

Review of *The Gus Chronicles*, by Charles Applestein

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The Gus Chronicles provides a unique perspective on working with abused children. The story is told from the perspective of an abused teen named “Gus” who is currently living in a residential treatment center. We hear Gus’ impressions of his world and emotions in his language as he periodically interjects some professional definitions because as he explains he has an IQ of 163. Gus not only eloquently describes his emotions but also tells how these emotions are at the root of his behavior.

The Gus Chronicles remind us that emotionally troubled children are often caught in a cycle of being vulnerable to the powerlessness of abuse and then finding power in the form of unhealthy acting out. Negative behaviors create a false sense of control over a dysfunctional environment. The Gus character is powerful precisely because he gives an everyday voice to the large number of children who are abused in our society but are unable to talk about their story.

Throughout the story Gus touches on many of the challenges that abused children face; family reunification, foster care, sexual identity and experimentation, emotions, isolation, shame, friendships, and the atmosphere and treatment models of residential treatment. Gus tells of the isolation that constantly faces abused children as they are conditioned to look out for “number one” and explains many of the behaviors that he and other kids use to show their pain.

This series of vignettes from residential treatment gives a rich, although fictional, description to the central features of our child care work and the relationships that we build with youth. Perhaps, Gus speaks for all the kids in care when he says: “Kids aren’t bad. They’re just screwed up. The kid who’s pushing you away the most is probably the one who needs you the most.”

Winner of the Trieschman Child Care Literature Competition, *The Gus Chronicles* reflects a sound applied approach to practice and can serve as a valuable tool for training staff in child and youth care facilities. Applestein has captured the often unspoken “feelings dynamic” that children have about us and each other over their behavior in group care. Applestein leads us through state of the art abuse counseling techniques with a wry sense of storytelling magic. Gus’ experiential dilemmas with peers, parents, and

child care workers capture real life situations and hold your attention, deliver a clinical message, and is almost all too honest about the trials and tribulations kids face on the road to recovery.

The book is an interesting way to educate those working with abused children and adolescents. It shows what effects agency policy can have on the children and also provides insight into the amount of compassion, attention and understanding that these emotionally starved children need to survive.

Oh, and we almost forgot, Gus says, "We only go around once in this world. Kids only get one chance at being kids. Help us grow. Help us live. We're worth it."

Reference

Appelstein, C.D. (1994). *The Gus Chronicles: Reflections from an Abused Kid*. Needham, MA: The Albert Trieschman Center.