

LEARNING THROUGH MISTAKES AND PRAYING THEY'RE NOT BIG ONES: ON THE JOB LEARNING FOR HOUSE PARENTS

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Over the years, much has been written about the importance of the role of youth workers (e.g., Krueger, 2004; Maier, 1987, 1995; Garfat, 2004), and considerable attention has been given to the competencies exhibited by workers across the nation. The youth work field is in a stage of rapid growth and transition, including adoption of national certification guidelines that have standardized competencies of practice (Mattingly, 2002; Thomas, 2002). With this growth comes an increasing need for education, training, and support of providers at all levels. Youth work is highly intuitive (VanderVen, K. 1992) and dependent on a person's ability to relate, communicate, and connect with youth in diverse contexts.

This article describes a study I conducted to investigate the role of house parents in group and residential care, and how they learn their practice. A comprehensive understanding of the professional knowledge that youth workers acquire, and how they transfer it into practice, is a timely necessity. Though funding for service is shrinking, the pressures to professionalize are increasing. Certainly the needs of youth remain high, and the societal issues they are facing are increasingly complex (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Cammarota & Ginwright, 2002; Rose, 2008). It is imperative to their success that youth receive care from competent and caring workers, who often learn through their own volition and trial and error the best way to do their jobs.

It is widely recognized that with proper training, support, resources, and supervision, workers can in fact improve their capacity to form healthy relationships and promote the development of youth as they engage in their daily interactions. Unfortunately, several of factors, including low pay, inadequate program funding, and demanding and nebulous working conditions, make it difficult to recruit and retain staff while helping them reach their potential. Further, high rates of turnover create human impermanence in programs that often work with youth who have already experienced considerable abandonment, making it difficult for them to have consistent positive attachment and interactions. Work has been done to mitigate such problems in the field as the lack of applicable professional knowledge and training relevant to standardization and credentialing. Through those efforts, a number of characteristics, practices, and attitudes related to competence, longevity, commitment, and satisfaction in youth work have been identified (Anglin, Denholm, Ferguson, & Pence, 1990; Beker & Eisikovits, 1992; Knorth, Van Den Bergh, & Verheij, 2002; Krueger, 1996; Mattingly, 2002). Many of these efforts have been part of a sixty-year, worldwide effort to professionalize the field.

Missing from much of the literature is the understanding of how youth workers in specific roles acquire their professional knowledge and put it into practice. Progress will be made in the development and enhancement of curricula and methods of teaching and preparing people for employment in the field when we gain a better understanding of what various youth work positions are like in real, specific contemporary circumstances. This study addresses that need by focusing specifically on the functions of house parents who work and live in residential host homes. This is a branch of youth work that blends foster parenting and short-term residential care.

The lack of available research related to this particular youth work position, makes it necessary to obtain a detailed account of the day-to-day functions and the contexts in which the work is performed. To this aim, an intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995; Zucker, 2001) was designed to provide an in-depth look at what it is to be house parents and how they learn the skills necessary for their occupation. Information was obtained from four principal sources: (a) agency documents, (b) administrative staff, (c) youth in care, and (d) house parents. Results of this study may inform education and preparation for youth workers in similar settings, because the case study itself provides insights that readers may be able to relate to and from them make their own generalizations (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2000).

Selecting the Case

The case in this instance is a specific set of house parents, James and Edan, who work in a host home located in a coastal university town in the state of Washington. With a population of roughly 70,000, the city is situated between two major metropolitan areas with populations of roughly 600,000—one 50 miles to the north and the other 85 miles to the south. The case was limited by a 12-week research timeline and by the physical host home itself. The home is administered by a nonprofit agency with a 30-year history of serving runaway and homeless youth through transitional housing, independent living programs, and counseling services. The agency also offers foster care services, a restorative justice program, family support, and education services.

The agency is adapting its services to fulfill its mission to serve homeless and runaway 12-17 year-old youth with ever-shrinking federal and local financial support—a challenge faced by many youth-serving organizations around the country. The host home model is a new approach for the agency and is considered by its administration to hold much promise for supporting youth in transition to fully independent living. The agency had just received its license to operate the host home at the time this study was being planned. James and Edan had been hired and were beginning to provide services after Edan participated in 30 hours of foster parent training to meet the basic minimum standards for licensure—which was the only mandatory training throughout their first year of service. The agency was eager to

serve as the site for this study because there was a desire to understand more about what the functions of house parents entail, how they should be trained, and how they should be supervised and supported. The host home opened 5 months before my first visit.

