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The Past, Present, and Future of Child and Youth Work: A Sociohistorical Account and Look Forward

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Abstract

Child and youth care (CYC) has developed from an informal caregiving practice to a recognized profession requiring specialized training, professional development, and strategic coordination. This article traces the evolution of CYC from its early roots to current efforts in enhancing professionalism and certification. Additionally, it explores future directions that will shape the profession, including the ongoing need for universal credentialing, workforce development, and global engagement. By addressing these key areas, this article offers a comprehensive roadmap for advancing the field of child and youth care to better serve vulnerable populations across diverse settings.

Child and youth care (CYC) has undergone profound changes over the last few decades, evolving from a loosely defined caregiving field to a recognized professional discipline. Today, CYC workers are not just caregivers; they are trained professionals responsible for the well-being, development, and education of young people across diverse settings, including residential care, educational institutions, juvenile justice systems, and community-based programs.

This paper presents a historical overview of the CYC profession, assesses the present state of child and youth care work, and outlines the future directions for the field. Drawing upon key moments in the history of the profession, this analysis explores the significant progress made in professionalization, certification, and education while acknowledging ongoing challenges that must be addressed to move the field forward.

CYC: A Sociohistorical Account Spanning 40 Years

Establishing Foundations

The late 20th century saw youth work in the United States evolve from a loosely defined practice to an organized profession with clear structures and shared goals. This period began with the founding of the National Organization of Child Care Worker Associations (NOCCWA) on September 26, 1977. Ralph Kelly was elected as the inaugural president of NOCCWA, and the initial meeting brought together practitioners and advocates who recognized the need for a unified voice in child and youth care. NOCCWA's vision was rooted in the following priorities:

- Developing professional standards for youth workers;
- Establishing platforms for knowledge-sharing through conferences and publications; and
- Creating a community of practice to strengthen the identity of youth work as a distinct profession.

The organization's bylaws were formalized during this meeting, and a commitment was made to host triennial international conferences, fostering dialogue and collaboration across national and cultural boundaries. These conferences quickly became pivotal events, bringing together practitioners and researchers to share innovations and strategies.

The publication of the *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work* in 1984 marked a watershed moment. The journal provided youth workers with a dedicated space to document and reflect on their practices, bridging the gap between fieldwork and academic inquiry. Founding editor Mark Krueger played a transformative role, personally soliciting contributions from practitioners across the U.S. and Canada. His tireless efforts ensured that the journal became a trusted resource, blending practical insights with scholarly rigor. The journal's production often involved grassroots efforts, reflecting the ethos of the field at the time. Volunteers—many of whom worked full-time in youth care—dedicated their evenings to writing, editing, and mailing the journal by hand. This collaborative spirit

underscored the deep commitment of early practitioners to building a professional identity. The meteoric rise of JCYCW made it clear that while CYC was primarily seen as an informal field where individuals entered the profession without the expectation of formal education or training, there was a growing need for a structured educational framework and professional standards as the field began to mature.

Under a series of pioneering leaders, including Ralph Kelly, Norman Powell, and Mark Krueger, NOCCWA began to expand its influence. By its 10th anniversary in 1987, the organization had established itself as a hub for professional development and advocacy. In 1992, the International Leadership Coalition for Professional Child and Youth Care Work rose as an effort to unite youth work organizations globally, specifically through a landmark meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin dubbed as the Cream City Summit. At this event, 70 representatives from international youth service settings and education programs convened to discuss the future of the field (Leadership Coalition, 1992). This meeting resulted in a strategic plan focusing on five core areas for the advancement of CYC as a professional discipline: packaging and marketing, administrative support, networks and coalitions, education and training programs, and universal credentialing standards. These areas were viewed as fundamental to building an infrastructure that would support the career development of practitioners and enhance the quality of care provided to young people.

