

NEXUS

Mark Krueger

Nexus: A connection, link. A connected group or series. A spaghetti bowl of themes in the literature about youth work praxis. Also the name of a fictitious agency for youth.

Six teenage boys and girls and two youth workers in the Nexus transitional living group home are getting ready for dinner. They are wrapping up their activities (reading magazines, playing with their technology gadgets, conversing, listening to tunes, etc). Before this time, they were in school and then walked, took a bus, got a ride from a friend, or rode a bike to the group home. Now they are going to dinner where they will be nourished with food made by a youth and worker who are on the schedule to make dinner tonight: tacos. Two youths with jobs after school will arrive a little later. The food will be kept warm for them.

The smells of dinner, sounds of youth's voices, their music, their pictures, posters and paintings on the walls, the colors selected for the rooms, all suggest this is their home, a place where they can connect, discover, and become empowered as they live and work together during this very significant period of their lives.

They are a diverse group of workers and youth and the menu of food and activities reflects this. They will sit down together and have a conversation about school while they eat, and perhaps foreshadow the evening activities: homework, swimming, shopping. Their connections with one another will be strengthened in moments of empathy, humor, and listening as they practice their social skills around the dinner table.

The belief at Nexus is that youth need an opportunity to have a fulfilling adolescence as they make the transition to independence. Skills and attitudes are learned and acquired in a relational atmosphere where connections and discoveries are made in the process of daily transitions and activities. These moments become part of the youth's stories that will help them form new connections, solve problems, and care for others in the future.

If the youth who live there can experience their youth with caring adults, they are more likely to become responsible, independent, caring adults themselves. They are also more likely to form the new, healthy connections that are so crucial to their sustained success. The focus is on being *in* youth *with* youth.

Like the staff of most independent or transitional living programs, the workers at Nexus have identified specific outcomes for the youth. Unlike some programs, however, the emphasis at Nexus is on the process of achieving these outcomes. Youth, you could say, are the ends rather than the means to success. You have to be in it before you can carry it with you into the next phase of development.

They sit down together at the dinner table. A youth and worker bring in the “makings” for tacos. Bowls are passed from one hungry youth to another. In an environment of human warmth and presence, the conversation about the day at school and the evening to follow begins...