

# CHILD AND YOUTH CARE PRACTICE with **Families**



*Editors*

Leon Fulcher, PhD and Thom Garfat, PhD



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The CYC-Net Press

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Leon Fulcher, PhD and Thom Garfat, PhD – Editors

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# Child and Youth Care Practice with Families

Leon Fulcher & Thom Garfat

## **Abstract**

*Contemporary child and youth care practices are both fluid and ever-evolving in different parts of the world. We introduce this volume by exploring ways in which 25 characteristics of a child and youth care approach to practice extend to the inclusion of family members – whenever and wherever possible. Our aim is for child and youth care practitioners to ‘think family’ in all they do, and to actively pursue opportunities for family members to engage in restorative processes which research evidence shows to be highly beneficial for children and young people leaving out-of-home care.*

## **Introduction**

Child and youth care workers are ideally situated to be among the most influential of healers and helpers in a young person’s life. That statement represents our basic belief about child and youth care practice. It was not so long ago that that child and youth care work was considered a sub-profession and the workers themselves were considered auxiliary extensions of other helping

professionals<sup>1</sup>, most commonly Social Workers. However, with the passage of time and continuing evolution of a distinct method of practice, child and youth care practitioners along with Northern European Social Pedagogues, have come to be recognized in some places as having particular expertise and a unique approach to working with children, young people and families (Fulcher & Garfat, 2008; Garfat, 2004). It is worth noting how the European profession of *social pedagogy* accommodates “child and youth care services, youth work, family support, youth justice services, residential care and secure units – services that may appear somewhat disparate to British or North American eyes” (Petrie, Boddy, Cameron, Wigfall & Simon, 2006). Child and youth care practice involves the same wide spectrum of services for children, young people and their families.

A child and youth care worker’s position in the daily life of another person and/or family, allows her to intervene pro-actively, responsively and immediately to help the other person and/or family members to learn new ways of acting and experiencing in the world (Fulcher & Garfat, 2008). There is no other form of intervention which is so immediate, so grounded in the present experiencing or, one might say, so *every day*. This immediacy of intervention creates in-the-moment learning opportunities that permit individuals and families to experiment with new ways of acting and experiencing others as they are living their lives. Child and youth care practice is not oriented around temporally spaced and infrequent visits to an office where the ‘client’ meets with a therapist who has no direct experience of that individual’s everyday life. Rather, child and youth care practice is based on being *in-the-moment* with the individual(s) and family members, experiencing with them their life and living as it unfolds (Baizerman, 1999).

Child and youth care practice is based on helping people live their lives differently as they are living it (Garfat, 2002). Such practice is focused, timely and practical. Above all, child and youth care practice – as with social pedagogy in Northern Europe – is an immediately responsive form of helping which uses “*applied learning and daily knowledge to inform more responsive daily encounters with children or young people*” (Fulcher, 2004). It is immediate in a

1 In their investigations into why foster care placements succeed or fail, Sinclair *et al* concluded that “foster care is certainly seen as benign. Its carers are commonly seen as ‘the salt of the earth’. However, they are neither acknowledged as responsible parents nor treated as responsible professionals” (2005).

child or young person's 'life space', and focuses on interactions in the moment – as these moments are occurring. Social pedagogy, as well as child and youth care, enables children and young people, as well as family members, to learn and rehearse new thoughts, feelings and actions in the most important arena of their lives, in their daily life space(s), as it is happening.

Previously we employed the term child and youth care practitioner (Garfat & Fulcher, 2013) when seeking to emphasize the plethora of job titles embraced by child and youth care workers practicing world-wide (Gharabaghi, 2009; Phelan, 1999; 2009). In the same way that Social Pedagogues are recognized for their therapeutic and social care work, it follows that child and youth care workers, supervisors, family workers, instructors, trainers, educators and researchers operate within and between the daily life spaces where children, young people and family members live. Their 'approach' and ways of working bind assorted job titles together – emphasizing how they think about and engage in this work. The term child and youth care worker is used when referring to someone in direct care practice.

### **Relational Child and Youth Care Practice with Families**

*Relational child and youth care practice* focuses attention towards what Garfat (2008) called '*the in-between between us*', reframed as the '*co-created space between us*' (Garfat & Fulcher, 2013). Bellefeuille and Jamieson (2008) noted how "*relational practice is a dynamic, rich, flexible, and continually evolving process of co-constructed inquiry ... [where] meaning emerges within the 'space between' the individual, family, or community*". This is a central feature of responsive child and youth care practice. This *co-created space, the in-between between us*, represents the 'hub of the wheel' around which all other characteristics of practice revolve. This co-created space between us we call *the relationship* and involves more than just 'having a relationship' (even a good one) with the other person(s), rather, it invites us to consider the characteristics of this space (Garfat, 2008). It means that the child and youth care worker is continuously attending to the *co-created relationship dynamic that is unfolding between us*, wondering – for example – '*Is this a safe place?*', '*Is this a learning space?*' or '*Is it a developmentally appropriate opportunity for experience?*' The focus becomes what is unfolding in the co-created relationship, not just the individuals in the relationship.

This focus on the '*co-created space between us*' ensures that a child and youth care worker remains attentive to the mutuality of relationship, recognizing

that all parties to the relationship create and are influenced by it (Fewster, 1990). Stuart (2009) argued that the “*the relationship is the intervention*” and this focus on the relational helps to ensure that a child and youth care worker maintains such a focus. Smith’s (2009) re-thinking of residential child care arrived at similar conclusions, arguing that “*building appropriate relationships ... to help children as they grow up*”, reinforced further by Smith, Fulcher & Doran (2013). In what follows, 25 *characteristics* of a child and youth care approach are applied to working with families.

