

## **NEVER ALONE: The Presence of Previous History as Part of Current Context in Child and Youth Care Interactions**

**Thom Garfat**

*Youth Horizons  
6 Weredale Park  
Montreal, Quebec*

Child and Youth Care, like all helping professions, is a highly evocative work. In our interactions with others, especially those who are struggling with essential life issues, we are constantly reminded of our own issues, whether they be current or those from our past. In our work with children and their parents we may be reminded of our struggles with our own parents; in helping someone to deal with loss, we may revive our own losses; in helping others to explore their feelings, we may evoke feelings of our own related to issues in our own life. Thus, our own 'business' is frequently stimulated by our work with others and it forms, therefore, a part of the context within which our work occurs.

Effective Child and Youth Care work requires, among other skills, that the worker be able to distinguish between the business of the youth and her own business (Garfat, 1992). In all areas of our work this requirement remains important whether our responsibilities lie in direct service, supervision, teaching/training or administration. No matter who we are working with, we must have enough self awareness to be able to distinguish between the issues of self and the issues of other. And we must be capable of dealing with our own business in a way that does not interfere with our work with others. The importance of self in relationship with, and to, others has been frequently highlighted in our field (see, for example, Fewster, 1990; Ricks, 1988). This becomes even more important when one considers that 'self' is the vehicle through which our skills and knowledge are filtered and actualized in our work.

This is not to suggest that the personal issues of the helper which are evoked in the Child and Youth Care interaction are always to be viewed in a negative light. Nor is it intended to suggest that the worker's own personal issues should be the primary concern of effective child and youth care practice. The personal issues of the worker, whether arising from her past, or from her current life situation, are simply one part of the context from within which she creates and implements her interventions (Garfat & Newcomen, 1992). The question is not what comes up for the helper but what the helper does with the personal issues that do arise. The positive use of self is an extremely important and useful technique in working with

others. In order to use the self effectively, however, one must be aware of the presence and potential impact of her own business.

Reference has been made here to the current and past issues, or 'business', of the worker. Both form an important part of the worker's interactional context. 'Old business', a term frequently encountered in the helping literature, refers to ongoing, and usually unresolved, personal issues from the worker's personal history. The impact of previous history, however, need not necessarily be seen as negative or problematic. Previous experiences often create a positive impact on current interactions. Current issues in the worker's life also form a part of the interactive context and are equally important in terms of their potential to impact on current actions.

Together, previous and current issues and experiences, constitute an important part of the context within which the worker's interactions occur. But they are in no way the only elements which must be taken into consideration in defining the current context. Biology, ability, knowledge, situation, meaning and many other variables also form part of the current context. All must be considered in our analysis of worker-client interactions (Garfat & Newcomen, 1992).

In order to help highlight the importance of this matter and as a way of giving some definition to the notion of our 'own business,' the following examples, focusing mostly on 'old' business, are offered. Hopefully through the sharing of these personal stories, others will feel more accepting of the idea that their 'own business' plays an important role in their work with others. These stories come from the authors' personal professional experience and are chosen to represent the potentially positive, as well as negative, impact of old business on the current interactive context.

### Wanting To Fit In

It's Tuesday night in the shelter. I've been working here for only a few days so far and I'm liking it. The group of kids seems all right: teenagers of both sexes from a variety of backgrounds. They seem to form a tightly knit group as they hang around the table talking with each other and smoking.

The other staff is out shopping with a few of the other kids and we've agreed that I will stay back and try to get to know the group a little. I approach the table casually and take an empty chair. They're talking about the rock concert in the park last weekend. I was there, but not with them, so I figure it's a good point to jump into the conversation.

"Man, I was there too. It was great."

"Yeah," one of the guys responds. "Were you there when the cops came? That was far out."

I had thought it was kind of scary myself but I want to join with the group. "Yeah, it really caused a scene. But it was kind of weird."

"It wasn't weird, man," one of the girls sneers. "The only thing that was weird was that the cops just couldn't leave everybody alone. It's not like anyone was causing any problems."

The cops had come, as far as I could tell, because the park was filled with young people drinking and doing drugs like there were suddenly no rules about it. With the music, the alcohol, the drugs and the carrying on, things were getting pretty close to being out of control. A lot of us had begun to back away from the music area because it was starting to look like trouble waiting to happen and we didn't want to be in the middle of it. But I didn't want to alienate the group before we had even connected.

