

CREATING A WARM PLACE WHERE CHILDREN CAN BLOSSOM

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Abstract

This paper addresses the themes of resilience, rights and responsibilities, to explore how community life, professional practice and social policy can be more attuned to the needs of vulnerable children. It considers the parts children, families, communities, professionals, government and the wider public can play in creating conditions under which children can thrive. It argues that our approach must be guided not only by an application of knowledge, but also by a sense of hope.

VULNERABILITY AND ISOLATION

A colleague and friend of mine is a gifted and sensitive social worker. She makes a great job of running a local children's support project in Dublin.

One day she received a note about a boy in primary school who was causing concern. He was being referred to her project for ongoing work, because of his challenging behaviour in the classroom and elsewhere. He was a pupil at the school where her project is based.

She decided to observe his behaviour in the lively playground at lunchtime, as part of her preparation for engaging with him. She saw him running around relentlessly in a manic game of chasing. But as she looked more closely, she realised that there was actually no one else in the game with him. He was running around this busy playground *on his own*.

Imagine any attempt to work with this boy that did not have this level of detail about his predicament. Any such attempt would veer far wide of the mark in terms of impact and effectiveness.

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YOUNG PEOPLE IN CONTACT WITH SERVICE SYSTEMS

To begin to help children, we need truly to know them and their context. Many young people known to our services may face a heightened risk of social isolation, in some way like this boy in the playground. For a myriad of complex reasons, at least some of these youngsters may grow up with a smaller social network than an equivalent young person not in contact with our service systems. A restricted social network may lead to a reduced range of social roles.

In the absence of additional or alternative social roles, these young people may develop a consuming and stigmatised master-identity of “young person at risk”, or of “client of social services” or of “young person in care”, a master identity that comes to dominate their sense of self.²

Such stigmatised identities may also lead to excessive reliance on formal services. The young person’s reliance on formal services for help may be both a cause – and a consequence – of weaker access to informal social support. And, the young person may also end up with a narrower base of positive role models on whom to draw for guidance, inspiration and encouragement.

Young people in public care offer many examples that illustrate this point. Those of us working with young people in care must be sensitive to the possible risk for these young people of being entrapped in a ghetto populated almost exclusively by young people in care or their carers, a ghetto that may lead onto longer-term social exclusion on many fronts. At worst, we must strive to protect young people in care, or leaving care, from an “endless tundra of aloneness and loneliness” to quote a telling phrase of the Irish playwright, Brian Friel.³ This “endless tundra” of loneliness may be a real risk if we are not very active in promoting and preserving social connections for each vulnerable young person as they grow up.

I am reminded here of the young woman – let us call her “Annie” – who was at a little low-key leaving-care graduation party in her honour.⁴ There was a very positive atmosphere and she joined in the speeches to say a few words reflecting on her experience. Looking around the room, she said “All my friends are adults”. Most of the people present were adults from the services who had helped her along the way.

2 This issue of stigma has been highlighted by young people from the Youth Council (Watts et al. 2006).

3 Sonya in *Afterplay* by Brian Friel (2003).

4 I am grateful to a workshop participant who shared this story.

She meant the comment appreciatively and affectionately, but there was certainly another very telling way to read it. Her story illustrates the risk of restricted social networks, excessive reliance on formal services and the master identity of being-in-care. Immersion in professional service systems may risk cutting young people off from peers and natural networks.

A young adult who had grown up in the care system in Australia touches on the same issue. He was contemplating marrying the mother of his child, but he said he would have “no one to invite to the wedding” (Maunder et al. 1999). A challenge for those concerned with the lives of young people in care is to ensure that young care leavers do indeed have social networks that can yield up a potential list of invitees to their wedding. I want to suggest that a sense of “belonging” should become very central in thinking about the needs of young people in care or any vulnerable young person.