James had 2 years of prior experience working with teenage youth in a transitional living program. Additionally, he had gained experience working with youth in various field placements throughout his undergraduate education. Edan had limited prior experience working with youth, having served as a student-teacher for an alternative high school for roughly 9 months. James holds a BA degree in Human Services. Edan has an interdisciplinary BA degree in Art History. James and Edan had been married for five years, were 34 and 27 years old respectively, and had a 3-year-old daughter, Beatrice at the time of the study.

During the 3-months of the study, I conducted fieldwork at key times throughout each week, including observations during weekday evenings, when youth returned from school or other coordinated daytime activities such as day camps. This was a time when youth would transition to meals and free-time activities. Observations were also conducted during weekday mornings, when youth were waking up and preparing to go to school, as well as weekend mid-day and evenings, when youth were engaged in social and learning activities with James, Edan, and Beatrice. Additionally, James and Edan were observed at times when youth were not present, when they engaged in administrative functions and "behind the scenes trouble-shooting." Observing each of these significant parts of the days provided a well-rounded view of the workweek.

Results

Defining the Job

Throughout the study, there were discrepancies in the descriptions of the functions of house parents, depending on the source: agency documents, host-home administration, youth in care, house parents, and personal observation. This lack of consensus and clear awareness of what it truly means to be a house parent supports the initial purpose of the study: to shed light on a burgeoning field for a better, more complete understanding of the role and the preparation needed to succeed in the position.

To begin, the agency's official job description of a house parent is itself simple and generalized, not providing detail of what the position entails (Appendix A). The lack of detail regarding the functions of the job is not unique to this agency. Child and youth care work has historically been described in general terms. It is frequently described as service for children and youth in out-of-home and out-of-school care, or simply, as stated by Maier (1987), "being equal to, but unlike being a parent" (p. 187).

The position is dynamic, with a complex dispersion of activities and services performed on any given day. The house parents described the functions of their

work. From a long list of descriptors of the job, six main functions were identified, including meeting basic needs, providing emotional support, providing academic support, linking to the community, role modeling, and case management (Appendix 2). The functions and necessary skills are similar to those found in previous literature related to professional development needs of youth workers in general (Krueger et al., 1999; Stuart, 2001; Zeldin et al., 1995).

There are various educational backgrounds desirable for house parents, including human services, social work, youth and family work, education, and psychology. The consensus among the house parents and administrative staff is that a bachelor's degree granted by an accredited college or university would provide an essential base knowledge. However, the agency considers this desirable education but not required. These minimal requirements do not align with the extensive descriptions of necessary abilities shown in Appendix 2. James and Edan said that learning the various functions of their job occurs in both formal and informal settings, but they said that the learning from informal settings is more important than formal. While there is a perceived need to have academic experience in any of the wide range of education expressed above, James and Edan said an academic institution is not able to teach them how to do their work.

James said his human services degree prepared him for some of the general elements of the work and particularly in understanding the various systems he is now working within. Edan said that parts of the foster parent training had been helpful, especially such skills as behavior modification and handling conflict. However, they agreed that they have not received enough training, and that it is difficult to access due to scheduling. Even with the positive experiences James and Edan had in obtaining skills in formal education at the university and in continuing education workshops, they said that those skills are best learned through experience, use of reflection, and supportive supervision. When I asked how they learned to do their job James said, "Trial and error. Lots of error. We need to do the work and learn from it, you know?" Edan said, "Yeah and we do a lot of reflection and that really helps. We purposely take the time to dissect everything and think about and talk about different ways we could do things, you know?"

James also said, "Sometimes I think it would be so helpful to have something like a support group, where we could corroborate with other people who are experiencing this stuff, too, you know? I mean that's how you learn this stuff. You do it, you talk about it, you try out different approaches, and every kid is different, every day is different, so you need to be a mechanic one day and a psychologist the next. It's a variety for sure." Edan said, "Yeah, you know, it's even cathartic to just have these conversations with you, I mean it helps us get it out there and talk about our feelings and what is working or not working."

Regarding the significance of on-the-job training and learning by doing, they emphasized the significance of having a support mechanism in place, whether it is with a skilled supervisor who can give professional advice, or with peers who

are performing similar work. In both instances, James and Edan said they gained invaluable professional development through debriefing and reflection.

The notion of experiential learning, which James and Edan frequently referred to as useful for their learning, is not a new one. Indeed, there is an extensive literature base related to experiential knowledge dating back more than 100 years. The considerable work that has been done investigating transfer of learning through use of experiential practice lends credibility to the explanations from James and Edan that the most common method of acquiring applicable professional knowledge is by doing the work under the guidance of a supportive supervisor. The diverse range of work performed requires different skill-sets, characteristics, and abilities. With practice, ongoing reflection, and supportive supervision, the house parents said they were able to develop as professionals.

