

ORIGINS OF MY CAREER IN CHILD CARE AND YOUTH CARE WORK: THE 4C'S PATHWAY

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After considerable reflection about how I came into the field of child and youth care work, and indeed am still in it after some 30 years, I finally came up with a "4Cs Pathway" stage model to organize a flood of memories. The first "C" is for "childhood": the events of my childhood and my response to them have perhaps been the strongest influence. My childhood affected not only the fact that I chose to work with and for children, but also the particular content and style of that work throughout my career. The second "C" is for "coincidence." The fact that I am sitting here now writing this account and came into what we now know as "child and youth care" is due to an uncanny series of coincidences. The third "C" refers to coaches or mentors whose compassion, support, and encouragement enabled me to prepare for child care practice and for it to take the particular direction it has. Finally, the fourth "C" refers to colleagues – those many wonderful people I've met in child care and related disciplines over the years, and had the opportunity to work with towards our mutual goal of developing and advancing the field. So, in sequence, just like a stage theory of development, these "4 Cs" together have determined the "pathways" of my career in child and youth care.

The First "C": Childhood

I first knew that one day I would work with children when I was nine years old. I remember the realization very clearly. My mother, an avid reader, had left copies of Menninger's *The Human Mind* around the house, along with what must have been the very first edition of Dr. Spock. I devoured these with great curiosity and interest. Similarly, articles in her women's magazines also piqued my interest in understanding and handling children with sensitivity. I remember a McCall's magazine coming in the mail and turning first thing to a photo essay that showed the positive and negative ways to manage common child-rearing situations.

Once I knew that there was an option in this world to choose to work with children with problems as a career, and that one could

actually be a child “psychiatrist” or “psychologist” I didn’t wait until I grew up and received professional training. At nine, I set to work immediately, “taking on the case” of those children in school who were left out, scapegoats, noticeably different, conspicuously acted up, or somehow differentiated themselves from the rest of the group. I would try to get them included in games or nominate them for special roles in class such as “buzzer monitor.” Once I found such a child, I would become a staunch defender – nobody had better dare give him or her trouble, or they’d have me to deal with! One teacher told my mother that “Karen acts like a tiger” whenever she tried to correct a recalcitrant friend.

This early selection of career, of course, raises the question of why I was so acutely aware of the painful situations that could befall children and took it upon myself to intervene. In an early article, I listed a number of dynamics of the child care practitioner that seemed to determine his or her selection of vocation (VanderVen, 1980). The major dynamic was “identification with childhood as a life stage,” which means that for a number of reasons a person is particularly sensitive to what it is to be a child and that this is somehow transformed into the wish to constructively relate to the lives of other children. Among more specific factors were “transformed identification” (an astute sensitivity to childhood which is translated into some form of adult work); “mastery of specific experience” (dealing with a trauma sensitizing one to others’ pain); “identification with difference” (experiencing a handicap or similar factor that generates interest in the children’s feelings of other “different” children); “role modeling” (positive contact with a person already in the caring field); and “counter-identification with negative child caring system” (having had a poor experience in one’s family or “in care” which makes one want to make it better for others in similar situations). All of these were primarily based on my observations of numerous people I had come to know in the field as well as my own self reflection. Fortunately I came from a very stable family, in which I stayed – with the exception of summer camp – until I went away to college. Thus, which one applied to me?

Certainly “feeling different” was a major factor, and probably the first one. I was very late in beginning to talk, and when I did, had a fairly severe stutter. As a result I was often treated delicately – and even too kindly – by adults who wanted to make sure that any dispensation or protection that I needed would be provided. This made me feel self conscious. I was acutely sensitive to how other children would respond, both to the speech hesitation and to the special attention from teachers and other adults. Their responses could range from a grudging touch of

pity to making fun of me, neither one of which I liked. This was all painful and because of this pain, I came to identify with other children who were "different" or had some characteristic or difficulty that set them apart.

I very actively wanted to be like the others, and to be viewed as competent rather than handicapped or "special." I deliberately looked around for a way to become so and found it – on the playground! It has been said that men learn the skills of life on the playgrounds of their boyhood. Although female, I have indeed found this to be the case for myself. Much of what I learned and did on the playground of the old yellow brick school in the small Hudson River town in which I grew up is still reflected today in the style and content of my work in child and youth care, and the way I approach the challenges of the field.

