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Professional Boundaries: Questions for Success in Child and Youth Care Work

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Abstract

Reflecting on when I was a child and youth care worker, I would have benefited from structured questions that I could refer to during my shift in helping me think through boundary situations. Not rules that would tell me how to handle a situation, rather, key points that I should consider. This article is intended to serve such a purpose—to aid child and youth care workers in critically thinking about boundary choices they make and the intended or unintended consequences of their choice.

Keywords: Professional Boundaries; Dual Relationships; Ethics; Child and Youth Care Work; Boundary Guidelines

Introduction

“...I think you should focus on caring for yourself. I want to support you and not complicate the situation; I think I should end contact with you....”

Those were the last words spoken to a teen that I attempted to mentor after her discharge from a treatment facility. As her former child and youth care worker, I entered into a personal/mentoring relationship and her behaviors started to negatively escalate. Because I lacked training about professional boundaries and felt overwhelmed from all that was asked of me, consequently, I hastily ended the relationship. Feeling bewildered about my experience, I began my quest to understand professional boundaries (Richmond, 2003) and educate workers so they would not make the same mistakes I did.

Through research (Richmond, 2006 and Richmond and Padgett, 2002), many years of child and youth care work experience and educational training I have learned that often frontline child and youth care workers do not receive formal training on professional boundaries and how to handle situations faced in practice. Training for workers is

important to “normalize conversations” about boundaries and can assist in practice (Grant and Mandell, 2016, p. 710). Rather, oftentimes, risk management techniques are enforced without there being an understanding from workers of why actions are being supported (Zur, 2017). As a result, workers can be limited in their ability to describe the dimensions of a decision (Richmond and Padgett, 2002). Boundaries are often presented on a continuum with “entangled” at one end and “rigid” at the other. What is optimal is to have a “balanced” perspective (Davidson, 2005, p. 518). Finding the balanced perspective of boundaries is not easy when there is lack of training (Richmond and Padgett, 2002).

Reflecting on when I was a child and youth care worker, I would have benefited from structured questions that I could refer to during my shift in helping me think through boundary situations. Not rules that would tell me how to handle a situation, rather, key points that I should consider. This article is intended to serve such a purpose—to aid child and youth care workers in critically thinking about boundary choices they make and the intended or unintended consequences of their choice.

This article is developed from readings, many years of child and youth care work experience, articles I have written and notes from numerous conference presentations that I have given, specifically, the Wisconsin Association of Child and Youth Care Professionals. The result is a compilation of important boundary information that can be considered and applied in a user-friendly way in practice. This article is not filled with detailed explanations and theoretical perspectives. Rather, the focus is a quick guide to provide an overview of boundaries and areas to consider when faced with professional choices in a variety of child and youth care work settings by responding to a series of questions. The intent is the questions will be used “on the job”—referring to when faced with a boundary choice. The focus will be on nonsexual boundaries because having sex with clients and their family members is grossly unethical (North American Child and Youth Care Professionals, 2017).

Prior to presenting a series of questions, it is important to define professional boundaries and why they are so important. Then eight areas are offered to be considered when facing a boundary decision. The acronym **boundary** will be used to highlight the eight areas to include: background information of the young person, organizational policies, professional codes, continuity of care, diversity, assessments of the situation, documentation and worker needs. Following a brief description of each of the eight areas, a series of questions will assist the child and youth care worker in thinking through the boundary challenge.

Definition of Professional Boundaries

Cooper (2012) explains “professional boundaries are a set of guidelines, expectations and rules which set the ethical and technical standards in the social care environment. They set limits for safe, acceptable and effective behavior by workers” (p. 11). Examples of professional boundaries in practice include: physical touch, gift giving/receiving, self-disclosure, politics/religion (Cooper, 2012), technology (Reamer, 2017), love (Byrne, 2016), and cultural comfort (Sanders, Bullock and Broussard, 2012).

Professional boundaries are cloaked under several terms to include dual relationships, boundary crossings/violations, and transference/countertransference.

Dual Relationship—When a worker mixes personal and professional roles this is considered a dual relationship. An example of a dual relationship is having a young person as a client and then coaching them (outside of the agency) on a sports team.

Boundary Violations & Crossing—Boundary violations are a clear disregard for what is in the best interest of the young person. In addition, the primary needs focus on what the worker finds beneficial. Having sex with a young person is a clear boundary violation. Whereas “a boundary crossing is a nonsexual boundary transgression in which the ultimate effect is positive in that it may constructively advance the treatment or the understanding of the [client]” (Gabbard, Crisp-Han and Hobday, 2015, p. 9). For example, a young person cannot go on a field trip because a parent/guardian does not have the money. The worker pays so the young person does not have to miss the trip. The worker is not gaining from paying for the field trip, rather, it is the young person that prevails.

