

ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT: A CHILD AND YOUTH WORKER APPROACH TO PROMOTING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR YOUTH IN CARE¹

Kiaras Gharabaghi

Manager of Residential Resources

Family and Children's Services of Waterloo Region

&

Instructor

School of Child and Youth Care Practice, Ryerson University

ABSTRACT: Accountability for youth living in residential care facilities should be based on core child and youth care principles. A review of legislative measures dealing with young offenders in Canada indicates that for youth in care, court imposed sanctions for myriad offenses have little accountability content. Instead, such sanctions are experienced by youth as routine placement interruptions that even have benefits. One child welfare agency in Ontario has moved from a "law enforcement" approach to accountability for youth living in its residential care facilities to an approach based on core child and youth care principles, especially on the concept of engagement. Substantive accountability for youth in care should sideline the concepts of "punishment" and "consequences" and focus on restorative elements of managing the impact of quasi-criminal behaviours and developing and nurturing the collective memory of all those sharing the life spaces of the youth.

Key words: youth in care, accountability, engagement, police involvement, collective memory

INTRODUCTION

There has been much public debate in recent years about the concept of accountability in general and accountability measures for youth in particular (Greenwood, 2006; Waller, 2006). After years of critical responses to the Young Offenders Act (YOA), which had been in place as Canada's national response to youth crime for nearly 20 years, the Government of Canada proclaimed the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) in 2003. Contrary to the expectations of many, this Act did not toughen punitive measures in response to youth crime, except perhaps in cases where murder or severe assault are involved (Doob & Cesaroni, 2003, 22). The YCJA was based on a moderate level of punitive measures and a significant emphasis on developing accountability measures reflecting the circumstances of the youth involved, including their living situations, their communities, and their willingness to

¹ This paper is the result of a collaborative project by the author and a number of frontline child and youth workers employed by FACS Waterloo. The author wishes to acknowledge the support of FACS Waterloo in writing and presenting this paper at the International Child and Youth Care Conference in Montreal, Quebec, in October 2006.

participate in some kind of alternative to custody program (Doob & Cesaroni, 2003; Department of Justice, 2001).

One of the consequences of this legislative change has been that youth in care are experiencing much greater uncertainty when entering the court process. On any given day, they may face a significant penalty for their actions, or they may receive virtually no consequence at all. Clearly, custody is rarely used in response to first offences, and only very short custody time is assigned to repeat offences.

For care providers, the implications have been significant. Youth living in group care situations and causing havoc through acting out or simply through non-compliance in terms of program participation, are immune to the reaches of youth criminal justice initiatives. Youth are no longer removed from group care programs through custody time. No longer are they engaged in behaviour management through the collaboration with the police and other law enforcement agents, including probation officers.

Until the proclamation of the YCJA, Canada had the highest incarceration rates for youth in the Western World (Doob, et al., 1998; Department of Justice, 1998). The approach to youth accountability had become so entrenched in criminal justice language and process that even youth with severe developmental or mental health challenges were subjected to this system, sometimes entirely as a way of enforcing program rules and standards. When youth started to seemingly care less about the consequences for their actions rather than reexamining the approach to accountability itself, the response was to reevaluate custody programs. A concerted effort was made to reduce the "fun component" of such programs by eliminating programming, recreational trips, and the appearance of comfort and nurturance. This led to the establishment of Boot Camps that operated with a quasi-military approach to discipline and social control.

During the final few years of the YOA and throughout the early period of the YCJA, there has been an increasing realization that the concept of punishment through youth criminal justice interventions may not work and sometimes may produce the opposite effect from what is intended (Finlay, 2005). Particularly for youth in care, who quite often have had significant exposure to crime and violence, the experience of custody seemed to have little positive effect and instead a great deal of negative impact that perpetuated further involvement in criminal activity. Certainly one conclusion drawn from the extensive use of youth criminal justice measures has been the realization that if accountability is one of the hoped-for outcomes, it has not been achieved (Ungar, 2002). If anything, there has been a significant trend toward an increase in criminal and quasi-criminal activities on the part of youth who have had repeated exposure to custody settings. Moreover, even noncustodial dispositions seem to not work all that well, as so many "hard core" youth appear to have very little regard for the authority of probation workers (Gharabaghi, 2006).

Given these outcomes of the "get tough approach" to accountability, and the realization that almost all youth living in its group homes were involved with the youth criminal justice system, Family and Children's Services (FACS) of Waterloo Region undertook to reexamine its fundamental assumptions with respect to hold-

ing youth in care accountable for their actions. Within the broader context of the opportunities presented by YCJA, particularly in its philosophical underpinnings, FACS Waterloo set out to develop a new approach to accountability that reflected the values and approaches of those most closely involved with the youth—the child and youth workers employed in the residential programs of the agency. This study explores the thinking and development of a new approach to accountability in our group homes. We at FACS Waterloo feel what we have achieved so far is noteworthy because we have affirmed the centrality of living spaces and human relationships, of engagement, and of community in our explicitly child and youth worker approach to accountability for youth in care (Garfat, 2003; Fewster, 2001; Barter, 1999 & 2003).

