

## **CHILD CARE WORKERS: CATALYSTS FOR A FUTURE WORLD**

**Thom Garfat**

*Youth Horizons*

*Montreal, Canada*

Brian Gannon came to Canada to the First International Child Care Workers Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia and spoke, eloquently, about child care in South Africa and about some of the experiences, feelings and frustrations of South African child care workers. He said that it's pretty clear that child care workers in South Africa feel very undervalued. He said that at the end of the day very few of them can put out their chests and say "What I have done today makes me feel good." I found it interesting that he would talk like this about child care workers from a country which was so far away for me. It sounded very much like he could have been talking about Canadian or American child care workers because many—probably the majority—of them would say the same things about themselves.

The societies in which we live give us constant messages about our value. This is true whether we are politicians elected or rejected; students in an academic setting getting messages about our competence and ability; apprentices learning a new trade getting constant feedback from the master teachers; or if we are just people growing up in the society within which we live. On a daily basis we receive, from the world in which we live and work and play, messages about our value as individuals, as professionals, as human beings, and as members of society. We work with children who are constantly receiving messages about their value as well.

We seem to believe that the way we treat children will determine how they will feel about themselves, and how they will behave, in the future. Frequently, in our work, we tell them to ignore some of the messages which society gives them—especially if these are messages which undervalue them. In doing so, we are recognizing that an individual can make a choice about whether or not to listen to the messages given to him, or to her, by the society in which he lives. We believe that there is an inner core to a person which can help him feel good about himself even though society is giving him messages that he is unimportant or of little value. Thus, we say to children "even though society does not value you, you can, indeed you must, value yourself."

### **CHILD CARE WORKERS**

If we use this approach with the troubled children with whom we work, why is it that we fail to use this same strategy with ourselves? I know that we are notoriously underpaid, that our words are not listened to about how

troubled children should be treated, or about how children in the world should be treated. I know that many of you are treated with professional disrespect and are undervalued. But you must make a decision as to whether or not you will allow these messages, or feedback to you, to determine how you feel about yourself and your work. What you believe about what you do; what you value about what you do; how you interpret what you do, will influence how you feel at the end of the day and how you feel about yourself as a child care worker, as a professional, as a person, and as a catalyst for a future world.

To some extent we are responsible for how we feel about ourselves and what we do. What we say to ourselves and the phrases which run through our heads which describe what we do, contribute to our own definition of who and what we are. Sometimes, because of the multitude of difficulties we face, or the multitude of problems with which we deal when working with troubled children, we forget the significant contribution we have made to their lives through our everyday interactions with them. At the end of the day, when you review what you have done and you ask yourself the question, "What have I done today that makes me feel good?" or "What have I done today that is significant?," you must remember the important, yet seemingly everyday, moments which have passed before.

Did you help one child wake up this morning to an environment of acceptance and understanding rather than to an environment of confusion or hostility? Is that not a significant thing to do for another human being? Could you not say to yourself "Today I helped one child enter the day peacefully!"

Did you help one child eat today who might otherwise not have eaten without your intervention? Is that not significant? Is it not a genuine contribution? Did you help one child learn one new behavior that will help him or her to make one new friend? Is that not a significant contribution to that child's future?

Did you help one child, today, learn that people can treat each other with respect and caring and dignity? Is that not a significant contribution to that child's future and perhaps, to the future of that child's children? Could you not say to yourself, "Today I taught a child to care."?

Did you help one troubled child sleep peacefully this evening in the midst of his confusing and chaotic world? Is not a peaceful night's sleep a significant gift to give another? Could you not say to yourself, "Today I helped Peta go to sleep gently!"?

## THE CHILD CARE PROFESSION

My point is that you are very special people who are part of a very special profession: the profession of child and youth care. I have no hesitation in using the word "profession" as it relates to child care. I know that we hear frequently that there are criteria for being a "true" profession, and that child care is not normally seen to meet those criteria. Yet, the

thinking that child care is not a profession is based on old information and an old perception of the field. Our field has changed and we, as much as others, must change our own perceptions of the field. Let me give some examples of what I mean.

