

OUR HOPE FOR HEALING: THE ROLE OF THE CHILD AND YOUTH CARE WORKER IN HELPING SEXUALLY ABUSED CHILDREN

Toby Owen

All Church Home for Children

ABSTRACT: Many children in residential facilities have been sexually abused. Within these agencies child and youth care workers are the primary caretakers for the children. Oftentimes, these workers have received little training or guidance for helping sexually abused children. In order to help these children overcome a history of abuse and lead a normal life, child and youth care workers need effective and practical training. This paper will give practical ideas and information that can be applied to their working environment. The principles of safety, support, and education will be discussed as important steps for the child and youth care worker to utilize in helping the sexually abused child.

Key words: treatment of sexual abuse, sexually abused children, child and youth care work

INTRODUCTION

Across the country thousands of children live in alternative settings such as residential treatment centers, children's homes, emergency shelters, foster homes, group living environments, wilderness camps, and a host of other locations. Many of the children in these situations have experienced some form of abuse or neglect ranging from mild to severe. Sexual abuse is one of the most prevalent forms of abuse a child placed in out-of-home care has experienced. It is estimated that 66-75% of children in these settings have been sexually abused (Plach, 1993). Once these children are in care, it is the responsibility of the facility to expedite the healing process. In most residential facilities, the persons most directly involved in helping children heal are the child and youth care workers (CYCW).

Often these workers are only minimally trained in caring for sexually abused children, and rarely are they equipped to facilitate the healing process. Most persons in the child-care field believe that helping sexually abused children is the responsibility of the therapist and not the CYCW. Many believe that their role is preparing meals, washing clothes, and handling discipline. They don't have the time or skills necessary to plan and execute an elaborate therapeutic treatment plan for each child. However, CYCW are the ones who establish lasting relationships with the children and who can have the most impact on the child's future. With the amount of time and energy CYCW put into helping children, they indeed can do much to help sexually abused children heal (Long, 1996).

Research has not recently addressed the issue of training CYCW to aid in helping sexually abused children heal. Topics such as institutional sexual abuse (Bloom, 1993; Bloom, 1994; Braga, 1993), assessment of sexually abused children in residential treatment (Zimmerman, & Dillard, 1994), staff training needs about child abuse and sexual abuse (Krenk, 1984; Nevin, 1993), and safety issues concerning sexuality (Schimmer, 1993; Ross & Villier, 1993; Caldwell & Rejino, 1993) have been addressed at length. All of these topics are essential and should be incorporated into the training program. However, there is a need to equip CYCW to effectively facilitate healing. This paper will give practical ideas to use in helping sexually abused children. The specific techniques and ideas presented can be used for both children and adolescents, male and female. How they are implemented will vary depending upon the age and sex of the child but the ideas are universal and can be used by all CYCW. A description of child and youth care agencies and workers will be given to help understand their role, and the principles of safety, support, and education will be discussed as important steps for the CYCW to utilize in helping the sexually abused child heal.

Description of Child and Youth Care Agencies and Workers

Residential facilities are agencies that provide continual care to children and youth. These facilities vary in the types of programs and services they offer. These programs can range from serving children in foster care to youth who have a criminal record and require constant supervision. Another difference among many residential facilities is the length of time a youth may reside at the facility. Some facilities require payment in order for a child to receive their services and others only accept what a family can afford. Each facility may offer a variety of services to children and youth ranging from recreational programs, educational assistance, medical support, college tuition reimbursement, facility sponsored school, and spiritual guidance. These differences in programs and services offered occur because of the vast needs of children. With the differences that exist, it allows for a greater number of children to receive the assistance and help that they need (Plach, 1993).

One constant theme that must be present in these types of agencies is a strong desire and commitment to helping children overcome a variety of issues. Equipping CYCW to help sexually abused children would be useless if the agency, itself, was not geared toward helping the children. It should be mentioned that the responsibility of helping these children does not depend on the child and CYCW but rather on the facilities' commitment. Yet the CYCW have the best opportunity to help the children work through their past abuse and teach them new skills. They are the ones who can help the children far more than any other person within the agency. Therefore, it must be a joint effort. The agency must be responsible for laying the foundation upon which the CYCW can build.