Defining the Problem

FACS Waterloo has been operating group care programs for youth in care for approximately 15 years. From the early beginnings of a single group home for the purpose of assessing youth coming into care before moving to a family-based placement to the establishment of eight group homes providing short term and long term living situations for youth in care, the number of youth in care living in group homes in Waterloo Region had been steadily increasing, reaching nearly 100 by the end of 2003. Given the explosive growth of the group home population, FACS Waterloo staff have struggled significantly with developing group programs in a planned manner, with attention to physical design, programming, resourcing, and building community connections. They have sacrificed somewhat in favour of creating placement opportunities for the huge influx of adolescents coming into care after legislative changes to the CFSA in 1997 had substantially expanded the criteria for protection.

The staffing of these group homes involved a minimalist approach to ensuring professional standards and some level of uniformity in terms of preservice qualifications for program staff. As Waterloo Region does not have a college or university program in child and youth work, most of the staff hired during the rapid expansion of the residential system were trained in other disciplines than child and youth work. By the end of 2003, of the approximately 150 program staff associated with the residential system, only about 25% actually had a degree in child and youth work. Most staff were graduates of the Social Services Certificate program offered by the local college or had various unfinished or finished undergraduate degrees in what were considered related disciplines.

The residential program's staff's diversity in training, preparation, values, and approaches was reflected in the client population in the programs. The idea of "matching clients" in order to provide the basis for functional or at least workable group dynamics was not viable at a time when the pressure to provide beds for adolescents coming into care was huge. Repeatedly, group homes designed for up to eight residents were temporarily expanded to house nine, ten, and even more residents.

These dynamics caused many challenges for program staff, program supervi-

sors, and FACS Waterloo as a whole. Notwithstanding numerous close calls and on-going conditions of high risk, and largely due to the efforts of frontline staff, this period of time was free from major disasters. There were no deaths and no serious injuries, and somehow the programs managed to operate on a day-by-day basis.

On the other hand, disturbing trends became obviously entrenched and seemingly irreversible: Youth were either not attending or failing at school, and more and more youth simply ran away from the programs and lived on the streets or in self-discovered family situations that were unapproved and unapprovable by FACS Waterloo. Nearly the entire youth population of our residential system became involved with the youth criminal justice system. By the end of 2003, of these youth living in our group homes, 95% had incurred criminal charges while living there. In most cases, the charges stemmed from the actions inside group homes. Once charged and convicted, the initial consequence of a probationary term quickly increased to custody time as a result of rapidly accruing charges, almost always breaches of existing probation terms.

Given the chaos and instability of the work environment, calling police to deal with behavioural problems became deeply entrenched amongst frontline workers. Police officers complained frequently about having to engage in behaviour management and crowd control activities in spite of the presence of paid staff in the group homes. Nevertheless, program staff and FACS Waterloo workers had become comfortable and complacent with extensive involvement of police and the youth criminal justice system in the programs and lives of the youth. They began to construct a language and a set of values that provided a defensible rationale for that involvement. The youth criminal justice system itself did very little to question these emerging patterns, and police and probation officers dutifully implemented what seemed their legal imperatives in the name of generating accountability on the part of youth in care.

By the end of 2003 and perhaps even into 2004, the service community in Waterloo Region had concluded that accountability for youth required the involvement of the youth criminal justice system. The rationales were substantial and well articulated.

1. Children who break the law should be held responsible for their actions, and legal consequences that apply to other members of the community should therefore also apply to the children we serve.
2. We sometimes struggle with containing the behaviours of some clients, and having the police provide assistance is helpful, even if this results in an escalation of the child's behaviour followed by charges.
3. Particular types of behaviours present us with safety concerns that we are ill-equipped to handle; police officers can more effectively manage safety concerns.

4. By calling the police, we are able to send clients the message that some types of behaviours will simply not be tolerated. Police officers can speak to the client in ways that we cannot, and therefore, they can provide the client with “a dose of reality.”
5. By involving clients with the court system, we gain valuable resources in terms of ensuring the clients have their needs met; some resources, including various types of assessments, are more easily accessed by the criminal justice system than by us.

These rationales proved quite effective in perpetuating the myth of accountability through the youth criminal justice system for adults and professionals, but they completely bypassed the realities of youth in care and their version of experiencing these accountability measures. As it turned out, those youth who had experienced repeated exposure to custody and less intrusive measures did not interpret these experiences as adding to their understanding of accountability, much less responsibility. The professionals were affirming the virtue of their position, but the youth were changing how they were experiencing these interventions.

In the past, custody was seen as a place of exclusion, a place where one gets sent away from one’s community and social involvements as punishment for one’s actions. Youth in care, however, began to understand that custody was not outside of their social sphere. It was a place where one goes to reconnect with old friends, including the friendly staff, and where one can take a break from the fast pace and often chaotic and unsafe living environments in the cities. Custody was a place of comfort and security, where social involvements unfolded in relative safety and in the comfort of well-equipped facilities. In Waterloo Region, some of the facilities even had gymnasiums, well-equipped workshops, and attractive grounds. Most custody dispositions were relatively short, ranging from 20 to 60 days inside, and did not present much of an inconvenience in terms of the youth’s social priorities and on-going connections.

The court process itself also was no longer seen as an intimidating or undesirable process to take part in. For most youth in care who were bored, the courthouse was a great place to meet up with friends. The court worker assigned to work in the courthouse on behalf of FACS Waterloo would frequently return with stories of youth loitering at the court in support of a friend facing charges or just because it was a familiar place. Judges and crown attorneys were neither here nor there, and most of the youth facing charges proudly told of their fierce and awesome lawyers, comparing notes on who had the best one, would one would get them off most easily, and which one took them out for the most coffees.

