

WANTING TO CONNECT

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‘There are no strangers here; Only friends you haven’t yet met’.

William Butler Yeats, Irish poet, dramatist, writer, and politician.

It is said in Garfat et al. (2018) that, ‘Relationship is the foundation of all CYC work and connection is the foundation of relationship’ (p.32), yet a definition of what they mean by connection is not offered. In this chapter we offer a definition of connection, explain some of the reasons why connections are important in our field and offer a few strategies for making meaningful connections with young people and others. This definition, and suggested strategies, might seem controversial to some, and the authors welcome any exchanges which might advance the thinking about connections in our field.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CONNECTION?

In searching the literature for the meaning of the word ‘connection’ we were surprised to find that there is little by the way of definition. In our opinion, the best we found is one offered by Brown (2010), who says:

‘I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued: when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship’ (p.19).

This is consistent with a typical dictionary definition like these from the Cambridge Online Dictionary (2023):

‘The act of joining or being joined to something else, or the part or process that makes this possible’; ‘a feeling that you understand, like, and are interested in someone or something’.

These definitions are also consistent with what Roberts (2003, n.p.), called the moment of ‘join-up’ which he describes as, ‘that moment when the horse decides that it is better to be with the person than to go away’. In *Horse Sense for People*, Roberts’ (2001) translation of his thinking into human relations, he suggests that joining-up + is a two-way process, one of cooperation between the two individuals involved. ‘Connections are positive emotional bonds. Humans are highly social beings who scan our interpersonal world in search of connections with those we encounter’. (Roberts, 2000, p. 197). As Maier (2004, n.p.) said, ‘establishing meaningful contacts requires energy-laden outreach as well as time and space for the persons who await connections’.

While the above is true in the general sense of an on-going connection between two people, it also applies to the other form of connection identified in our field – the brief momentary connection between individuals like that expressed in the story below.

I walk into the room where three young people are sitting engrossed with their phones.

‘Hello’, I say, not addressing anyone specifically. Two of the young people look up immediately and return the hello I have just offered.

Birdie waits a minute and without looking up, says, ‘Oh, God, not you again’.

‘It is’, I respond, ‘So, I guess it’s your lucky day’.

Birdie finally looks up at me, catches my eye briefly and says, ‘I don’t think so’.

And there it is, the moment of possible connection, when her energy is focussed on me, not on the phone before her. I need to engage with that energy somehow.

‘Come on, Birdie’, I laugh, ‘You know you love to hassle me and give me a hard time’.

‘Nah! Too easy’, she says, ‘doesn’t take any effort to get you going’.

‘Well’, I say, still laughing lightly, ‘I’ll have to work on that’.

Birdie stands up, turning away as she heads for the door. As she leaves, she throws a comment over her shoulder, laughing a little herself, ‘Let me know when that happens’.

‘I will’, I throw at her before she leaves the room completely.

That was it, a quick moment in which there was a joining of our energies in engagement: a brief connection, one which needs to be repeated to form the deeper therapeutic connection we are seeking.

And therein lies our definition of connection: *a joining of energies between self and other in which both are engaged. The energetic joining which leads to the development of relationships over time.* As Perry has said, ‘The more healthy relationships children have, the more likely they will be to recover from trauma and thrive’ (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006 p. 230).

WHY CONNECTIONS ARE IMPORTANT

Essentially, connections provide the foundation for building healthy relationships between human beings. When you ‘connect’ with someone you are sending the message that they ‘matter’. When a person believes they ‘matter’ to someone, it creates a sense of acceptance and belonging. The opposite of connection is disconnection, which may be interpreted as loneliness. We envision loneliness to be desolate and cold, and loneliness has many negative implications on overall human mental and physical health. When working with a developing young person, it is essential to be cognizant and intentional regarding the importance of connection.

We begin by examining the reasons why connections are so important. Some of the reasons that we have found in the literature include:

- they may lead to deepened relationships where a young person may feel a sense of mattering and significance.
- they help young people heal from trauma through relatedness, feeling seen and being validated.
- they can help reduce stress and lessen the chances of mental and physical health problems.
- they can help a young person feel safe with us.

- they can facilitate a comforting sense of belonging.

Mattering and Significance: Time spent with a person, learning about their likes, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses allows us to know more about the person. This allows us to see and hear a person which may then make them feel valued, through providing undivided attention and interest. This is connection; a connection built on a foundation of *being present* with another individual. This type of connection can take place in many ways, including just *hanging out* with a young person. It will create a path for the young person to feel we like to be with them, and that they can be likeable. In essence, when they are acknowledged like this and in other small ways, young people feel they are significant, that they matter (Charles & Alexander, 2014).