## LITERATURE

A number of years ago it would have been difficult to find a body of child care literature, but today there is a substantial amount available which addresses itself specifically to the field and to the practice of child care. When I first started as a front line worker about fifteen years ago, there were very few articles, and even fewer books, specifically related to child care. Those which did exist were buried in obscure journals or hidden in some unimportant back corner of the university library.

We could find information on children and youth and the disturbances they presented in the volumes of psychology or psychiatry, but there was little available to help us understand how to live with troubled youth, how to treat them in the context of their daily lives, and how we might survive while we did it.

There were, of course, the early works of Fritz Redl, Bruno Bettelheim, Albert Trieschman or Henry Maier and others, but they were well hidden and hard to find. Perhaps this lack of literature (and the hiding of what literature there was) was a reflection of how society cared for troubled children—it was satisfied if we just took the children who were disturbing to them and kept them out of sight. It wasn't considered important to "help" them or to "treat" them.

Now, however, if you were to gather together all the available child care literature, you would have a substantial library of information on troubled children, on child care methods of treatment, and on how to survive as a child care worker.

## CAREER DEVELOPMENT

There are also other signs that child care is developing well as a profession. In many countries, like here, national child care worker associations are establishing criteria and standards for acceptable practice; codes of ethics and responsible professional behavior; and are taking the necessary steps towards becoming self-regulating and self-monitoring, developing certification procedures.

I believe that child care is a profession. I acknowledge that it is a relatively new profession, but it is a profession nonetheless. Everywhere we look we see other signs of important professional development: More people are staying in child care for longer periods of time; child care workers are moving into more influential positions in the hierarchy of the social service systems; other professionals are consulting child care workers more

frequently in the development of programs and policies which effect services to children and families; child care workers are beginning to use the word professional, and to apply it to themselves. This suggests that we are thinking differently about ourselves and our work.

Child care may be a relatively new profession, but it has, over the last number of years, established the continuing base for future professional growth and development.

Like most persons who have been involved in child care for a number of years, I consider it to be a unique and special field distinct from others with its own unique attraction. I would like to share with you some of the reasons why I think child care is "special."

## THE PEOPLE INVOLVED IN CHILD CARE

Child care workers are unique people. They are people committed to children and youth, so intensely, that they are willing to spend the majority of their days living and working with them. How many other people would choose to spend their days and evenings and nights working with children who hurt? How many others would voluntarily choose to spend their time helping young people learn new ways to live in spite of the fact that these children behave in ways which hurt and abuse you on a daily basis? Yet, in spite of the hurt it may cause for you, and in spite of the fact that much of your work is not valued by the societies in which we live, you choose to continue to make your contribution in this way. Many people, if you told them that you were choosing to spend your days with children who would frequently hate you, often hurt you, and only occasionally appreciate you, would think you were crazy.

Child care workers are curious people. They are curious about life, about behavior, and about what "makes things tick." Let me paint a little scenario for you. It's dinner time. You and one of your colleagues are sitting around the table eating supper with a group of troubled young children. At the other end of the table two of them begin to fight, you ask them to calm down, they tell you to go to hell, and one of them throws something at you. After you've dealt with the situation in whatever way works best, you probably find yourself later that evening talking with your colleague about what happened. And, typically, you find yourself asking questions like: "I wonder what was bothering him tonight?"; "I wonder how we can help him manage better in the future?" Questions of curiosity. Questions of understanding. The search for reason and the search for a way to do things differently. These are hallmarks of the child care profession and they grow out of our curiosity about children, about problems, and about life. Many other people, after such an experience, would simply be angry and critical of the child. Child care workers seek answers to questions rather than satisfaction for their own upset or anger.

Child care workers are creative people. There are no manuals for teaching you how to deal with the myriad of events which face you on a

daily basis. You are constantly creating new ways of dealing with new situations—and of using life events themselves as therapeutic opportunities. You seek to find ways in which you can be creative with the limited resources you have. You create new ways to wake children up, or put them to sleep, which will be helpful to them. You are constantly creating new ways to do old things and new ways to do things that have never been done before. Much of what you do cannot be learned only from a manual or a textbook. That knowledge can only be created through your experience.

Child care workers tend to be extremely assertive. If they like the way things are they tend to say so. If they don't like the way things are, they tend to say so as well. While this sometimes tends to make supervisors and managers uncomfortable, it is a necessary component of our advocacy for troubled children.