## **A Child and Youth Care Practice with Children, Youths and Families**

***Participating with People as They Live Their Lives:*** Child and youth care work involves being and participating with people in the everyday moments of their lives (Phelan, 2015). Whether it is with a family in their home as they are doing dishes (Shaw, 2015), playing soccer with a young person in the community park or chatting with a homeless youth on the streets of a major city; whether it involves hanging out with a mother in jail or in hospital, helping a young supervisee learn a new skill, pausing in the corridor with a student, or participating with a young person in a church activity; whether it involves being in the sandbox, on the football field (Steckley, 2012), or sitting with a child as she falls asleep after a difficult day – child and youth care workers involve themselves in all aspects of the daily life of the people with whom she or he works (Hilton, 2002; Smart, 2006). Central to a child and youth care approach is the idea that if people can change how they are and how they act in the everyday minutiae of their lives, then change will be all the more enduring since their relationships with those whom they call ‘family’ are central to who they are and how they are living their lives, in their world. Thus, as child and youth care workers, we are with people – with families – as they live their daily lives, whatever that might comprise.

***Rituals of Encounter*** require that a child and youth care worker gives conscious thought to the ways in which she engages with another, especially family. This involves giving respectful attention to important protocols associated with engaging with someone from cultural, familial or historic traditions that may be different from one’s own (Fulcher, 2003). Simply trying to understand, as well as contemplate different relational starting points can

present major challenges. One's own experiences of acculturation and socialisation leave us with taken-for-granted assumptions and a cognitive mindset – or set of default responses – that are not easily altered. Rituals of encounter between youth workers and others involve cultural protocols. The meaning a child, young person or family member gives to culture – including youth group, gang or familial culture – is evolving constantly as they seek to understand and adapt to the life space circumstances in which they find themselves, facing prospects for a new living environment or experiences. Each encounter requires that a *cultural lens* be included in a worker's essential toolkit of competencies. Like transitional objects, rituals of encounter strengthen purposeful communication. And each family's rituals of encounter are distinctive – and may be very different from the cultural rituals familiar to the worker.

***Meeting Them Where They Are At:*** Meeting families 'where they are at' involves engaging with them where they live their lives. But more than that, it means accepting them for how they are and who they are as we encounter them. It means responding with sensitivity to their developmental capabilities, accepting their fears and hesitations, celebrating their joys and enabling them – without pressure – to be the people they are in our interactions with them. As Krueger (2002) said, interventions must be "*geared to their emotional, cognitive, social, and physical needs*". Just as a forest guide meets others at the beginning of their journey, so does the child and youth care worker seek to connect and meet them "where they are at", at the beginning of a relational journey, and then move on together from there.

***Connection and Engagement:*** If someone is not connected with another, and/or if one cannot engage with him or her in a significant way, then potential interventions will not be effective. It is unacceptable to blame 'the other' when they are unresponsive; it is a child and youth care worker's obligation to engage towards such connection. All too often, a failure to connect or engage gets rendered into a diagnostic justification for 'what's wrong with the other person'. Connection is the foundation of *relationship – with a child, a young person or family members* – and through such connections one engages with them as they live their lives. Helping a young woman nurse her child, assisting parents to prepare the garden, teaching a young man to shoot a basketball ... all such engagements offer powerful opportunities for interpersonal learning when

purposefully connected in relationship with the other(s). And, within a family, members need to be connected with each other and with the family as a whole. Strong families also engage together, with their community, their culture and history, in activities, in rituals and in everyday life events. Thus the worker is pushed to connect and engage with all family members and the family as a whole while facilitating the family connections which are important. The focus of a child and youth care worker engaged with families is, therefore, broader and more complex than when working only with individual youths.

***Being in Relationship*** is not the same as 'having a relationship'. Everyone has relationships but 'being in relationship' means engaging with the other person in a deep and profound manner which impacts both young person and helper (Gannon, 2008). The same can be said for being in relationship with the family and family members. It means purposefully engaging in relationships with family members – grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins – and supporting and encouraging these relationships with a child or young person – even sibling groups – over the course of time. Relationships build up a history and that history continues to shape the relationship and how the respective parties contribute opportunities for learning and play in such relationships. Thomas (2005) came to similar conclusions about the importance that children and young people in care give to “*the continuity of this relationship, reliability and availability, confidentiality, advocacy and doing things together*”. As Fewster (2004) said, “*Being in relationship means that we have what it takes to remain open and responsive in conditions where most mortals – and professionals – quickly distance themselves, become ‘objective’ and look for the external fix*”. This is often challenging for the worker, especially when the family lifestyle is different from that of the worker, or when they hold values and beliefs which are different. The worker may need to accept cultural and lifestyle differences in order to effectively establish a relationship of caring and connectedness with the family and its members.

***Using Daily Life Events to Facilitate Change:*** Child and youth care work involves using seemingly simple, everyday moments which occur where children, young people and family members live with the aim of helping them find different ways of being and living in their world (Maier, 1987). And of course, this 'everyday' represents the underlying structure of a family's life. These moments – as they are occurring – provide the most powerful and relevant

opportunities for learning and interpersonal change. Whether it be an opportunity-led event (Ward, 1998) with a child in residential care or foster home, a life altering moment in working with a family (Jones, 2007), a brief encounter on the street (Apetkar, 2001), or a simple exchange in a rural college classroom (Shaw, 2011) – such moments, and their potential for powerful change, are central to child and youth care practice. When we think about daily life events with families, they include everything from eating together, to engaging in an activity, to gardening, to going to church and other seemingly simple activities which form the structure of a family's life. Life is composed of everyday events, including events like everyone in the family being sick with the flu, a child moving schools, a parent having a new job, birthdays and anniversaries, births and deaths.