Healing from Trauma: Oftentimes, the young people that we support have felt some form of disruption and disconnection in their relations with important figures in their lives. Some of these disruptions are a result of traumatic experiences. Some traumas that the young people may have experienced include assault (physical, emotional, mental, or sexual), neglect, not being cared for or rejected, and a life-threatening event that was out of their control and left them feeling exposed and vulnerable. Perry and Szalavitz say, '[t]he more healthy relationships children have, the more likely they will be to recover from trauma and thrive'. (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006, p. 230). Connection, through attention and interest in the person that we engage with allows for space to feel seen, valued, and validated. Connections and healthy relationships are crucial in helping young people heal.

Stress and Well-being: The children we are serving today will one day become adults. Healthy connections at a young age lessen the chance for future complications in adulthood and create the opportunity for healthier outcomes. The US Department of Health and Human Services in a 2003 report advised that, 'poor or insufficient social connection is associated with increased risk of disease, including a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke. Furthermore, it is associated with increased risk for anxiety, depression, and dementia' (p. 8). Therefore, the intervention that we provide through establishing a strong connection

with a young person can not only be a role-model for future healthy relationships, it also can promote healthier physical well-being. When we spend time being present, physically, mentally, and emotionally, with the young people that we serve, we help promote a sense of calmness. Therefore, connection may aid in reducing stress and promote well-being.

Safety: Stress not only affects our physical well-being, but it also affects our mental well-being and functioning. Maté reports that connection promotes safety. ‘Safety is not the absence of threat; it is the presence of connection’ (Maté, 2022). When serving a young person, a primary goal is for them to feel safe, to experience relational safety in their interactions with you (Garfat, 2015). This might include them feeling secure in knowing that you will keep their information private, you won’t turn away from or reject them, and they can be themselves and still be loved.

Belonging: Connections involve trusting relationships with caring adults as well as normative community supports such as sports teams, youth groups, and recreational programs (Bath, 2008). Building connections fosters resilience by meeting growth needs for belonging and generosity. Levy (2021) argues that the best strategy for success is to have many meaningful connections with others. Brown (2010) says that ‘[c]onnection is why we're here. It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives ... connection, the ability to feel connected is neurobiologically how we're wired’ (min 3:22-3:50 TED Talk). When we build secure connections with a young person, this fosters a fruitful foundation for other connections and healthy relationships in the future. We achieve this through reliability, curiosity, open-mindedness, and acceptance. These strategies also offer the opportunity to create meaningful connections and a long-term sense of bonding and belonging.

STRATEGIES TO HELP US CONNECT

When one reviews the literature, it becomes obvious that developing deep and meaningful connections with young people requires such things as trust, respect, understanding, presence, availability, etc., (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005; Burns, 1984; Laursen, 2002; Leaf, 1995; Skooglund, 1997). While there may be some agreement that these ‘states’ or characteristics of ‘being in relationship’ are important in developing deep connections with young

people, there is little written about how one attains these states and what strategies might help us develop them.

As Burns (1984, p.48) said, ‘A sound knowledge of ... strategies used in relationship building is extremely helpful in avoiding and working through roadblocks that hamper effective rapport building’. It is our intention in this section to identify what one might call ‘strategies’ to help us develop these states so necessary for the evolution of effective therapeutic connections. To do so, we turn to the twenty-five characteristics of a relational Child & Youth Care approach (Garfat, et. al, 2018). While one could argue that all the characteristics are meaningful in terms of developing the states needed to attain deeper connections, we believe the following are of particular significance.

Love is inclusive. To be inclusive means to accept people for who and how they are while acknowledging that everyone brings to the relational encounter their own history and that history requires recognition, understanding, valuing and acceptance if we are to focus on the creation of relational safety (Garfat, 2015). Every child deserves to be loved unconditionally. When we assume positive intent of children, they are likely to respond with positive intent. So many of the youth we serve are put down by so many of the “supportive” figures in their lives. We can be the corrective experience to show them that no matter how big their “ugly” is, they will still be loved.

Love, like caring, is an action verb. It is expressed through how we are with other (See Modlin & Gaitens elsewhere in this publication). As Glasser (1965) once said, basic human needs include to love, and to be loved. When these needs are met, it opens the door for one to feel safe enough to take the risk to connect deeply with others. How love is expressed may vary depending on beliefs, culture, and the individuals’ experience. What is important is that it is a felt experience. So, if we want to make meaningful connections, we must act with love. And, as said, love is an action verb which can show up in such simple things as a hug, a high-five, making someone’s favourite dish or even a simple warm look.

