

A Guide to Developing Effective Child and Youth Care Practice with Families

Second Edition



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Grant Charles, PhD**

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The CYC-Net Press

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ISBN 978-1-928212-06-5

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An imprint of Pretext Publishing

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1

Introduction

The Purpose of this Book

The purpose of this book is to encourage child and youth workers, across the range of different areas of work, to engage in family work that is grounded in practice and theory and is meaningful to the daily life experiences of 'doing' child and youth care. It has been written because we both believe that to work effectively with a young person one must also work with their family in whatever way is possible. Family can assume many shapes. Essentially, family is who you consider it to be rather just what you consider it to be. In this book we will explore how we can work with families regardless of the definition. The goal of this book is to help front line practitioners and family support workers to better understand the basic dynamics of family work. The book is intended for students, beginning practitioners and those who have been working in the field for some time and are just beginning the journey of becoming involved with families. The two authors, situated as they are in North American (especially Canadian) child and youth care practice, recognise the influence of this context on the content of this book.

Child and youth care is a profession characterised by working in partnership with people who experience marginalisation or disadvantage. Typically child and youth care workers work with children, youth and their families in a range of settings and circumstances. We believe that there is a particular child and youth care perspective for working with

families. This approach differs quite radically from the approach of other human service professions due to our *emphasis* on the use of daily life events, relationship, and 'being in the moment'. This book is based upon this child and youth care approach. Our work reflects the current state of the field in several systems as it relates to family involvement (see, for example, Charles & Charles, 2003; Garfat, 2004; Gharabaghi, 2008; Jones, 2007; Valois, 2009; Verheij, 2002). We will make this child and youth care way of working with young people and their families explicit in this book by exploring with the reader a framework for family practice.

Overview of the Framework

The role of the child and youth care practitioner is becoming increasingly complex. Stuart and Carty (2006) have identified seven specific Domains of Practice with an accompanying 198 specific competency statements. The framework put forward in this book implicitly incorporates the key components of what we know about child and youth practice with a particular emphasis upon systems thinking and an understanding of families and family dynamics. Our approach primarily focuses on the use of self in the context of relationship as central to the helping process. In our view reflective practice is at the core of engagement with children, youth and families (see, for example, Garfat, 2005a, 2005b). We believe that a child and youth care practice should be approached from a caring perspective with practice grounded in a cultural context that utilises intervention approaches, that whenever possible, are empirically validated.

Preparation for a career in child and youth care demands a commitment to learning the essential components of developing healthy and caring relationships. We need to be fundamentally concerned with relationships which integrate the use of self, teaching, counseling, and learning into a myriad of interactions throughout the course of the work day.

As pointed out by our late colleague, Henry Maier, the minutia of everyday life should remain the focus of all intervention (Maier, 1987).

Henry Maier makes an important point that helps us understand the child and youth care approach. Unlike people in many of the other human service professions, the child and youth care practitioner operates within the actual life-space of the child or young person with whom she/he works with for often significant amounts of time. This means that we have the opportunity for daily life-events to be used as they are occurring as therapeutic moments. As a result of this unique approach to practice, child and youth care has developed a corresponding and interconnected set of attitudes, specific knowledge, skills and proficiencies that are commonly exhibited by competent child and youth care practitioner.

We believe that a foundational belief held by effective child and youth care practitioners is that relationships are the essence of effective practice. Indeed, Carol Stuart has said, “the relationship very often **is** the intervention” (Stuart, 2009, p.21). It is within the context of meaningful relationships that young people and their families frame their experiences and find new ways of living and growing together successfully. It is in this context of genuinely caring and mutual relationships that young people and their families find new ways of (re)structuring their experience of the world and the encounters they have had and may have in it. *The attention to relationship and being-in-relationship while utilizing everyday life events as they are occurring for therapeutic purposes is one of the ways in which the professional practice of child and youth care work distinguishes itself from other forms of helping and caring* (Garfat and Fulcher, 2011). In order to be effective in their role, it is our contention that child and youth care practitioners need to become reflective practitioners, and much of that reflection needs to focus on the personal and professional construction of experience (Gharabaghi, 2009).

