

Being, Interpreting, Doing: A Framework for Organizing the Characteristics of a Relational Child and Youth Care Approach

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This article provides a framework for organizing the characteristics of a relational child and youth care (CYC) approach (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012) which is designed to support learning and application in college coursework and training environments as well as in supervision and personal application by CYC practitioners. Questions for reflection and discussion in CYC courses, organizational teams, or individual consideration are included.

Keywords: relational child and youth care, characteristics, daily life events, personal and professional development

The dawn of a new year is, for many, a distinctive time of reflection and renewal. It is an opportunity for us to make important decisions about what we want to bring into the world and in what areas we want to grow, develop, and change.

One significant guide for our personal and professional growth is located in the characteristics of a relational child and youth care approach. These twenty-five characteristics provide a unifying philosophy which defines our engagement with young people and their families. They are straightforward, understandable, and relevant to range of practice settings. They are also comprehensive and profound enough to guide a lifetime of practice.

The characteristics originated from an examination of the practice and literature of the field (Garfat, 2004), have been revised and applied to foster care settings (Fulcher & Garfat, 2008), and further developed to reflect the ongoing growth of the field (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012). They are a meaningful contribution to the rich history and knowledge base that informs and guides our daily practice.

To support the potential for deeper learning and application it is helpful to organize the twenty five characteristics within a structured yet flexible framework which includes:

- Identification of one unifying characteristic to which the others connect



- Organization of the other characteristics into three categories
- Recognition of an anchor characteristic within each of the categories

This framework is designed to support learning and application in college coursework and training environments as well as in supervision and personal application by CYC practitioners.

Daily life events as a unifying characteristic

The therapeutic use of daily life events is the central identifying characteristic of a relational child and youth care approach. Daily life events are those moments which are “open for therapeutic use when the practitioner and young person engage in exploring its meaning together and in learning from each other” (Stuart, 2013, p. 295). Each of the other characteristics demonstrate how this use of daily life events integrate into the larger CYC approach as well as describe the qualities of those who use daily life events effectively. The use of daily life events links to each of the other characteristics and unifies them in a structured system. It rests at the crossroads of the other characteristics connecting with each one to create a unified whole. In fact, it is often identified as the foundational characteristic of our approach (Garfat, 2002).

Being, interpreting, and doing

With the use of daily life events at the core, the remaining characteristics of a relational CYC approach can be organized into three general categories. These cate-

gories are *being*, *interpreting*, and *doing*, each including eight characteristics.

Being: The first category or grouping is focused primarily on our way of being with others and includes:

- Love
- Being in relationship
- Flexibility & individuality
- Hanging in
- Hanging out
- Participating with others as they live their lives
- Counseling on the go
- Working in the now

Notice how these eight characteristics range from internal motives (e.g. love) to the temporal (e.g. working in the now). Being with a young person requires both an internal awareness and an ability to sense and respond to the moments that make up our everyday lives.

Interpreting: A second grouping of characteristics provides a focus on how and what we are interpreting in these moments of interaction. This group includes:

- Meaning making
- Strengths & resiliency
- Examining context
- Needs based focus
- Responsively developmental
- Family oriented
- Reflection
- It's all about us

Notice that these eight include both a



focus on others (e.g. needs based focus) as well as a focus on self (e.g. it's all about us).

Doing: The third grouping guides us in what we do – our movement and actions – with others. It includes:

- Connection & engagement
- Meeting others where they are
- Rituals of encounter
- Doing with not for or to
- Being emotionally present
- Intentionality of action
- Purposeful use of activities
- Rhythmicity

These eight focus primarily on our outward actions. They are what make the first two categories visible to others.

These three classifications are neither rigid nor linear. Each characteristic has components that might be described in each of the categories. The framework does, however, highlight the primary focus and function of each characteristic.

Bidding for connection

Together the three categories – being, interpreting, and doing – form the acronym BID, highlighting the bids for connection that are at the center of our relational work. To make a bid is the act of making an offer for something. It is an old word dating from before the twelfth century and is defined as an “attempt or effort to win, achieve, or attract” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) as in making a bid for reelection.

In relational child and youth care, we make bids to connect with others. This

bid for connection is a two-way exchange. Our response to a child's bid has the potential to enhance attachment and promote development, just as it does for parents who

... respond consistently and appropriately to their child's social bids and initiate interactions geared to the child's capacities, intentions, moods, goals, and developmental level are most likely to have children with secure maternal attachments. (Howes, 2007)

Howes further explains that “one can assume that this is also true for alternative caregivers”.

It is our responsibility in creating a caring practice to be “keenly tuned in to responding to kids' bids for connections and that [we] make pre-emptive attempts to connect” (Laurson, 2008). The idea of responding to or making a bid for connection comes alive in this framework when we recognize that it involves working in the crossroads of being, interpreting, and doing (see figure 1 over the page).

Three anchor characteristics

A third component of this being-interpreting-doing framework includes the recognition of anchor characteristics. The anchor characteristics provide strength and support to the other characteristics within each category. Identifying anchors within each category offers practical guidance to those beginning in the field as they focus on in their own development. It prioritizes, in a way, what might be an essential starting point in ones personal



Figure 1

growth and development. The three anchors in this framework include:

- Love – in the category of being
- Meaning making – in the category of interpreting
- Connection & engagement – in the category of doing

Love serves as a “pre-requisite of healthy development” (Smith, 2006) and without a basic love for others and a willingness to be stretched and grow in that love may be an indication of the need for an individual to consider a different field.

Meaning making is the process through which each of us – worker or child – interprets everything else including, for example, what constitutes a strength of character (Freeman, 2013). In the category of doing, *connection and engagement* summarizes the core of what young people and families need in today's world. Connection and engagement is an end of our work and not a means to an end. Love and meaning making, along with connection and engagement, are the anchors of our work in using daily life events therapeutically and CYC work in general.

These anchors provide guidance for the lifetime of our career. Each one of them – certainly each one of the characteristics – is deep and comprehensive enough to provide guidance for a lifetime of practice.



Considerations for personal application

The characteristics and framework are made useful when we apply them and integrated them into our work and life. In this moment of reflection and renewal, consider how you might further integrate the characteristics of a relational child and youth care approach into your work and life. Don't push or force these characteristics into your work. Rather, relax into them respecting your own personality and style. There might be things you want to change in yourself, or in your approach, but there is nothing more powerful than being authentic in your relationship with others. Forgive yourself for past mistakes and missed opportunities. Take ownership of integrating these characteristics into



your own practice and give it your best.

Questions for class, team, or individual reflection and discussion

1. Which category or characteristic(s) seem come more naturally to you? Why do you think that might be?
2. In which ones would you like to grow or improve? What's your plan to do so?
3. Which characteristics do you admire in others? Why?
4. What do you think about the idea of integrating the characteristics of a relational child and youth care approach into your life, not just your work?

Conclusion

The characteristics of a relational child and youth care approach provide a unifying philosophy which defines our work with young people and their families. The framework presented here provides further support and organization for discussing, learning, and applying them in our lives.

A new day is dawning for the field of child and youth care. As we grow in our capacity to live out the characteristics of relational child and youth care, we have the potential to create new and powerful experiences in our lives and work, bringing great things into the world together.

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