Almost never did the youth speak of the crime they committed. Neither did the professionals. Once the youth criminal justice system was involved, the requirements of process and the bureaucratic imperatives of administration became the focal point for the adults and professionals. By the time it was over, very few youth knew exactly what had happened and what landed them there in the first place.

All they really knew was that once again they failed to meet the expectations of the adults and care givers in their lives, which meant that they had to go away for a while to give those adults a break.

Given the casual attitude of the youth toward their involvement with the youth criminal justice system, frontline staff were beginning to question whether there was anything at all that could prevent the youth from doing as they pleased. "What's the point, they'll do what they want anyway" and "there's is nothing we can do" became common refrains. Child and youth workers throughout the residential system were overwhelmed by the level of disengagement and alienation demonstrated by the residents. Before long, disengagement became a two way street. The "we versus them" mentality became common in residential care had firmly taken root.

From a child and youth work perspective, little was happening in terms of ensuring accountability for children or staff members. Residents who did engage in challenging behaviours were left to their own devices, sometimes given consequences that everyone knew would be ignored. Child and youth workers took on the role of monitoring and documenting resident activities, until either enough noncompliance had been documented or a severe incident happened that justified the involvement of police. Whenever this led to charges, the resident would simply be taken away, the courts would impose a consequence (typically either probation or a short time in custody). When the resident returned to the program, no more mention was made of the incident. All concerned complacently accepted the assumption that this somehow constituted a form of accountability.

This process perpetuated a continuous cycle of group home to custody and back to group home placements, with no learning on the part of the resident and almost no input on the part of the child and youth worker. This was a time of near-total disengagement and very low morale among the staff. From their perspective, they were feeling disempowered and generally not very useful in their roles as care givers to the residents.

Within this context of low morale, disempowerment, and futility, residential system staff members began reflecting on their approach to accountability and to reevaluate the fundamental principles and values upon which this approach was based. This led to the establishment of the Beyond the Obvious Group, consisting of ten frontline child and youth workers, a residential supervisor, and the manager of Residential Resources. This group set out to change the way the FACS Waterloo system dealt with accountability. By the time the group had finished its work, it had developed an entirely new approach to accountability and contributed substantially to putting child and youth work back into the child and youth worker. Below is a description of the group itself, including the challenges of coming together in the context of low morale and a pervasive mistrust between management and frontline staff.

The Beyond the Obvious Group

The Beyond the Obvious Group (BTO) came into being after the team of residential supervisors at FACS Waterloo released a document entitled "New Strate-

gic Directions for the Residential Programs," in which they outlined guidelines and expectations regarding four elements in residential care: food, education, police involvement, and diversity. For the most part, frontline child and youth workers received these strategic directions positively, with the notable exception of the section on police involvement. The idea of reducing police involvement was seen as a major safety concern and as an abdication of staff responsibility in terms of holding youth accountable for their actions.

Frontline child and youth workers protested the release of this document including filing a policy grievance through their union. In response, the supervisors clarified that this document represented an initial effort to engage frontline workers in a dialogue about the problems in the group homes. They emphasized that the input of all frontline workers would be sought before proceeding with implementing any changes in terms of operating policies and procedures.

Input was not forthcoming. Repeated calls for child and youth workers to contribute to the process of changing the way of using police in the programs and of rethinking conceptualizations of accountability, solicited only minimal responses. As a result, the manager of Residential Resources sent out a special invitation to a selected group of child and youth workers representing each of the residential programs to participate in a special "thinking group." This group was asked to look at operations in such a way that would transcend the obvious issues and seek to dig deeper into possible ways of intervening in otherwise quite destructive dynamics. The criteria for selecting the frontline child and youth workers for this group included a demonstrated ability to think critically, and a solid, respected position and role on their teams. If frontline staff felt they were represented by someone they respected, they would more likely accept the process as credible and would provide input from the others.

In October 2004, the BTO Group started meeting weekly in order to discuss the dynamics in the group homes in considerable detail and with a critical lens. The commitment of each member was to be honest and straightforward about concerns, whether these related to specific youth, staff, or supervisors. After meeting six times and having progressively more intensive debates about specific issues, the group decided to commit to meeting for an additional six months with the aim of rewriting the Strategic Directions document.

Throughout the winter and spring of 2005, the BTO group worked diligently on rewriting all of the major points in the Strategic Document. The section on police involvement was particularly challenging. However, a closeness had developed within the group, with a much greater trust between frontline workers and the manager of Residential Resources. They gained a better understanding of each others' perspectives. Thus, the group was able to rewrite this section in such a way that it mirrored the supervisor's approach. The group then advocated less police involvement and therefore criminal charges in the homes. Together, the group developed a fifth theme entitled "Accountability," and they provided a range of approaches designed to ensure that youth would experience accountability in a real sense but not necessarily through punitive measures.

By June 2005, the group presented its work to all of the child and youth workers

at FACS Waterloo, and to a group of senior managers who had been invited to attend the release of the rewritten document. The document was retitled to reflect its purpose: *Beyond the Obvious: A Vision for Our Residential Programs*. Unlike with the initial release of the previous document, the staff were overwhelming receptive to this new document. They recognized the value of the collaboration between frontline workers and management. As a result, FACS Waterloo was able to introduce a profoundly new approach to the issue of accountability, reflecting child and youth work principles into our residential programs.