I became a scrappy player. I loved the whole range of childhood games and activities – both those for boys and for girls (children's occupations were more sex-typed in those days) and played them all. Kick soccer, baseball, softball, football, keep away, ball games involving bouncing balls off the wall, dodgeball, marbles, jacks, mumblety peg, ping pong, tag, relay races, bombardment, hide and seek, kick the can, jump rope (single rope and double dutch), and hopscotch filled my recess, lunchtime, and after school hours while I waited for the school bus.

To be included in these playground activities, it was necessary to develop the requisite skills. I noticed and admired the way the boys could throw a tennis ball all the way to the top of the three-story school building, and sometimes could even throw it over to the other side. When I first tried it, however, I was feeble and awkward indeed. But somehow I knew that I could learn how "to throw like a boy" if only I practiced enough and made the ball go up just a little bit higher each time. And that is what happened. After two years of steadfast repetitive practice, finally I too could send a ball all the way up to the top of the building, and over, if I wished. Other skills then came more easily. And, of course, once I could throw a rubber ball, I came to be able to throw a baseball, and even a spiral football. There were a number of older boys my brother's age in the neighborhood – no girls my age – and once my skills increased I could also, at times, play with them. Although I was "socially" very shy (I could quake for hours before a birthday party) I was quickly in the middle of things should a game be organized.

From the experience of learning playground skills I received several benefits. The first was a modicum of acceptance as I came to be included in the play and games of my schoolmates which increased my self esteem. I also developed persistence and feel that this quality has

enabled me, in the long run, to attain goals important to me. And also to work towards goals that I feel are important for the child and youth care field.

When I was not playing outside, I was inside developing my collections, and making things. I remember woodworking at my father's cellar workbench, and a long period of building models: those wonderful balsa wood airplanes that were covered with colorful tissue paper. If school-age children are collectors, I was the quintessential school-age child. I collected stamps, coins, playing cards, stuffed animals, souvenirs, marbles, sea shells and still maintain some of these old hobbies. Again, the pleasure I gained from these childhood activities, I'm sure, contributed to my later interest in and appreciation of activity programming. And, shy youngster that I was, mutual interests in hobbies gave me something with which to more comfortably interact with other children.

The other major dynamic contributing to my career choice was "continuity of early childhood responsibility": being involved in direct child care at a relatively young age. I tucked all my dolls and stuffed animals under a blanket before I would go to sleep when I was just a preschooler. Then, live animals became the next recipients of my burgeoning caregiving activities. We had a wonderful boxer dog to which I was extremely attached and which I fed, played with, and took for walks. I still love animals, although my allegiance now, as a city resident, has turned to cats rather than dogs. Those early "caregiving" experiences set the stage at eleven for taking care of my newborn sister, which my mother actively encouraged. As might be expected, I was enchanted with having a baby to help look after and soon learned all aspects of infant care, from bathing to burping. I especially liked to rock her to sleep, using a special rhythm that I devised and that nobody else could duplicate. As she grew older, I played with her, read her stories, drove her to nursery school, and made dresses and sunsuits for her on my mother's sewing machine. Today my baby sister is a busy lawyer with two children of her own!

Taking care of her added a new dimension to my life and afforded me a new sense of competence. Thus, like a rolling snowball, the forces leading me towards an adult career dealing with children, were gathering. As a teenager my first jobs involved working with children: baby sitting, camp counselling, and life guarding. Low salaries are nothing new; I remember a three-hour babysitting job. While the parents went to a cocktail party, I would play with, bathe, feed, put to bed and clean up after 3 young children, and would go home with \$1.50 at the customary rate of 50 cents an hour! For two summers before college I

had a summer job as a day camp counsellor in charge of a group of 18 or so boys age 6-10. My earlier tomboy skills came in handy as I herded them off to the playground for softball or kick soccer, and back to the gymnasium for games and other physical activities. I loved the children and the job, which paid me a princely twenty dollars a week. Following my freshman year in college, armed with a Water Safety Instructor certificate, I taught various levels of children's swimming on Cape Cod, group and private, from morning to dusk, from beginners to Junior Life Saving, and ended up the summer with savings and enough money to buy a good guitar to enhance the "folk singer" image I was trying to cultivate then, complete with black turtle neck sweater. That was probably the best money I've ever made in the field!