They are people capable of sharing great intimacies with others. Because it is the nature of their days to spend their time in intimate interaction with others, child care workers are people who are capable of, interested in, and committed to openness, honesty and intimacy in human relations. But perhaps above all else, child care workers tend to be caring people. They care about children, about colleagues, about themselves and about the society within which they live. And, because they care, they tend to be catalysts for change.

## THE CHILD CARE ORIENTATION TOWARDS CHANGE

The child care worker's orientation towards change, for the children and youth whom they serve, is also part of what makes child care a special profession.

Child care workers do not focus simply on pathology. Their focus is much more developmental and their orientation towards change is based on the normative development of children and youth. They are more focused on the strengths of the individual, as a basis for growth, than are many other professions. They seek not only to eliminate or change maladaptive behavior, but also to use an individual's strengths to help overcome areas of difficulty. They are just as committed to the development of strengths as they are to the resolution of weaknesses.

It goes without saying that child care is child-focused. However, more important than being just child-focused, the child care orientation towards change is focused on both the child and on the child's participation in the world in which he lives. Child care workers focus not only on *who* a child is, but *how* a child is, in the world around him. For that reason, we find child care workers frequently working in areas of daily living—in the arena of normative life events—rather than just being focused on the individual therapeutic interaction with the child in the context of an hour a week. Child care workers are not only aware of a child's daily life experience, but they use that daily experience as a vehicle for change.

Child care workers also tend to be systemic in their orientation towards

change. Because of that we see child care workers involved not only in the child's daily life in the unit, but also in the child's life in school, in the community, in relationships with peers, or in the family. Child care recognizes that the child is at the center of a number of complex systems which interact with each other and within which the child must be able to survive and function. The profession recognizes not only that the child may need to change, but also that frequently the need is for a system to change to accommodate to the child, rather than for the child to change to accommodate to the system. This leads child care workers to be advocates for social change as well.

Finally, and perhaps this is the most important point, the focus of the child care orientation towards change is a "total life focus" and is not a focus limited solely to the child or to a particular aspect of the child's life. All arenas of the child's life are potential arenas for intervention. No area is insignificant.

## **THE CHILD CARE NETWORK**

Another thing that makes the child care profession special is the child care network itself. Perhaps because of the isolation we have felt in the past, or perhaps just because of who we are as individuals, we have created a child care network which is alive, vibrant, growing and supportive. It is filled with people who constantly seek to help one another, to support one another, and to share life strengths and life's joys with each other. It is a network which recognizes the difficulties involved in developing as a profession. It is a network which constantly reaches out to help others develop their own networks within their own communities. Equally important, it is a network filled with exciting people who are interested in new ways and new methods of helping children and their families. It is a network filled with professionals who care. They care about the children, about their colleagues, and about the future. Because of this caring and this vibrancy, it is a network that is fun to be part of.

As those of you who are involved today continue to be involved in the child care network, you will find yourselves supported and re-energized by your contacts with other colleagues from the field. And as the network grows, across national boundaries and across continents, we will continue to build the bridges of helping and supportive relationships which are necessary if we are to collectively help the troubled children of our own communities and of the world.

## **CHILD CARE — THE POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

Another thing which makes child care so special, especially at this point in time, is the potential for growth and development for the field, for the associations, and for the individuals, who are involved in it.

For the associations, there is the opportunity to create new types of professional relationships, which are not necessarily based on the models of the past. Our structures and our procedures do not have to be the same as everyone else's. We do not have to accept the standard definition of professional associations. We can create new models which better serve the needs of the individuals involved and which address themselves more clearly to the needs of the clients whom we serve. We can, for example, create professional associations which have clients involved as active members, rather than developing in isolation from these clients. We can involve the children and families we serve in helping us to become the kind of association which will best meet their needs.

For the field, we have the opportunity to create new ways, and new philosophies about how to best serve children and their families. Because we are not yet imbedded in a tradition of professional service delivery, we have the opportunity to put forward, and to try out, new approaches, new strategies and totally new orientations towards the resolution of children's disturbances. Every day we explore new territory.