With such a variety of functions of house parents, there is a wide range of skills needed to perform them. While there are some general skill-sets that are vital to youth work, such as the ability to communicate well with a diverse population or engage in a variety of activities, there are others that are more specific to a particular function of their job, such as household budgeting and financial management. For the purpose of my study, in order to identify how James and Edan learned the necessary skills, it was helpful to distinguish different skill-sets. Which resulted in two categories: one related to case management and organizational skills and the other related to interpersonal and relational skills. This categorization of youth work has previously been referred to by Maier (1987) as “indirect or direct work with children” (p. 189).

Indirect Skills

An important aspect of the day-to-day functions of house parents includes indirect care through case management. Within this function of the job is the ability to do such things as write reports to administration or to current and potential funding sources, to manage and articulate outcomes of services, to create and manage an operational budget, and to communicate with outside systems and agencies. This includes monitoring and assuring that each youth is receiving needed outside services. Additionally, skills associated with maintaining accurate and up-to-date, confidential records are important, requiring a combination of writing and organizational skills. Much of the indirect care equates to preparation for direct service, such as planning a day’s or week’s events, scheduling household activities, and obtaining resources that will make it possible to engage directly with youth.

Maintaining a sense of order and organization in the home is important because numerous schedules are kept related to each resident’s needs. Frequently each of the youth attends different schools and is involved in different nonschool-related activities and services. Each youth has different service needs, and visitation schedules with friends and family members are rarely in sync from one child to the next. This requires strict monitoring of schedules and close attention to transportation needs, as can be seen in the following excerpt from a discussion with James.

It was 6:45 AM, and the sounds of a blow dryer and girls talking could be heard from upstairs, where there were two female residents getting ready for school. James was quickly eating a bowl of cereal after giving the girls a fifteen minute warning:

So now, like I need to drive one [of the girls] out to Mt. Barker, and then the other way out to Burlington. It's going to be like a two-hour round trip. No, more like two and a half, since there are no major roads connecting the two. I will be driving through farm country. I am trying to figure out the best way to do it, but there is no good way.

I come home and try to get something done around here, but I only have about an hour and a half really before I need to go back out and pick them up. Well, at least I only need to pick up one of them today, but it's still a pain in the butt. But then, oh yeah, we have to get Amy to her counseling appointment by 3:15, Stacie has a Doctor's appointment at 4:00, and Edan was supposed to take Beatrice to a friend's house for a play-date at 5:00, but I don't know if that will happen.

I have so much to do. I just don't know when I can get it done. When the kids go to bed, I guess. Oh, yeah [laughing], and I am supposed to have a meeting with [a case worker] in between, and somehow we need to get some groceries. Edan has to be here because we are supposed to get a new boy today, or maybe tomorrow. All in a day's work.

This excerpt sheds light on an often frenetic schedule. Keeping track of information about the house and its residents, the comings and goings of everyone, the organization's requirements and deadlines, and myriad other specific tasks and details requires the house parents to be highly skilled at planning and organizing. Without strong organizational skills it seems unlikely that the job could be done well. As a case worker, Julia, put it:

You have to be very organized [to be a house parent]. But, yet you have to be flexible. I mean if you are a very organized, methodical person who can't deal with last minute change, it's not for you. You have to be able to focus with a lot of different people's schedules. You [may] have three kids at different schools, one has a probation meeting and one has track, and one has a counseling appointment. You have to be able to multi-task in many different ways in order to be able to do all those things at once. Yes, I guess it's an interesting mix of organized and being comfortable with chaos. Organized chaos, maybe.

Julia's perception from the outside, nearly mirrors James' perspective as someone performing the services.

Direct Skills

Many of the functions performed involve direct engagement with youth, which requires a variety of interpersonal skills. Direct engagement includes communicating with them and providing emotional support and care, role modeling or mentoring, and building relationships. The principal functions of house parents require the ability to understand, be comfortable with, and otherwise relate to youth from diverse backgrounds. The ability to communicate with diverse populations—from adults in positions of authority to youth in need of support—is an important requirement for the position. Like most youth work occupations, the capability to engage youth in activities is an important skill, which relates directly to the ability to connect interpersonally (Baizerman, 1996; Fewster 1990; Garfat, 1995; Krueger, 1998).