THE NEED FOR RELATIONSHIPS

Raymond Carver, the great American writer and poet, addresses this issue of belonging – a central question for all of us – in his poem “Late Fragment”.⁵ As I understand it, this was his last poem, written as he was dying of cancer:

And did you get what
You wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
Beloved on the earth

These are profound questions for every human being, but they seem especially challenging for those of us concerned with vulnerable children and young people. Can they call themselves “beloved”? Do they feel themselves “beloved”? Is the legacy of our work with them that they are connected into such enduring relationships? Is the legacy of our work with them that they are able to sustain, and be nurtured in, these enduring relationships?

One of my key arguments in this paper is that we must be both humble and flexible in how we go about helping build this legacy of relationships for a vulnerable child or young person.

Humility makes sense because we quickly know how challenging this task is. Flexibility makes sense because one size will not fit all. Youngsters come in different sizes and in different circumstances, and need different responses. To quote a mother making

5 From Raymond Carver, *All of Us: Collected Poems* (1996).

a good job of rearing her teenage boy in the unforgiving and violent streets of inner city Philadelphia, “You have to be flexible, because life is flexible”. She was talking to researcher Frank Furstenberg and his colleagues (1999) about her approach to parenting and the dilemmas she found. Her advice seems well suited to the challenges of providing well for vulnerable youngsters everywhere.

Where are youngsters in need of our care and support to find these relationships? I hope that they will find them with their parents or primary carers, and in their wider family of origin. However, they may also find positive and influential relationships in other settings – in school, for example. We should be open to finding such potential relationships wherever they may lie waiting to be tapped. We should look “wherever life pours ordinary plenty” to quote our much loved Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh.⁶

ROLE MODELS

Part of the “ordinary plenty” that life may pour may include the example and encouragement of key role models in a young person’s life and indeed of key relationships that the young person may observe.

Yugoslav-Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita⁷ has written a wonderful reflection on his life growing up in his migrant family in Australia and his relationship with his father, who for much of the time was a lone parent. His account has a great deal to say about resilient development in the face of much adversity. He was close not only to his father, but also to his father’s best (male) friend. In the book *Romulus, My Father*, he acknowledges the debt he owes both men for their influence and for the quality of the men’s friendship and its impact on him as a young boy:

On many occasions in my life I have had the need to say, and thankfully have been able to say: I know what a good workman is; I know what an honest man is; I know what friendship is; I know because I remember these things in the person of my father, in the person of his friend Hora, and in the example of their friendship. (Gaita 1988:74)

I think these powerful and moving lines from Raimond Gaita speak strongly to our work with young people in need. Through our efforts, are youngsters in our services endowed with at least some abiding images and experiences that help to steer them through life?

6 From the poem “Advent” by Patrick Kavanagh (1988:124–5).

7 Raimond Gaita is Professor of Moral Philosophy at King’s College London and Foundation Professor of Philosophy at Australian Catholic University.

EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES AND THEIR IMPACT

Opportunities for positive everyday experience offer one way of doing this. Below are some examples of everyday experience – “life’s ordinary plenty” that made a difference. These examples are gathered from the evidence of formal research and from the evidence of my growing collection of what I might call “therapeutic tales”, stories that I have collected from the accounts of carers, social workers and service users.

- A major New Zealand study that found that women were helped in their recovery from sexual abuse in their adolescence, among other things by their participation in sport at school. The sporting activity seemed to help in promoting comfort in their own body (Romans et al. 1995).
- A young person who grew up in long-term foster care became a music teacher because she learned the flute as a child with the consistent encouragement of their carer and social worker.
- A young care-leaver achieved a role in a professional dance show on a leading international stage thanks in no small way to his foster carer’s support and encouragement of their choice of dance as a hobby.
- Young people in foster care are less likely to be bullied at school if placed in the same foster home as a sibling, a finding from our study of long-term foster care in Ireland (Daly and Gilligan 2005).
- A career in French (fine) furniture polishing began for a boy in residential care with training and mentoring by his grandfather who had this trade, something strongly supported by the Head of Home.
- Part-time work in a pet shop for a previously isolated and depressed boy arose from his hobby of tropical fish, an interest prompted by his foster father’s interest in tropical fish.
- A boy who grew up in foster care achieved a career as a professional rugby player in part because his lone-parent foster mother saw rugby players as a promising prospect for socialising the boy into relatively sensible behaviour around drinking

These stories remind us of how ordinary experience and the efforts of ordinary people in our networks can be helpful and healing, often in a lasting way.