Transference—Transference “...occurs when someone [a client] projects feelings about important people in their life onto a current relationship” (Cooper, 2012, p. 135). For example, the young person was physically and emotionally abused. The worker is the same height as the abuser, talks in the same accent, and has the annoying habit of biting their nails like the abuser. **Countertransference**—Countertransference is when the worker is emotionally triggered by a client. An example, the worker is providing case management to a pregnant teen

mother. The worker was a teen mother and feelings of what she experienced as a pregnant adolescent has been triggered when she is working with the young person. It is important to note that transference and countertransference can be positive or negative depending on the awareness of the worker.

Why Professional Boundaries are Important

Why should child and youth care workers care about professional boundaries? According to the North American Child and Youth Care Professional Standards of Practice (2017, p. 5), boundaries are a key component in working with young people and their families. Specifically, the importance is emphasized in section II j by stating child and youth care workers:

Ensures appropriate boundaries between professional and personal relationships

1. Recognizes and adjusts for dynamics related to power, authority, and position
2. Does not engage in harassment or sexual misconduct with a child, youth, or family member

Workers are on the “front lines” and “in the trenches” working with young people and their families in a variety of settings and with different levels of complexities. Surely, workers have the best of intentions to help young people. Yet, the boundaries faced in handling daily responsibilities can have negative implications in a variety of areas if they are not attended to on a consistent basis. The following are considerations workers should account for in their work.

Boundaries assist in protecting the youth, worker and the organization. The young people that child and youth workers assist often have challenges they are grappling with such as family and school difficulties, bullying, gang involvement, use of substances, physical/sexual/emotional abuse and neglect. Because of the issues, the adults working with them must be prepared for the range of boundaries the young person may present from rigid to none. The intimate relationship developed with young people and the variety of settings child and youth care workers are employed can confuse young people who have questionable boundaries. When transparency of the worker is present there is continuity of care with other professionals that ultimately benefits the clients.

The organization is ultimately responsible for the care that is provided by their employees. The organization may have a board of directors, funders, licensing, child welfare agencies as well as the parent/guardian of the young person they are accountable to for care. When the worker is open about the boundary decisions they make and why, this puts the organization in a favorable light if they must account for the actions. In addition, boundaries can assist in ensuring there is not an appearance of impropriety—to other clients, professionals, and the public.

Professional boundaries assist in preventing burnout among child and youth care workers. Giving of time and emotional energy can be draining for the average person. But a child and youth worker that is handling intense interactions with young people and their families can become burnt out very quickly if they do not take care of themselves. For example, if you are allowing young people to call you at home, providing material goods such as money or clothing and working outside of typical hours, after a while, chances are you are going to become overwhelmed.

Boundary Acronym to Think Through Boundary Situations

A general understanding of how professional boundaries are defined and why they are important were previously explained. Now it is necessary to take your knowledge to the next level by determining how you are going to make decisions in practice. Besides not having sexual contact with young people and their family members (National Association of Child and Youth Care Professionals, 2017), there are no hard and fast rules with how to handle boundary situations faced in practice. Therefore, it is important to have a mechanism for how to think through boundary decisions when they occur.

The acronym **boundary** is used to highlight eight areas that should be considered when faced with making a boundary decision. The eight steps of **background** information of the client, **organizational** policies,

understanding of professional codes, **nonstop** continuity of care, **diversity**, **assess** the situation with a colleague or supervisor, **reporting** and documenting and **your** needs were developed from years of practice experience, reading, research, writing, and presenting on professional boundaries.

It is important to note that using the acronym will not bring you to a conclusion of what boundary decision you should make. Rather, using the acronym will assist in thinking through the boundary issue. This is important because oftentimes when faced with a boundary decision it is easy to become caught up in the emotion of how a situation should be handled. However, the consequence of making decisions based on emotion is that judgment may be cloudy and valuable points may not be considered. Using critical thinking and asking a series of questions like the boundary acronym to work through a boundary issue ultimately benefits the young person, worker and the agency.

Using the boundary acronym is quite simple. When faced with a boundary situation you can go through the acronym, think through the specific area (for example, background information of the client) and then ask yourself the associated questions. When you finish thinking about the eight areas, you will make decisions based on facts rather than emotion.

BOUNDARY ACRONYM/QUESTIONS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE CLIENT

When contemplating a boundary decision, it is important to consider the setting of the agency where you are employed. For example, if you work with school age kids in a before and after school program, the boundaries will most likely not be as rigid as if you were employed at a residential treatment facility with young people that have emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Along with considering the setting it is important to keep in mind the issues the young person may have. Some young people may have behavioral issues, problems with abandonment, abuse, loss, and lack of trust with authority figures. Therefore, the actions of a child and youth care worker could inadvertently negatively impact the young person. For instance, a child has been physically abused in the past. When the child is upset the child and youth worker may initiate a hug to show support. However, the hug may not be viewed as supportive, rather, it may trigger issues of abuse.