"Yea, well, I guess they got a job to do," I respond weakly.

"What are you saying, man? You think they were right or something?" the first guy asks aggressively. I feel them all watching me, waiting for my response.

*I'm fourteen years old and I'm new in town. This is the tenth place we've lived. I've been going to the school now for a few weeks and it's hard to get connected to any of the other kids. They're all grouped together in clubs or gangs. There is one group that seems to have the run of things and I've made a casual acquaintance with one of the guys, Ted. After school I go with him to hang out with his group, hoping to become a part of it; to find an acceptance and a place to belong in this new environment.*

*He introduces me to a few of the other guys. They nod but that's about it. They're talking about a new girl who's come to the school in the past few days. I've met her. She seems like a nice person. I was feeling lonely and so was she so we kind of hit it off friendly. To join in I tell them that she seems nice, that she would probably make an okay new friend.*

*The group leader looks at me like I'm the village idiot and the others, following his lead, laugh at me. He flicks his cigarette in the road and speaks to Ted.*

*"What's this Ted? You make friends with a suck? She's seems nice. . ."* he mocks.

*Ted responds, "Hey, what did I know. The guy's new. How was I to know he didn't have any balls."*

*"You should have known by his haircut," one of the others chimes in. I had cut it short to fit in with the sports group.*

*I try to take back what I have said; to look at the new girl as another piece of meat in the supermarket of adolescent lust. When that doesn't work I say that she seems stupid. All my backtracking is useless.*

*They all laugh at my attempts to join with them and tell me to get lost. I wander away, looking for another group to join, knowing that I'm going to go through this again and again, until I get it right. In the end, like always, I compromise and become whatever I have to be in order to be a part of a group. Everybody needs to belong somewhere.*

"Yeah. I guess I do think they were right, I say to the adolescent group at large. Things were starting to get out of control and if they hadn't come, there might have been trouble. I think fun is great, but I prefer it when it can be fun for everybody, not just for some."

They start to argue with me. I argue back. We take it from there and it lasts till bedtime. Just before the lights go out I tell them about how I had been tempted to go along with them about the cops. The girl who had spoken first laughs gently.

"We would have known you were just sucking up," she says on her way up the stairs, "and then we would have cut you out." In the current context, my earlier adolescent business had provided me with important learning and had helped me be a little more effective in my role.

### **Don't Pay Any Attention To Your Grandmother**

It's a rainy west-coast afternoon and I'm meeting with the Beckersons for the first time. They've decided to come to the Centre for help because their daughter has been having problems at school. Skipping out, talking back to the teacher and getting into fights with other kids were only part of the problem. It was Mrs. Beckerson who had called for the appointment and I had asked her to bring along everyone who lived in the family home, so they were all there: Mr. and Mrs. Beckerson, their daughter, Emelie, their 12-year-old son Martin and Mr. Beckerson's mother, who had been living with them since the death of her husband about five years earlier.

We've spent the last forty-five minutes getting to know each other and trying to get a handle on how their family works. Their family is a whirlwind and it's taken a lot of effort on my part to keep things under control and stop everyone from talking at the same time. Finally, I take the last of our time together to tell them how I think we can work together and we wrap up with an agreement to meet again tomorrow. I walk them to the door.

The grandmother lingers back until everyone else is out of the room. As she is leaving she tells me that she thinks I am a rude young man because

every time she started to say something I would cut her off.

I think back on how much energy I had put into controlling the interactions and especially how I had to keep stopping her from jumping in all the time. I suggest that we talk about this when we meet again and after she leaves I go to review the videotape of the session.