One of the most significant outcomes of this meeting was the development of the Child and Youth Care Code of Ethics in 1995, which established clear guidelines for ethical practice across North America (Mattingly, 1995). Led by visionaries such as Drs. Martha Mattingly, Carol Stuart, and Karen VanderVen, these ethical guidelines were expanded into rigorous and transferable competency-based standards for practitioners in diverse settings, from early education and residential care to juvenile justice and mental health services. These competencies encompass five key domains—Professionalism, Cultural and Human Diversity, Applied Human Development, Relationship and Communication, and Developmental Practice Methods—providing a structured framework for certification and education at various levels of practice (Mattingly, 1995).

The competencies also emphasized the integration of theory, practice, and ethics, reflecting the developmental-ecological approach central to the field. It addressed longstanding challenges, including the need for consistent professional standards, alignment between the U.S. and Canadian educational systems, and the recognition of cultural and human diversity. Educational prerequisites were defined, with a baccalaureate degree or equivalent experience serving as the baseline for certification at the first professional level. This document shaped

the trajectory of child and youth care as a recognized profession, offering practitioners a clear pathway for development while strengthening the field's credibility and cohesion across North America.

Professionalization through Certification

In 1997, NOCCWA was rebranded as the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice (ACYCP) to reflect its broadened scope and mission. This transition was more than a name change—it marked a strategic shift toward unifying the fragmented field of youth work across practice settings and geographic regions. The decade following ACYCP's rebranding was characterized by a determined focus on professionalization, with certification becoming a central priority. The updated bylaws emphasized inclusivity and adaptability, laying the groundwork for innovations in professional certification guided by the combination of the 1995 code of ethics and competencies. Moving forward, the establishment of universal credentialing, ethical standards, and professional competencies played a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for a more professional and well-regarded field. Nonetheless, challenges remained in aligning the profession's identity with societal expectations and securing recognition from government bodies.

In 1998, ACYCP initiated the North American Certification Project (NACP). This ambitious decade-long endeavor sought to establish a unified framework for recognizing professional competencies in the child and youth care field. Over the course of ten years, more than 100 dedicated practitioners from the United States and Canada volunteered their expertise to develop what would become a transformative blueprint for the profession. One of the most significant outcomes of NACP was the combination of the 1995 code of ethics and subsequent competency document into the *Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals* (Mattingly et al., 2001). This landmark document introduced the first cross-sector code of ethics and professional competencies explicitly tailored to the unique challenges and responsibilities of child and youth care practice. It provided practitioners with a clear ethical compass, ensuring consistency and professionalism across diverse roles and settings. This comprehensive document offered an in-depth analysis of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for effective practice. It became a foundational tool for educators, trainers, and organizations, shaping curriculum development and professional training programs throughout North America.

The culmination of these efforts was the introduction of the CYC Certification Program, a rigorous, multi-method system for assessing professional competence (Eckles et al., 2009). Unlike earlier credentialing systems, which often lacked cohesion and transferability, the CYC program established a standardized process for evaluating

practitioners, ensuring that certified individuals met consistently high standards of excellence. NACP also addressed critical challenges that had hindered earlier certification efforts. By defining a clear set of core competencies, it created a standardized framework that made credentials transferable across regions and practice settings. The project prioritized equity by making certification accessible to practitioners from diverse backgrounds as well as scaling costs to accommodate varying economic circumstances. Finally, NACP introduced a forward-thinking approach to career development by envisioning a multi-tiered certification system. This structure supported lifelong professional growth, offering pathways from entry-level certification to advanced levels of practice, thereby fostering a dynamic and evolving professional landscape.

NACP's accomplishments represented a seismic shift in the field of child and youth care, establishing the foundation for a unified, professionalized workforce. It not only elevated the standards of practice but also empowered practitioners by providing them with the tools, recognition, and pathways to grow within their careers. In 2006, a comprehensive validation study was conducted to test NACP's framework led by Dr. Dale Curry at Kent State University. This study, spanning nine U.S. states and two Canadian provinces, demonstrated the reliability and impact of the certification program (Curry et al., 2009). It highlighted measurable benefits, including improved practitioner competence and outcomes for children and youth. To oversee the implementation of the program, the Child and Youth Care Certification Board (CYCCB) was established in 2007 with Frank Eckles as its inaugural president. This independent body became the governing authority for certification, ensuring consistency, quality, and accessibility.

