

GROWING TOGETHER: THE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP IN CHILD AND YOUTH CARE

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ABSTRACT. The term “relationship” is used to describe many forms of interaction between youngsters and adults. In this chapter it is suggested that the “personal” relationship provides the critical learning context in the field of child and youth care. The nature of this relationship is analyzed and discussed.

This chapter is about relationships. In the broadest sense, it is concerned with the most critical of all learning contexts: that complex interpersonal arena in which we struggle to know who we are and where we stand in relation to the world around us. Here is the universal crucible that inevitably consumes all of our personal experiences and blends them into complex and wondrous configurations of understanding and meaning. Only through relationships, real or imagined, past or present, near or far, do we come to know our qualities, potentials, vulnerabilities and, ultimately, our humanness and our mortality. Only through relationships can we come to understand the existence of others and the paradox of how, through our very individuation, we begin to discover the network of connections that forever draw us toward each other.

More specifically, this chapter is about a very special kind of relationship. In all societies, the continuity of the culture is founded upon the ability of the children to learn the ways of their elders and understand the meanings that emerge from individual and collective experience. Children who are fortunate enough to learn and understand through personal encounters with adults are able to acquire the competence, confidence, and knowledge to establish their own unique pathways toward self-discovery, esteem, autonomy, and responsibility. Children exposed to inadequate or coercive teachers and those who are denied access to the personal meanings and experiences of their elders become prisoners of their own incompetence, self-depreciation and confusion. Unable to come to terms with themselves and the worlds in which they live, they may choose pathways of dependence, resentment, hostility or despair. For the most part, these are the young people who find themselves in encounters with professional child and youth care workers. Potentially, these very critical and challenging relationships always contain the hope that the adult-child connection can be successfully established to the personal benefit of *both* participants.

Having suggested that the interpersonal encounter embodies the essence of

all that we come to know and understand about ourselves and our worlds, it would be impossible to present an adequate analysis of the worker-child relationship within the scope of this chapter. The thoughts expressed here offer no more than a very brief and very idiosyncratic introduction to the topic. Bound up in the personal and professional experience of the author, they are not presented as "truths" or universal realities. The suggested approaches are not infallible, although they do have time-tested validity within a relatively limited sphere of experience. Behind all that is said here, however, is a fundamental belief that the personalized relationship continues to be the greatest challenge in professional child and youth care. From this perspective, it is suggested that child and youth care workers are in a unique position to explore new ways of connecting children with themselves and the adults that assume responsibility for caring and nurturing. To achieve this through relationships means that such practitioners must first become open to their own experiences and be prepared to examine their own meanings that emerge through their encounters with young people. The words that express these thoughts come easily. The actions that the thoughts imply demand courage, commitment, creativity and, most of all discipline.

WHAT IS A RELATIONSHIP?

The term "relationship" can be applied to almost any type of human encounter. In the field of humanistic psychology, it has always been assumed that personal growth and development is inextricably linked to a person's awareness and understanding of others (e.g., Rogers, 1951; Perls, 1951; Derlega, 1984). By the same token, social psychologists have long been fascinated by the relationships between social interaction and personality development (e.g., Smelser & Smelser, 1963). In child psychology particularly the influence of primary relationships on child development and socialization has been a major emphasis (e.g., Hoppe, Milton & Simmel, 1970) and such influences have been well established in the areas of social cognition (e.g., Leahy, 1985), self-concept (e.g., Coopersmith, 1967) and social behaviors (e.g., Bond & Joffe, 1982).

The serious reader or committed practitioner should certainly examine the relationship literature carefully and consider the findings and conclusions in terms of her or his own experience. In the present context, however, we are concerned with one particular perspective (i.e., that of the author), on one particular type of relationship (i.e., where interaction is both personal and enduring), within a narrowly prescribed context (i.e., the world of the child and youth worker).