Rethinking Police Involvement and Accountability

One of the outcomes of the deliberations of the BTO group is a new approach to police involvement with our clients. Because calling the police has traditionally led to an increase in charges being laid against the residents, an explicit goal of the new approach was to reduce the calls to police. This could be done by focusing on differentiating calls into those related to the safety of residents and staff and those made out of frustration and a perception that police would entail some measure of accountability on the part of the youth. The BTO group sought to reduce the latter kinds of calls, if not eliminate them altogether.

In order to accomplish this goal, the BTO group felt it important to provide some context for the kinds of activities our residents might engage in. In so doing, the group was committed to maintaining a perspective on where our residents came from and what the world and its social expectations might look like through their eyes. As a result, the group articulated the following.

It is extremely important to maintain a clear perspective on the types of problems facing our clients and what types of behaviours might be reasonable responses from their perspective. Even children who live at home in a nurturing and supportive family environment and who have not experienced significant hardship engage in difficult and sometimes antisocial behaviours, such as stealing, lying, manipulating, being verbally disrespectful, violating curfews, etc. Such children may get into physical fights with peers, throw things at peers and other community members, etc. For the most part, these types of behaviours, while not desirable, are not abnormal either, and in no way are indicative of a criminal mind set. The children we work with in our group homes are subject to all the normal experiences of adolescents and therefore engage in most of these types of behaviours as well. In addition, they have experienced a great deal of loss and trauma, which can range from sexual abuse to emotional abuse, neglect, abandonment, loss of family, witness to violence, substance use, etc. Moreover, many are struggling with a wide variety of mental health concerns over which they have no control, including depression, bipolar disorders, conduct disorders, etc.

At a time when these children are most in need of support and nurture, of consistency and stability, they are asked to live with a group of peers they don't know and a group of staff with considerable power and authority over their lives in an institutional environment that provides at best only for their minimum needs.

Based on this reality, we should fully expect that our clients will not only continue to present the symptoms which may have landed them in care in the first place, but in fact that these symptoms will intensify. Being aggressive, being disrespectful, not following the rules, and running away are reasonable responses to the reality these children face while living with us.

Our job is to ensure that our clients get help for their problems; this means that we have to look beyond symptoms and focus on the core issues that may give rise to challenging behaviours. The legal system, including the police, the courts, and custody, are mandated to address the symptoms. Their job is to enforce specific consequences in relation to specific actions that clients take. Regardless of the language we use to describe the latest approaches to youth criminal justice, the consequences imposed by the courts are always punitive.

It is our belief that the children and youth we serve in our group homes are in need of assistance from a supportive and nurturing perspective rather than punitive interventions. We do recognize that the idea of charging kids for inappropriate and illegal activity is not without merit. We believe, however, that police involvement is not the most effective way of nurturing a change and growth process in our clients.

Having contextualized the whole issue of police involvement, and by extrapolation, of accountability, the group then set out to develop some general guidelines with respect to calling the police:

We continue to encourage the involvement of police with clients in our residential programs in instances where there is an immediate and significant threat to the well being of the client, a staff member, or anyone else within the residence or in the community.

Wherever possible, we will avoid contacting the police in circumstances such as these:

- a. A client is acting out behaviourally and destroying property.
- b. A client steals items from the group home.
- c. A client appears under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- d. Two or more clients engage in a physical conflict with one another.

We will contact the police in circumstances such as these:

- a. A client becomes violent and significantly injures another person in the residence or in the community.
- b. A client is found to have a gun, explosives, or other illegal weapons in his/her possession.
- c. A client sexually assaults another person (in this situation, intake would have to be notified prior to any police involvement).

The group was aware that there would be many objections to this approach, in part because calling the police to deal with major behavioural challenges had

become so deeply entrenched in the culture of our child and youth workers. In addition to citing myriad safety concerns, our child and youth workers became quite adept at rationalizing calling the police (almost always in the hope of charges being laid and custody being imposed) as being in the interest of the youth. After all, was it not the role of the child and youth workers to ensure that residents were held accountable for their actions and suffered the consequences?

To avert the predictable criticisms and also in order to ensure that no matter the course of action chosen, it would always be a planned course of action, the group developed a contingency approach for situations that were progressively escalating over time.

Planned Involvement with the Criminal Justice System

Where clients present us with challenges or behaviours that would not normally result in police involvement as per the criteria outlined above, but where it is felt that police involvement would be in the interest of the client, an individualized plan can be formulated for that client in which criteria for police involvement deviate from the above.

There are situations where particular clients might benefit from an organized and coordinated approach to police involvement and other interaction with the youth criminal justice system. Furthermore, the safety of clients, staff, and community can often be enhanced by working collaboratively with police, probation, bail officers, and the Crown. Where we feel a client's actions are of significant concern, therefore, we will call all relevant individuals together in order to meet and discuss the possible roles of the criminal justice system in relation to that particular client. This may result in concrete plans as to when or under what kinds of circumstances police might be called (this could deviate from the circumstances listed above). However, it could also entail developing recommendations for probation or for the Crown to be considered at court.

One of the most common charges against our residents is, as mentioned previously, a charge related to the breaching of existing terms. For many years, child and youth workers felt that their role as care givers was simply to report the movements and activities of the residents to probation and police, and then "let the chips fall where they may." One of the many benefits of the introduction of the YCJA has been much greater flexibility especially on the part of institutional care givers in terms of imposing consequences and rules related to terms of probation or undertakings than was possible under the YOA. Taking advantage of this part of the YCJA, the BTO group consulted with the Region's Crown attorney in order to be able to provide child and youth workers with a new opportunity in terms of managing and responding to activities on the part of residents that appear in contravention of existing terms.