Questions to ask yourself when considering the **background** information of the client:

1. Are you working in an organization that is a highly restrictive environment (for example, residential treatment, group home, psychiatric hospital, detention center) or a less restrictive environment (such as, prevention, school system, before and after school programs, Headstart)?
2. Does the child or youth have mental health issues that you should consider?
3. Is your behavior/action consistent with the young person's goals?
4. How do you think the young person will interpret the behavior/action?
5. What will be your response if the young person expects this behavior/action again?

ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

Organizational policies are the rules and regulations outlining how employees should conduct themselves in the job setting. It is important to have written guidelines that all employees are expected to adhere to—this helps to prevent the agency from incurring liability. Each agency should have a policy and procedure manual, sometimes referred to as an agency handbook that will outline policies. Many times, there will be policies that all workers “just know” and they are not written in the policy and procedure manual or they conflict with what is written in the manual—these are referred to as informal policies. An example, the policy and procedure manual states that workers should not accept gifts from young people or their family members. However, in your department, gifts are accepted at the Christmas holiday. Keep in mind that because formal policies are written they take precedence over informal ones.

While policies are meant to provide structure and guidance about professionalism in the work setting, Marshall (2009) reminds us that "...policies and rules that are too rigid can impede the development of therapeutic relationships" (p. 37). Therefore, if there is a policy that you do not agree with then get involved and promote change (Richmond, 2017).

Questions to ask yourself when considering **organizational** policies:

1. Did you check your agency policy and procedure manual for guidance?
2. If there is a policy, is it written in the manual or is the policy known informally among other child and youth care workers?
3. What is the potential for the behavior/action to present as a liability for the agency?
4. If the agency had to defend your actions to parents or community members, would they be able to do so?

UNDERSTANDING OF PROFESSIONAL CODES

Codes of ethics are a roadmap to how workers should behave in practice. However, codes are guidelines that outline the expectations within the profession; workers are expected to use critical thinking in interpreting how the code is congruent with the client's needs. Child and youth care workers have a professional code that can be found at: <https://cycb.org/ethics/>

It should be noted that workers may have the title child and youth care worker, however, they may be educationally trained in a variety of disciplines such as education, nursing, social work and psychology. Many professional disciplines such as social work and psychology will have a professional code that must be adhered to in their work with others. The codes typically have consistent values, however, the specifics of implementation may be different.

Questions to ask yourself when considering an understanding of the code:

1. Did you check the Child and Youth Care Code of Ethics for guidance?
2. Will your decision be consistent with the Child and Youth Care Code of Ethics and other professional codes the worker may be associated with (for example, social work or psychology)?

NONSTOP CARE

It is typical for child and youth care workers to be employed with a variety of professionals while assisting young people. Depending on the setting the worker is employed, some professionals you may work closely with include: social workers, psychologists, teachers, law enforcement, nurses, psychiatrists, judges and physicians. Boundaries assist in providing continuity of care with other professionals.

At times young people can be very skilled at trying to "split" the professionals involved in their care—almost like a child attempts to get their needs met by playing parent against parent. Take for instance, you are a worker that always hugs teens when they are upset. The teen is interacting with another worker and they do not offer a hug. The teen says, "Child and youth care worker X gives me a hug, I guess they understand what I need more than you."

Not keeping secrets when faced with a boundary issue (Richmond, 2013) and having open communication between professionals will help to avoid splitting between colleagues. In addition, open dialogue will squelch any appearance of impropriety.

Questions to ask yourself when considering **nonstop** care:

1. Is your interaction consistent with how colleagues may understand and handle the situation?
2. Will you feel comfortable sharing the boundary situation and your decision with other colleagues?

DIVERSITY

Child and youth workers have the awesome privilege of working with young people and their families from a variety of diverse backgrounds. According to the Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals (2017), workers:

Ensures services are culturally sensitive and non-discriminatory (regardless of race, color, ethnicity, national origin, national ancestry, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, religion, mental or physical capacity/ability, medical condition, political views, or socioeconomic status) http://www.acycp.org/images/pdfs/ethics_and_practices_ACYCP_v2-1.pdf

Questions to ask yourself when considering **diversity**:

1. Are you considering the differences between yourself and the child/youth and their family?
2. Do you have an understanding of the young person's diverse background?
3. Are the child/youth and their family that you are working with from a group where boundaries are vastly different (for example, race, substance abuse, rural areas and the GLBTQ community)?

ASSESS SITUATION WITH COLLEAGUE OR SUPERVISOR

Richmond (2013) explains, “By seeking consultation and supervision to ask questions and/or sort out feelings, you are demonstrating self-awareness and the importance of grappling with boundary situations” (p. 40). Keep in mind that if a professional boundary has been crossed it is imperative to consult with a colleague or supervisor (Cooper, 2012).

