

# Professional Boundaries in Child and Youth Care Work

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*Working with children and youth takes a lot of skill, genuine desire to help young people on their journey and an ability to create boundaries that reflect care and concern while highlighting our trustworthiness and professionalism. Finding and maintaining this distinct balance is challenging. Nancy Marshall illustrates, through research, the importance of maintaining balanced professional boundaries that include showing warmth, nurturing and love in order to create healing relationships as a Child and Youth Care Worker.*

**R**eported incidences of litigation, abuse, and slander against youth workers, coupled with concerns related to client-helper relationships becoming too “friendly”, have led practitioners to create clear and often strict policies around boundaries. In the summary of his study on the issue, Professor Scott Okamoto (2003) says, “in the case of the practitioner/client relationship, boundaries provide a limit that allows for a ‘safe connection based on the client’s needs” (p. 303). Unfortunately, some agencies and workers get so concerned with this “safe connection” that the love and nurturing in the work is lost. Although there is a definite need for boundaries and limits, it is equally important we not lose sight of the fundamental love and nurturing needed to build therapeutic relationships.

In a study examining practitioners’ fears in working with troubled teens, two hundred and forty eight professionals from 15 agencies in Hawaii



were surveyed. There were three main fears highlighted in the study: “fear of being physically harmed by a client, fear of being sued by a client or client’s family, and fear of damage to one’s professional reputation” ((Okamoto and

Chesney-Lind, 2000, p. 374). It is fears like these that compel agencies into developing boundary policies. Although these fears may be well-founded, practitioners must remember that policies and rules that are too rigid can impede the development of therapeutic relationships.

Teens in care were surveyed regarding their viewpoints on professional boundaries (Richmond, 2005). Many of the girls’ responses reflected frustrations regarding the rigid professional boundaries implemented at the centre. Of the 10 girls, 8 reported feeling frustrated with the agency’s rules on hugging. Teens explained that staff felt hugs to be “unprofessional” and a violation of their personal boundaries. One girl stated, “if you want affection like you have to ask and even then, it’s not warm” (p. 61). Another teen replied, “here, you’re not supposed to touch anyone — you’ll

get your privs. [privileges] taken or you'll get on a time-out which means you can't do anything" (p. 61-62).

Strict boundaries such as these disregard the human need for affection and often ignore clients' common sense regarding personal space. As one teen described, "I know I feel a lot better when um, I'm feeling bad and you have someone to hug ... I mean like hugs are good. Especially like if they're nonsexual that's great" (Richmond, 2005, p. 62). Yet another teen stated, "I think they should provide a nurturing environment for us. So I think that should be a part of their job description — provide warm hugs" (p. 63). When asked the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch, one teen explained, "Appropriate would be like playfully poking someone in the arm, giving someone a hug, um, play wrestling or something — you know, things that are consensual between two people. And inappropriate is things you don't like — like people in your bubble [personal space] all the time when you don't want them" (p. 63).

In a different study on youth perceptions, young people expressed various attributes that they looked for in a child and youth worker. These included, "someone who genuinely cared ... loved the kids ... talked 'with' rather than 'to' me ... felt warm ... felt loved ... a friend ... feelings of comfort", and so on (Weisman, 2006, p. 49).

Weisman suggests that child and youth workers share the

common belief that "these relationship reluctant" children need to learn to love and trust adults. Yet at the same time, workers are "given a message that it is inappropriate to love the children and youth we work with" (p. 49). Isn't it ironic that in our work there are distinct rules and limitations dictating how not to model love and trust.

There is no doubt, as a Child and Youth Care Worker, that there is a significant need for certain boundaries to be in place, in order to clearly define our relationships with clients. But it is important to remember what purpose these boundaries serve in our relationships. We need to question how 'blanket policies' such as "no-touch" rules are effective and for whom they are effective. After all, "if we, the helping adults, are relationship reluctant too, then no meaningful therapeutic change can occur" (Weisman, 2006, p. 49).

## References

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*From the Line* is facilitated by Jessica Sauve-Griffin & Andie Fournier

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