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TRANSFORMING THE MILIEU AND LIVES THROUGH THE POWER OF ACTIVITY: THEORY AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: This article describes the significance of activities in promoting the positive development of children and youth, the role of child and youth care workers in providing such activities, and an array of strategies for designing and implementing activities in the milieu.

Key words: activity, activity planning, milieu, positive development

"But you told us you'd show us how to make water bombs!"
(comment from workshop participant)

Activity, that is, *doing*, and its benefits has received relatively little attention in the child and youth work literature. In direct care settings, what the children and youth actually do to occupy their time productively is similarly underemphasized. There may be boredom due to lack of interesting and engaging activities, lack of challenge with activities pitched below the competence level of the youth, or an overemphasis on a particular domain of activity--too often video games. Given these factors, there is a great need for child and youth staff to have: a sense of their role in providing activities; the developmental and therapeutic reasons for the significance of activities in the lives of youth; and some practical ideas on how to successfully design and implement activities in their own settings.

The workshop upon which this report is based focused on the following.

- How recall of activities experienced in their own childhood helps child and youth workers to be effective activity programmers in their work today
- The role of activities in the Culture of Childhood and the development of self
- Some theoretical rationales that justify how activities promote positive development
- Strategies for designing and implementing activities in the milieu
- Activity, Self, and the Culture of Childhood

The concept of the Culture of Childhood refers to the collective folklore of children that is transmitted down the generations, across geographic areas, and among cultural subgroups. The forms and domains of activity that are transmitted include tricks, rituals, sayings, games, crafts, and the

like that engage and focus exchanges among children and youth. At the same time, these exchanges generate changes in children and youth. There are universal patterns found in all cultures that underlie many of the activities in the Culture of Childhood.

It is easy to help a group recognize the Culture of Childhood and its power in transmitting childhood-pertinent information and in enabling children to have a basis for forming connections with each other. In this workshop, participants were offered paper of different colors, scissors, glue, and tape. They were invited to make something out of paper they recalled making during their own childhood. In the meantime, the workshop leader made a list of items she thought they might construct, including fortune tellers, table top footballs, weavings, fans, chains, lanterns, and the like. Indeed, almost all of these were produced. Several points were made regarding the Culture of Childhood. Knowledge of these kinds of simple activities can serve as social coin to help children gain entry into their peer group. However, many children and youth in care may not have been exposed to such activities due either to restrictions and deprivation in their earlier environments or to their own particular social or physical limitations, and the activity, therefore, is not in their repertoire. Thus, paradoxically, adults must take responsibility for conveying the activities of the Culture of Childhood to them.

Another exercise that demonstrates the connection between practitioners' own interests and their ability to provide activities for children and youth in an activity-programming format is for each of them to recall--and share with the group--those activities that they enjoyed as children and still enjoy now. These can be recorded and then compiled using the concept of domains of activity as an organizer. (A domain of activity is a meaningful category for organizing a number of similar activities, e.g., football, lacrosse, baseball, basketball, soccer, swimming, etc. would fall under the domain of sports.) When this compilation is made, it will be apparent that therein exists an entire activity program, reflecting the interests and skills of the participants and covering a multitude of activity domains. This recognition can serve as the basis for any staff member to return to his or her setting, conduct a similar inquiry, and encourage the staff to recognize that, among them, they have the capacity to build on, or to enhance, whatever activities are already in place. This also supports the premise that, ultimately, activities come from the self. If we recognize the role of activity in our own development, that we have experienced an array of interesting and meaningful activities, then we are equipped to use our selfhood as a springboard for engaging youth in the activities and relationships that are encouraged by activities and that they so desperately need.

THE THEORETICAL BASES OF ACTIVITIES

There are a number of reasons why activities are underutilized as the powerful developmental and treatment modality they actually are. These include the fact, already mentioned, that child and youth workers don't

connect their practices as adult child and youth workers to their own childhood experiences and current activity interests. But there are other reasons. Frequently, administrations do not value or support activities, thus making it difficult for even the most activity-committed worker to introduce and implement an activities program. A reason for this is that preparation in the human service professions, even child and youth care work, only minimally, if at all, includes coverage for activities--certainly not in the practical application, and rarely in the theoretical base, strong and compelling as it is.

Yet, there are numerous theorists who acknowledge the role of activity in positive development and include it in their formulations. Where child and youth workers wish to advocate for activities so that these may gain administrative support and keep from being used as rewards in a point and level system, they must be able to show how these activities specifically support valued developmental attributes and outcomes.

There are many theoretical perspectives, some of which are very briefly cited, that provide compelling justification for activities and show how activity participation leads directly to the development of life skills. These include ego theory, which is based on neo-Freudian ego psychology (VanderVen, 1965), the multiple intelligence theory of Howard Gardner (1999), resilience and protective theory (e.g., Werner & Smith, 1992), and Vygotsky's theory of social learning (Wertsch, 1985).