The Personal Relationship

A personal encounter is one in which participants relate directly to their own experience as it occurs at that immediate moment in time. Any disclosure then becomes an expression of the self rather than of some covert agenda designed to create a particular impression or evoke a particular response. Where such inten-

tions exist they are disclosed as elements within the immediate experience. Since child and youth workers are generally burdened with a multiplicity of intentions associated with issues of control, treatment, and immediate task completion, this is not an easy stance to take. Caught up in the activity of the moment, even the act of being in touch with personal experience may demand a supreme effort. If this is not achieved, however, there is no way that such experience can be made available to a young person and the learning potential of the personal encounter is lost. In many relationships between adults and children, particularly in "therapeutic" environments, both parties are more concerned with "impression measurement" than self-disclosure (see Goffman, 1963; Schlenker, 1980).

This is not to suggest that a personal encounter calls for a total and absolute act of self-disclosure. If we are to maintain any sense of self-integrity it is essential that, in each encounter, we determine how much we are prepared to share at any particular time with any particular person. A failure to establish such personal "boundaries" can have devastating personal and inter-personal consequences. It should be emphasized that a commitment to pursue a pathway of complete self-disclosure is a very serious decision to be made and agreed upon by two people who intend to experience a state of "intimacy." Within the context of the practitioner-child relationship this goal is considered to be both impossible and undesirable. On the other hand, relating from the personal is possible across a wide range of encounters and contexts, and inevitably contributes to the ongoing process of learning and discovery. Where it occurs, the person creates an opportunity for both participants to address the most critical existential questions of "Who am I?" and "How do I fit into the world?" It is essentially an interactional process to the extent that it brings together two unique sets of experiences within the same arena of analysis. Hence, the benefits accrue as much to the practitioner as to the child.

Through being personal an adult extends an invitation to the child to respond from her or his own place of immediate experience. Of course, the young person may not choose to do so and that decision must always be respected. To invade the boundaries of another person by assaulting her or his private world of personal experience is an act of disrespect that can only serve to depersonalize the encounter. On the other hand, the need to examine personal experience through the personal experiences of others is one of the most crucial developmental tasks and child care practitioners can do much to ensure that such opportunities are constantly available. A willingness to make use of these opportunities is clearly bound up in such issues as trust, self-worth, and risk-taking but, even when strangers meet in suspicion, the potential for a personal encounter is built into the equation. Similarly, it is always possible for a child care worker to establish a personal way of relating to a child regardless of the conditions, deficits, or developmental histories involved.

Existentially speaking, it is being suggested that in understanding ourselves and the worlds in which we live we have only our own experience to guide us. Personal relationships then become the most critical of learning contexts through

which we all come to “understand.” From this perspective they provide the foundation for self-awareness and development. In psychological terms, they are the very essence of self-esteem, personal autonomy, and individual responsibility; notions that have become the cornerstones of contemporary child care practice. To fully appreciate the value of such concepts, however, it becomes necessary to abandon, or at least suspend, the traditional image of a practitioner “doing something to” a child. We must step away, at least temporarily, from the magic of “intervention” in order to fully experience the mystery of two lives, caught up within their own unique struggles, learning together by taking the risk to be personal.

This does not mean that roles and responsibilities should be cast upon the wind in a gesture of cathartic abandonment. On the contrary, it is a disciplined process of examination and analysis that brings together thought, feeling, and action. In its most energetic form it involves an active and precise interchange where even the words employed are examined for their fidelity to experience and shared understanding. Roles and responsibilities become essential parts of the analysis to the extent that they enter into immediate experience. In its most evolved or developed form, the personal encounter actually requires very few words since immediate experience is quickly understood, communicated, and acknowledged between people who know themselves and each other. Usually this is the experience of people who have spent many years sharing the journey of self-discovery and it should not be an expectation of child care practice. For the most part, we must be satisfied with the Airline’s exhortation that “getting there is half the fun.”