Advocacy Efforts, Globalization, Communication, and Celebration

Since its establishment in 2007, the CYCCB has made substantial progress in professionalizing the field. Thousands of practitioners across North America are now certified, and research indicates that certified professionals provide higher quality care than their non-certified counterparts. In the years following the establishment of CYCCB, ACYCP presidents Jean Carpenter-Williams and Dr. Andrew Schneider-Muñoz led a deepening of advocacy efforts, international collaboration, and structural innovations in career development.

One of the persistent obstacles is that CYC work is still often misunderstood or underappreciated by the general public. In many cases, the field lacks a coherent narrative that explains its importance to influential stakeholders, such as policymakers and potential funders. In 2009, ACYCP launched Thank a Youth Worker Day (TAYWD) to honor the contributions of youth workers globally. Recognizing the often-overlooked efforts of these

practitioners, TAYWD became an annual event celebrated in multiple countries. By 2015, ACYCP assumed leadership of the initiative, integrating it into the broader professional culture. Public awareness of the importance of CYC has increased, but there remains a need for greater visibility. Initiatives like "Thank a Youth Worker Day" and the publication of materials through the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice (ACYCP) have helped promote the profession. However, much more could be done to enhance the profession's profile.

Network building has been a cornerstone of recent progress, with coalitions and partnerships forming between organizations and countries. Organizations like the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations and the CYCCB have been instrumental in fostering collaborations across borders. In 2012, ACYCP joined the Fédération Internationale des Communautés Éducatives (FICE), expanding its reach and influence on a global scale. This membership facilitated participation in international conferences and research initiatives, fostering cross-cultural exchange of best practices. ACYCP's involvement with FICE underscored its commitment to positioning child and youth care as a global profession.

In 2015, the *CYC Advocate* was initiated as a newsletter providing a dedicated platform for practitioners to access updates on certification, research, and professional opportunities. This publication reinforced ACYCP's role as a central resource for the field. It has become a cornerstone for advocacy, education, and professional connection. Under the editorial leadership of Michael Mitchell, the *CYC Advocate* quickly emerged as the go-to resource for practitioners, administrators, and educators alike, bridging the gap between frontline practice and high-level policy discussions. Its cutting-edge articles have set the agenda for critical issues in child and youth care, from certification and workforce development to global perspectives on relational practice.

In 2017, ACYCP celebrated its 40th anniversary by reflecting on its journey and impact. Under the leadership of James Freeman, the professional standards and competencies within the CYC code of ethics underwent its first full revision since its original inception. Key updates emphasized the importance of supervision and self-awareness, clarified language around self-determination, personal agency, and advocacy, and acknowledged the growing relevance of virtual and online dimensions in everyday practice. The revisions also placed a stronger focus on equity, inclusion, and expanded topics such as social justice, racial equality, and cultural humility. During this process, the ACYCP board committed to reviewing the code every five years to ensure the profession's ethical standards remain responsive to evolving sociocultural and historical contexts. This milestone underscored ACYCP's transformation from a small association of childcare workers to a prominent leader in professional advocacy, certification, and global collaboration.

Pushing forward the CYC Profession: Recent Advances by ACYCP

The history of youth work in the U.S. from 1977 to 2017 reveals a consistent trajectory of growth and professionalization. What began as a grassroots movement has evolved into a unified field with standardized ethics, certification processes, and global networks. The establishment of NOCCWA, the transformation into ACYCP, and the introduction of the CYC-P certification program stand as testaments to the commitment of youth workers to improving their practice and impact. As the field continues to evolve, the foundations laid during these decades will remain vital, guiding practitioners in delivering ethical, competent, and transformative care to children and youth. This history is not only a record of achievements but also an invitation to future generations to build on this legacy.