People who apply as CYCW come from a variety of backgrounds. In one study, the CYCW of a particular agency ranged in age from 24 to 58. Their educational level varied from a high school diploma to a college degree. Types of study and work experience ranged from: work with the deaf, elementary and early childhood education, a former caseworker, a naval officer, and an electrical engineer (Kirby, 1987). This make up of CYCW is very common among all residential facilities. Many of them have little or no experience, skills, or training in working with sexually abused children. Therefore, it is vitally important that they receive some practical training. Considering the variety of backgrounds and numerous responsibilities that CYCW have, they need practical knowledge rather than in-depth theories. So with specific training, CYCW can have the skills they need to help sexually abused children.

If CYCW are adequately trained and put the techniques into practice, sexually abused children in residential facilities can and do recover from sexual abuse. A study conducted by the University of California at Los Angeles concluded that with the right kind of help, most children who say they have been sexually abused eventually recover from the resulting fear, anxiety and behavioral problems, even though recovery may take months or even years (Austin American-Statesman, 1990). In addition to professional and community help, the children in the study who recovered had supportive caretakers who spent significant amounts of time with them. These caretakers had the attitude that, together, they could overcome the abuse and then took steps to do so. Conversely, children with caretakers who avoided talking about and dealing with the abuse, did not recover (Austin American-Statesman, 1990). This study is encouraging for both children and CYCW; it gives hope that sexual abuse can be overcome. Within the field of child and youth care work a variety of opinions, beliefs, and debates exist concerning sexual abuse recovery. Regardless of where one stands in this discussion the involvement of caregivers is an essential part in any person's recovery from sexual abuse. For thousands of children, CYCW play a tremendous role in helping them overcome many aspects of the abuse (James, 1989).

Establishing & Maintaining Safety

A foundational goal in order for sexually abused children to heal is establishing and maintaining safety. They must feel totally safe and not in danger of being rejected or hurt (Babley & King, 1990). This safety not only includes physical safety but sexual, emotional, and psychological. Establishing safety must begin with the agency in which the children live and where the CYCW perform their duties. The agency must have three factors for a safe program: a safe environment, a structured program, and therapeutic discipline procedures. Most often children entering residential facilities have not come from a safe environment. Lack of food, chaotic home environments, various types of abuse, and unpredictability, probably characterize these households (Plach, 1993). Therefore, it is up to the

residential facility to provide this structure, predictability and therefore, safety. The child must feel safe and know that no physical, sexual, or emotional abuse will occur (Caldwell & Rejino, 1993).

In order for a child to feel safe, the facility must take several steps to make the living environment safe. The first way is to have a safe physical structure. Wherever the children live, whether it is a home, building, group home, shelter, or camp, it must be and feel safe. There should be no hazards such as broken glass, water, electrical, or fire dangers. A safe facility should have adequate space for each resident, clean living quarters, working appliances, and a variety of other things. Having a well-maintained and functional living environment shows the children that they are important (Caldwell & Rejino, 1993). The second step in establishing a safe environment is to have CYCW present at all times. Disruptive and dangerous behaviors often occur between children in these facilities and having CYCW present will help control these behaviors, which demonstrates to the children that the living quarters will be safe. Thirdly, there must be strict guidelines and procedures for dealing with disruptive and dangerous behaviors. It gives security to the other children, the disruptive child, and the staff. If not handled correctly, these behaviors can lead the children to believe that the environment is out of control and therefore unsafe (Schaefer & Swanson, 1988). When providing a safe environment for children and youth, having a safe physical structure, ongoing adult presence, and mechanisms for dealing with dangerous and disruptive behaviors, will send a strong message to the sexually abused child that their environment is safe and that they are cared for.

The second step for providing safety is by establishing a structured environment within the residential setting. Structure provides the children with a sense of consistency and predictability. Structure is built through the daily routines of the facility, how inappropriate behaviors are managed, and the number of staff working with the children. Any form of alteration in these components can breed a feeling of lack of control. When a structured living environment is present, children will begin to feel safe, and for the sexually abused child, it will help lay the foundation for healing to take place (Schaefer & Swanson, 1988). Along with structure, the residential facility must establish a detailed procedure for discipline. Appropriate discipline should never be used to punish but to teach. The goal of discipline should be to give new information. As one author puts it, our discipline should always be measured against the question, "How does this contribute to the development of new experiences and a new view of self?" (Durrant, 1993, p. 101). Teaching optional behaviors is very important for children in residential care. Usually they have never learned appropriate behaviors, and teaching rather than punishing will allow the child the opportunity for growth. The discipline techniques should always help the children make changes in their behavior that will allow them to lead more successful lives. Therapeutic ways of dealing with behaviors are key in helping the sexually abused child heal. It shows

the children that they are in a safe and caring environment because the discipline measures are not intended to hurt but rather to teach appropriate behaviors (Durrant, 1993).