***Examining Context*** involves a conscious awareness of how everything that occurs for and with this young person and her or his family does so in a cultural and socio-economic context that is unique to a particular place and to the history of family members who live there, and have lived there for any length of time. While some elements of context may be similar (national and regional policies and funding practices, agency philosophies, care standards and regulations, physical environments and where services are located, etc.) other elements of context (cultural traditions, personal histories of being cared for by others, previous relationships with adults, the meaning of family, and developmental capabilities, etc.) set the stage for interactions between child and youth care workers. When a child or young person, or sibling groups, are identified as benefitting from family-negotiated after-school care, or through State-imposed care, in specific opportunity moments of interaction between helper(s) and family members, it is important to consider another 'context' that involves what history of interactions these family members have had with carers engaged in the 'shared care' of these children. No two contexts can ever be the same, meaning that child and youth care workers actively scan contexts that may assist them to 'understand the moment' more fully and thereby engage with greater benefit.

***Intentionality*** implies that everything a child and youth care worker does is done with purpose (Molepo, 2005). There are few 'random' actions or interventions with either a child or members of her family. It means consciously thinking about what is required for the other to be comfortable with intentional

attempts at making connections. Interventions need to be carefully considered and planned to fit with the updated goals established with each child or young person and her or his families. When meeting with a family in their home, it is important to decide how one greets each family member on arrival, who is greeted first, and how one will spend time with them. Irrespective of job titles, child and youth care work is always intentional although it does not mean that one abandons spontaneity. Even in moments of spontaneity, reflective child and youth care workers continue to think about their intention(s) in such moments. Each family is different, and therefore intentionality of action is tailored to each particular family and each family member.

***Responsively Developmental Practice*** means paying attention to relevant developmental capabilities with each child or young person, and extending such consideration to what capabilities family members might contribute towards the care and supervision of their child(ren) or young person(s). Instead of reacting to behaviour, child and youth care workers respond pro-actively in a manner consistent with a young person and her family's developmental capabilities and needs. This means exploring developmental capabilities from more than a chronological perspective. It means engaging this young person, as an individual, with strengths and challenges in different areas, and engaging similarly with family members – not just birth family – since these are the relationships that underpin any sense of belonging and ancestry. Responsively developmental practices also recognise and address local and regional politics, as well as or along with associated social and economic developments. In the broadest sense, the terms 'development or developmental' permeate and are an important part of the context of our work with families.

***Hanging Out*** means that child and youth care workers do apparently simple, everyday (yet extremely important) things with people. To the outsider it may seem as though nothing is happening. A walk in the park or sharing tea with a family; kicking stones with a young person; chatting in the corridor with a student; or leaning on a street lamp chatting with a homeless girl – all may seem like 'doing nothing' when, in fact, these may be the most important of activities. During such moments and experiences of 'hanging out', one is investing in the work of building relationships of trust, safety, connectedness, and intimacy. As the worker hangs out around the family, relationships – with the family as a whole as well as with the individuals – develop. Without pressure and demands

for change, experiences of safety can develop for the family as a whole. It is from such a place of safety, that the family as a 'system' might explore opportunities for modifying boundaries and re-aligning family sub-systems. Along the way, perhaps, they find courage to try to live together differently, with each other and with their extended family and community. This takes time – something often missed as financial controllers scan quickly through monthly and annual accounts. These are the kinds of relationships which are necessary if a child and youth care worker is to become a significant and influential person in the life of others (House of Commons Select Committee, 2009; Redl, 1951). And we, as professional workers, need to be able to explain to others and to family members, the importance of just 'being together in safety'.

***Hanging In*** means that a child and youth care worker does not give up when 'times are tough'. Rather, one hangs in and works things through whatever challenges that arise, demonstrating a commitment to and caring for that child, young person, parents and family members. This is especially highlighted whenever young parents are placed along with their young children in care. A traumatized child or young person in a foster home who is struggling; an Aboriginal youth seeking to re-connect with cultural traditions; a student who is failing to grasp a concept; a young parent who keeps slipping back to old ways of behaving; even research participants who find difficulty turning up for interviews – all highlight the need to *hang in*. It requires that one be patient and move at the other's pace instead of at 'our' pace (Fulcher, 2006). Equally, when things seem to be going well, it doesn't necessarily mean that 'all is well'. Steckley and Kendrick (2008) highlighted implications associated with 'holding on' whilst 'hanging in', signalling the importance of safe restraint practices in extreme cases. When the times are good, it's worth remembering that set-backs may be just around the corner since learning and changes take time. Families know this as well as anyone, and it is this knowing that things can slip which sometimes gets in the way of family members trying to live together differently, because they have experienced it before. Thus, a part of our job is to help generate a hope for the future: a 'we *can* do it' attitude.

***Doing 'With', not 'For' or 'To'*** refers to ways in which child and youth care workers engage with people, helping them to learn and develop through doing things with them. This does not deny prospects for learning and growing through doing things for themselves, especially when they are capable (Delano

& Shah, 2011). Nor does one stand back and order them about. Ultimately one remains engaged 'with' people through the process of their own growth and development, walking and sometimes running alongside them as a guide. This process of 'doing with' requires an ongoing commitment to the *co-created space* between worker and other – whether child, young person or family member – monitoring the changing circumstances and experiences participants have in that co-created space. Whether in supervision, at a family picnic or graduation event, in a rural garden or engaging in any other activity – the constant focus remains being and doing *with* the other(s).

