

Working Together with Purpose

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Introduction

Children and young people in need of care are almost always dependent on adults to ensure safety and security, to receive a meaningful education, and to form social relationships that strengthen distinctive cultural identities and promote life opportunities. Community and extended family members – along with health, education and social service professionals who make care decisions – are particularly influential, especially when seeking to achieve positive outcomes for the futures of children and young people. Multi-disciplinary teamwork is essential to ensure that everyone is working together with purpose. This involves placing family/kinship or sibling carers – as well as other designated carers – at the very centre of attention alongside children or young people receiving state-sponsored or voluntary care. Only in this way is it possible to thereby promote and deliver integrated services to society's most vulnerable members.

Children Depend on Adults

From before birth, children depend on adults for safety and security, and for nurturing in them a sense of belonging. Birth mothers, sisters and female elders, as well as other of kin group members traditionally guarantee the safety and security of children – including birth fathers (whether present or not), older brothers, uncles and grandfathers. Children depend on adults for shelter, food and sustenance, and for life opportunities to engage in purposeful activities and play. Children and young people also depend on adults for education in life skills to become a contributing member of a household, family complex, neighbourhood, village and community. Life education in the 21st Century also includes meaningful formal education where children and young people depend on adults to provide education that is learner-centred and not just subject-centred. Children and young people need to gain mastery of life skills and knowledge for meaningful life if they are to make independent contributions to their people and families. Children and young people also depend on adults for introduction to, as well as induction into social relationships through which they master life skills, acquire cultural identities and learn to demonstrate generosity as a contributing member of any social group (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Bockern, 1990).

Different Adults Claim Purpose, Define Needs and Supervision Rules

There is a purpose associated with identifying children's needs and requirements for supervision. From supervision over milestones of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development, to mastery of specific life skills needed to achieve positive adult standing in particular living groups, adults play significant roles in every culture, each claiming a designated purpose in the care and supervision of children and young people (Maier, 1987). Children's life stories touch the souls of child and youth care workers. While it is not uncommon for unknown adults to define 'needs' and 'supervision requirements' for children and young people deemed to require 'looking after' by the State, or in need of State sponsored 'out-of-home care', primary carers and family members want to know: *Is our child safe now?*

Who are the Adults that Claim Care and Supervision Purposes?

Birth mothers, siblings, family & kin members make legitimate care and supervision claims about the health and wellbeing of their children. Children are traditionally viewed as the future of a people, of a family and extended family line, of sub-tribe and tribe, and of communities of interest, however these are defined. It is when these traditional care and supervision claims or duties are not met that social workers & other health, education and welfare professionals are assigned responsibilities to supervise the State's Duty of Care (Fulcher & Ainsworth, 2006). Health, Welfare, Education and Justice professionals legally assigned duties administering to children's needs provide for the supervision of children and young people. Teachers have a significant influence in children's lives, and this continues into the lives of young people – whether influencing a young person to leave school or to continue along a pathway of learning that makes even greater contributions to the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Policy makers and service managers also make decisions about how the State responds to the needs of children and young people, allocating resources and administering local responses to complex personal, family and community requirements. With policy makers and service managers, service regulators make decisions about standards of “looked after” care, whether based on traditional practices, legal requirements, or religious induction. The mass media also claim purpose in the lives of children and young people through reports, or failures to report, on breaches of the duty of care involving the death or institutional abuse of children, about care standards, or reactions to care deemed ‘not good enough’. Social work researchers and scholars have much to say about the needs of children, although such pronouncements rarely give prominence to distinctive cultural and geographic realities from which personal meanings and world views are derived.

Working Together with Purpose includes Multi-Disciplinary Teamwork

Working together with purpose involves more than professions integrating their efforts and primary tasks into multi-disciplinary practices. Shared purpose involves participation in decision-making. Shared purpose requires that children and young people— to the extent possible – participate in decision-making about their lives and futures. Young people especially need to participate in decision-making about their present and future circumstances since this is how they learn to engage responsibly in mastering life skills essential to independent or inter-dependent living. Research shows that family participation in decision-making is very important (Burford & Hudson, 2000). Participation of community members in decision-making is essential. Working together in purpose involves viewing the world through the eyes of children and young people. Working together with purpose involves:

- spending time with and actively listening to children and young people;
- engaging in young people's lives;
- more than case management;
- sharing decision-making powers;
- stepping out from behind desks and moving beyond professional comfort zones;
- wrapping collective professional efforts around children and young people; and
- sharing personal & professional responsibility for children's futures.

Wrap-Around Services are more Responsive for Young People

It is one thing to talk about integrated services where different adults, professionals and community members exercise purpose around the care and supervision of children and young people. It is quite another matter to provide truly integrated services that are directly responsive to the needs of specific children and young people. Services need to be wrapped-around specific children and young people in ways that respond to their particular health, education, welfare and supervision needs in a timely manner. All too often, care and supervision services may be apparently integrated while giving limited personal or community return on the investment of scarce community resources. Working together with purpose to provide responsive 'wrap-around' services need to start where children and young people live. Responsive wrap-around services need to promote child and youth development as well as community development. Responsive wrap-around services involve the pro-active use of child welfare legislation, asking what can be done more than what can't be done. Working together with purpose involves team parenting, where all involved in the care and supervision of children and young people work to a shared purpose – the safety, wellbeing and future for each particular young person (Fulcher & Garfat, 2008). Working together with purpose requires a long-term commitment to caring and supervision that makes service organizations more responsive to local needs. Team parenting includes family members as essential members of the TEAM! Purposeful team parenting can't afford professional power plays nor can it afford to be undermined by professional jealousies. Status arguments about professionals or auxiliaries have little place in the State's delivery of responsive care and supervision of looked after children and young people. Instead, working together with purpose requires entering into rhythms with children and young people to provide care and supervision that promotes their achievement of developmental outcomes and social wellbeing.

Conclusion

Child welfare organisations, like other organisations, face many challenges when seeking to achieve greater clarity of purpose and to promote team parenting in the delivery of care and supervision services wrapped around particular children and young people. Organisational dynamics shape the delivery of responsive services, both in planned and unplanned ways. Ackoff, Addison and Bibb (2007) noted several management f-laws which impact directly on any care organisation's capacity to provide team parenting with purpose for a community's most vulnerable and challenging children and young people (Fulcher, 2007). Carers and managers are reminded that the only thing more difficult than starting new ways of working in an organisation is to stop some of the old ways of working. The less managers expect of their carers, the less they get, and the less children and young people in need of responsive services get. And managers who are 'boxed in' by fixed ideas around the care and supervision of children and young people face major challenges thinking 'outside the box'. Working together with purpose to provide care and supervision services wrapped around 'looked after' children involves team parenting that actively seeks participation in decision-making from children and young people themselves, as well as from significant family members.

References

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