When the residential facility has established a safe, structured, and disciplined environment, the CYCW can begin to facilitate the healing process. The initial guidelines for providing safety are up to the residential facility. However, the responsibility of executing and maintaining them is up to the CYCW. One of the most important steps in providing safety is letting the child feel that the CYCW are safe. This is very crucial in helping sexually abused children. If they do not feel secure around their caretakers they will not seek help from them. Establishing CYCW safeness can be difficult. It can take a long time for children to feel protected. The children probably have expectations that all adults want to hurt them, even CYCW. In fact, most sexually abused children feel that adults in general want to have sex with them. This has often been the case with adult survivors of sexual abuse (CYC-online, 2001). It is essential that the children feel that the CYCW will not physically, sexually, emotionally, or psychologically abuse them.

For CYCW to establish their safeness, they must be consistent in the way they work with the children. This congruity must show in the way they play with the children, show affection, conduct daily routines, and most importantly, how they discipline them. If a CYCW is unpredictable in disciplining the children, trust and safety will never be established. On a daily basis CYCW have to address negative behavior exhibited by the children. Staying calm, not taking the child's behavior personally, and giving logical consequences will demonstrate safety in regards to discipline. A CYCW can demonstrate proper affection by giving side hugs, high fives, or a pat on the shoulder. It is vitally important that children know how a CYCW will react. They must always try to be therapeutic in the way they respond. However, CYCW will make mistakes. If they do not respond therapeutically to a situation, they should learn from their mistakes and try not to do it again (Krueger, 1988).

The next type of safety that must be established is sexual safety. Very rarely in residential care is sexual safety talked about. In most cases there are rules established for sexual acting out, but being open and honest about sexuality is not prevalent. For sexually abused children, sex is a big issue. They have misguided information about sex and tend to think about it more than the average child (Hindman, 1989). If CYCW will take the initiative to be honest and open about sexuality and willing to teach the children appropriate facts about sex, all the children in their care will benefit (Duehn, 1990).

In establishing sexual safety, several elements must be included. First of all, these rules should not be instituted after the children bring up the issue. It is important for the CYCW to bring up the issue beforehand and thus have control over it. Many times the children feel that sex should not be discussed. However, if CYCW discuss the topic it will not be a secretive

issue, and the children will know that the CYCW are comfortable and confident with the subject. The best way to explain the sexual safety rules is in a natural setting where other types of rules are discussed. Children need to know that sex will not be treated differently than any other subject. If family meetings are used to discuss other types of issues and rules, then sex rules should also be discussed in this fashion. Discussing them in a normal setting will send the message that talking about sex is standard (Duehn, 1996).

The best way to begin the family meeting is by talking about other rules, and then introducing sexual rules the same way any other rules are discussed. For example, a CYCW could begin the meeting saying something like, "Tonight we have a few things to discuss. We need to review the study hall procedures, being the boss of our hands rule, and our nightly activity. Let's start by discussing what it means to be the boss of our hands, does anyone know what this rule means?" Discussing it this way shows that it is a common subject and that CYCW are concerned and willing to discuss sexual safeness. In the meeting, the children need to know that they are not there to satisfy the sexual needs of anyone, adults included. Many times sexually abused children believe they are only sexual beings and therefore some adults or children want sex from them. Building upon the previous example, a CYCW could respond with something like the following: "We all know that being the boss of our hands means no hitting, or taking other's belongings, but it also means we're not allowed to touch other people's private areas. We expect all of the kids to follow this rule and all of the adults who take care of you will also follow this rule. We won't touch you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable." Another important fact children need to know is that their body belongs to them, and that no one has the right to touch them. They also do not have the right to touch other people's sexual areas (James & Masjleti, 1983).