Ego theory. In ego theory, most applicable in a mental health context, attributes necessary to relate to reality include perception, anticipation, imitation, identity, capacity to experience pleasure, body image, motility, communication, and attentiveness (VanderVen, 1965).

Theory of multiple intelligences. The well-known theory of multiple intelligences such as musical, kinesthetic, spatial, and interpersonal intelligences (Gardner, 1999), to name several, obviously supports participation in counterpart activities.

Zone of proximal development and scaffolding. Lev Vygotsky's concepts of the zone of proximal development and scaffolding have major implications for activities (Wertsch, 1985). The zone of proximal development reflects what a child can do with assistance and support; scaffolding is the process of the adult encouraging the child to maximal performance, and when this is attained, and the child is capable of more, then again helping the child to the next level of optimal performance. Adults offer activities at a slightly higher level than the child's capability and then coach them to attain the higher level of performance.

Resilience and protective theory. Emmy Werner's (1992) seminal research has demonstrated that children's participation in a non-sex-typed hobby serves as a protective factor, decreasing their vulnerability to risk and promoting positive outcomes.

Flow theory. Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of *flow*--featuring an activity that is so compelling and engaging to participants that they lose themselves in it--has great implications for youth work. If we can help

youth find legitimate activities that give them a flow experience, then they might be prevented from seeking it through harmful means such as drug and alcohol use.

IMPLEMENTING ACTIVITIES

Perhaps the first step in transforming an activity program in a group care setting is to realize how an increased emphasis on activities can transform the entire milieu. An activity-centered, structured milieu can emphasize goal orientation, pro-social values, meeting challenges, and teamwork. An empty or point-and-level setting can promote boredom, lack of purpose, and adversarial and asocial values.

Recognizing oneself as a major source of activity ideas and of ways of relating to children and youth through activity, and understanding the various theoretical rationales for activities, are the *inputting* factors in getting a strong activity program underway. But specific strategies for implementing activities are still necessary. These include ways of engaging other staff, of convincing administrators to provide resources, and of promoting an overall climate that supports activities as well as methods for scheduling activities, and strategies for actually involving youth in the activities, including ways of adapting any given activity to the group at hand, whatever its age and capacities.

To engage other staff, exercises that reconnect them with their childhood selves and their adult interests, and then connect them to their current work with youth, can be useful. When they have "permission" to share these activities with children, and when they see that, collectively, they have a complete activity program among them, then they are ready to initiate an activity program or to extend one already in place that may be less rich or less well-defined. There are a number of domains of activity (meaningful organizing categories for specific activities), e.g., sports, games, arts, crafts, music, drama, writing/journalism, technology, hobbies, entrepreneurial activities, service, etc.

It is then necessary to take a systemic approach to installing the program. Within the agency, center or unit, what forces will support it? Which ones might oppose it? These forces can include value and belief systems, policies and procedures (such as point and level systems, the enemy of activity programs), administrative structures, physical plant characteristics, and budgetary constraints. None of these has to prevent the installation of the program; they do have to be taken into consideration, however, and strategies must be devised to address them.

Once the steps above have been accomplished, then it is time to translate the information into a real program. A helpful tool in overall program planning is a standard planning model that include the steps of needs assessment: goal (overall purpose of the program); objectives (outcomes); activities (designed to attain the outcomes); resources needed (to conduct the activities); evaluation (degree to which activities met the objectives); and feedback (making modifications based on the information

collected). A time/place schedule can be useful to identify specifically how activities can be worked into daily life. An easy way to do this is with a grid that lists time slots (analogous to the main temporal organization of a youth's day) on one axis and the days of the week on the other. The grid can then be filled in with activity suggestions giving a possible picture of what an activity-rich week would look like. This, of course, can be adjusted according to other requirements of the schedule and to enable the program to be coherent, with activities connecting to each other and the reality of the youth's needs and interests rather than just being a randomly assembled series of events.

Then there is the challenge of engaging the youth in the activities. There are a number of useful strategies: avoid tying activities to "good behavior" or to "deserving them" (they are a core aspect of treatment); maintain an orderly, inviting environment; show enthusiasm; provide ongoing support and encouragement (rather than injudicious praise); avoid power struggles with reluctant participants; nudge youth towards higher standards; have positive expectations; and incorporate occasional novelty to gain attention.

The engaging power of activity and the playfulness that can accompany it, as well as its inherent goal directedness was demonstrated by the participants, who recalled that I had mentioned in the beginning that I might show them how to fold paper to make water bombs. As I tried to end the workshop, they reminded me of my promise, and indeed, we finished up by making water bombs.

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