Clients With Probation Terms, Recognizance Orders, or Undertakings

The vast majority of charges laid against our clients are “breach of term” charges. These charges are frequently based on our reporting of behaviours or events that we believe to be in breach of a particular term or order. We have considerable discretion in the interpretation of what constitutes a breach of term that must be reported. In virtually all instances, we do not have to report such “breaches” to the police unless a new crime has been committed. Where clients appear to violate terms imposed by the courts, we can, as care givers, resolve the situation through in-house consequences.

*There should never be an **automatic** process by which staff report apparent breaches of terms to the police without first consulting with a supervisor.*

The group felt it was very important to ensure that all staff felt supported in their quest to maintain a safe and predictable work environment, and one major component of this was to empower staff to make decisions about what constitutes safety *in the moment* without having to consult with supervisors. Residential work, particularly in a child welfare environment, is, after all, crisis driven, and during crises, child and youth workers need to be relied on to make reasonable, child-centered, but also safety-oriented decisions in order to alleviate the acuteness of the crisis. To this end, the group provided the following guidelines.

Use of Police During Crises

The decision to call the police is often taken under circumstances where immediate assistance is required in order to ensure the safety of clients and staff. Where staff feel that a situation is unsafe and requires the immediate assistance of police, they are encouraged to dial 911 and request such assistance.

When requesting police assistance to deal with a crisis, we may, post crisis, act as advocates for our clients if charges are not in the best interest of the client. Other options may also be considered and proposed at this time.

A Return to Engagement through the Concept of Collective Memory

Child and youth work is fundamentally about joining children and youth in their exploration of relationships—relationships with other people, with places, with activities, and with themes and issues (Garfat, 2003&1999; Maier, 2003; Fewster, 2004; Durrant, 1993). All of these relationships are lived and experienced by the child or youth everyday and in every setting. The job of child and youth workers is to engage the child or youth in exploring these experiences and to provide a menu of meanings the child or youth might reflect on.

The idea that accountability is a process that starts with an incident and ends with the resolution to that incident does not correspond to the conceptual frame-

work of relationships. In fact, this view of accountability forces us to understand such incidents outside of the child's identity and daily experiences. It is as if the incident is to be erased from the child's memory and from ours so as to not corrupt the relationships that might exist. An alternative way of conceptualizing accountability is to assume that an incident does not just impact other individuals, but that it also impacts our memory. Memory is a permanent concept and once an incident has been committed to our memory it cannot be erased. In this sense, any incident becomes a part of an individual's identity, permanently lodged in that individual's memory of herself or himself as well as impacting the memory of those sharing the living space where the incident took place in any capacity, be that by living there, working there, or regularly visiting there (Ungar, 2006).

Accountability is not simply a matter of saying "I am sorry," nor is it achieved through punitive measures. Instead, accountability is lived, every day, sometimes through negative emotions such as sadness, anger, or regret, and sometimes through positive emotions associated with humility, acquired wisdom, and fond memories. What matters is that we do not try to erase what cannot be erased. Our actions have consequences for ourselves and for those around us, and even when the individuals move on, the place can carry forth those consequences. This is the major theme of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, to this day an invaluable source of insight into the concept of accountability. It has happened frequently, for example, that a residential program has a particularly challenging client who commits various acts of aggression, and thus is discharged from the program. The memory of violence will remain in the program, kept alive either consciously through new rules and consequences for future acts of violence committed by others, or through its impact on the staff who might have been present during the incidents or who feel the incidents as silent ghosts in the program and adjust their posture accordingly (Kostouros, 2006; Fewster, 2004). This dynamic has given rise to an ever-increasing literature on "vicarious trauma."

When youth engage in activities that require an accountability measure, the question for child and youth workers is twofold:

1. What accountability measure will adequately address the specific impact of the incident?
2. What actions can be taken to ensure that our collective memory of the incident highlights both the specific impacts of the incident itself as well as provides some framework in which to understand and experience the incident on an on-going basis?

The first question is addressed through the concept of consequences. As is well-established in the literature and in child and youth work practice, consequences are most effective when they are natural consequences (i.e., consequences that arise from the incident without anyone taking any specific action) wherever possible, or at least logical (i.e., the consequence directly relates to the nature of the incident) when natural consequences cannot be identified or present safety or antitherapeutic concerns.

With respect to this first question, then, accountability measures might include specific program restrictions, loss of privileges, limitations on community time, and so on. Such consequences might have restorative features such as restitution work, repairing or cleaning up whatever physical damage has been caused, and where applicable, facing those who have been adversely impacted by one's actions and listening to their concerns.

Where an incident includes behaviour that could potentially be labelled as "criminal," such as physical assault, theft, or vandalism, the restorative element of any accountability measure is particularly important. For child and youth workers, it is critical to recognize that youth should not be accountable to them, but rather to themselves and to those directly or indirectly impacted by their actions. When a youth sprays paint on the neighbour's new car, doing household chores really make no sense, nor does apologizing to the staff. The youth will have to be accountable to the neighbour and perhaps to other neighbours whose anxieties about potential property damage may have been raised.