Children must be told that if someone is trying or has touched them they should immediately tell an adult they trust. The children must know that it is important for CYCW to know if someone has touched them so they can make the facility a safe place (Hagans & Case, 1988). If sexual touching takes place in a group, the children must also tell an adult. Many times when a group of children are acting out sexually, intimidation or fear may become a hindrance for telling. If a peer threatens a child, it will be much harder for them to disclose the abuse. However, the children must be told that no one will be allowed to hurt them and that telling will help the CYCW to make the living environment a safe place (Duehn, 1990).

Even though strict rules and boundaries about sex are being established, the children need to know that they will not go untouched. The CYCW want to show affection to each child but they only want to demonstrate what the children are comfortable with. The children should be allowed to tell the CYCW or show them what type of affection

puts them at ease. For some, a hug or arm around the shoulder will be appropriate, but for others only a handshake or high five will be adequate. The CYCW must not assume that all children want the same type of affection. If the wrong type of affection is given, it could bring back feelings or thoughts of past abuse. The CYCW should simply ask each child or youth what type of affection they feel most comfortable with. Doing this will communicate safety and respect for the child or youth. The children need to feel safe in the way they will be touched, therefore, it is very important that CYCW give the type of affection that the children will accept as safe (Duehn, 1990).

Having a family meeting about sexual rules is very important. It sends a message to the children that they are in a sexually safe environment. However, telling the children all of the sexual rules will not be enough. The children must see that the CYCW are serious about these rules. They must be consistent in carrying out the consequences if a sexual rule is broken. If a child breaks a sexual rule they must receive a consequence no greater than the behavior. Many times, sexual acting out is treated differently, often with harsher discipline. This should not occur; the child should receive an appropriate consequence for the behavior. If a sexual rule has been broken, the most important point is to discuss the situation with the child. The child needs to learn from the event. Talking with the children will help them understand why they did it. They need to try and gain some awareness of what motivated or caused them to act out sexually (Schaefer & Swanson, 1988).

Family meetings will help establish and maintain rules for appropriate touch, consequences for inappropriate touch, normal and acceptable affection, and consistency on the part of the CYCW. Sexual safety is a crucial factor in helping sexually abused children. These children must know that the residential facility and the adults that care for them are safe. Through consistent efforts in establishing and maintaining a safe and structured environment, implementing therapeutic discipline procedures, demonstrating child and youth care worker safeness, and normalizing and implementing sexual safeness, the children in care will know they are safe and will begin the process of overcoming their abuse.

Providing Support and Education

Once the children feel safe, the CYCW has an excellent opportunity to help the sexually abused child. There are two things they can do after they have gained the child's trust. Provide them with support and education. A support system consists of believing the child, validating their feelings, and protecting them. Within the education system the CYCW needs to teach about correct sexuality, give facts as to why the abuse happened to them, and have high expectations that they will recover. These components are vital to a child recovering from sexual abuse. It will take a long time for the child to work through the issues and a lot of patience on the part of the CYCW (Duehn, 1990).

When a child is ready to begin talking about the abuse, the disclosure can take place in many different situations or places. Something may trigger a feeling or thought about the abuse. Many times, children will not come out and begin talking about the abuse. They will show that they are upset through their behavior. Whenever the CYCW believes it is appropriate to talk with the child, there are a few things they can do to help the child feel relaxed and comfortable. These include using a private setting for the conversation, sitting at or below the child's level, controlling their own emotions, and giving the child the permission to tell whatever is bothering him/her (Duehn, 1990). For example, a CYCW could be speaking with a thirteen-year-old boy about his past history of sexual abuse. The CYCW could ask if he felt most comfortable talking in his room or outside away from others. If the bedroom was chosen as the most comfortable location for the youth, the worker could then either sit on the floor or in a chair next to the youth as he sits on his bed. The CYCW could then begin the conversation by saying something like, "What do you think would be most helpful for you to share with me?" Implementing these simple steps will greatly increase the likelihood that the youth will feel comfortable in sharing such intimate details.