"Identifying with childhood as a life stage" is certainly a major part of my own development. There are two relevant aspects that I recall. The first is that as a child I loved to read about children. If I were not out playing or working with my hobbies and collections, I was inside, curled up with the dog and a book. I loved most of the traditional childhood series, especially the Bobbsey Twins about two pairs of boy/girl twins and their adventures. I often wonder if my interest in them was a premonition for the fact that one day I would have boy/girl twins of my own. The "Ann of Green Gables," picked out for me by my mother, who had a wonderful knowledge of books and knew just what I would like, was another series that was very important to me. The interest in reading about children remains today: I have dozens and dozens of books, overflowing shelves and stacked in two offices, and don't even ask what is my monthly bill at the University of Pittsburgh book store. One of my continued adult hobbies is collecting books. My collections include old high school and college yearbooks (these are actually fascinating in learning about the interests and mores of a particular group of young people); and works of specific authors, Erik Erikson is one of them, as is the mystery writer John D. MacDonald.

In spite of the fact that I was a shy child, I found out as I grew up that I liked fun in the form of humor and pranks. I knew all the children's jokes . . . "Why did the moron" . . . and in camp, happily participated (and sometimes instigated) the usual "pieing" and "shorting" of the counsellor's bed. Later, in college, the scope of pranks increased to the point that I came under the purview of the "warden" who was the administrative person in charge of applying consequences to feisty students. I still remember, very fondly indeed, her trying not to laugh as she assigned me a modest punishment for what I considered the best prank of my college career (ask me about it sometime). Even now, I like playfulness, laughter, and an occasional April fool joke that I

impose on family and colleagues.

Thus looking back at my childhood, I am inclined to ask what might I have become if those two major influences (sense of difference and early responsibility for caregiving, in the context of the ongoing identification with childhood in general) hadn't been so compelling?

Often, of course, choice of vocation is shaped by one's own family. My parents were involved in creative arts. My father made his living as an artist. My mother, a writer and journalist, had also been trained as a concert pianist. I enjoyed drawing and making things, as already mentioned; and playing musical instruments that could be played by reading just one note at a time (I could not really play the piano because for some reason I couldn't read several notes at a time on the staff), the French horn in high school and the folk guitar later on in high school and young adulthood. There was talk about my being a writer or a journalist, and had my interest in some kind of psychological work with children not been so compelling, I suppose that is the career I would have ended up trying. As it is, I do love to write. Much of what I have written is about children and child care, but occasionally I like to try something else, i.e., humor or psychobiography. Thus, I think that my parents' interests and occupations were a significant influence on me and have strongly flavored the kind of work I chose to do in the human service system.

The Second "C": Coincidence

During my young adult years, several real coincidences occurred to set my path towards child and youth care work. There were several times when, as the saying goes, I just happened to be at the right place at the right time. This was lucky, because it was during those years that I encountered obstacles: people here and there who thought because of my speech problem I should not do any work that required much talking. By that time I had already experienced some success in such work (my jobs), knew what I wanted, and with my stubborn persistence at the helm, had no intention of taking "no" for an answer! And while my speech was not always smooth, it had improved greatly and I thought I could handle most situations reasonably well.

I majored in psychology and minored in child study in college and my best grades by far were in these subjects. I had an excellent practicum in the college laboratory nursery school, which helped set a life-long interest in early childhood education, even though later I was to work primarily with disturbed, handicapped and retarded children in residential programs. However, my first post college job was working

for a nationally recognized educational test publisher, doing editorial work related to their various standardized tests. I was somewhat mismatched to this job, since it required sedentary, detail work and I liked (and needed) to move around more. After I had worked there about 10 months, my "boss" kindly told me that they felt I'd be better off working with children. I couldn't have agreed more and set about finding another job. Someone suggested I contact a research psychologist at a nearby state psychiatric institution, and I did. He didn't have a job for me, but just for good measure, I decided to stop by the Personnel Office on my way out. Incredibly at the very same time the Director of the Occupational Therapy Department was there looking for someone to fill a position working with the children's unit. That "someone" turned out to be standing right there! So I began work in the "O.T." Department. What a wonderful job: woodwork, tiles, the eternal popsicle sticks, weaving, sewing, painting, etc. with very interesting and engaging children who had a variety of severe developmental, behavioral, and emotional problems.