A Shifting Focus of Practice

It is now common for child and youth care practitioners to work with families (Garfat, 2001a; Metselaar, Knorth & Van den Bergh, 2007). However, this has not always been the case. It wasn't that long ago we worked primarily, if not exclusively, with young people (Charles & Gabor, 2006). A reading of the descriptions of intervention programmes from the middle of the last century (see, for example, Redl & Wineman, 1952) would reveal that they were primarily focused on the young person. Often no mention was made of family, or family involvement, in the programme. If there was a mention of family it was frequently in the context of keeping them away from the young person so that they would not contaminate the treatment process. The family was, in many ways, considered to be 'the enemy' (Shaw & Garfat, 2004)

This has all changed. There is of course, good reason for this shift in focus. Child and youth care, like most of the 'helping' professions, has come to realize that the young person is a member of a social interacting system and that the development of the young person, and the young person's thoughts, actions, values, beliefs and experience of self occur within this system (Garfat, 1998). We have come to understand that lasting change for the young person is most likely to occur when helping professionals are involved with the total family system (Charles & Charles, 2003; Garfat, 1998, 2007; McConkey- Radetski & Slive, 1988). As with most changes in child and youth care, this shift to a family-focused approach has developed organically. One would find it impossible to define exactly when this change occurred. However, what is clear is that there has been a dramatic change in how *family* and *family members* are perceived by practitioners in our field.

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Reflections on a Child and Youth Care Approach to Working with Families

There can be no doubt that child and youth care practice with families is complex and demanding. In this chapter we provide you with some ‘food for thought’ as you begin your work with families. We want to offer some stimulus to encourage you to begin to reflect upon various aspects of working with families.

Child and youth care practitioners who engage with families are not family therapists in the traditional sense of that term. Nor are they social workers, psychologists or some other human services professional although many of the tasks, philosophies, and skills across the various professions are quite similar. Child and youth practitioners are professionals in their own right and, as such, we believe, should practice within a child and youth care framework. We are not therapists although our work is genuinely therapeutic. We do not follow the models of other professions, although we learn from, and in many cases contribute to, them. We believe that in order to be an effective practitioner with families, the child and youth care worker must know, and be fully grounded in, our own profession and the way in which we consider family in our field.

It seems simplistic to say so but all of us have previous experiences that are relevant to our current interactions as practitioners. These experiences greatly influence how we work with people. Our previous experiences of trying to be helpful, of working with families, of receiving help themselves, or of working independently may be of importance to the practitioners. The same holds true for families. Their previous experiences, with social workers or with police or other helpers, of trying to obtain help and of having strangers in the house may all be relevant for the family. And, of course, the previous history of practitioners and families are relevant to the others as are our own experiences as members of families. Family, in whatever form we understand it, significantly influences all of us (Fewster, 2004). The importance of history cannot be denied. When we enter in to a situation or have an experience, we search for ways to make sense of that experience (this will be discussed more in the chapter on meaning-making). One of the most powerful influences on how we experience and interpret that experience is our previous experiences of similar situations.

As an example of this imagine for a moment that a practitioner is going to visit a family who lives in a particular neighbourhood. The last time that this worker visited a family in this area she was thrown out of the family home by a mother, angry and possibly threatened with something she thought the worker had said. It is impossible for the worker not to be influenced by the previous experience she had when going now to visit this new family. She may be scared, hesitant, determined, cautious and maybe even excited as she uses her framework of previous similar experiences to prepare herself for this new encounter.

Imagine, too, that the family who is waiting for the worker to arrive has made numerous attempts to obtain help, although in a more traditional, office based, form. They did not believe that any of the previous attempts had been helpful.

The help has not seemed to resolve the problems they were experiencing. As they wait for the worker to arrive, they are likely thinking about these previous experiences. The question to ask then is how will their current expectations be influenced by these previous experiences? How might their expectations be different if all of their previous experiences had resulted in positive outcomes? How might this impact on their current expectations?

It may be helpful if we explained this a bit further. For example, how families initially see us is influenced by all of the other experiences they have had with ‘helpers’ before us. It is important to be aware that we are often not seen as an individual when members of families first meet us. Rather we are seen as a combination of every other ‘helper’ they have ever interacted with throughout their lives. If their experiences have been helpful then they are likely to assume that we will be helpful. If their experiences have been negative then they are likely to assume that their experiences with us will be negative. This may not be fair to us but it is just the way it is, not just for families but for all of us. We all often tend to initially judge what is about to happen by what has happened in similar situations in the past.