***A Needs-Based Focus*** assumes that everything a child and youth care worker does is done for a purpose, and that is to meet the personal or social needs of the family, and family members. It requires us to have a way of understanding family, not just individual, needs – although many times they are the same or overlap. For example, a young person has a need for safety, and so might the family as a whole. When one helps a family member to find different, more satisfying ways of meeting a need, then often the previous way of meeting that need (usually an undesirable behaviour) is no longer so necessary. Thus, it becomes easier to let go of such behaviours. The young person who belongs to a gang may be meeting her need for belonging. A husband having an affair may be meeting his need to feel valued. A young runaway may be meeting a need for safety. The student who 'acts the clown' in class may be meeting a need to be noticed by others. Often, the task is to help people identify their needs more clearly and to find more satisfying ways of meeting them. When these needs are met in the context of one's family, the family itself becomes stronger.

***Working in the Now*** means remaining focused on what is happening in the 'here and now', in this moment, especially between the worker and young person or family member(s). Such a present orientation builds from the assumption that '*we are who we are, wherever we are*'. In the present, we carry with us the past as well as expectations about the future. If a person can change her or his way of being with another or other(s) in the present, so too can they more easily generalize that behaviour to other situations in their life. Past experiences can become even more important learning cues in the here and now. Similarly, expectations about the future or future consequences can also change through new lived experiences in daily life events as these happen. As we work with a family 'in the now' we are being with them as they live their lives,

helping them to find new ways of living together in the present. As we work together in the now, helping family members gain new experiences, so it is that we help them to create new family history moments.

***Flexibility and Individuality*** refers to the fact that every person and family is unique. All interventions must be tailored to fit the person and/or family as we understand them. This requires some flexibility in interactions with each young person and family member. There is no one approach or intervention which fits for every family, or applies in all situations. Just because the last time a family from a different culture responded to the worker in a particular manner, it does not mean that all families from that culture will respond in the same manner. When one young person liked a joke when they were in pain, it does not follow that another young person will respond likewise (Digney, 2007). Rituals of encounter, likewise, may vary between families, depending on cultural histories. Just as child and youth care workers are individuals, so it is for everyone with whom they work. This requires being flexible enough to modify one's approach or way of being as appropriate with each family. It follows that '*one size does not fit all*' and thus prescribed interventions make little sense, where every family receives the same intervention from a worker.

***Rhythmicity*** refers to the shared experience of engaging in a synchronized, dynamic connection with another or others (Maier, 1992). Rhythms of coming and going, rhythmic rituals of acknowledgement, patterns of play amongst children, reciprocating gestures of greeting at the door of a family home, special handshakes on the street corner, the rise and fall of togetherness and energy throughout a family's day, who speaks when in a family discussion – are all examples of rhythms. Connecting in rhythm with someone, or a family, helps to nurture and strengthen connections and a sense of 'being with' them. Regardless of location, child and youth care workers are invited to pay particular attention to rhythms that ripple throughout this family's life, in their interactions with friends, teachers, carers and between family members – strengthening rhythms of connectedness, belonging and caring.

***Meaning-Making*** refers to the *process* someone goes through in making sense of their experiences. An action occurs – one interprets it according to one's own way of making sense of things – and then acts according to that perception. Another person in any interaction does the same, thus explaining how different

people may respond very differently to a simple gesture because of what it means to them. 'What one meant to say' is not so important when how what was said or did is interpreted by any other person(s) involved. Saying hello to some family members on the streets, for example, may be interpreted as a gesture of inclusion, while to another family, such a gesture may signal betrayal. A male offering to shake hands with a woman of one culture may be interpreted as a gesture of equality, while to a woman from another culture it may signal invasion and disrespect. Child and youth care practice with families requires that careful attention is given to shared meaning making and, wherever possible, to family and youth participation in decision-making concerning the care and supervision of their children. Always, we are asking ourselves 'I wonder what this might mean to individual family members and the family as a whole?'

**Reflection** involves thinking about one's work: What have we done? What are we doing here? What seems to be working or not working? What might we do in the next few days and weeks? The effective helper is a reflective helper, always contemplating whether there are better ways, or how one might do things differently (Winfield, 2005). As a child and youth care worker intervenes in the moment, she questions why she is doing what she is doing. And after the intervention is over, she questions herself why she did what she did. In preparing for the next intervention, she might ask: 'Why am I thinking of doing this?' 'What is influencing me to think like this?' or 'How might what I'm doing be interpreted by this young person or these family members?' This continuous process of reflection – before, during, and after an action (Schon, 1983) – helps a child and youth care worker to stay focused on acting in the best interests of young people connected with sibling groups, family members and kin. An important part of our reflection when working with families may be found in the question 'I wonder how my own experiences of family are influencing me at this moment?'

**Purposeful Use of Activities:** Phelan (1999) argued that one of the essential tasks of child and youth care work is to arrange experiences for people, "*experiences that promote the possibility of new beliefs for the people we support*" (Phelan, 2009). Child and youth care workers attempt to facilitate learning opportunities in the everyday where purposeful use of activities enables children and young people to experience safe places where new life experiences and important interpersonal learning can be nurtured. The same is

true in our work with families. One learns about and takes account of a family's previous experiences through participation in activities with them. In a similar way, one remains open to learning about family members' prior experiences with social workers and carers, in anticipation of how new experiences offering potential for interpersonal fun, growth and learning might be planned and negotiated (Phelan, 2009). For example, someone who has never experienced being cared for may experience this through a learning opportunity and planned experience arranged with – and even engineered by – a youth worker. Part of our focus, then, is on thinking about how we can help create new experiences for the family, through doing activities together – a family walk, a picnic, a stress-free dinner, popcorn and a movie together. Through such activities families can develop a new experience of family.