For the individuals involved, the future, in terms of career development, is very open. There is not an established group of people who presently control or direct the future of child care, and because of that we have the opportunity to move into important areas of influence. Those areas of influence may involve directing professional associations, writing new literature, or moving into positions which allow us to direct the future of the practical aspects of child care work. There are many opportunities available to us to become supervisors, administrators, directors, writers, teachers, researchers and political advocates. Because we are creating our own future, we can be active participants in shaping it as we think it should be.

## **A FIELD COMING TO BE IN CONTROL OF ITSELF**

Child care is a profession which is only now taking control of itself. In the past, we were directed or supervised by psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers or members of other professional groups. We have been the extensions of other people's thinking. Today we find that the people being hired into positions of power or authority in social service systems, are people with backgrounds in direct child care. We are a system gradually becoming more and more in control as supervisors in the field. As this move continues, child care will continue to have more control over its own development, and will cease to be the simple extension of psychology, psychiatry or social work.

It has long been an adage in the field of child care that the people who know best about what will work most effectively with a child, are the people who spend their days with that child. As those people gradually assume positions of influence, and any one of you could be one of them, the field of child care will continue to develop its own unique and special flavor.

## A CHANCE FOR NEW DIRECTIONS

There is one other characteristic which makes child care a very special profession. Because of our newness and because we are imbedded in traditional professional behavior, we have the opportunity to create new directions in the delivery of services to children and their families.

The recent move in the field of child care, to include children and families more directly in the treatment process is but one example. All over the world we find children and families actively involved in programs, in identifying their own areas for change and in finding their own solutions. We find family members on the board of directors of programs. We find advisory groups of children and families making suggestions to agencies about how programs can be better for them. We find parents as volunteers working with other people's children. The movement to integrate families into residential programs for troubled children is perhaps one of the most powerful changes we see at the present time in our field. We are no longer treating troubled children in isolation from those other important influences in their lives as we come to realize that families are part of the solution for, rather than the cause of, the problems of troubled children.

The support in the field of child care for the "empowerment of youth" is yet another example. It is not by chance that the First International Child Care Workers Conference has as its theme "The Empowerment of Youth." The empowerment of youth: helping young people to find, and believe in, the power within themselves. It is also not only by chance that child care workers were involved in the development of, and continue to support, the Youth in Care Networks. Such networks serve to provide a forum for youths to express their opinions to professional associations, agencies, and organizations and governments about what would make the experience of being-in-care better from a consumer point of view. Troubled youth are now providing input into the development of programs, of policies and of legislation in many countries. The fact that this movement is supported so strongly by child care, reflects not a new direction for the field, but is rather a new manifestation of the child care workers' belief in and support of advocacy for youth.

The new directions we develop will only be as limited as the collective creativity we possess, and the opportunity to develop these new directions is another characteristic of what makes child care a special profession.

## WARNINGS ABOUT THE FUTURE

I have suggested that the future for you as individuals, and for child care in general, holds much promise. But, there are certain potential traps waiting for us in the future, and I would like to identify a few of them.

As we find ourselves, and our new professional identity, and as we move forward in professional circles with a sense of pride about ourselves



and our field, we must be careful that we do not lose the essence of child care. We must be careful that we do not, in our desire to grow and change, lose some of the characteristics which make child care a "special profession."

As we feel good about ourselves and our work, as we develop our profession and take even greater control of our own future, we must be careful that we do not become complacent with ourselves. It is important that we do not rest upon our successes, and over-indulge in self-praise, at the expense of our own growth and that of our clients. It would be too easy for us to become bogged down in the quagmire of traditional professionalism and to end up being just another version of the traditionally established professions. Child care has its own unique characteristics and attributes and we must be careful that we do not lose them.

As we move forward to define ourselves clearly as a separate professional group, distinct from psychology, social work, special education and psychiatry, we must be careful that we do not, through our behavior, alienate other professionals who are sources of support to us in our treatment of troubled children. In the past it was acceptable for us to scoff at psychology, psychiatry and social work, in much the same way that a young adolescent scoffs at the values and beliefs of his parents. If we are to be accepted as a true adult profession, we must behave as adults and seek from those other professions, the help they can give us. We must stop making bad jokes about psychiatry, we must stop discounting the contributions of special education; we must give up the behaviors of one who has a low self-concept.