Why Do We Choose to Be Impersonal?

Despite our best intentions and the obvious benefits of developing personalized practices, it seems that we are often reluctant to take the risk. In this regard, we are no different from the children we serve. We also have our own self-doubts and confusions built into our personal struggle. At the professional level, however, child and youth care can also provide us with an effective impersonal cloak, if we choose to be seduced by its glamorous pretense. Grasping at its promise of invisibility, it is possible to enter a world where knowledge and understanding become matters of theory and concept rather than process of discovery. Hiding behind the role that it offers, we can choose to accept a safe identity that is shared with others and evaluated according to prescribed performance criteria. In this way it is possible to avoid the more threatening prospects of self-evaluation. Then, when the action gets underway, we can happily fall back upon all of those skill-based intervention strategies that have become part of the trade. In this way, we always have the choice of attributing success to ourselves and failure to the tools. The real danger here is the sacrifice of the self in favour of the professional identity. As we objectify ourselves, so we turn children into objects to be treated, changed or otherwise controlled. At best, we create a sterile learning context and, at worst, we establish a climate for depersonalization and abuse.

For the practitioner who accepts the mantle of professionalism with humility and self-commitment, there are still many aspects of the world of practice that offer temptation toward depersonalization. From the outset, most practitioners must come to terms with the control functions of the agencies that employ them. Expectations are set and embodied in policies, regulations, and procedures that promote accountability and standards, on the one hand, while encouraging routinization and control on the other. Where these influences cannot be recognized by the practitioner, it is easy to slip into the role of assuming responsibility for all that the individual child does while engaged within a particular program. Caught up in this expectation the practitioner has effectively taken away the autonomy of the young person and may well feel obliged to resort to strategies of coercion and manipulation in order to make sure that she or he complies with a set of agency standards or treatment outcomes. Here the youngster may be perceived as a threatening object who needs to be controlled from a distance. Many of the forces that have the potential to create these conditions are, in fact, legitimate aspects of service delivery and do not have to adversely affect practitioner-child relationships. Understanding how they operate, however, surely assists the person who wishes to place the personal relationship at the centre of child and youth care.

BECOMING MORE PERSONAL

In order to embrace the personal relationship within the core of child and youth care practice, it is necessary for practitioners to fully acknowledge that the primary commitment is to their own personal growth and development. If personalization is approached simply as an orientation for intervention strategies or treatment techniques, integrity is immediately lost and the scene is set for manipulation and control. Only when the self is fully invested in the process will the full potential of the relationship as a learning context be realized. Then it becomes possible to generate hypotheses, construct concepts and develop skill-based practices. As I have suggested elsewhere, "The practitioner who seeks to truly understand the nature of the relationship enters a world of intimidating complexity" (1982, p. 73).

For the person who is intent upon carving out a pathway through the forest of personal experience, there are many interactional theories and models that others have offered for consideration. Some have attained impressive empirical support while others seem to rely extensively upon intuitive appeal. They should all be examined from the perspective of personal experience at some point in any analysis. Then there are forestry guidebooks that point direction and teach basic survival skills without telling very much about the history or ecology of the environment. In child and youth care, the popularity of skill-based training approaches suggests that we will always have great needs for efficacy and survival in a context that we will never fully understand. Unfortunately, many of the solutions and prescriptions offered do not encourage self-involvement, personalization, and relational practices. As such, they are generally low risk and control focused. The following suggestions

are prescriptive to the degree that they move the person toward personalization. From that point, however, specific outcomes are unpredictable and risks are high. These are the costs of personal and professional growth.

Becoming Present

To be fully attuned to any immediate experience, the self must be totally invested in the process. This involves being exclusively attentive to the situation and in touch with all of the sensations and feelings experienced at that moment in time. In a personal encounter, this state of "presence" represents a condition of self-awareness from which the individual reaches out in an attempt to grasp and understand the experience of the other. It is not essential for all of the thoughts and feelings to be shared, merely that they be identified. In this context, a state of presence is a necessary precondition for any personal encounter.