The only ones I was not assigned to work with were a group in a special unit for autistic children. One day I heard that a new person, especially prepared for the job through a graduate program at the University of Pittsburgh, was coming to head up this unit. His name was George Cohen, a well known child care worker. After he got to be a friend, I heard even more about this unique graduate program. It sounded interesting but of little significance to me at the time. I had other graduate study plans in mind. However, all of that was changed because I met my husband-to-be that summer. I did start graduate school at another university in the midwest, but left after a semester (including another very good experience in the laboratory preschool) to come back east to get married. Ned then was offered a job at Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie-Mellon) and so I would soon be on my way – to Pittsburgh! I ran into George Cohen again in the shopping center and upon learning I would be going to Pittsburgh, he told me that I should look up the same graduate program he had attended. After we arrived in Pittsburgh, I tried, to no avail, to find it. A few months later – another incredible coincidence – I again ran into George, in a coffee house. He offered to personally take me up to the Program in Child Development and Child Care the next day. He did, and I applied. The day I was accepted was one of the most special days of my life. I still remember receiving a telephone call from Genevieve Foster, a faculty member and pioneer in the field, at the same time movers were trying to wedge a grand piano into our tiny third floor apartment!

Thus began my association with the University of Pittsburgh Program, which has lasted to this very day. I often say, with apologies to George Cohen who I hope will forgive me for telling this story just once more, that were it not for him, I would literally not have come into child care and would not be doing what I am today.

While I was doing my Master's degree work, I developed an arts and crafts program, using my earlier "O.T." experience, on a children's psychiatric treatment floor. Later I took a position in a new state hospital, where I continued to do activity work, but also was involved in overall program development, working under a psychiatrist to start new units for retarded, emotionally disturbed, and physically handicapped children, youth, and adults. I was responsible for coordinating all aspects of the living situation, and for encouraging a team approach among the various disciplines assigned to the units. I did some individual work with children, but my preference was more for working with the group in the various aspects of their daily life.

My original aspiration in child care had certainly not been to work in a university! It was only after I had worked "clinically" for several years, and in different positions, that I began to think that I might like to do some teaching. And incredibly, by sheer coincidence again, an opportunity presented itself. One day, after I had children of my own, I took them over to the Program offices to visit and was standing in the hall with my two-year-old boy and girl twins. Suddenly Dr. Chambers (the late Chairman) emerged from her office. She was tugging at her hair, murmuring that she must find someone immediately to teach a course in the School of Nursing. I was just standing there, quickly spotted, and "dragooned" (actually very willingly) by Dr. Chambers into teaching the course. One part-time teaching activity led to another and several years later I found myself working full-time in the Program. And, in line with the expected functions of a university faculty, I became increasingly involved with writing, research, community service, and project development. Most of these have focused on ways of advancing the field of child and youth care.

The Third "C": Coaches

During, and subsequent to, my graduate work at the University of Pittsburgh, my child care career was directly influenced by a number of people, who for sake of "C's" model, I will refer to as "coaches" as the term for mentors who guide one's professional development. They were very important and helped me to elaborate and grow in my particular directions and interests that remain to this day – showing the childhood

to adult career continuity. Each area of the field in which I am working today can be traced back to the involvement of a specific person.

Genevieve Foster, my advisor in the Master's program, was supportive of my interests in "activity programming for ego development," and also encouraged me to write. My first major professional writing was working in the institutional milieu and on activity programming, which appeared in a book she edited, *Child Care Work with Emotionally Disturbed Children*.

Working in the state hospital made me a believer of the statement I had once heard Dr. Chambers make, "It's not how to work with the children, it's how to work with the other adults!" A psychiatrist with a distinct flair for designing institutional settings, and very supportive of child care workers as well, the late Dr. Marion Marshall, helped me learn how to provide a sound environment for children through working with other adults. She gave me many insights into how adults function, and these fueled my interests in "indirect" work, i.e., training, supervision and administration, and adult development, which have only grown over the years.

Anticipating years in advance the role that people prepared in child development and child care work could play in family centered work, Dr. Jack Muldoon of Craig House-Technoma suggested to me when I applied for part-time work that conducting parent education groups for mothers of young children might be a good way to use my background. For several years I did this, organizing many groups that were held all over the county, and expanded it into making home visits, and running small groups for parents of children attending the agency's programs.