We must also, as we move forward, be continually prepared to confront ourselves when we find ourselves being satisfied with the status quo. We must be aware of the pressure which will be upon us to remain unchanging, so that others will not see us as a source of threat. One of the exciting things about the field of child care is its continued quest for new ways and new ideas. As we develop there will be pressure upon us to remain the same as we have always been, and we must continually remind ourselves that we should be moving forward into new areas and new ways of doing things.

For those who move from front line child care work into positions of different influence such as teaching, supervising or directing programs, we must be careful that we do not lose the values we held as front-line child care workers. It is too easy, in moving through a system, to succumb to the pressure to become like all the other members of the social service field. We must remain true to the values of child care, for it is in those values that we find the qualities of uniqueness which make child care workers a distinct professional group.

## THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

In looking to the future, I would like to suggest a few things which we might do in order to ensure that our profession develops as it might.

We must stop saying to ourselves things like, "we are an emerging

profession." In my opinion, child care has emerged, and it is time for us to let go of our image of ourselves as "emerging." When we think of emerging we might think of a fragile chick just breaking through its shell. When we think of "emerged" we can think of something standing proudly, if a little hesitantly, on its own two feet.

We must stop thinking of ourselves as people who occupy the lowest rung on the ladder of the social service system. Instead, we must see ourselves as people who occupy a position within a system. And that position is neither at the bottom nor the top of the system, but is rather simply a place in it.

We must stop sharing with each other only our frustrations and our failures. We must stop discussing only the ways in which we are not as good as other professions. Instead, we should spend more time with each other focusing upon the positive strengths which we possess and our belief in ourselves. If we speak to each other, and to other professions, with a sense of conviction and belief in ourselves, we will convey to others that we are significant and important members of the field of social services.

We must take pride in the title we have chosen—child and youth care workers—rather than just saying that we are people who work with children. The more that we ourselves use the name child care worker with pride, the more others will be interested in who we are and what we do.

Finally, as we cast off the shackles of an inferior self-image, we must move forward into the political arena of our society, and become vocal advocates for the needs and rights of troubled children and youth. Who better than the child care profession can represent the point of view of children and youth in our society?

## CONCLUSION

It has been said that a society can be measured by how it treats its least fortunate members. Surely the children with whom we work can be seen as some of the least fortunate members of our societies. In America they have begun to talk of troubled children as "throw-away" children. Who can be less fortunate in society than those who are thrown away?

In this sense, we are the representatives of how our society might be measured. What we do and how we treat the children with whom we work are the measures by which we might someday be judged. We are involved in what may be one of the most important activities of our society. I know that other members of society—especially those who fund us and give us the resources to work with troubled children—may not think so. But you and I know that this is true.

What you do with one child may eventually affect a thousand. The values which you teach to one child may well be the values by which future families and communities are raised. You must never underestimate the significance of your interventions into the life of one single child. The values which you are teaching to children are taught intentionally. They are taught

with purpose and with reason. Because of this, they may be deeper, more impactful and of longer duration. The one interaction you have with a child this evening may be the interaction that shapes an important part of your community's future.

In order to carry forth successfully with this important task of shaping a part of the future, you must pay close attention to how you treat yourself. How you treat yourself is the most powerful learning model which you present to children. You must be what you believe that people can and should be, for ultimately the way you are is the way the world may become.

You must have a sense of pride in yourself today. You must believe that you are of worth and of value. And it is your responsibility to share that belief with your colleagues so that they too might feel the sense of pride which is necessary in order to maintain your self-esteem and integrity as you move forward. You have chosen to be child and youth care workers. You should live that choice with pride and with commitment. You have chosen to commit your professional life to helping those less fortunate than yourselves, and surely there is no more special or more important vocation than giving of yourself that others might grow and live with less pain and with less suffering.

Troubled children are abused, misused and frequently discarded by the societies within which we live. Their worlds are confusing and frequently filled with sorrow. With you, and through you, they can learn that there is a different kind of life than that which they have experienced to date.

How you are with them will be determined by how you are with yourself. You have the right to feel good about what you have chosen to do. You have chosen to be child and youth care workers. Live that choice with pride and with commitment. For surely you are special people, doing a very difficult job in a very confusing and chaotic world.

You are child and youth care workers and I salute you.