For child and youth care workers caught up in their routines and responsibilities, becoming present generally requires both discipline and commitment. Previous activities, future aspirations and obligations, role-based ideals, long-term agendas, and the like, must all be suspended. Taking a moment before each "session" with a child to get in touch with the thinking and feeling self, should assist in making the transition from the pragmatic to the personal. Essentially, this involves a process of allowing thoughts and feelings to be acknowledged, and then letting them go with the security of knowing that they can be retrieved for future reference. In this way, the self becomes sensitized and "vulnerable" to the experience of the other person and aware of its own place in the moment. This is well exemplified by the Zen Master, Paul Reps, who when asked, "What are you doing this morning?" replied "Listening to you ask a question." For all who experience it, being present is an energizing rather than a draining experience. This is good news for all who work in the helping professions and fear the spectre of "burnout."

Making Judgements

Given the perspective presented here, it is impossible for any one person to "know" another; all that is available is the personal experience of the encounter. Hence each person is the "owner" of her or his judgements and opinions. Such interpretations are a direct function of the self and not of the other ... from an analytic perspective, they are self-revelations. In this way, for example, the positive and negative qualities that we attributed to others turn out to be the likes and dislikes that we hold about ourselves.

For professionals trained to believe in clinical judgements, the above statement may seem offensive, bizarre, and nonsensical. On the other hand, a person who accepts full ownership for personal judgements assumes a position of personal responsibility for all actions based upon such interpretations. As statements of self-disclosure, rather than fact, they are simply information for the other to consider without prejudice. In this way, both participants in an encounter are free to express

judgements and interpretations with out manipulation, coercion or condemnation.

While this seems like something of a lofty idea, experience suggests that children and young people can very quickly grasp the self-related function of judgements and learn by taking this perspective. Children with needs to protect their self-view learn to understand that they cannot be hurt directly by the judgement of others; they must take the dagger in order to stab themselves. By the same token, children with needs for acceptability can avoid losing autonomy to the imposter of flattery or "social reinforcement." Conversely, children can learn that their own attempts to manipulate through insults and flattery are more self-revealing than controlling. On the other side of the coin, once the ownership of judgements is understood, the adult or worker is free to be open without having to be "right," or responsible for the choices and interpretations made by the child. In an important way, this orientation gives people permission to be human.

Role-Taking Ability

"Role-taking ability" is a concept that emerges from the Symbolic Interactionist tradition in social psychology, particularly the work of George Herbert Mead. Briefly stated, it refers to the process through which we are able to look back at ourselves as if through the eyes of others. This ability represents a critical developmental task in the genesis of the self, but it continues to be fundamental in most forms of social interaction. One way or another, we are all interested in the images that others have of us, particularly those people whom we consider to be significant in our lives. This is an important aspect of self-awareness and discovery as long as we are clear about those images and understand them for what they are—the experiences of others.

Seen this way, information from role-taking becomes highly relevant in the process of understanding and deciding among the courses of action open to us. In child and youth care, for example, the young person who understands how she is perceived by the workers is aware of how they might respond to the choices she makes. In this way she is able to assess the possible consequences of her actions and is in a position to take control of her own destiny, rather than take pot luck. In the same way, this young person is also in charge of meeting her own self-esteem needs since she is able to choose how, and from whom, she would like to be accepted, recognized and cared for. Conversely, workers who understand how they are perceived by children are able to operate in a sensitive manner and continue to act in the best interests of the child. In its most effective form, role-taking is inter-personal understanding and is best exemplified by those individuals who, somehow, manage to move together in unison without verbal instructions or pre-determined scripts.