Many residential programs are quite good at dealing with the issues arising from significant incidents in accordance with some of the principles laid out in response to question 1. Accountability does not stop here, however. Question 2 provides a framework for thinking about how to manage the identity and memory effects of such incidents. What can we do that will ensure that our memory of any incident is guided by the principles of child and youth work?

If we accept the idea that we join youth in their exploration of relationships to issues, themes, identities, places and other individuals, we should ensure that any incident is somehow captured in all of these relationships in an on-going and everpresent manner. There is no sense pretending that an incident is all over and accountability has been achieved. As long as we have memory of the incident, it is not over, and no single accountability measure will suffice to undo what has been done. One way of ensuring that accountability maintains momentum without becoming a burden or overshadowing the learning and growth that may have been achieved through the initially imposed consequences is through the process of engagement (Stuart, 2005).

Within a child and youth work context, engagement is the art of creating collective memories of a living space for all those living (or working or visiting) there. We at FACS Waterloo engage our youth by joining them in their activities, their thoughts, their emotions, their fears, their experiences, and their process of identity formation. Within the context of a residential program, memories are collective entities, individualized only by the differing interpretations and ways of creating meaning of past events. Therein lies the challenge: Frequently our youth remember things quite differently than the way we do. Acts of aggression or property damage are remembered as momentary events, significant only with respect to the specific circumstances of the moment. Child and youth workers, in contrast, remember such events as potential clues as to what might happen in the future. We have learned what the youth is capable of, and we take preventative action and adjust our approach to the youth accordingly. This profound difference in

creating meaning is unfolding silently; the youth has moved on and stops talking about the incident altogether, while the staff change their approaches either subconsciously or through discussion away from the youth. In this sense, this process of remembering is characterized by disengagement, and the memories of the incident are discreet and not at all collective. Accountability is thus not even on the agenda, as we have already moved to a phase of realignment of approach and are embarking on a new way of seeing and experiencing the youth.

As an alternative, and more consistent with the fundamental principles of child and youth work, we can start with the goal of creating a collective memory of the incident by engaging the youth wherever the opportunity emerges. When we are reminded of what happened, we might make a comment to the youth. When we experience a similar incident at the hands of another youth, we might praise the youth responsible for the original incident for not having taken part in the newest incident. When we watch a show on TV that features similar behaviour and are again reminded of what our youth had done, we might tell him or her that this is what we are reminded of— not to judge, not to nag, but simply to speak a truth and to reengage the youth in reflecting on the original incident.

There is no limit to the practical applications of collective memory. Not all such applications have to be verbal. A visual application might include taking a picture of a damaged area and taking another picture of the area once the youth has fixed it. Frame the pictures, hang them up, and ensure that from time to time, the staff, and perhaps well-prepared visitors, comment on the transition from broken to fixed.

Where an incident may have caused damage or problems in the neighbourhood, involve the neighbours (where possible and without breaching confidentiality) in participating in collective memory engagement by commenting on the restitution the youth may have completed, or by lamenting the lack of restitution from the youth without inviting an argument. During plan-of-care meetings or case conferences, rather than reviewing the incident itself (which is invariably a negative experience for the youth) review the ways in which the impact of the incident has been mitigated and speak to the impacts still present, including the silent ghosts and lingering anxieties of any affected persons (peers, staff, neighbours, etc.). The goal is not to be demanding of the youth, not to be punitive, and not to be judgmental, but rather to articulate what already is happening—a new dimension to the youth's relationship with people, places, and issues has been introduced. The incident lives as part of the youth's identity, and all of his or her relationships to everything will be impacted every day and everywhere.

Over time, any steps taken by the youth or jointly by the child and youth workers and the youth will mitigate the negative impacts of any particular incident, and the balance of meaning about the incident will shift to positive things: Time characterized by active engagement is healing in and of itself, and accountability therefore is furthered even if the youth is uncooperative. Nothing perpetuates a lack of accountability more so that the false pretence that an incident has ceased to have any impact whatsoever as if it never happened. Everyone knows

that what exists, exists forever. Collectively we will remember, but without a conscious engagement with the youth. What we remember will not be a collective memory.

Including Community

It is important to recognize that within a child and youth work conceptualization of accountability, the idea of community is not a spatial concept per se. Instead, like child and youth work relationships with children and youth unfold in their life spaces and through the many connections of the child to these spaces, accountability is conceptualized as a process that unfolds through the life spaces of the perpetrator. As we engage our collective memory of any given incident, we have to acknowledge the manifestations of the incident's impact beyond the walls of the residential program. As one place within the community, any stress, hard feelings, and lingering memories of an incident add to the stress and identity of the community as well.

In this way, collective memory extends beyond youth and child and youth worker and includes neighbours, visitors to the residential program, the maintenance crew from head office, the probation worker where applicable, and all the other workers, volunteers, and programs and organizations involved, even marginally, with the youth. The point is not to ensure that there is on-going nagging of the youth in all of these settings or from all of the individuals, but rather that the impact of one's actions are acknowledged to have touched any and all life spaces of the youth. If we agree that one's actions contribute to one's identity, then any incident will impact on the youth's identity, which in turn impacts on every life space of the youth.