**Family-Oriented:** There was a time, not that long ago, when family members were not considered to be a part of the child and youth care field. Indeed, child and youth care workers were often encouraged to think of family as 'the enemy' – the cause of the problems in the child or young person with whom they were working (Shaw & Garfat, 2004). Now, however, and, as shown in the chapters of this volume, child and youth care recognizes that family and particular family members are important. Families – including extended family members, clan or tribe – are ever present. A student in the classroom carries the expectations of family and extended family members with her. A young man living rough on the streets carries 'family' – even if it is a 'wished for' ideal family – in his head. Families with whom we work are not only present but so, too, are the families and extended families of the young persons involved. Whether working the floor or engaging in supervision, it is also important to acknowledge that child and youth care workers also have families and extended families. There is no such thing, really, as helping in the absence of family and extended family members because family – in whatever form or traditions – is always with us and is central to belonging for each person we encounter. Thus, even when we work with individuals, we are engaging in family work.

**Being Emotionally Present:** Krueger (1999) was one of the greatest child and youth care advocates for 'being present' in relationships. Whether with children, young people or adults and families – *being present* remains a central feature of child and youth care practice. While difficult to describe, *being present* with another and in relations with other(s) involves allowing one's Self to be in the

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## **Back to the Future: Mother and Daughter Reflections after 40 Years**

**Aliese Moran and Donna Sanders**

### **Abstract**

*At the end of a book entitled Sisters of Pain: An Ethnography of Young Women Living in Secure Care – a study of young women living in a high security youth services facility in the USA – by Leon Fulcher and Aliese Moran (2013), Aliese and her mother Donna shared their reflections about why ‘thinking family’ is important across all sectors of the child and youth care field – including secure care. While the Sisters life stories were compiled four decades ago, the voices are still remarkably alive and worthy of note, especially given notions about trauma-informed practice and pain-based behaviour. As Aliese became an active participant in the development of Sisters, she shared a draft of the work with her mother, with whom she now has a good relationship. Her mother Donna – whose relationship was once broken with her daughter – shared her own reflections about what happened.*

### **Donna’s Reflection**

It was devastating to read these girls’ stories and especially my daughter’s story. No matter their actual ages, they were all still children. Most were placed in the the institution where Leon and Aliese first met by circumstances beyond their control, and some were placed beyond their parents’ control.

I believe that, with this particular time frame and set of counselors, this was the first place where many of the girls felt safe. Scared, definitely, but safe. Some would go back to their old ways, but hopefully with better survival and coping skills. A few, like my daughter, would go with the knowledge that there was a better life – one that they could control. Perhaps this was their first opportunity to grow and learn to cope with their feelings.

Ali was a happy bubbly child, always active who loved being “mother’s helper”. She was constantly playing house. She would vacuum with her toy vacuum cleaner, pretend cooking on her toy stove etc. It doesn’t surprise me that “home & family” remain some of the most important things in her life.

Her grandmother – my mother – spent countless hours trying to find out where “Ali” was, after I was told that I could be arrested if I persisted in calling Social Services seeking information about her. When Ali finally turned 18, her parole officer took her to my mother’s house. After spending some time with her grandmother, Ali flew down to California to be with me and my third husband, Chris.

The reunion was highly emotional for both of us. But for me it brought back all the guilt I had buried for years. She told me that she had run away countless times trying to find me.

Guilt, like death and taxes, never ever completely goes away. It overwhelms you and eats away at your soul. It plays with your memories and always asks the question “What If?”. The guilt wipes out the good memories and re-plays the bad ones over and over in an endless loop.

It took many years to bury the guilt and live a “normal” life, if there is such a thing as a “normal life”. But guilt raises its ugly head from time to time and the guilt replay loop starts again.

Ali and I don’t talk about our separation. I think this is an emotional safeguard for us, even though we have a very close relationship and consider ourselves best friends. Now and then she will mention something regarding these times, but it is never elaborated on. She often talks about Lexie with whom she was very close, and kept in contact with long after she was out of the system.

Monetary wise, I came from an upper middle class family. My parents fought often and when they finally split up and divorced, I was fifteen. I had been dating Ali’s father who was in the air force, for about a month when he suggested we get married. So I married at age fifteen. We were together for about 4 months

before we separated due to Gary going for training out of state. I moved back in with my mother and soon to be my stepdad.

At that point I decided I wanted to finish school as I felt I was too young to be married. When Gary finished his training, he came to re-claim me as his wife. We tried to pick up where we had more or less left off, and this is when I became pregnant with Ali. Not knowing that I had become pregnant during this “reunion”, I stayed with my mother to finish school and Gary went on to his next duty station. Gary and I discussed getting a divorce, mainly because I felt we were both too young. So I filed for divorce, but had to wait until after Ali’s birth for it to be final. So at age seventeen I had Ali, and was on my own.

Ali has deep rooted abandonment issues. When she was a toddler, I left her with my cousin while I was looking for a job and an apartment. This was only for a month, but I’m sure that it is in her subconscious. When Ali was three I married her stepfather, Dave. Dave loved Ali and wanted to adopt her. So her natural father Gary relinquished his rights and Dave adopted her. During this marriage I had two other girls. Dave was in the navy and deployed often, so there was abandonment there too.