Skills associated with giving genuine care and support to youth, including use of appropriate touch and affection is imperative in creating and sustaining a nurturing environment in the home. Given the intimacy of the house, and the bond that occurs, it is important for them to have the skills necessary to balance emotions and set and maintain professional boundaries. There is often an emotional struggle occurring as they simultaneously provide genuine care and professional distance (Markiewicz, 2005; Mattingly, 2002). Indeed, the job is affecting, and requires people who have the skills necessary to understand and cope with their own and other people's emotions (Cottle, 2003; Deikman, 1982; Fewster, 1990; Garfat, 1991; Goffman, 1959; Krueger, 1995, 1998; Markiewicz, 2005; Rosenberg, 1979). The interpersonal skills associated with the position are of utmost importance, and as the house parents' supervisor stated, "The interpersonal skills are critical, and may be the ones that are the hardest to teach. You got it or you don't. Maybe you get better with time."

How Skills are Learned

The data related to how house parents learn their work revealed themes centering on a combination of three methods: (a) experiential learning and use of reflection, (b) supportive supervision and, (c) classroom instruction, or formal education, which was described as largely a "foundational knowledge-base." The experiential learning that takes place while on the job was considered to be the most prudent way James and Edan learned to be house parents. Supportive supervision was considered one area that has great potential for supporting learning. Formal workshops and classroom education were also considered useful, but only when among peers, and with immediate applicability.

Experience Based Learning and Reflection

The most apparent method for James and Edan to acquire knowledge was through practice itself. Time and time again the house parents discussed the significance of trial and error, of learning from mistakes, and the sense that, you just got to do the work "to get the hang of it." Considering the empirical support for the usefulness of experiential learning in the literature, together with my personal experience

learning while working in the youth work field, I was not at all surprised to find this method of learning emerge as a theme in this study. What struck me, however, was the adamancy with which experiential learning was advocated--nearly to the extent of discounting all other forms of learning. The data obtained consistently pointed to the significance of learning through a purposeful series of planning, acting, and reflecting. This mode of learning is in line with early notions of experiential and action-learning principals, including those of Kurt Lewin (1946), who suggested a learning process as, "a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action" (pp.34-35). Throughout my study, the house parents obtained what Lewin (1946) referred to as "fact-finding about the result of the action" through times of reflection.

Reflection is commonly considered an important aspect of experiential learning (Kenny, Ralph, & Brown, 2000; Magnuson & Burger, 2001), and linked to John Dewey (1933), who argued that "experience without reflection can just as well be miseducative as educative" (in Magnuson & Burger, 2001, p.14). Indeed, James and Edan considered their acts of reflecting as a formal extension of their workday. In other words, reflection was a purposeful method used to replay the happenings of their days, to work together to identify what did or did not work well, and to use that information to adapt plans for the following day. This reflection process began for them as a "therapeutic way to calm [their] nerves at the end of the day" when they first started working at the host home. They realized how much they benefited from this purposeful analysis of their daily happenings and implemented it as a regular part of their planning and evaluation. James and Edan spoke of reflection as a way to make sense of what they are doing and to articulate what they are experiencing, which seemed to support them in making adjustments to how they worked with individual youth, and managed the house as a whole (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

Formal Education

The house parents and the administration staff all expressed the belief that continuing education workshops regarding adolescent behavior management and related topics are useful, when attended with people who work in similar situations and can relate to the work performed, and when the information is clearly applicable. This is consistent with findings from others who have investigated transfer of learning (Curry, 2001; Curry & Rybicki, 1995; Daley, 1999; Kagan, 1983; Zigler & Gordan, 1982). In particular, the findings from this study connect to the literature of Dale Curry and Henry Maier, relating to the transfer of learning from educational settings to the workplace and to the notion of first- and second-order change (Curry, 2001; Maier, 1986). Paralleling what has been stated by Curry (1997, 2001), Curry and Cardina (2003), and Maier (1986, 1987, 1995), this study has indicated a high degree of importance placed on achieving second-order change through experiential knowledge and immediate, measurable use in the host home.

Closing Thoughts

The purpose of my study has been to provide a better understanding of the work lives of house parents, and how they learn their profession. Similar detailed understanding of the functions and requirements of youth workers in different contexts is also needed. Furthermore, the results of these studies should be made available to youth workers and youth-serving organizations around the country. While this is a grand and long-range undertaking, the effort will assist the field in its goal of professionalizing and better understanding the specific occupations that it encompasses. For a field that is defining itself, it will be helpful to have a baseline understanding of the different specific functions it provides.