Effective role-taking can undoubtedly enrich the personal aspects of the worker-child relationship. To some extent, it is a skill that can be enhanced through experiential training and practice. In its most basic form the role-taking person

attempts to predict the responses of others by observing their behavior and assessing (1) that person's intentions; (2) that person's feelings about themselves and (3) that person's feelings about the role-taker. The training procedure involves an open disclosure of these assessments and interpretations within an interactional sequence. In this way, each person has an opportunity to check out such interpretations by inviting the other to attest to their "accuracy" and to provide further elaboration. Each participant can keep an accuracy score and may be encouraged to monitor progress over time through an accuracy chart. In the author's experience, where this procedure has been employed, role-taking has invariably improved and participants almost always report that their relationship has become more personal.

The benefits of role-taking training can often be quite dramatic, as participants move toward greater depths of personal disclosure and understanding. As more and more information is made available, people generally experience increased control over personal destiny, enhanced feelings of competence and esteem and expanded awareness of the needs of others. There seems to be little doubt that effective and accurate role-taking is an essential ingredient of any close relationship and a skill possessed by all people considered to be socially "successful."

Keeping Things Clear

In all relational networks, people carry around thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and feelings about others that profoundly affect individual encounters. In many cases, this hidden "baggage" inhibits open and personal communication to the extent that it influences intentions and responses. In child care settings, many of the assumptions and interpretations made about children come to the surface in public bars or staff rooms, and may even become formalized in carefully guarded reports or closed case conferences. Similarly, people carry feelings and thoughts drawn from other experiences into relational encounters that have no legitimate place in that experience. We are all familiar, for example, with the husband who returns home from a frustrating day at work to "take it out" on his wife.

In child and youth care, it is easy for experiences with one child to be carried over into interaction with another or, even with the same child, it is possible to harbor resentments from one session to the next. The dangers of hanging on to such assumptions and beliefs, along with their associated feelings, are self-evident. Even so, for workers bound up in the pursuit of pragmatic goals and expectations, it takes considerable discipline and "presence" to take the time and the risk to confront this unfinished business. When external pressures prevail, such matters may be conveniently tucked away and dismissed as insignificant. A commitment to relationships would render this reaction intolerable.

To confront this issue directly, it is possible for child and youth care practitioners to incorporate a process of "clearing" into their daily practices and routines. This begins by specifically setting time aside to be with the young person for "personal" time. At the beginning of each session, both participants should have the opportu-

nity to identify, acknowledge, and express any carry-over assumptions, interpretations, thoughts, and feelings. Similarly, at the end of the session, each person should take the time to reflect upon the immediate encounter and clear anything that could potentially be carried over and, thereby, influence the course of subsequent interaction. Where judgements, interpretations, resentments, or appreciations are offered, there should be no expectation that the listener must respond. This is not the purpose of the exercise and, in any case, over time it should be clear that such expressions and experiences belong entirely to the speaker and their acknowledgement is for her or his benefit. Once such procedures are incorporated as part of the normative interactional expectations, they readily become accepted and, just like dental flossing, their absence becomes immediately apparent.

Establishing Boundaries

Whenever people step beyond immediate tasks and roles in interaction with each other, the prospect of a personal encounter is presented and the rules become less clear. This can be anxiety producing and many opportunities for personal growth are lost or rejected in favour of a safe passage with a "goal and role" approach to life. On the other hand, the individual self and its private world of experience makes us who and what we are. Ultimately, it's all we have and there can be no sense of integrity or cohesion if it can be bombarded at any time by the forces of the external world. At the extreme, individuals who have no boundaries, who are unable to separate themselves from the world, are considered to be in a state of psychosis.