Reflective Questions

- Can you think of a time when your first impression of someone was negatively influenced by your previous experience with someone else?
- How did this influence your current interactions?
- How do you think you can guard against this from happening again?

When we work with families we need to be aware of how we are influenced by our perceptions of previous experiences. As we prepare ourselves for our encounters with families, we need to ask: What am I bringing to this encounter from my own previous history? How might my experiences in my own family influence what I will be doing and ‘seeing’? What experiences have I had as a worker that might influence me? What similar situations have I encountered? And how do these help or hinder me now? As we work with families, we need to try to understand how our and their previous experiences may influence on our encounter.

Opening up the Definition of Family

We mentioned in the opening chapter of this book that family may well be *who* you consider it to be rather than *what* you consider it to be. While historically the definition of ‘family’ was confined to a married couple and their offspring, or included the broad extended family, we have seen a change in the definition to reflect the greater inclusiveness and reality of a contemporary society. Family has probably always defined in a broad and ‘non-traditional’ manner by some of us although it is only recently that these ways of seeing family has become more widely accepted. It is not uncommon now, for example, to see the definition of family in child and youth care practice as: the members of a biologically connected system who have impact, or the potential for impact, on the young person in care or, persons *not* biologically related who have assumed roles traditionally occupied by biologically related persons. The following example illustrates this point:

Marcie, 15, was admitted to the residential treatment programme with the understanding that she had ‘no family’. She had been in the care of the system for six years and in that time had had no ‘family contact’ of any kind. Her mother had died a few months after Marcie was taken in to care and her father was unknown to the social

services system. No-one had any idea of who he might be. Her maternal grandparents were also dead. Her paternal grandparents were, of course, also unknown.

Marcie was always reactive at those times when other young people had family contact. Weekends when parents and siblings visited, holidays, and vacations were times when staff expected that Marcie would 'act out' in response to her sense of being alone and without family. As Marcie stayed in the residential treatment centre it was painful for the staff to observe. They became determined to find *family* for Marcie, for they operated under the assumption that everyone needs family.

To make a long story short, the staff began to search for family and here is what they found:

- Marcie's mother had a step-sister who had been fostered at a young age. They tracked her down and found she only lived a few hours away. When they contacted her, she was thrilled to think she had a relative for she, too, had thought she was alone.
- There was a man who, although not Marcie's biological father had spent a number of years living with Marcie and her mother. When he was contacted he asked about Marcie and said that he had 'always thought of her as if she was my own'. He was interested in developing connections with her.
- During Marcie's first few years in care she had lived in a foster home with two other girls her own age. When the staff talked with her about them she said they were her 'sisters'.

The staff of the programme made contact with all these people each of whom was interested in contact with Marcie.

At the time of the next holiday, Marcie had to make a choice as to which ‘family member’ she was going to go and visit. She came into the center with ‘no family’ and she left with an aunt, a step-father and two sisters, all of whom were as real a family for Marcie as any biological relatives could have been. When one broadens one’s definition of family, there are often ‘family members’ to be found.

Reflective Questions

- What is your definition of family?
- Where did that come from?
- How did you develop that definition?
- Is it the same as the definition your own family of origin might hold?
- How has your definition changed over time?

The Advantages of a Child and Youth Care Approach to Working with Families

A child and youth care approach to working with families is inherently different than other approaches. It is founded in the values and beliefs of child and youth care and because of this we suggest it has certain advantages over other approaches. (See, for example, Garfat & Fulcher, 2011, 2012.) Primary among these characteristics is the fact that *child and youth care practitioners work with families in their environments and in their homes, not in an office detached from the daily life of the family*. This is consistent with the characteristic of our approach to being with people as they live their lives’. We help people learn to live their lives differently in the places where those lives are lived.