Meeting them where they are at means more than just being physically present in their everyday lives. It also means accepting them for who and how they are in their world and adapting our way of being with them so

that it ‘fits’ for them. When our way of being with them fits for them, then opportunities for deeper connections are created. The story below expresses this strategy of meeting someone where they are at, not where we think they should be.

I was put on an 11-year old’s case because he was not connected to the previous therapist (after working with her for 2 years). She would show up to the home for their weekly session and he would take off and not return until later that evening (with no announcement for his return). Before meeting him, I asked mom what his interests were, and she said he enjoys skateboarding. Since I was not a skateboarder, but I did enjoy scootering, I took my neon green scooter to my first session with him. The sight of me with my scooter made him smirk. So, I offered for him to guide us around his neighbourhood while he was on his skateboard, and I followed closely behind him on my scooter. It was at that moment that I bought myself some form of credibility and rapport because I wasn’t afraid to be goofy and I used humour and interests to build a connection.

Hanging-in with a young person, especially when times are difficult, shows the young person that we are committed to them; a rare experience for many of the young people we support. The young people that we serve have often encountered many people such as us wanting to ‘help’ them. The frequent turnover with service providers can be disheartening and discouraging for young people desiring to initiate and/or build connections. Ideally, the youth we serve can build lifelong connections but unfortunately because of the nature of the intensity of our work that doesn’t always end up being the case. Therefore, it’s important to remember that connections take time to develop, and the young people deserve our patience to help them feel comfortable. Hanging-in means staying with them. It says, ‘you are important, we care about you’. Hanging-in requires that we move at the young person’s pace not pushing them for more than they are able to give or do at any time. This is especially true when it comes to making connections, an experience which for many young people has been one of pain and trauma. When a young person experiences this commitment and caring, expressed through how we are with them, they often find the courage to open themselves up a little, the first step in developing deeper

connections with us. Hanging-in means that no matter what happens we are, somehow, still there and available in the young person's life.

Participating with others as they live their lives means that as much as possible, we are with a young person, present with them as they engage in their daily life activities, whether those activities be simple or complex. Sitting alongside them watching TV, walking in the park, working on homework, making dinner, going on a home visit, or any other activity you can think of is an opportunity for us to 'be with them' as they live their lives. And the more that we show that 'we are there for them' the more likely they are to develop the trust to allow us to connect. The more we are active participants in their life story, the more likely they are to connect with us. Humans live their lives in the story of their lives and when we join with them as they live their lives, we become a part of their story. This is where we create memories. Memories create significance and meaning in our lives. They're the blueprint of our life lessons and the curriculum that helps us develop and grow. So, in those small simple or complex moments, we give the young people meaning and lifelong knowledge.

Meaning Making is the process we all go through to make sense of everything we encounter in life. It is what helps us to organise the chaos around us. Something happens, we interpret it (make meaning) and, based on that interpretation, we act. Meaning making, therefore, is the basis for our actions. Meaning making is happening all the time, even if we do not notice it – I see a young person talking to another and wonder if they are 'conspiring'; a mother refuses to take my calls and I assume it means she does not care; a young person says to me 'fuck you' and I think it is about me. But it is not personal!

It's not personal because the young people have heard the 'song and dance' we perform at onset of getting to know one another many times. It can be disheartening to be told the same thing time and time again without follow through (such as 'sticking around'). So, the young people might lash out and treat us harshly. But it is not personal! Some young people have been hurt so many times in their lives that they may be trying to test your limits and see how far they can push you before you fold/quit/react. They

may be trying to push you away because connections with supposedly caring adults have been painful for them.

So, when they move to push you away, for example, take a deep breath, say to yourself, 'it is not about me' and then step back into the encounter. When you see them doing something, notice how you interpret it and wonder; be curious, about what it means to them. It is through this process of wondering that we might come to understand what things mean to them.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing has offered some of our thinking about connections with young people. Through it all, the reader will notice an emphasis on 'what we do, and how we do it'. This is because Child & Youth Care is an action-oriented field; our work involves doing – doing with the young people, participating as a member of their life story (Garfat, 2003). It is what we do, and how we do it, that creates the context within which meaningful connections might occur. Actions create connections and the states necessary to help those connections develop into meaningful relationships.

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