Council on Accreditation (2018)

In 2018, the Council on Accreditation (COA)—an internationally recognized accreditation entity for organizations providing human and social services to voluntarily undergo an intensive review to ensure high standards of quality, accountability, and best practices in their operations—officially recognized CYC Certification as a way to meet staffing credential requirements across multiple standards, including those for site directors, senior group leaders, and group leaders in Out of School Time (OST) programs. The integration of Child and Youth Care (CYC) Certification into the Council on Accreditation (COA) standards represents a significant step forward for the field of child and youth care. This recognition spans various editions of COA standards, encompassing Child and Youth Development, Private, Public, and Canadian frameworks. With over 800 organizations across North America employing certified CYC practitioners, the adoption of certification by a major accreditor like COA underscores the growing acknowledgment of the profession's rigorous standards and its commitment to quality care.

As supporting organizations of COA, ACYCP and CYCCB have demonstrated their alignment with COA's mission to promote high-quality services. CYC Certification reflects a commitment to competence in the field by connecting practitioners to a broader professional community, endorsing higher practice standards, and fostering ongoing professional development. The inclusion of CYC Certification in COA standards not only elevated the status of certified practitioners and marked a transformative step in the professionalization of the field, but also signaled to large and small organizations alike the importance of investing in credentialed staff to meet the demands

of professional child and youth care. This partnership strengthens the infrastructure for supporting excellence in care.

Salary and Benefits Survey (2020)

Between October and December 2020, the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice (ACYCP) conducted a comprehensive Issues and Salary/Benefits Survey to establish a baseline for understanding compensation trends and pressing challenges within the child and youth care (CYC) workforce. The study revealed that certification at the Professional Level was linked to increased salaries, whereas the Entry and Associate Levels did not experience similar benefits, exposing ongoing workforce disparities (Scanlon et al., 2021). These findings highlighted the urgent need to develop a well-trained and well-compensated workforce, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing staffing shortages and exposed critical vulnerabilities in the care system. Moving forward, addressing these challenges will require strategic investments in education, certification, competitive salaries, and career advancement opportunities. The survey underscored the diversity and complexity of the CYC field and reinforced the importance of advocacy for equity, professional recognition, and robust support systems for youth workers. As a benchmark study, it offers valuable insights to guide future research and inform policies aimed at enhancing the well-being of practitioners and the children and youth they serve.

Post-COVID Revisions to Code of Ethics (2022)

Since the 2017 revision of the Code of Ethics, the child and youth care profession has faced increasingly complex ethical challenges. The rapid evolution of social media and digital communication technologies has transformed the ways young people connect, necessitating a recalibration of traditional relational practices. Practitioners must navigate issues of consent, confidentiality, and boundary management in virtual spaces, ensuring their own cyber presence remains ethical while supporting children, youth, and families in developing safe and responsible online behaviors. These shifts underscore the need for the field to adapt continuously to the realities of an increasingly digital world.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further reshaped child and youth care practice, accelerating the shift to virtual environments and limiting face-to-face interactions. This transition has complicated the establishment of meaningful relationships, which are foundational to the field. Concurrently, the pandemic exacerbated systemic issues such as poverty, unemployment, and mental health challenges, intensifying the

vulnerability of the populations served by practitioners. Against this backdrop, the ethical responsibilities of child and youth care professionals to provide empathetic, responsive, and equitable care have never been more critical.

The 2022 revision of the Code of Ethics comes at a pivotal moment, addressing these evolving demands. Guided by an ad hoc committee chaired by Dr. Christina Scanlon and involving collaboration between U.S. and Canadian practitioners, the updated code expands guidelines for virtual practices and recognizes the roles of indirect care practitioners. Reflecting a renewed commitment to equity and social justice, the revision aligns with contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter, emphasizing anti-oppressive practices. Building on the legacy of Martha Mattingly, this revision serves as a moral compass for the field, ensuring its ethical foundations remain strong as child and youth care professionals navigate an ever-changing world.