Questions to ask yourself when considering **assessing** the situation with a colleague or supervisor:

1. Have you consulted with a colleague or supervisor regarding the questionable boundary situation?
2. Are you comfortable informing your supervisor of the decision you made?

REPORTING AND DOCUMENTING

Documentation of boundary situations are crucial for the protection of the worker, the young person and the agency. It is important to keep in mind that what you write is considered a legal document and should be written for the inevitability that it might have to be defended in court. Therefore, facts should be documented and not feelings. The focus of documentation should not be on the worker (Sidell, 2015) but on the young person being served. For example, a male teen in a gang prevention program tells a female worker that he wants to “be with her” when he is no longer in the program. When documenting, the worker should refrain from making comments like “I wouldn’t be with him if he was the last guy on earth.” Instead, the facts should be reported.

Questions to ask yourself when considering reporting and documenting:

1. Have you documented your boundary situation and how you arrived at your decision (for example, consultation with a supervisor)?
2. Have you documented using facts and not opinions?

YOUR NEEDS

When considering needs there are two areas that should be considered—professional and personal. When interacting with young people the focus should always remain on them and not the needs of the workers. For example, in a detention center for young people, the worker is having a bad day and self-discloses too much information as if they were talking to a friend. In this case, in a professional setting, the worker is focusing on what they need (a sounding board because they are having a bad day) and not the young person.

The other area that should be considered is the child and youth care worker taking care of themselves, so they can avoid employment burnout. The issues of the young people, the demands placed on the worker,

requirements of agency administration and low wages can quickly exhaust the most committed worker. If a worker consistently finds themselves not doing typical activities, for example, going to the gym, keeping a date night with a significant other, taking a vacation, etc. because of work needs, then that is a red flag that burnout may be approaching.

Questions to ask yourself when considering **your** (child and youth care workers) needs:

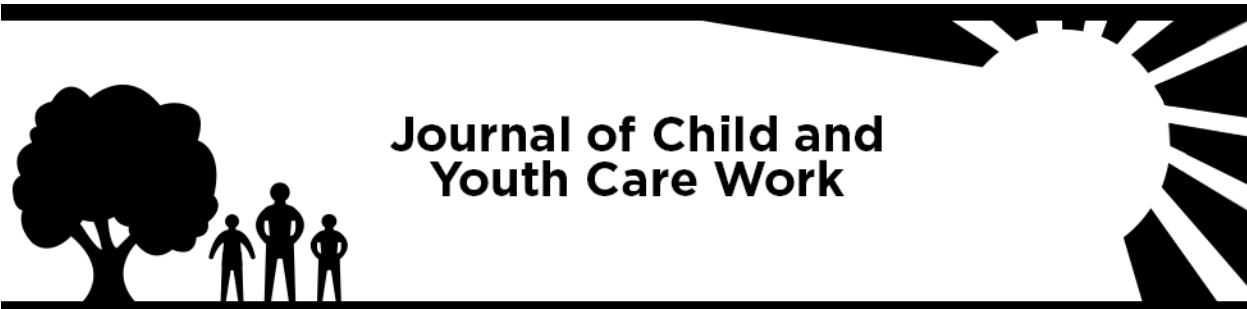
1. Are your interactions/decisions based on the best interest of the young person?
2. Will you personally benefit from the action you take (for example, your needs being met over the young person)?
3. Are you consistently practicing self-care, so you do not become burned out?
4. If you have stressors in your life, are you seeking professional assistance?

Question Considerations

As you are going through the list of questions, some responses to the questions should immediately provide caution. For example, if the policy and procedure manual has guidelines regarding the boundary situation (such as receiving gifts from clients) that should alert you there could be difficulties if you ignore the protocol. This would also hold true for a violation to a specific rule with the code of ethics. And, if you are meeting your own needs instead of the young persons and you are not being attentive to diversity that should raise a red flag. Remember, the guided questions are not going to tell you how to handle a given situation. Rather, the questions are going to slow you down and ensure you have thought through each important aspect of boundary decision-making. In addition, the questions will prompt you to seek guidance from a colleague or supervisor and document the boundary interaction.

Conclusion

Dealing with professional boundaries in practice can be challenging at best. With emotions running high and boundary decisions needing to be made quickly, sometimes that can leave a worker feeling as if their head is swirling with choices. Having structured questions to think through will assist in making sure important points are not overlooked. The totality of the questions may appear to be a lot to remember and process. However, the more the questions are referred to, the more user friendly they will become. Ultimately, using questions to think through the eight steps of professional boundaries will assist child and youth care workers in the knowledge they are protecting the young people, the organization, and themselves from boundary missteps.



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