Once the child feels comfortable and begins to disclose the abuse the most important thing for the CYCW to do is believe the child. When the child is believed, they are provided with reassurance, safety, and love. The child is reassured that it is beneficial to tell. When believing the child, it is important that the CYCW verbally reassures them. The child needs to hear an adult say they have done the appropriate thing. Listening to the child and believing them shows the child that the CYCW is a safe person and can be trusted. This action sends a supportive message that the CYCW cares and wants to help (Adams & Fay, 1992). Along with believing the child, it is important that the CYCW listens to all of what the child has to say. The CYCW should not interrupt the child or minimize what they are saying. When reassuring the child, the CYCW should not use phrases like, "This is unbelievable" but should use phrases like, "You were very smart to tell us what happened" or "I know it took a lot of courage for you to tell what happened to you. What happened is not your fault" (Hagans & Case, 1988, p. 10-12). These types of statements are therapeutic and healing. They will allow the child to feel open to sharing all that has happened. When verbally reassuring the child, it is also very important to tell him/her that what happened was not his/her fault. Continuing this message over a long period of time will help rebuild the child's self-esteem (Adams & Fay, 1992).

Once the CYCW has told the child they believe them, it is very important that the child's feelings are validated. When validating the child's feelings the CYCW should use the child's vocabulary, especially the sexual terms. If a child uses slang terms such as "pee pee" or "dick," the CYCW should also use them. Using the correct terms can cause the child to feel shame or insecurity about themselves and what they are disclosing

(Hagans & Case, 1988). It is important that the child knows that whatever they say will not get them into trouble. The child should have permission to disclose whatever they feel is important. Many times the child may express anger, sadness, a sense of loss, guilt, shame, or remorse. The child should know that it is normal to feel that way, and it is fine to express it (Macdonald et al., 1995). A few examples of how a CYCW could validate the child's feelings are, "You seem to be sad about what happened to you, it wasn't your fault." or "You have a right to be angry, no one should have done that to you."

Validating the child's feelings is a continual process. Doing it only one time will not be sufficient. There may be long periods of time when the child shows no symptoms. However, when the child remembers the abuse, the fear, sadness, or anger can resurface (Adams & Fay, 1992). When this happens, the CYCW should be there to give the child support. The child needs them to be available day and night, always supporting and understanding when they are upset, sad, fearful, or angry (Halliday, 1985).

The final important part in supporting a child who has been sexually abused is protecting them from further abuse. Protecting refers not only to adults protecting children, but it includes teaching the children to protect themselves. It is estimated that 50% of children who have been sexually abused will be victimized again. Therefore, it is very important that the CYCW safeguard the children through teaching them to protect themselves. It is crucial that the child believes they are safe, develops a stable self-esteem, and is in control of his/her own body. The child should also be taught to know when to trust others and how to get positive attention (Adams & Fay, 1992). Protecting the child takes place in conjunction with believing and validating the child. It is a continuous and daily teaching process. Giving new information will allow the children to protect themselves from possible further abuse. CYCW have many opportunities to provide training around protection. A few examples include teaching the youth what clothing should and should not be worn, discussing appropriate dating guidelines, teaching how to respond to strangers, and giving practical steps on how to say no to inappropriate advances. The age and gender of the child or youth will dictate how these issues are communicated and the CYCW should adjust their approach accordingly. Believing the child's story of abuse, validating their feelings, and protecting the children are extremely important. Through affirming these children, CYCW will have a lasting influence upon the child. However, if they only provided support, it would not be adequate to help the child recover completely. Along with supporting, the CYCW must begin educating the child. Within the education system three things must be taught. These components are: sex education, facts about why they were abused, and future expectations and empowerment for the child.

A common myth about sexually abused children is that they know a lot about sex. However, this is usually not the case. Sexually abused children usually have inappropriate knowledge and behaviors about sex.

Therefore, it is very important that CYCW give the child appropriate sex education (Jones, 1993). One common idea that sexually abused children may hold is that they are "damaged goods". This is the idea that they may have something wrong with their sexual makeup. Many times, when they are not, children and youth may think that they are pregnant, have a sexually transmitted disease, and are unable to have children, or have abnormal sexual parts. In some cases, it may be necessary for the child to have a physical exam in order to let them know that they are physically normal. CYCW should continually let the child know that they are normal (Rencken, 1989).