When Ali was to start kindergarten, she and her sister contracted TB from one of our friends. At that time anyone with TB was placed in a sanitarium, since TB is highly contagious. So Ali and her sister were placed in a hospital ninety miles away. Even though visiting was discouraged, I drove every weekend to see them. Being so young, Ali and her sister didn’t understand why they were there. They would cry to come home with me. So this was one more abandonment. Ali was released after four months, but couldn’t understand why her sister couldn’t come home also. Again, abandonment. Her sister was hospitalized for two more months.

When Dave and I divorced, he also relinquished Ali’s adoption and his parental rights. So, another abandonment. But the biggest abandonment was being taken into the system. This was the most traumatic one, and it has had a tremendous effect upon her psyche and her life overall.

When Ali eventually came to California to live with me and my third husband Chris, she settled in and her life was pretty much like any other young woman, though much more mature than most. She worked and associated with a good crowd. Since we had a pool table in the garage, we often had her friends at our house. Chris was ex-navy and an avid pool player, so he really enjoyed having these guys around. They were a tight knit group, and most of them had only been away from home for a short time, so I more or less became “Mom” to them.

A few years ago, they held a reunion here in California, and everyone caught up with each others' lives. It was rather bittersweet, as one of the wives was terminally ill and Bob, to whom Ali had been engaged, and was the leader of the group, had died of a heart attack while only in his 40's.

During the past six years, Ali and I have become especially close. We are the best of friends as I've mentioned before. We do have separate residences since I lost my job several years ago, but we communicate daily.

Writing her reflections has been very emotional for her and I'm very proud of how she is handling it and her writing skills. Her insight into the girls she writes about, is to me incredible. It is interesting to note that since she has been co-authoring *Sisters of Pain* she now calls me Mommy rather than Mom.

I have always been very proud of Ali. She is a very intelligent, positive, loving and giving individual. She always thinks of others and is generous to a fault. She will do without, to give to others. She has had a lot adversity and major disappointments in life, yet she always keeps a smile on her face and in her heart.

I know I'm supposed to be writing about my experience as a mother in losing a child to the system. But this is the best I can do.

Losing your child this way is like losing them to death. And that is how I felt. It was the way I coped. There was such a rage inside for the longest time, then that slowly became grieving. It takes pieces of your soul month after month. In some ways I became two or three different persons. The public person, well liked and respected, professional in the workplace, always in the top percentile in performance reviews. Someone who always remembers birthdays and special occasions, who is quick to give an "Atta boy" to someone for their accomplishments. Then there is the private me, who wishes to be left completely alone, preferring the company of my pets, books and movies. Feeling like I never want to interact with any human being again. The other side of that is, while I prefer not to attend social gatherings, I do like to associate with a select few friends.

There is no real ending to this narrative. Life just goes on. Step by step, and day by day, seeking peace and a degree of happiness. Being thankful I have my beautiful and intelligent daughter back in my life.

## **Some Afterthoughts**

We are a throw-away nation. We not only throw away our children, but also our elders. Some are thrown into the various systems and the others just into the wind of invisibility. They are unseen and forgotten.

Thousands of children have been thrown into foster care and the system. Many foster parents only do it for the money the State gives them for the child's necessities. Many have had zero training on how to care for and handle these children, so they are often passed on to the next set of foster parents and the next. Most of the children are scared and confused, not really understanding what or why this has happened to them. Some of the children don't conform to the foster parent's ways and others are defiant. Usually, they are scared of the uncertainty of the situation.

When they max out at age 18, many are still "thrown out" on their own. Very few have the life skills to lead healthy and productive lives. It is very rare that foster families allow their "charge" to continue living with them and help them with the necessary skills they need to be self-supporting. There don't seem to be many programs around that help these kids to adjust to living on their own, or if there are such programs, there aren't enough of them. It means that many young people in "the Youth Justice System" end up in the "adult" system and so the cycle continues – invisible and forgotten.

Donna

## **Aliese's Reflection**

It has been many years since I have thought about those earlier days in my life. Being re-united with my mother at the age of 18 was phenomenal and unexpected. I think that over the years, I figured I would never see her again. I jumped at the opportunity to meet with her and her husband and stay with them, at least temporarily. I was engaged to be married to an army man and I had to leave him behind to make this move. He later visited and after some time passed, I moved back east with him and later returned back "home".

As my mom writes, we never really discussed the past and she is probably correct by saying that it was an emotional safeguard for the both of us. I wanted to focus on the here and now and I knew there was no undoing the past and I had to learn to live with the loss of my family, and that was something I was just

going to have to live with. I don't believe I ever fully recovered, but that is a different story.

You can train yourself mentally to adjust over time, but the heart – well that is another matter. The move was a huge change and it took me a long time to sort this out mentally. I belonged, but yet, I didn't. At least I was trying, and I wanted to make the best of the situation.

I know that I still have some abandonment issues, and for me, knowing what my strengths and weaknesses are helps me to live a balanced life. I cannot undo my past or make my half-sisters and adoptive family love me or want me to be a part of their lives. I cannot bring back my grandma and grandpa who were alive and wanted me to live with them, but the system thought it knew better. It is hard when you are raised with your family and then pulled away, never to see them again. It made me very angry as a child and I had to learn to accept what I could not control, even though I knew “they” (the system) were totally wrong in what they were doing to me and my family.

It doesn't take much for a youth to fall from grace, when a set-back happens, or a major let down. And it takes a lot for them to get back to that place of balance, when they haven't learned all the coping skills; and finally, that you can't control everything in your life. That is part of “growing up”, or becoming mature. We learn to concentrate on doing what we can, and not to concentrate on what we have no control over.