As the youth work field continues to develop, this study and others like it may be used to better understand the context of the range of services it provides, and how youth workers in each of these areas can best be taught and supported in their craft. When well-informed programs are being developed and run by well-prepared youth workers, youth will be well served. The benefits associated with better educated, qualified workers translate into better quality care for youth, and lends help to the current efforts to professionalize the field of youth work.

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APPENDIX 1, HOUSE PARENT JOB DESCRIPTION

Host Home Parents Job description

In general terms, host home parents are responsible for the care and supervision of safe home youth aged 12-17 who are placed in the home. They also are responsible for supporting the Safe Home Treatment Plan that has been developed by the youth and safe home therapist. It is also expected that host home parents will support and cooperate with transition and aftercare plans for youth as they leave the home. Host home parents are expected to know, understand, and adhere to program policies and to ask program staff (safe home therapist or program manager) for clarification when it is needed.

Qualifications:

1. Host home parents will complete the DCFS pre-service training and be willing to continue training on an ongoing basis as it is offered by program staff of the agency.
2. Host home parents will reside in a Washington State licensed foster home.
3. Host home parents will have an automobile, a current driver's license, adequate auto insurance, and enough working seatbelts for the youth in their care.

4. Host home parents will have an interest and ability to work with at-risk and challenging youth on a full-time basis. This will have been demonstrated by at least one year experience working with at-risk youth and families.
5. Host home parents will be employees of Northcoast Youth Support and as such will be eligible for all benefits applicable to that position.

Duties:

1. Participate in a minimum of 30 hours of training annually. Training required annually includes Child Protective Services Mandated Reporting, Suicide Prevention and Assessment, Cultural Diversity, Emergency Preparedness, Field Safety.
2. Provide basic care and supervision for up to four youth at a time who are in placement. This includes:
 - Room and Board—healthy, nutritious meals and snacks
 - Clear limits and house rules
 - Transportation as needed by youth
 - Medical, dental, and health care coordination as possible in a short-term stay
 - Clothing
3. Work as integral members of the safe home team to:
 - Provide a home atmosphere in which the youth may work on their treatment plan or process the family crisis that resulted in their placement in the host home.
 - Provide a sense of stability in the home in order to facilitate smooth transitions for youth moving in and out of placement.
 - Keep program staff, and especially the safe home therapist and the crisis and counseling program manager informed of all significant events and/or incidents as they occur with any of the youth in placement. This may need to take place on a daily basis, or at least as often as is deemed necessary.
 - Participate in formal and informal meetings with a youth and the safe home therapist regarding their treatment plan as deemed helpful by either the host home parent or the safe home therapist.
 - Participate in planning and following through with enhancement activities for youth in placement, such as swimming, basketball, art, community services, and any other appropriate activities.
 - Support youth in placement to participate in their current school programs.

Work with the Community:

1. Represent NYS in a professional manner and be willing to educate community providers about the Host Home program.
2. Foster and encourage community involvement for themselves as well as youth in placement.
3. Adhere to the confidentiality policy regarding youth in placement and their family.

I agree with the duties as outlined above. In addition, I understand that I may ask the NYS Licensor or safe home program staff if I have any questions regarding these duties.

Host Home Parent(s)

Date

APPENDIX 2

House Parent Functions, and How They Are Learned

Function	Examples/Skills Needed	Examples of How Skills Are Learned
<p>Provide Shelter and Meet Basic Needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutritious Meals • Transportation • Household Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shopping - Cleaning - House Maintenance • Budgeting (Household) • General 'Parenting' • Entertainment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social Events - Family Activities • Discipline Techniques • Administration of Meds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience and Practice • Trial and Error • Workshops • College Courses/Degree: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Psychology - Social Work - Human Development - Human Services - Nursing - Physical Education - Youth Work • Reflection • Consultation (Peers and Supervisors)
<p>Provide Emotional Support and Care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening • Counseling • Affection • Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College Courses/Degree: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Psychology - Social Work - Youth Work • Mentorship From Supervisor
<p>Provide Academic Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College Courses/Degree: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Education - Teaching
<p>Advocate and Link to the Community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents - Schools - Outside Agencies - Probation/Parole - Counselors - Medical Providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College Courses/Degree: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Psychology - Human Services - Youth Work - Social Work • Experience and Practice • Trial and Error
<p>Role Model and Mentor</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging with Family • Conflict Resolution • Anger Management • Decision Making • Healthy Relationships • Cultural Competence • Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience and Practice • Trial and Error • College Courses/Degree: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Human Development - Human Services - Youth Work • Workshops
<p>Provide Case Management</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report Writing • Record Keeping • Budgeting (Program) • Planning & Coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College Courses/Degree: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social Work - Nonprofit Management • Workshops