Another aspect of educating the child is to teach them the correct terms for their sexual parts. It is important and necessary that they know the correct words because it lays a foundation for teaching human sexuality. The children also need to know what is normal sex and what is sexual abuse. Providing this education will demonstrate that what happened to them was not normal and that it was not their fault. Many sexually abused children think that sex at a young age is common. Showing them what normal sexuality is will help them gain understanding that what was done to them was sexual abuse (James & Masjleti, 1983; Duehn, 1996). A CYCW could do this by having group or individual conversations about what they perceive as normal sexuality. This would allow for the child or youth to verbalize what they believe to be appropriate and it would allow the worker to correct any misinformation or communicate what could be abusive. Most often however, CYCW will provide this type of teaching during the course of a normal day. Questions could arise while watching a movie, eating lunch, leaving for school, or going to bed. CYCW should be confident in their ability and prepared to have teaching moments at any time. It is important for CYCW to know that they should not be solely responsible for teaching human sexuality. The residential care facility should have sex education training for their residents. However, CYCW can be very influential in reassuring the child that they are normal by providing basic sexuality training.

The next part of the educational system is to give the child factual answers to their questions. Answering the question of why the abuse happened to them or other questions the child may have is very important. Often, children who have been sexually abused will ask the question "why me?" CYCW should be able to give the child an answer that will give them some understanding. Depending upon the child's situation, CYCW can say the abuse happened for a number of reasons, such as a chaotic home environment, enmeshed living arrangements, or the lack of protection provided by their caretakers. All situations are different, and it is important that the CYCW try to answer the child's questions honestly. When the child begins to ask the question "why me", the CYCW should be encouraged because it shows that the child is dealing with the issue and wants to work through it (Duehn, 1990). If they will answer all the questions that the child has, it will help them come to grips with why

the abuse occurred. Giving factual information is a continual process that can take place at the beginning when a child starts talking about their abuse, and it can take place afterward when it was thought that the child had worked through all of their issues. CYCW should always be willing to spend the time that is necessary to help the sexually abused child find answers.

The final part of the educational system is having high expectations or empowering the child. This stage is vitally important because it gives the children hope that they will lead a normal life. Telling the children they will have a good and productive life can be very encouraging and healing. In fact, one child who lived in a residential facility said the most healing words spoken to him were that he was normal and that he had a bright future (Long, 1996). CYCW have opportunities to empower the child every day. Showing the children their strengths, giving them skills to deal with fear or anger, and encouraging them through the process can have significant effects upon the children (Macdonald, Lambie, & Simmonds, 1995). Helping children who struggle with their past of sexual abuse is extremely difficult. Once a child has reached the point of trusting those around them, education is a crucial part in the healing process. The combined efforts of sex education, giving factual information as to why the abuse occurred, and having high expectations and empowering the child for future success will dramatically increase the likelihood that children who have been sexually abused will recover.

SUMMARY

This paper has presented practical steps that can be taken to help children who have been the victims of sexual abuse. Residential facilities have a notable opportunity to assist sexually abused children. They should provide safety for the children and workers by having a safe physical structure, appropriate staffing patterns, and mechanisms for dealing with dangerous and destructive behaviors. Implementing a structured work environment that includes set routines, proper worker to child ratio, and therapeutic behavior management procedures are the remaining steps that residential facilities should incorporate into their system of operations. And finally, the CYCW should demonstrate safety by establishing their personal safety, being consistent, and implementing a sexually safe environment through family meetings. They should also provide support to sexually abused children by believing the child, validating their feelings, and protecting them. In conjunction with safety and support, the CYCW should provide ongoing education to the children through the teaching of basic human sexuality, providing facts as to why the abuse happened, and having high expectations, and thus empowering the child towards recovery. Providing these steps is not a one-time process or a set of procedures that should be followed verbatim. Through the normal course of the day, a child will face situations or events that spark a memory or feeling about the past abuse. During these unsched-

uled times, the CYCW should respond with these practical ideas to help the child who has been sexually abused.

The residential facility and the CYCW have a tremendous responsibility and notable opportunity for helping children. However, it must be realized that helping sexually abused children is not easy and takes a strong commitment by the residential facility and the CYCW. The safety, support, and education that can be provided must be continual and deliberate as the process of healing can take years. The residential facility must know that CYCW cannot do this alone. They must receive full support from others within the agency and help from professionals in order to make a lasting impact upon the children. It must be a joint effort and commitment between the residential facilities and the CYCW. Nevertheless, if the agency is established in such a way as to make the environment safe and therapeutic, and if they have CYCW who provide safety, support, and education, they will impact the lives of children for years to come and offer them the opportunity for a happy and productive future.

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