

DO THEY REALLY NEED ANOTHER FRIEND? DUAL RELATIONSHIPS IN CHILD AND YOUTH CARE WORK

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When I recall my first year as a child and youth care worker at a transitional program for adolescents, the memories are bittersweet. However, this was also a period of profound growth and insight in working with youth.

One particular incident I remember involved a pregnant 17-year-old who was very bright. I'll call her Anne. Anne knew the rules and regulations better than most of the staff and didn't hesitate to "call" us on each and every decision or mistake. Headstrong, stubborn, and usually correct, Anne consistently confronted and irritated me and my co-workers. The problem really was that Anne was also intelligent, funny, and reminded me of myself at her age.

Anne and I talked easily and openly, and I prided myself on the level of rapport we had established. We spoke of our personal lives, exchanged gifts of adoration, and borrowed various items from each other. I even allowed Anne to practice driving – in *my* car.

One afternoon, just after arriving at work, I found myself in agreement with another staff member who had directed Anne to leave the office for using inappropriate language. As Anne walked out the door, it was obvious she was angry and hurt. Scowling at me she stated, "I thought you were my friend."

I thought about Anne's accusation. Friend? How could she label me that? Friends share intimate stories, friends give gifts to one another, friends borrow things and ... and ... it hit me. We were friends!

This incident with Anne began my concern and intrigue with dual relationships. A dual relationship is one in which a practitioner assumes more than one role with a client (e.g., as a therapist and a friend; as a care worker and an employer, and the like). A more formal definition is constructed by combining the meaning of dual - having a double character (Webster, 1981) and of relationship - a state of affairs existing between those who have relations or dealings. Thus a dual relationship would imply a double character in the relationships of those who have dealings.

While dual relationships are endemic in child and youth care work due to the nature of the job, they are also extremely problematic. Despite the naive conviction on the part of the practitioner participant that he or she is "helping" or meeting a profound need, dual relationships are not always in the best interest of the youth.

While there is clear agreement that sexual dual relationships are verboten, nonsexual, dual relationships are much more difficult to define,

govern, and avoid, although human services codes of ethics usually give some consideration to them. Thus this article will discuss nonsexual, dual relationships from an ethical perspective and as they might occur in child and youth work, provide a conceptual background to increase understanding of the dynamics of dual relationships, and discuss implications for child and youth care workers.

Dual Relationships and Ethics

One of the caveats against dual relationships is the fact that many professional codes of ethics deem them unethical. Admonitions against them are included in ethical standards of such professions as psychology (American Psychological Association, 1981) and counseling (American Association for Counseling and Development, 1988).

While the American Psychological Association offers little detail in defining dual relationships, it does state flatly that "dual relationships should be avoided (1981, Section 6:a). Other codes of ethics specify that dual relationships should be avoided but do not find them specifically unethical (National Association of Social Workers, 1984, Section II:4; American Association for Counseling and Development, 1988, Section B:11). Indeed, sexual intimacy with clients is the only definite, explicit unethical practice identified. Thus it is up to child and youth care workers to practice within the boundaries of their role.

Dual Relationships and Child and Youth Workers

Above and beyond ethical prohibitions, child and youth care workers are likely to "fall" into dual relationships when they assume additional roles as friends, employers, and/or advocates, among others. Examining the broader ethical issue of dual relationships in general, Kitchner (1988) noted that many such relationships violate some of the same fundamental principles that sexual relationships do. Three guidelines for differentiating among those dual relationships that have a high probability of being unethical and those that do not are as follows:

1. As the incompatibility of expectations between roles increases, so does the potential for harm;
2. As the obligations associated with different roles diverge, the potential for loss of objectivity and divided loyalty increases, and
3. As the power and prestige between the professionals' and consumers' roles increase, so does the potential for exploitation. As the risk of harm increases, so does the potential for the relationship to become unethical.

Most particularly for child and youth care workers, it appears that these principles come into play in situations regarding friendships and friendliness, gift giving, advocacy, and bartering and employment.

Friendship

Friendships and friendliness can sometimes be confused by youth. Being “friendly” is defined by Webster (1981) as “showing kindly interest and goodwill,” whereas friendship is defined as the “state of being friends.” These concepts may appear superficially to be synonymous, but when the dynamics of the client/worker relationship are scrutinized more closely, the differences between being “friendly” and having a “friendship” emerge. By definition both from the dictionary and descriptions of professional child and youth care work, a practitioner would appropriately be “friendly” – indeed, to show “kindly interest and goodwill.” A stance of friendship, on the other hand, can encourage unhealthy dependency and unrealistic hopes when such elements as worker self-disclosure and exchange of goods are brought in. Friendships are reciprocal and thus require the focus to the assistance to shift from one party to another, from one set of interests to another, and back again. In the case of the youth/worker relationship, this then makes the youth become obligated to staff. For example, in my account of my relationship with Anne, it is obvious that she felt obligated to consider the needs of her friend, a child and youth care worker.

Gift giving

The respective roles of the child and youth care worker and the youth may become unclear when workers accept gifts from youth. The danger is that the gift, either at the time of reception or later, will acquire a significance that will alter the helping relationship itself. For example, it may signify to the youth that the child and youth care worker now owes the youth something special in the way of care, in return. Other youth may feel that they have to “buy” workers’ devotion; that they are not worthy of it for themselves. Still others may see gift giving as a way of establishing a social relationship (i.e., a friendship with the worker). As evident in my relationship with Anne, gift giving and gift receiving are characteristic of such relationships.

Advocacy

Child and youth care workers appropriately serve as advocates for youth, often coaching them and providing support for them in stressful and challenging situations. But the issue arises as to what is “over-advocacy,” that is, so identifying with the “causes” of one particular youth that he or she may fail to be afforded the opportunity to learn new skills and insights through working through a particular situation. Furthermore, if one youth receives special intercession from one worker, then others may not be afforded equitable attention.