*Mom has finally managed to get us all into the car for the hour-long drive to the home of my father's parents. I didn't like going there but it was part of the family routine so once a week it was off to the grandparents for dinner.*

*I liked my grandfather a lot. He was always doing things with us kids and I learned a lot from him. Next to my father he was the idol of my life. My grandmother was another story. All she ever did was criticize. She never seemed to have anything good to say about anyone - especially my dad. It seemed like no one could do anything right.*

*"How come we have to go to grandma's?" I complain to my mother as we set out. "All she ever does is criticize everyone."*

*"Just ignore her," my father responds over his shoulder. "That's just the way she is."*

*"Ya, well I don't think it's fair. She's your mother. Why do I have to go and visit. I'd rather stay at home."*

*"You have to go because you are part of the family," my mother says. "Do like your father says, when you hear her starting up, just tune her out. Think about something else, but don't you be rude to her."*

*I follow their advice and I find out they are right. When I ignore her, it doesn't bother me so much. I don't have to hear the things I don't like. So I learn not to pay any attention to my grandmother.*

As I watch the videotape I think about what Mr. Beckerson's mother has said and I think about my own grandmother. I try to be open as I review the session and I see, in living colour, that she is right. Every time she tried to say something I either cut her off, ignored her or went on to something else. I am shocked and ashamed of myself. I hadn't known that I was doing it.

The next day when we meet I tell the rest of the family what she had said to me and of my experience in reviewing the videotape. I apologise to her for my insensitivity and ask her to tell us some of the things she was trying to say during our last meeting. Now that I'm not doing it, everyone goes crazy trying to cut her off themselves. I control traffic so that she can say her piece.

She tells us that her son is abusing his daughter. It turns out to be true. My own business had fit so well with this family's pattern that I had almost

helped to maintain the abuse. No matter where I go, there I am.

### **Doing Things Together**

It's case conference time and I'm sitting around the table with a child care worker, social worker, program supervisor, assessment worker, a social work supervisor and a few other professionals. We're discussing Jeffery and his father. The staff are struggling to help them develop a more intimate relationship; one in which they can share things verbally, because they have a lot to talk about.

I share with everyone my perceptions of how hard it is for an adolescent boy and his father to talk about things and how the staff should try to help them find ways to do things together as a way for them to start being together before they face the pressure of having to talk about things.

I think about my adolescence with my own father. How he never told any of us that he cared for us until he was in his late fifties. But we knew that he cared because we would always do things together. He taught us boys to fish and hunt, coached us in Little League baseball and took us to father-son nights at the Rotary Club. But we never shared intimate conversations. Finally, after years of doing things together and never talking, as we are turning the boat around in a storm, he tells me what it was like for him when his father died. From that day on we could discuss anything. Before he died he was even able to tell me that he loved me on the telephone.

I tell the staff that we are perhaps trying to hard too get this father and son to live up to our middle class social service ideal and repeat that they should try and help them find ways to do things together.

They point out that they have just spent the last few minutes summarizing for me all the things that this father and son do together, including fishing and playing sports.

I wonder where I have been. Certainly not in this case conference for the past few minutes. I thank them for their assertiveness with me and we move on to discuss ways that Jeffery and his father can begin to talk, something they have told the staff that they want to do but they don't know how to start. As the conference closes, I remind myself that all relationships are not like mine, that everyone is unique. I note that I have to find a way to control this tendency I have to drift off into my own personal memories.

### **You Are Not My Mother**

It's six o'clock on a Wednesday evening and I have been facilitating this group supervision for child care workers for about an hour and a half today. We come to a point where we want to look at different ways of intervening and so we decide to do some role-play.

I play a fifteen-year-old adolescent boy living in a co-educational group home. It's supper time and, with the child care worker's approval, I leave the table to go and get a fresh bowl of potatoes from the kitchen. As I walk back into the dining room with the potatoes, I trip and spill them on the floor.

The rest of the group, also playing adolescents, giggles and laughs at me. A little bit of acting-out occurs but the situation is under control. I'm trying to play the role straight so that the child care worker can try on an intervention. I stand there waiting for her to respond to my situation so that I can react to her.

She empathizes with me and then asks me to clean up the mess made by the potatoes.

I am an adolescent male who doesn't want to lose face so I respond with, "No. Why should I have to? It was an accident."

She empathizes again and maintains her direction, "I know it was an accident. I'm not blaming you for anything but you need to clean up the mess."

As the facilitator of the group, I don't want this adolescent to be too compliant so that the child care worker has a chance to challenge herself. I refuse again, more firmly this time, "No way! It's not my fault." I sit down at the table to reinforce my resistance. The others in the group watch closely to see what happens. She looks me calmly in the face and speaks in a firm voice.