Community, therefore, is a forum for feedback, rooted in unprepared, unrehearsed responses on the part of known or relatively unknown individuals. For example, a youth who has been aggressive in the residential program might be accompanied by a staff member to the weekend soccer game in order to ensure that there will not be further incidents in a less controlled environment. The youth is aware why the staff is present. However, her or his peers, the coach, other parents, etc. will not be. Their responses, if detectable, to the presence of the staff serve to remind the youth of the need to be accountable everywhere.

A "Really Imagined" Example of Engagement Through Collective Memory

Making the concept of engagement through collective memory operational is complex and requires a conscious and strategic response on the part of the entire team involved with the youth and a multitude of other stakeholders. In the traditional approach to accountability, the staff on shift made various attempts at finding natural or logical consequences to a "fit the crime," but in this approach we abandon the concepts of resolution in the shortest possible time frame and consequences as the primary way of achieving accountability. Indeed, we abandon the idea that accountability is an "end state" that can be achieved. Instead we rearticulate accountability as a process that is on-going and that manifests itself through stages of con-

scious and strategic engagement.

In this sense, we can conceptualize the process of accountability in three phases. These phases are not written in stone, do not have to be entirely sequential, and do not have prescribed time frames. We understand that every situation requires a customized approach that fits with the identity of the youth and the specific context of the incident. Nevertheless, by way of exemplifying how a process of accountability might unfold using an engagement through our collective memory approach, we have created the following scenario which is based on real circumstances characteristic of what actually happens in our residential programs quite regularly, but that allows us to imagine what could be done if we move "beyond the obvious."

Three Phases:

A fourteen-year-old girl in one of our coed residences became very angry after having to face the consequences for not attending school one day. She started yelling and swearing at the staff, and notwithstanding their best efforts, there was no calming her down. She began throwing items at staff and even at her peers, who were becoming increasingly upset and concerned. The staff made every attempt to separate the girl from the other peers and to secure the physical environment as much as possible. The girl's behaviour continued to escalate, and she systematically destroyed whatever she could find in her path. Eventually she headed outside and started to destroy, one by one, the freshly planted trees on the neighbour's property.

Normally under these circumstances, the staff would have called the police. The girl would have calmed down upon the arrival of the police, or she would have simply taken off before the police arrived. If indeed police officers were to engage with her: She would be lectured, and then the officers would leave, or the officers would decide to charge her. Typically under these conditions the preferred charge would be breach of existing bail or probation terms, but if necessary, a new charge of mischief might be laid. If she were charged, they would take her into custody until a court appearance, usually the next day, at which time she would almost certainly be released on bail. Either way, the incident would be over the following day, and at the most, the girl might have to assist with cleaning up her mess. By the time the issue would come to court for sentencing, the specifics of the incident would long have been forgotten, the neighbour's trees would still be dead, and all that remained of the mess in the house would be the memories of those who were present. The fact that all of this came about by the girl's failure to attend school that day would not even make it onto the agenda.

If, on the other hand, we approach this incident through an engagement of our collective memory, things would unfold very differently. There still

would be a great deal of destruction and deescalation might take longer. Once done, however, the question of accountability would be approached, not through the use of consequences as the primary intervention, but through engagement on the part of the team, the neighbour, all relevant adults in the lives of the girl, and where possible, her peers in the residence. Before doing anything else, we might take some pictures of the mess and save them for a later intervention. Of course we would ask the girl to clean up the mess she made, but we might not be so anxious for this to happen right away, because we would know that the cleaning up itself is not the core of the accountability process anyway. Instead, we could take the initial time after the incident to reassure the girl that we are still joining with her to deal with the current problem, and that she is not the problem.

Once things calmed down, even if this has to wait for the following day, we would offer to work with the girl to clean up. We would then ask the girl to speak with the neighbour about the trees, in order to determine how to replace them. Ideally, we would want to join the girl in purchasing new trees, planting these trees for the neighbour, and then taking pictures of those trees. That picture we would frame and hang in the living room somewhere, so that everybody could comment on how nice the trees look. Where appropriate, the girl or staff could then retell the story of the incident and the girl's contribution to resolving the immediate issues.

Where possible, we would work with the neighbour to ensure that she or he would comment from time to time about her or his trees and how important they are to her or him. We would work with visitors and other workers involved in the life of the girl to bring up the incident occasionally and focus on its resolution. And we would want to use every new situation of property damage by any other resident as a way of remembering what had happened with the girl and how things had progressed since the incident.

For the first three weeks or so (a somewhat random time frame), members of the team would ensure that they would make at least one comment about the incident every shift. Comments could include the following:

- Girl, I was surprised by how you responded to that situation.
- I saw this kind of thing before; glad you are feeling better now.
- I don't know who cleaned up the mess, but I'm glad it's cleaned up.
- Wow, you did a great job replacing the trees. I was really hoping you would because I really like those trees.

Each of these comments is brief, but indicates at least three things:

1. Everybody has been impacted by the incident and feels compelled to comment.

2. There is no judgment of the girl, just honest expressions of observations and feelings.
3. Everybody is impacted differently and has a different frame of reference for their responses.

For the girl, this approach provides little opportunity to react. The child and youth workers just won't hang around long enough to get a response. The goal is to engage the girl in reflecting, not in processing. The message needs to be clear from everyone: The incident is embedded in our collective memory, and you cannot process it away.