A young person needs to find that they are good at something, that they hold worth and value, and can have their own personal goals and dreams that are attainable. I think it is important to instill those ideals close to the first encounter with the youth, rather than later.

Disturbed and disrupted adolescent growth patterns and social skills – like misaligned stepping stones – can be identified, re-learned and reinforced by the child and youth care worker. A child needs to learn a new language that “I am good”, “I can do this job”, “I have a good life and good friends” and learn to control those thoughts that are demeaning and hurtful.

I have had to learn to make friends quickly due to all the moving around I did as a child with my family, from the East and West coasts; and later through all the youth care programs. It came easily for me and it didn't take long for me to make new friends and leave behind the past that I was very willing to forget. I connect quickly with people, or I don't; and I place a high value on my friends because I learned early in life, that nothing is certain. I kept in touch with only a few of the girls and with the passing of time, we have lost contact. I know I was

very fortunate to have survived those earlier years and I often wonder why I was “spared” and not them.

As I look back on all this now, I know that so much of what I experienced has made me into a strong and independent lady. There was so much tragedy and very little hope within the lives of these young women when they arrived at the secure unit – but I would like to think that, like me, they came out stronger because of the close bonds of friendship they made during their stay. Your past does not define who you are as a person. That is a very hard step. Guilt and the shame can devour a person.

Okay social workers and youth workers, if you think your job is going to be tough – just imagine what the young person must be enduring. I can guarantee, nothing will be more rewarding than knowing you have helped a child untangle the mess that others have made in their lives, to see them move forward from the decisions and consequences of their own undoing, and blossom into the person they were meant to be.

Love and a good heart are the keys to your success. Knowledge on its own is not enough.

Aliese

### **Questions for Small Group Discussion or Guided Reflection**

1. *“Losing your child this way [to the System] is like losing them to death. And that is how I felt. It was the way I coped. There was such a rage inside for the longest time, then that slowly became grieving. It takes pieces of your soul month after month”.* How often do we stop to think about how a parent feels when their child has been placed in out-of-home care?
2. To what extent might it be said that ‘the System’ and its caseworkers and professionals often lose track of family members and still apportion blame to the extent of severely restricting family contact?
3. *“We are a throw-away nation. We not only throw away our children, but also our elders. Some are thrown into the various systems and the others just into the wind of invisibility. They are unseen and forgotten”.* What evidence might you identify that supports or refutes this mother’s assertion about the way things are for young people in care where you live?

4. *“I cannot bring back my grandma and grandpa who were alive and wanted me to live with them, but the system thought it knew better. It is hard when you are raised with your family and then pulled away, never to see them again”.* When thinking of family and what family means, what family members might be excluded or overlooked, and why?
5. *“Your past does not define who you are as a person. That is a very hard step. Guilt and the shame can devour a person”.* How does one connect with and walk alongside a young person at particular times in their lives when guilt and shame threatens?

# Contributors

**Leon Fulcher, MSW, PhD**, has worked for more than forty years as a social worker in residential child and youth care work, and as a foster carer in different parts of the world. As a practitioner, supervisor, manager, researcher, scholar and author, Leon has given special consideration to working across cultures and geographies, how this impacts on team working, supervision and caring for caregivers, as well as promoting learning with adult carers.

**Thom Garfat, MA, PhD**, is an international consultant and trainer who, for over forty years, has worked with children, young people, care givers and those who help them. His primary focus is on 'making it work'; finding practical day to day ways to enhance the process of development and healing.

**Mark Krueger** died in early 2015. He was an inspiration to our field. To read more of Mark's writing search for his name on [www.cyc-net.org](http://www.cyc-net.org) or the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

**Jack Phelan** is a child and youth care practitioner who is teaching at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Jack travels to child and youth care schools and programs around the world whenever he can, and loves to be invited to visit new places. He has been in the USA, England, Scotland, Ireland, Holland, Sweden, Denmark and South Africa.

**Lorraine Fox** holds a PhD in Clinical Psychology and a Doctoral Certificate in Organizational Development. She is a Certified Child Care Worker, having spent her career working with children and young people declared "emotionally disturbed" as a result of abuse and neglect. Lorraine has held roles as a direct service worker, as a supervisor, as a clinical director, and as an Executive Director. As an Assistant Professor she was awarded the Outstanding Service Award for Excellence in Teaching by the University of California-Davis. Lorraine has travelled widely and has published extensively.

**Sarah Gallagher** provides training and consultation in family engagement, family group conferencing, organizational development, child protection and youth justice. She has almost 30 years experience in the child welfare and youth justice field, from social worker, trainer, and regional manager to her current focus on research, system change and empowerment of children, youth and families in the child protection and youth justice arenas. She earned a BA from Harvard University, and her MSW is from the University of Vermont.

**Gale Burford** is Emeritus Professor of Social Work and past Director of the Child Welfare Training Partnership at the University of Vermont. His research and training, and continued involvement in semi-retirement as an independent contractor, has focused mainly on child, youth, and family interventions and organizational change in statutory settings. Gale came to his first university appointment after a decade of direct social work practice and senior management experience in services for children, young people, and their families. He has provided consultation, training, and program evaluation with a wide range of services internationally. Gale is a graduate of St. Martin's University (BA), the University of Washington (MSW), and the University of Stirling (PhD).

**Kelly Shaw** is a member of the core faculty at the Nova Scotia Community College in the Child and Youth Care Diploma Program. She holds an MA in Child and Youth Studies, Certification from the North American Child and Youth Care Certification Board, and is completing a PhD in Educational Studies at Brock University. Prior to moving into Child and Youth Care education, Kelly worked in a group care treatment program that focused on family support and intervention. She believes that in child and youth care work, family is always present.