Having children of one's own inevitably intersects with professional interests in child care, and being a parent myself certainly supported my interest in parent work and increased my empathy and appreciation for the challenges and puzzlement of parenthood. I was absolutely thrilled to have twins (I had not expected them although it turned out that twins had run in my mother's family). I enjoyed not only the challenges of caring for two tiny babies, but also taking them out together. I learned a lot about other people's theories of child rearing which they were all too willing to share as I wheeled Mark and Elizabeth around the neighborhood in their twin carriage!

The relationship between being a parent with strengths and weaknesses is another story. Here I will say that I found that when my own children were young, my interest in working directly with other children decreased while my interest in parenthood, family roles for child care workers, and adult development in general, grew.

So also did my interest in the "scholarly" aspect of child and youth

care work, fueled by the continued development of my university career, with the supporters within the University during that time including Margaret McFarland, Nancy Curry, Anne Pascasio, and Alex Ducanis. Other major influences in my very earliest academic work, from outside the University, included Jerome Beker, who involved me with the *Child Care Quarterly* and engaged me with the wider professionalization effort in the field; and Henry Maier, who introduced me to the wonderful idea of exchanging papers, or “think pieces” as he calls them. My husband Ned has been a major and steady supporter of my professional development all the way along these past 30 years. He made sure that as I worked for both my master’s and doctoral degrees, I stayed on target and wrote my thesis and dissertation – to name just one of his many contributions. I’ve learned a lot from students too. Thus, as I reflect back on the role of “coaches” or mentors in my career development, their major significance in career development becomes very clear.

The 4th “C” – Colleagues

As I have grown older, the stimulation of colleagues, and working relationships with numerous people in this exciting field of child and youth care – “in a life span perspective” as I like to put it – has become the most current influence on my work. In line with the notion of adult development that we continue to develop and change throughout our lives, the infusion of ideas that has come through interaction with these colleagues (too numerous to name in person in a short article), has been an incredible enrichment. They include fellow faculty in the Program in Child Development and Child Care and the University as a whole, people involved in child care organizations, committees and conferences. The child care conferences I’ve participated in have been really special: the most fun – and the greatest learning and networking opportunities. I might add that I’m grateful to Mark Krueger for encouraging me to write in a new “genre” (nonacademic writing) and, following him as a role model, hope to do more in the future.

The 4Cs Today

With the coalescing and intermingling of these four major influences on my career choice and development, where am I now? First of all, I note with interest the ongoing reiteration of my childhood style and interests in what I do today. I tend to persist in following up something I think is important, even “fight” (hence my recent interest in military strategy as a metaphor for empowering the field). I now do so much

speaking (in any particular week or month I might give classes, workshops, formal presentations, and participate actively in meetings) that I have gotten used to it and actively come to like it. In fact, I would no longer say that I just love writing. I love speaking too, especially if I think I have something to say.

Adult development and leadership skill development for the field of child and youth care is a strong interest. I still love play and activity, both as an ongoing area to develop within the child and youth care field, and as a personal way of interacting with the world. Everyone knows that if I can squeeze my basketball into my luggage, I'll bring it along to a conference, along with my latest "toy." One of my burgeoning interests is in knowledge generation and knowledge retention for the field. Here my love of books continues. I read in different fields as well as child care to see what ideas might be co-opted to expand the knowledge and extend the influence of child care practice. This contributes to my interest in training and education, and to my conviction that to be properly prepared and to know what we are doing is absolutely fundamental. I also like to encourage others to speak and write in order to contribute their knowledge to the field. As I once wrote in an editorial in the *Child Care Quarterly*, "Common sense is dead." Knowledge is power.

One of my major visions for the field today is to see "developmental caregiving," that is, the "care" in child care, provided for people of all ages. While I intend to persist in working towards this, but do not expect it to happen within my lifetime, I think that the "life span care" route will improve the quality of service to all people who need it. It will also contribute towards professionalizing the activity of caregiving, which I do not think should be subservient to other human service fields. If anything, it is primary. Furthermore, I am not one who thinks that more status, a stronger economic base, formal preparation (and other accoutrements of a professional model) in any way detract from the core of care (to use Henry Maier's title) which includes relationship building and flexibility and spontaneity within such relationships.

Finally, in line with my interest in futurism, I believe that "if we play our cards right" in caregiving work, the future is ours. The opportunity for advancing this exciting and fundamental field in the future is greater than ever, and I am looking forward to being a part of it!

REFERENCE

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