The latest addition to my collection of “therapeutic tales” came to me on the flight from Dublin to London on my way to the 10th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect. I got into a conversation with a woman who had fostered a boy, now aged 15, for two years, some time back. She had taken on the role officially, but her involvement arose from a connection she had with the boy’s mother through their shared social network. She stays in touch with the boy and his progress. She is delighted to know that he keeps up his love of reading, something that she believes she instilled in him (and in her own children). When he was with her, she spent a lot of time reading to the boy.

She places a very high value on reading for herself and her children because of a favourite teacher she had, Miss Leahy, when she was seven years old, at a school in a poor inner-city area. Miss Leahy used say to the class, "Whatever happens, keep reading books". This phrase from her teacher, and the teacher's relationship with her, sparked a love of reading in the girl, now grown and a mother. I think there is something very moving and inspiring that this simple but profound phrase, from someone who was clearly a great teacher, still touches many lives over 40 years later.

All these examples show that everyday opportunities, simple phrases, simple decisions, chance contacts and chance events can all help weave the rich tapestry of a child's development. In our decisions, we must be alive to such possibilities. We must be alive to the richness of moments when we may glimpse what the gift of "life's ordinary plenty" may offer a child.

CREATING A SPACE WHERE GOOD THINGS CAN HAPPEN

Helping a child or family is not just about delivering *services*. It is about a stance and a mindset. Part of it is about drawing out what the child or parent and others can bring to solving problems and meeting needs. Helping is about drawing out the talent, the capacity and the resources that people may have. Helping is something about creating a space where good things may happen. We may not be able to predict or script or dictate what happens in that space, but maybe we can give things a favourable nudge in the right direction.

If each of us thinks of where we seek or get help in our own lives, I would suggest it more often comes from *people* rather than *services*, and more often from people we know and trust in our own informal networks. Very often, this kind of help releases energy and fosters hope. It restores our self-belief, self-reliance, autonomy and capacity, and our natural urge for healing and development. Our role in professional helping services may need to be less about doing things *for* and *to* people, and more about restoring and reinvigorating their own capacity, and recharging the solidarity of the natural social systems that surround them.

The professional helper needs to be there, but not necessarily in the foreground. Often, effective work is done unobtrusively, in the background, valuing and affirming what others are doing. Helping requires us to be fully attuned to the context of need, like my friend the social worker and the boy in the playground. We cannot tune in remotely from some kind of metaphorical call centre with a highly prescribed protocol of response. Influence comes from relationship, and relationship comes from proximity – both physical and emotional.

SCAFFOLDING: KEY SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND ROLES

Growth, healing and development in children comes from two sources: key social relationships and key social roles. These provide the scaffolding that stretches and supports the child's development and progress.

To continue with this image, borrowed from the work of the great Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), our task in looking after vulnerable children or children in care is to place scaffolding around the young person as they build their future. Scaffolding allows building to proceed safely. Builders use scaffolding when they need it. Similarly, the young person uses the scaffolding of the adult's support when they need it. The trick for the adult is to give help when it is needed, and to hold back when it is not needed. The young person develops by a combination of their own effort and the right support. Like the builder, the young person will only need the scaffolding for a certain time, or for certain critical tasks. We can help young people to be resilient in the face of adversity by various forms of scaffolding, by, for example, helping build their sense of belonging to, and acceptance by, people who value them. We can also help them to be resilient by building their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy through their accomplishment of tasks they value.

Young people thrive through supportive relationships and especially through relationships with adults. Care has to be based on young people's relationships with committed, supportive adults – at home, in the extended family, in school, in the care setting or in the wider community.

To overcome problems, and to blossom, the young person needs to experience positive relationships with committed supportive adults. Young people who do well invariably do so because of the encouragement and constant support of at least one adult who means a lot to them. Does each young person in touch with our services have access to such an adult in their circle of care?