**Heather Modlin** has worked with young people in residential care for more than 25 years. She is currently Provincial Director of Key Assets Newfoundland and Labrador. Heather is a former president of the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations, an active member and former President of the Child and Youth Care Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, a founding board member of the Child and Youth Care Educational Accreditation Board of Canada, a board member of the Child and Youth Care Certification Board and the International Child and Youth Care Network, and an editorial board member of the *Relational Child and Youth Care* journal. Heather has a Master of Science in Child and Youth Care Administration from Nova Southeastern University and is a PhD candidate and sessional instructor in Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria.

**Tuhinul Islam** was awarded his PhD for a thesis entitled *Residential Child Care: The Experiences of Young People in Bangladesh* from the University of Edinburgh, UK. He has an MA in International Child Welfare from the University of East Anglia, UK and an MBA in Human Resource Management. He has 20 years of teaching, research and practical experience in the fields of residential child care, child welfare management, education and development in Bangladesh, Malaysia and the UK. Currently he is a Senior Research Fellow at Northern University Bangladesh, and a Director of Education and Child Development Programmes for an NGO in Bangladesh.

**Karen VanderVen** – At the end of an illustrious career as a Professor of Psychology in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh, the title of Emeritus Professor was bestowed upon Karen, a title that goes right alongside youth worker, teacher, author, soapbox campaigner, scuba diver and collector of sea shells – amongst other accolades. Thank you Karen, for hanging in with us!

**Dr. Gerard Bellefeuille**, Professor of Child and Youth Care at MacEwan University, is recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award for innovative teaching/mentoring skills, and has an extensive international record of research and scholarly publications in academic journals, at conferences, and in book publications.

**Dr. Frances Ricks**, Emeritus Professor, University of Victoria, lives in Victoria, B.C. She fondly recalls a career of teaching, mentoring, research, and community development. She credits her students for a rich and vibrant life of learning. She is currently involved in challenging volunteer experiences, traveling, and writing.

**Seeng Mamabolo** began working as a residential child care worker in 1996 with Bethany Children's Home at Mthatha before starting to work with NACCW in 2006 as a Mentor after completing her Diploma in Child and Youth Care from the University of South Africa in 2003. Since 2009, Seeng has been an Isibindi Senior Mentor assigned to South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. She obtained her BTech degree in 2014 from Durban University of Technology. Seeng is a Sesotho-speaking person who stays with Xhosa-speaking people.

**Hloniphile Dlamini** started her journey in the field of child and youth care in 2003 and has worked in different settings, eg. secure care centre, places of safety and court, working with young people in conflict with the law. She obtained her degree in Child and Youth development in 2006 at Durban University of Technology. She then diverted to community work in 2009 when she joined the National Association of Child and Youth Care Workers and worked as Isibindi mentor. Hloniphile is currently working as Isibindi senior mentor for Gauteng province and monitors over 60 sites and supervises a team of 24 mentors ensuring that child and Youth Care practice is demonstrated and skills are well transferred. She will be pursuing her Master degree in Child and Youth Care.

**Mark Smith** was a residential child care worker and manager in Scotland for almost 20 years before, in 2000, taking up a post at The University of Strathclyde in Glasgow to develop a Masters programme in residential child care. In 2005, he moved to the University of Edinburgh where he is currently a Senior Lecturer and Head of Social Work.

**Aliese Moran** grew up in the rainforests of America's Pacific NW, hitched-hiked across the USA, and travelled on the subways of Boston and New York during her childhood. Deeply connected to her Native American roots, she became a youth activist; blazed her own trail, fought for Indian Fishing Rights, Community Healthcare, and the rights of foreign contract workers at Guantanamo Bay. She is blessed with a daughter and a son, both of whom have made her a grandmother, and together they are all blessed that their great grandmother is still with them. A former little league soccer coach, Aliese is also a certified legal assistant and a heavy equipment operator with an interest in civil engineering. She has returned to the Pacific NW, shares her life with two Labradors, is passionate about simpler ways of life and enjoys a rousing debate. Her mother, **Donna Sanders** – with whom she has regular contact – lives in Southern California.



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has worked for more than forty years as a social worker in residential child and youth care work and foster care in several parts of the world. Leon has specialised in working across cultures and geographies, team working and caring for caregivers, as well as supervision and promoting learning with adult carers.



### THOM GARFAT, PhD

is an international consultant and trainer who, for over forty years, has worked with children, young people, care givers and those who help them. His primary focus is on 'making it work'; finding practical day to day ways to enhance the process of development and healing for young people and families.

*This volume provides a compelling case for the extension of child and youth care work to the families of clients. Enriched with case exemplars from different cultures, it explores the imperatives for a broader focus, the similarities and the differences with traditional child-focused work, and the unique skills, perspectives and values that child and youth care workers bring with them.*

– **Howard Bath**, Child and Youth Care Consultant and Inaugural Children's Commissioner, Northern Territory, Australia

*The centrality of the family can often be overlooked in some forms of Child and Youth Care work. This collection explores the many dimensions of family work from a child and youth care perspective, accessibly and with acute insight. It should be priority reading for those working with families, and perhaps those who are not!*

– **Laura Steckley**, University of Strathclyde, Scotland

*Child and Youth Care Practice with Families is a thoughtful compilation of best-in-class thinking on how to effectively engage, support, and strengthen families. Those working in children's mental health, education, child welfare, or any practice setting which involves family members will find practical, culturally-sound guidance on how to be with and strengthen families in critical life moments.*

– **James Freeman**, Training Director, Casa Pacific Centers for Children and Families, California, USA

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