This holds true whether the child and youth care practitioner is engaged with families from the base of a residential or a community programme. Meeting with families in their environment is consistent with the principle of child and youth care work of ‘meeting them where they are’ (Krueger, 1998). While there have been arguments made both for and against working with families in their homes, here are some of the advantages, as we see it, of doing so:

- The worker is able to make direct observations of how the family lives their life together rather than relying on reports from others.
- Family members experience the worker as ‘reaching out to them’ and ‘meeting them where they are at’.
- The worker is more likely to encounter, and have the opportunity to engage with, all members of the family.
- The worker is more likely to be able to observe and appreciate the strengths of the family rather than just focusing on the ‘problem’.
- The worker is able to help the family change how they are and how they interact together in ‘real time’.
- When family members change how they interact in their living environment, the cues associated with that change are embedded in their daily life environment.
- When family members experience success in their own environment, the satisfaction they feel is associated with their own environment and not an office.

(Adapted from Garfat, 2004)

Reflective Questions

- Can you think of any other advantages of working with the family in their environment?
- Can you identify any potential difficulties of working with families in their environment?

Some of the Demands of Child and Youth Care Family Work

Working with families is a difficult and challenging form of child and youth care practice. Yet, at least in the initial stages, everyone wants to do it. Interestingly, in our experience, most people at first think it will be easier than residential work. We have seen a rush over the years to work with families as if one could simply reach out and make a difference. In the end it turns out this is far from reality. Here are a few of the reasons people have cited as to why, or how, family work is difficult:

- When you work in residential care you are a part of a team. When you are having a difficult moment, someone else is around to help you out. There is often a colleague to discuss things with when you are unsure about what to do. When you need a minute to think, you can tell the young person you'll get back to him in a few minutes. When you work with families, in their home, you are often alone and on the spot.
- All of us have 'personal business' which comes up when we are working with others. Working with families has a tendency to stimulate old, child-parent and sibling issues for many of us. And for many of us, these are the most demanding of issues.

- When working in a residential programme, you are in a familiar environment where you know the ‘rules’ of interaction and where you feel safe and comfortable. In family work, you move from environment to environment and context to context. This requires a constant shifting and alertness. You are ‘less grounded’ and have less control of the environment when working in a family’s home.
- When working with families, there are often parents who are older than the worker. This challenges the workers reliance on age as an authority factor. For some of us, positioning ourselves as helpers is difficult when the ‘helpee’ is older than ourselves.
- When working with families, the worker no longer concentrates only on the developmental stage of one person, but of many, and of the family as a whole.

Some people might argue that getting started in working with families is easier if one has **not** been previously employed in a residential environment because the worker does not have to adapt from working in one context to working in another. One does not have to ‘make the shift’ (Shaw & Garfat, 2004) from one environment to another and, quite frankly, some of the habits which have been developed in a residential programme do not have to be undone or relearned.

However, we believe that the practitioner who has previous experience in a residential environment, and who learns family work as a part of the transition of a residential environment, brings to the work a number of advantages. Residential work is, perhaps, the best environment in which to learn a child and youth care approach. In the context of support, guidance and a familiar environment, the practitioner grows through the developmental stages of becoming a competent worker (Phelan, 1999), learns to think systemically,

develops the ability to respond quickly, becomes familiar with 'surprises' and develops an organised approach to her work. She learns the process of 'doing with' (Garfat, 2001) which is essential to effective work with families. She also learns a range of creative ways of working with the challenges that young people can throw at us.

As well, when the practitioner learns about working with families as a part of a programme transition, he has time to adapt and to try on different approaches. He is not forced head first in to full engagement in this challenging work. However, make no mistake, when one is making the shift to working with families after having developed skills in working with individuals, special challenges arise. As Shaw & Garfat (2004) have noted, not everyone should do family work because not everyone is up to this type of challenge. However, it is possible to identify the characteristics of child and youth care practitioners who are effective in working with youth and families. The following chapters identify more of the characteristics of this approach, and of those who seem to be able to use it effectively.

Normally, a book's 'back cover blurb' should be made up of comments from other people but we thought we would just tell you what we think ourselves, so, here goes ...

This little book is filled with big ideas. Well, okay, maybe the ideas aren't big but we think you will find useful information here to help you get started in working with families. It is not a manual, but it is full of practical ideas. It offers you the necessary theory but in a manner that serves your practice. No matter where you work with families, we believe this book can help you get focused, enhance your skills and become more effective. What more could you want?

– Thom and Grant

ISBN 978-1-928212-06-5



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