Children need committed, supportive relationships as they grow up, but they also need to grow into valued social roles. Their parents also need support and a range of social roles. There is evidence that physical and mental health benefits from multiple role identities. In our work with young people and their parents, we can help to expand the number of role identities each youngster or parent has, the number of "hats" they have the opportunity to wear in everyday life. We need to help people to escape from oppressive *master identities* such as that of "poor, young, lone parent" or "young person in care". That person needs to play roles, too, such as neighbour, student, friend, part-time worker and sports-committee member. These additional social roles enrich and diversify their sense of themselves and widen their range of social connections.

STABILITY AND RESILIENCE

Public policy has a responsibility to support measures that respect, nurture and complement naturally occurring supports in the routine contexts of the children's everyday lives. Specifically, this means respecting, nurturing and complementing "life's ordinary plenty" – the contribution made by ordinary parents and carers, ordinary schools, neighbourhoods and employers. It means recognising that promoting the wellbeing of children is about more than a narrow and bureaucratic vision of child protection. It means working not only with the child, but also with the natural or potential allies of the child and parent in their everyday domains.

In assessing the quality of our efforts to provide care and support to vulnerable young people and build towards positive futures for them, we should consider the legacy that we leave them to bring to adulthood. In particular, we should think about this with respect to children in state care. I think most young people would hope the legacy includes a pathway into a stable relationship, a stable job and a stable social network connecting them to reliable social support and to people with a partisan commitment to them, whether born of kinship ties or otherwise. In marshalling the resources to respond to these needs, we should be careful to be as inclusive of potential resources as possible.

In striving to promote resilience, we should not think of it as some fixed trait or as some magic bullet with guaranteed and pervasive qualities. Life is not that simple, much as we might wish it to be. Promoting resilience seems more about releasing positive energy and processes in the different contexts of a young person's life. In relation to young people in care, any potential resilience is likely to be enhanced by:

- a sense of secure base and confiding relationships
- positive school experiences (academic and non-academic)
- social support
- "childhood industry" (Vaillant and Vaillant 1981) (plentiful and purposeful activity) and a general sense of competence
- constructive appraisal of self and circumstances.

If we look at some of the stories of adults and young people who have come through serious adversity and who have done well, it is clear that there are many and varied pathways to doing well. Many different factors lead to good outcomes. We need to search for lessons that are common across successful cases, but we need to do so in appreciation of diversity rather than dogma. Again, "you have to be flexible, because life is flexible".

Given how difficult it is to engineer positive futures for vulnerable children, futures that prove effective and sustainable, our approach should be to draw on as wide a repertoire of resources as possible. We should be striving to paint the future from a broad palette of existing and new possibilities. Our goal should be to maximise the range of social and emotional assets the young person can call upon, now and in the future.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND COMMITMENT TO THE CHILD

We must build a place for each child with our *heads* and with our *hearts*. From the head, we must strive to secure rights for children, because they are the foundation on which we build for the child. Rights are necessary, but not a sufficient basis for growth. We can be involved in promoting, observing or vindicating the rights of an individual child or category of children. We may be achieving very good things, certainly, but possibly doing so remotely, without the emotional connection that helps the child truly and wholly to thrive. Fundamentally, rights come from the head rather than from the heart; rights alone do not keep a child's place warm.

To blossom, children need not only the respect that flows from our heads (in the form of rights), they also need the passion that flows from our hearts (in the form of warm, personal commitment). To blossom, children need adult time and attention; they need partisan adult commitment and love.

Children need compassion, care and understanding, but most of all, to recall Raymond Carver, they need *belonging*. And as we think of meeting that challenge, we should remember that there many pathways to that warm place called "belonging". With our heads *and* our hearts, with the respect born of rights *and* with the love born of commitment, we can get closer to helping children blossom. We can work to guide children on the path from hurt to hope, on the path from harm to healing, on the path to "belonging".

Learning from the words of Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, we can strive to make "hope and history rhyme" in the lives of the children we serve.

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