"I know it's not your fault. I know it was an accident. And you are probably feeling a little bit foolish right now. But I want you to clean up the potatoes so that we can get back on with dinner."

Something inside me explodes. I slam my chair back from the table screaming at her, "Get off my back, you bitch. You're not my fucking mother."

The supervision group reacts with surprised silence. We stop role-play and begin the process of debriefing it, looking not at the interventions of the child care worker but rather, at the sudden explosion that came from me in this role.

*I am four years old, and I get shipped off to my aunt's place in the mountains while my mother waits for the birth of my younger brother. I end up staying there for the whole summer.*

*My aunt is a strict, moral fundamentalist with clear rules about right and wrong, about discipline and parenting, and about the need for children to be "in control" at all times. I experience her as cold and abusive compared to the warm flexibility I find with my mother. My aunt tries to control my every behaviour and it seems to me that she has a strict rule for everything.*

*I become rigid and resistant with her. I do not like this woman who is not my mother and I want to go home. But I am not allowed to do so.*

*When I do not want to do something that she tells me to do she gives me empathy with no feeling and tells me I have to do it anyway. When I refuse she looks me firmly in the eyes and tells me I have to do it or I will be punished. If I don't do it right away, I am punished severely.*

*I am just a child and I want to yell and scream at her. I want to hurt her but I know that I have to stay here and so I do nothing except resist and accept the punishment. I have no other choice.*

As we debrief the incident in the supervision group, I realize that I was screaming at my aunt and not at the child care worker. Even in "pretend" situations I am always there. I share with the group how I intend to work on this issue and we move on to another role-play. Someone else can play the adolescent this time.

### **Other Voices, Other Times**

In all the years I have been in this field and of all the things I have encountered, nothing has been more surprising to me than the realization that my 'own business' is always so present. Sometimes when I am talking with a mother, I will hear my own mother's voice whispering in my ear saying something like "if she really loved her children. . .". Other times I'll be listening to a parent talk about their child and I'll hear another voice saying "a good child should. . .". Sometimes when I have tried to help a couple solve their problems I have realized that I am judging their relationship by the qualities, strengths and problems of my own. Always, I am confronted by my own business.

The voices that I hear whispering in my ear, the images that return to me, the memories that come flooding back and the personal values and beliefs that rise up when I am doing my work are neither good nor bad. They just are what they are. If I want to be effective in my work I have to be able to recognise them when they arise as my business and I have to be able to deal with them as such. They do not belong to the people I am working with, they belong to me. Used well they can help me to help others. Ignored, or unacknowledged, they can be detrimental to my work and to those with whom I am working.

I am standing in front of an audience of hundreds of people giving an opening address for an important conference. I want to do a good job of setting the tone for the workshops and sessions that are to follow: I want to inspire people. It is my first time speaking to such a large group and I am nervous and scared. As I launch nervously into my opening, stumbling on the words and wanting to run from the stage, I see my father slip into the back of the room and stand there watching me. I want him to be proud of me.

*I am standing in the back of the room as my father gives a talk to a convention of salesmen who work for the same company as he does. He*



*tells a few 'travelling salesman' jokes and the audience warms to him. As he goes on, inspiring them to care about what they do and to do it well, I am overcome with pride. I find joy in being this man's son. My love for him fills me.*

I look up at my father standing at the back of the balcony watching me. I set aside my notes, tell a humorous anecdote from my Child and Youth Care experience and pause long enough to acknowledge him. He smiles back encouragement at me.

I know exactly how he feels. And it gives me the courage to continue. As I go on with my talk I am flooded with voices, images and memories from my own history and current situation. I am warmed by their presence and am grateful that they are with me. This momentary context is fuller because of them.

No matter where I go, I am never alone.

## References

- Fewster, G. (1990). *Being in Child Care*. New York, NY: Haworth Press.
- Garfat, T. (1992). Reflections on the journal entries of a residential hunter. *Journal of Child and Youth Care*, 7 (3), 59-65.
- Garfat, T. & Newcomen, T. (1992). AS\*IF: a model for child and youth care interventions. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 21(4), 277-285.
- Ricks, F. (1988). Self-awareness model for training and application in child and youth care. *Journal of Child and Youth Care*, 4 (1), 33-41.