501(c)(3) Status (2023)

In 2023, ACYCP achieved an important milestone by obtaining 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization status from the IRS. Prior to this change, the ACYCP operated as a 501(c)(6), which limited its ability to attract charitable donations since contributions were not tax-deductible. This designation also excluded the organization from many grant opportunities that are only available to 501(c)(3) entities. The shift in status represents more than just a technical adjustment—it expands the association’s credibility, reach, and capacity to attract diverse funding streams that are essential for sustaining and growing its mission.

With this new designation, ACYCP is now well-positioned to pursue philanthropic support, foundation grants, and individual donations to advance its work in the child and youth care field. These resources can be used to strengthen cornerstone initiatives such as the CYC Certification Program, amplify advocacy efforts on behalf of the profession, and elevate the recognition of youth workers nationwide. In addition, expanded funding will enable the organization to provide more robust training opportunities, professional development resources, and other support that directly enhance the skills and capacity of practitioners. Ultimately, the transition to 501(c)(3) status opens the door for ACYCP to deepen its impact, ensuring that child and youth care professionals have the tools and recognition they need to serve young people effectively.

Department of Labor Recognition (2024)

The journey toward gaining federal recognition for child and youth care practitioners (CYCP) as an official occupation by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) marks a pivotal moment in the professionalization of child and youth care. Despite advancements in the field, certification had long remained underutilized, and the profession struggled to gain formal acknowledgment from key government entities. Advocates understood that achieving DOL recognition would not only enhance the legitimacy of the field but also unlock new opportunities for funding, career development, and integration into federal workforce frameworks. Led by Gene Cavaliere, CYCCB and its collaborators undertook a multi-year campaign to secure this recognition. On May 11, 2024, after years of advocacy and groundwork, child and youth care practitioners were officially recognized by the DOL as an occupation. This designation provided a foundation for subsequent state-level initiatives, including apprenticeship occupation requests in states like Texas, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, and Indiana.

The recognition catalyzed significant developments, including the establishment of a paraprofessional certification level, later named the "Assistant Level," and the introduction of an apprenticeship status. DOL's acknowledgment also spurred dialogue with other influential organizations, including the National Association for Regulatory Administration (NARA), whose representatives praised the work of ACYCP's Professional Development Committee and offered strategic recommendations. These new pathways aim to broaden access to professional development while accommodating diverse entry points into the field.

The Future

Education and Training

The development of standardized education and training programs has been one of the most significant achievements in the CYC field. In Canada, where CYC-specific education programs are prevalent, significant progress has been made in integrating professional standards into both post-secondary and vocational education. Indeed, the 2020 Salary and Benefits survey found that Canadian respondents were more likely to have completed 2-to-3-year diploma programs, reflecting regional differences in education systems. The establishment of the Child and Youth Care Educational Accreditation Board of Canada has further formalized educational standards and accreditation processes. However, in the U.S., the reliance on training within organizations, rather than formal higher education programs, may limit opportunities for career advancement and recognition.

In response, Indiana University School of Public Health–Bloomington (IU SPH-B) is leading exciting work to strengthen pathways into Child and Youth Care (CYC) careers. Spearheaded by Dr. Deb Getz at IU SPH-B, a pilot program launched in 2024 offers high-school students the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge required of CYC practitioners while pursuing Entry-Level CYCCB Certification, dual credit through IU, or both. First implemented at a single high school, the program will expand to six more schools statewide in 2026–2027 alongside new efforts to establish CYC Practitioner training for 16-to-18-year-olds at local Boys & Girls Clubs. Supported by partnerships with the Indiana Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs and the Indiana Youth Services Association, these programs allow students to gain hands-on experience through placements in youth-serving agencies that fulfill CYC certification requirements. As the first high school–university partnership of its kind in CYCCB’s history, this initiative serves as a scalable model for CYC workforce development across the state and the nation.

Capacity Building within ACYCP

As ACYCP approaches its 50th anniversary in 2027, capacity building is a central focus as the organization looks toward future growth and sustainability. Since its inception in 1977, the all-volunteer board has pushed the field of child and youth work forward; however, the scope of work often outpaces the time and resources that volunteers can reasonably commit. Without dedicated staff, responsibilities such as managing daily operations, coordinating initiatives across committees, and maintaining consistent external partnerships can become difficult to sustain.