After the initial three week period, we might then move into the second phase of the accountability process. In this phase, we would expand the individuals and life spaces involved in the process by preparing neighbours, visitors, family, and other workers to comment and where appropriate, briefly engage with the girl about the incident and how it is being remembered. By this time, our collective memory will already have balanced the negative associations related to the girl's aggression with positive thoughts about the on-going resolution of the situation. Whereas in the previous phase, we would want the comments to be brief but high in quantity (say four or five per day), in this phase we are looking for fewer comments and conversations (perhaps two or three per week).

This second phase of the process is complemented by visual symbols as well. Hopefully we would have the picture of the planted trees up on the wall by now. Likewise, this might be a good time to pull out the picture of the mess we took on the day of the incident and discreetly pass it on to the girl with a message written on the back: "yikes, not such a good day! Glad we're better now!"

The final phase of the accountability process has no ending. During this phase, we are acknowledging that both the incident and the time spent remembering it has become part of the girl's identity, and therefore is characterized by both low points and high points in terms of the girl's conduct. Collectively we remember the incident, make reference to it when we are reminded of it by something we see, hear, or experience, but we don't judge, we don't nag, and we don't lecture. With the girl, we appreciate that we remember good things and bad things, and we join the girl in making meaning of our collective memory during moments when we are all open to that.

This phase is a time when accountability is in its simmering phase, always present but very low key, with periodic flare ups within a context of relative calmness and long resolved tension. This is a time when the actual incident

has for the most part been forgotten, and collectively we remember the positive steps, the resolutions, the growth, and the togetherness we experienced in dealing with the issues at hand. The incident itself only comes up very sporadically, when there are obvious reminders or when we are retelling stories of what used to be.

Accountability in this really imagined scenario is seen as a timeless process in which child and youth workers are engaging with youth to make meaning of our collective memory.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper has been an attempt to articulate a vision of accountability that transcends the one-dimensional approach of the court systems and that provides opportunities for child and youth workers to promote accountability in youth through child and youth work approaches. In so doing, three fundamental child and youth work principles are essential:

Engagement: Child and youth work cannot unfold in the absence of honest, direct, and on-going engagement with youth.

Life Spaces: Accountability, like all other processes, unfolds within the actual spaces, physical and otherwise, where youth live.

Joining: Child and youth workers join youth in their everyday experiences and therefore make meaning of those experiences together through their collective memory.

One of the most rewarding features of our approach to accountability is that it is one that has been developed entirely by child and youth workers. Indeed, the Beyond the Obvious group process led us to reexamine our base assumptions about working with youth in our residential programs. When child and youth workers get together and feel free to think creatively and “beyond the obvious,” much of what appeared as intuitive and true turns out to be open to critical reflection and change.

The endeavour to reevaluate how we think about accountability comes from the realization that we have for years abandoned child and youth work principles in our approach to this particular issue. We acted as if accountability measures within the child and youth work discipline had a limit, beyond which other systems and other professions had to take over. But this is not acceptable to a profession that purports to be child-centered, with the core principle of not abandoning children and youth when they need us most.

The court’s approach to dealing with youth who push the limits of tolerable behaviour is not compatible with what we, as child and youth workers, are trying to accomplish. When we know ahead of time that the youth we deal with face challenges that are likely to lead them to engage in activities that are rejected by the social standards of the day, we have a responsibility to find ways of providing opportunities for growth and learning even under the most difficult conditions. The youth who challenge us the most are the ones who are looking to us to remain true to our profession and the principles that guide it.

References

- Barter, K. (1999). Building community: A conceptual framework for child welfare. *Journal of Child and Youth Care, 13* (1), 49-72.
- Barter, K. (2003). Strengthening community capacity: Expanding the vision. *Relational Journal of Child and Youth Care Practice, 16* (2), 24-32.
- Doob, A. N., & Cessaroni, C. (2003). *Responding to youth crime in Canada*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Doob, A. N. et al., (1998). *An exploration of Ontario residents' views on crime and the criminal justice system*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Durrant, M. (1993). *Residential treatment: A cooperative, competency-based approach to therapy and program design*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company.
- Fewster, G. (2004). Just between you and me: Personal boundaries in professional relationships. *Relational Journal of Child and Youth Care Practice, 17* (3), 8-17.
- Fewster, G. (2001). My place or yours? Inviting the family into child and youth care practice. *Journal of Child and Youth Care, 15* (4), 137-150.
- Finaly, J. (2005). Youth inc. *Relational Journal of Child and Youth Care Practice, 18* (4), 33-47.
- Garfat, T. (1999). Editorial: Questions about self and relationship. *Journal of Child and Youth Care, 13* (2), iii-iv.
- Garfat, T. (Ed.), (2003). *A child and youth care approach to working with families*. New York, NY: Haworth Press.
- Greenwood, P.W. (2006). *Changing lives: Delinquency prevention as crime-control policy*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Kostouros, P. (2006). The curriculum of self-care for students in professional career programs. *Relational Journal of Child and Youth Care Practice, 19* (2), 19-23.
- Maier, H. (2003). What to say when first meeting a person each day. *Relational Journal of Child and Youth Care Practice, 16* (3), 40-41.
- Stuart, C. (2005). Staying engaged—bent out of shape. *Relational Journal of Child and Youth Care Practice, 19* (1), 3-6.

Ungar, M. (2002). *Playing at being bad: The hidden resilience of troubled teens*. East Lawrence Town, NS: Portersfield Press.

Ungar, M. (2006). *Strengths-based counselling with at-risk youth*. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Waller, I. (2006). *Less law, more order: The truth about reducing crime*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.