Bartering and Employment

Still another area in which there is potential for a dual relationship is employment and bartering. In employment, the child and youth worker might pay the youth to do special work, outside of the professional

relationship. In bartering, there is an exchange: each party does something for the other in exchange. If a child and youth worker pays a youth to do a certain task for the personal benefit of the worker, or offers a special service to the youth in exchange for one performed by the youth, then complex issues develop. What if the youth does not do a good job? What if the youth is not pleased with what the child and youth care worker has done for him or her in return? What about other children and youth in the setting?

The following example shows how dual relationships in child and youth care practice have the potential to be harmful to the youth.

An Extended Example in Child and Youth Care Practice

Arriving for my shift I noticed a girl, Sue, sitting on one of the couches in the main office. When I asked what, if anything, I could do for her, she stated that she was waiting for the other child and youth care worker, Pat, who was my partner for that shift. Not having paid attention to whom I was working with that day, I asked Sue how she knew that information. She confidently pulled a piece of paper from her pocket and showed me a handwritten schedule of Pat's hours for the two-week time period. While this concerned me, it didn't seem sufficient to confront Pat. When Pat arrived, I observed Sue's demeanor transform from lethargic to excited within seconds. I noticed the interactions between them. Sue remained in the office for most of the shift and hovered around Pat. When Pat ate lunch, Sue ate lunch. When Pat ran a group, Sue participated. When Pat went grocery shopping for the program, Sue went along. Basically Sue shadowed Pat for the entire shift.

The interactions between Pat and Sue were not inappropriate in and of themselves, and I was cautious about confronting either of them after just one day so I continued to gather information for the next few weeks. The same scenario repeated itself again and again. When I finally realized that much of Pat's time was spent with Sue, and particularly on what seemed nonproductive or growth-producing issues, I approached Sue and asked her about the relationship. Sue responded, "She's my friend ... she's gonna be the first person I have to dinner when I get my apartment, and we're gonna go to the movies..." When I asked Pat about these "plans," she admitted to the statements but added that she had no intention of following through, stating that Sue was "so clingy and needy... I feel sorry for her."

The subsequent process of shifting from friendship back to a constructive and positive professional relationship was, to say the least, difficult. Finally, Sue left the program with a general contempt for child and youth care workers.

Analysis of the Example

Pat acted as if she were a close friend to Sue. If it seems difficult to see how such a dual relationship can be harmful to the youth, one can consider the fact that Sue was indeed more vulnerable and needy than

Pat. Crossing of boundaries causes unrealistic fantasies that a worker will be an integral part of the youth's future life. When the relationship must be corrected, as occurred in this case, the client is left feeling abandoned and angry. Since abandonment may have been experienced by the client earlier in life, the restructuring or termination of a professional relationship that was offered as a tentative friendship may repeat these dynamics. Rather than making the youth feel stronger and better able to cope, the new abandonment lowers self-esteem and a sense of worthiness.

Implications for Child and Youth Care Workers

The following practices could be useful to help child and youth workers bring some clarity into the dual relationships issue.

1. Understand role and boundary issues in child and youth care work.

Child and youth care workers should be prepared through training and education to understand the nature and dynamics of dual relationships. The issue of dual relationships is particularly challenging because it is so easy to cross boundaries when the focus of the work in its professional function is indeed to develop a relationship and to be nurturing and caring. In fact, being professional in the context of child and youth care work, in which workers and youth spend long periods of time together in daily living, implies that the boundaries are less firmly drawn and actually appropriately so, than they are in more "office" centered human service professions. In the matter of advocacy, for example, the issues are subtle. If a worker over-identifies with a particular youth, taking on his "cause" to the exclusion of other youth and other concerns in his or her daily work, then this is moving into a dual relationship. If, on the other hand, the worker serves as a "coach" and support in helping the youth develop strategies for handling his or her own problems, then that is appropriate to the professional role.

Workers thus need to know how dual relationships can gradually creep into the primary function of their work and to recognize how, as superficially gratifying as dual relationships may appear, they actually can do harm by encouraging misuse of power on the part of the staff, and confusion, disappointment, and over-dependency on the part of the youth. Supervisors, too, need to be familiar with the concept of dual relationships and ways of encouraging their staff to handle interpersonal situations professionally.

2. Policies and procedures that discourage dual relationships.

While effective programs do not have an excess of policies that govern interactions between workers and clients, those that are directed to those areas where dual relationships might occur can be useful and healthy. For example, a policy about money and gift giving can give workers a precedent to avoid the dual relationship aspect of that activity, and encourage practices that provide ways for youth to get their needs met that do not require workers forming dual relationships. In the matter

of money, for example, youth can have opportunities to earn money through approved employment, and/or receive allowances. With reference to gifts, some consideration of how the agency or institution as a whole, or the staff as a group, can provide gifts for the youth as well as encourage gift making so that youth will be able to share with others, can be made.

3. *Team approach.*

A team approach is particularly pertinent in reviewing those situations in which dual relationships might be involved. For example, if a worker would like to employ a youth, his or her colleagues can help to examine the situation and its implications for not only the well-being of the youth, but also that of the other staff and youth in the setting.

Conclusion

Most if not all child and youth care workers act out of deep concern and care for the youth that come within their purview. More often than not, these youth present us with an overwhelming variety of unmet needs including, but not limited to, the need for acceptance, approval, and nurturing. It is difficult at best to distinguish between helping and enabling, fairness and friendship, and relationships that can be growth producing or harmful. It is for these reasons for the field of child and youth care work to continue to examine the dynamics of dual relationships and come up with practices that both meet needs of youth and avoid dual relationships.

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