Within the helping professions, the inability of practitioners to establish clear boundaries for themselves is one of the most common areas of difficulty. In the terms of this chapter, it means that the worker has not decided how personally she or he wishes to be involved with children. In some cases, the practitioner becomes literally swamped with personal pressures and conflicts resulting in resentment, avoidance, fatigue, and burnout. On the other side of the coin, the person may simply reject any temptation to become personally involved, preferring to reside in the impersonal world of "objectivity." Perhaps the most tragic of all is the person who constantly shifts personal boundaries in accordance with the perceived needs or demands of others. Relating to such a person is an exercise in acceptance and rejection, care and resentment, or love and hostility. Where such a relationship cannot be avoided, as is often the case with children, the result may be one of learned anger or learned helplessness.

Being personal in relationships is more an issue of style than of content. In other words, it is possible to be personal without being particularly self-disclosing. The latter issue is a choice that we must all make for ourselves with particular people, in particular situations, at particular times. In no arena is this more important than in the field of child and youth care. This means that each practitioner must decide for herself or himself where the boundary lines are going to be drawn. In any situation where status roles and prescribed responsibilities exist, any move toward, or away

from, the personal can readily upset the balance of the social equation. In a structured learning environment for children such a disruption may have consequences that should be considered.

From an individual perspective, there is no simple formula for establishing boundaries although it is crucial for all concerned that they be identified and communicated. As a simple rule of thumb, experience clearly attests to the conclusion that it is easier to work in the direction of "opening up" than "closing down." Although they will vary across individuals and situations, once established, they should be clearly communicated and maintained. If they change over the course of time, this must also be communicated through a process of renegotiation. Above all, it should be kept in mind that the learning, for both child and practitioner, is contained within the *process* and not in the location of the boundaries themselves. With this in mind, practitioners should be able to give themselves permission to establish boundaries according to their own particular needs and not according to some predetermined expectation of "openness." By the same token, the requirements and expectations of role responsibilities can, and should be, incorporated into decision making although this is usually more an issue of disclosure than personalization.

Maintaining a Personalized Workplace

The practitioner who is intent upon working through personal relationships with children must somehow manage to retain a fundamental commitment to her or his own sense of self-discovery and personhood. Unless this type of commitment is constantly addressed, the chances are that the pragmatic demands of the work environment will take over and create a climate of purposeful activity that is essentially impersonal. With this in mind, the person must be prepared to bring the real self into the role identity that is prescribed by the system and expected by colleagues. Once this position has been negotiated, the practitioner must then insist that the work environment becomes responsive to personal needs. To simply sit back and expect this of others would be an act of self-abandonment and diminished responsibility. This means that personal needs should first be identified and acknowledged. This will not occur unless time is made available for this purpose.

A child caring environment is not a factory of tasks and skills; it is an interactional milieu in which all of the primary benefits emerge from a sharing of individual knowledge, beliefs, and experience. It is not a place where personal issues should be pushed aside since each one of these issues is a potential learning vehicle for all participants ... adults and children. The environment should be responsive to the personal needs for competence, esteem, and autonomy by providing ongoing feedback within all relational structures and configurations, while involving people directly in those decisions that impinge upon their daily lives. This is a dynamic, personalized environment that will only reach its full potential

when all participants share a commonality of commitment to become fully human in recognizing their potential, individuality, and above all, their relatedness.

SUMMARY

This chapter has attempted to present one idiosyncratic approach to the role of the relationship in child and youth care practice. From this perspective it is proposed that the personal relationship represents the primary vehicle through which we come to "know" ourselves and the worlds which we live. In the field of child care, this proposition applies as much to the practitioner as it does to the child. The relationship is not, then, another tool or vehicle to be used by one person in relationship to another for the purposes of intervention, treatment, or therapy.

At one level, the position taken here may be regarded as being "motherhood" and naïve. On the other hand, the implications are both profound and sophisticated, since they penetrate the very nature of being and suggest explanations of monumental complexity. All of this makes for interesting speculation but, in working with children, the point of departure is the recognition that, in a personal relationship, practitioner and child are equal partners in a process of growth and development where the experience of one provides a learning context for the other. From this simple perspective, the objective has been attained when, after each encounter, each can say "thank you" to the other ... and mean it.

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