a major marketing and public relations effort to get much more information about the work and its importance into major media. As well we need much more advocacy at the legislative and standards setting level. I think we have more potential power than we think, but need to utilize it more effectively. We need to plan and think more strategically. If we are the generic and integrating profession, we are core and always needed. In tight times, use of specialties may have to be

reduced—but the on-line professionals are utterly essential. Ultimately, as I've said and contended for some years, professionalization of the field must focus on the nature of the work rather than on work performed with specific age groups and in specific settings. We also need to prepare people to function in a multiplicity of roles reflecting the core nature of the child and youth care work. That includes supervision, administration, teaching, training, advocacy, consultation, systems heads, and much more.

SUMMARY

The profession of child and youth care work has a rich and unfolding developmental history as a field of practice. At the same time there much more work to do, as Dr. VanderVen described: “we are on the way with a long way to go still ahead.” The contemporary challenge is “to draw upon our pioneering spirit and humanitarian traditions to carve out an alternative view of what it means to be a professional in our increasingly segmented society” (Powell, 1990, p. 185). This alternative view can be one that maintains at its center the value of young people and the passion and skills to engage them in ways that maximize their development and human potential.

The field has a significant opportunity to move forward. More evidence of the impact of professionalization on service quality is needed. Increased advocacy for public recognition and the integration of professional development structures is needed as well. The primary motivation for advancing the field must remain the benefits child and youth care offers to young people and their families. As the field grows in awareness of these opportunities and takes ownership of its own developmental process, a promising future can be created both for the field and the young people it serves.

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