To address these challenges, one of the most significant goals is to establish a paid Executive Director by 2027. This role would provide dedicated leadership to coordinate and advance the work of committees, ensure continuity, and strengthen the association’s external presence. With strategic direction and consistent management, ACYCP would be better positioned to seize opportunities for growth, expand advocacy, and enhance its overall impact on the child and youth care field.

Membership growth is another key component of capacity building, particularly among youth workers who stand to benefit most from the association’s resources. Expanding the number of practitioners who belong to ACYCP not only strengthens the professional community but also creates a more unified voice to advocate for the field. At the same time, continued efforts to diversify the board enhance the organization’s governance and ensure that leadership reflects the range of experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives within child and youth care. ACYCP

has already made meaningful progress in this area, but further broadening representation will solidify its commitment to equity and inclusivity.

Finally, strengthening the Child and Youth Care Certification Board (CYCCB)—which administers the CYC Certification levels—remains an important priority. Providing additional operational capacity and infrastructure support to the CYCCB will help professionalize the field further, ensuring that certification processes remain rigorous, accessible, and sustainable. Together, these capacity-building strategies position ACYCP to expand its impact, empower youth workers, and ensure that the field continues to evolve in ways that support both practitioners and the young people they serve.

Innovative Funding Strategies

The future of CYC depends on securing sustainable funding. This will require creative approaches to fundraising, including partnerships with private sector entities and philanthropists, and the expansion of existing revenue streams. All levels of the ACYCP must be involved in these efforts to ensure that the profession has the resources it needs to grow and thrive. Tapping into public figures and high-profile advocates who are aligned with youth development causes could be a valuable strategy for enhancing visibility.

In addition, there is significant potential in pursuing research-oriented intervention grants through government agencies and private or philanthropic foundations. These opportunities exist at the local, state, and national levels, and tapping into them could provide the association with both resources and legitimacy. Such grants not only provide critical funding but also generate evidence to strengthen the field's credibility, inform practice, and demonstrate the impact of child and youth care work. By positioning itself as a hub for research-practice partnerships, ACYCP could secure resources that both sustain its operations and advance knowledge about effective interventions for young people.

Furthermore, the CYC field encompasses a wide array of practices, ranging from early childhood education to juvenile justice. This diversity has made it challenging to develop a unified marketing strategy that captures the full scope of the profession. Nevertheless, there are untapped opportunities, such as forming partnerships with early childhood education initiatives, which could broaden the profession's reach and funding potential. However, administrative engagement could still be strengthened, as the profession has yet to fully harness the potential of administrative leaders within these organizations to champion CYC and its workforce.

Conclusion

The past, present, and future of CYC are deeply interconnected. The foundation laid over the last few decades has allowed the field to grow and professionalize, but these gains are fragile. Without sustained effort and strategic vision, much stands to be lost, including the recognition of CYC as an essential, skillful, and artful profession requiring specialized training—especially in an era of privatization, automation, and digitization—as well as the generations of work that went into building a shared code of ethics and a collective professional identity. The future of CYC is one of both opportunity and responsibility. By focusing on workforce development, universal credentialing, global engagement, and innovative funding, the profession can continue to evolve and meet the needs of young people across diverse settings. Through such intentional effort, child and youth care will remain a vital profession that not only cares for vulnerable populations but also empowers them to thrive.

In an increasingly interconnected world, child and youth care cannot be viewed solely through a local lens. The profession must engage with global issues—from unemployment to political unrest—that shape the lives of young people. This engagement requires not only awareness but also active participation in global networks and initiatives. Yet, the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of some of these networks. It is essential to rebuild and strengthen relationships with key partners, particularly those in early childhood care and developmental disability services, to ensure continued collaboration and resource sharing. Locally, there is an urgent need to address the ongoing challenges facing marginalized youth, including those in foster care, juvenile justice systems, and underfunded educational settings. By keeping both global and local challenges in view, the CYC profession can play a pivotal role in supporting young people as they navigate an increasingly complex world.

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