Helping Children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties: A personal account

Bill Wahl

When I tell people that I work as a member of a behaviour support team for an education authority, I am often asked a number of questions. How do you help these children? Do you work with just the children and their teachers or do you help the parents as well? Do you really think people like you can make a difference? Why do these children have the problems? It's the parents that are the problem, isn't it? Do you ever fix a child? I recall the words of an author whose name has long ago escaped my memory: 'The adept of antiquity spoke with eloquent and authoritative confidence; the adept of today stammers and grimaces as he or she attempts to say something honest.' The ever increasing complexity of our information-driven world excites and overwhelms in the same moment. When people ask me about my work with children I do try to answer as honestly as I can, yet I usually find that I have no simple or authoritative response to offer.

However, I feel that it is also fair to say that working with children with serious emotional and behavioural difficulties offers a steep learning curve. Over the past 11 years I have looked at myself and my colleagues and have noticed that in most cases people have a tendency either to learn fairly quickly or to get into another line of work. I have reflected on my work with children, and will describe (with a minimum of stammering and grimacing) what I feel have been the most important learning points along the way.

'Your creative individuality alone must decide'

I often see similar behavioural and emotional patterns from child to child, and yet each child is unique. While I realise that this sounds like some Zen koan, I must say that I have nevertheless found it to be true. Last spring I began work with two children attending different schools. One child refused to talk to or even look at me, and when I made attempts to bridge the gap he threatened to hit me with a piece of wood. When I walked into the other child's classroom, the child ran straight to me, leaned against me, made an introduction and

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then asked me if I would read a book to her. Despite the apparent differences, both children were very disturbed and shared backgrounds and patterns of social, behavioural and emotional difficulties which were in many ways similar. Helping children with such difficulties seems to be about developing an understanding and a range of skills which I can rely on, and about being open to the uniqueness of every child. It's a strange territory where science and art are complementary and where logic and intuition desperately need one another.

A visit to any good university library reveals hundreds of texts covering such topics as child development, childhood pathology, child psychotherapy, diagnostic systems, behaviour therapy, social skills training, play therapy — there is no end to the theories, perspectives and suggested interventions one can choose from. This represents the science bit, and I have found that the advice and suggestions of others can be of great help. However, in and of themselves they are not sufficient. What is also necessary is for those of us helping the child to think creatively in order to find a way to join with the child in effecting therapeutic change. In *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* Carl Jung expressed this notion very eloquently: 'That is why I say to any beginner: learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your creative individuality alone must decide.' Work with troubled children long enough and at some point one of them might scream an obscenity and throw a chair in your direction. Pull a few of books off the shelf and look up 'aggression' in the index. One book might suggest that children are aggressive because they watch too much violent TV, another suggests that genetics, gender and brain chemistry are involved and a third counsels that aggression is the natural result of frustration. Such scientific theories can be highly informative, but when the chair hits the ground and a response is required it is 'your creative individuality alone which must decide'.

'It's the relationship that heals'

When we read texts and journal articles from the fields of child psychology and psychotherapy, there is frequently a strong emphasis on understanding the causes of children's difficulties and the interventions which may be used to help. We read a lot about behaviour therapy, child psychotherapy, family therapy, social skills training, differentiating curriculum and so on. There is, however, less attention paid to the quality of the therapeutic relationship. The actual quality of the relationship one is able to develop with the child is not another technique: it is what allows any technique to be successful. Irvin Yalom put the point very poetically in *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy*: 'It's the relationship that heals, the relationship that heals, the relationship that heals — my professional rosary.' The quality of the relationship may be especially important when working with children. There is a banquet of approaches which can work powerfully to support significant and positive change for children, but nothing seems to work unless we are able to establish some semblance of a working relationship. There were children with whom I worked who did not make progress, children who ended up being permanently

excluded from their schools and sent off to self-contained institutions for those with serious behavioural and emotional difficulties. In every case these were precisely those children whom, despite my best efforts, I was unable to 'reach', to 'get through to' or to establish some means of communication with.

Meaningful engagement with children who have emotional and behavioural difficulties is perhaps the most difficult and necessary facet of our work. As it happens, I also spend a fair amount of time conducting therapy with adults. While this is not always the case, many adults do come in for their first session, sit down and describe in a fairly lucid manner the nature of their problems. By the end of the first or second session, we often have a fair amount of agreement on the nature of the difficulties and the goals the client would like to achieve, a sense of our respective roles and some idea on how we will work together to create change. There is often a feeling of mutuality and a sense of shared perspective. To put it bluntly, when working with children who experience serious emotional and behavioural difficulties, this rarely happens.

There are innumerable ways in which we can describe the difficulties that such children experience, but it could be said that the main difficulty is the problem they have in forming and sustaining relationships. A child's general pattern of being in a relationship may mean they are often aggressive, defiant, withdrawn, overly affectionate, scared or dishonest. They may need to control every aspect of relating; alternatively they may not be able to direct the relationship in any manner. They may be friendly and engaging on Tuesday and then rejecting on Wednesday. Their pattern of behaving may appear to fit nicely into a certain psychological formulation on Thursday and make absolutely no sense on Friday. It is not uncommon for our team to feel that we have finally been able to 'reach' a child only to arrive at work one day to find that everything has gone pear-shaped. We are left feeling disappointed, mumbling 'How did it go wrong?' to one another.

In large part, being able to help such children requires discovering how to engage with them in a meaningful way. This is usually difficult because they have often not been given much reason to believe that adults can be trusted or won't somehow hurt them. Why should they believe that I am any different from other adults they have known? I have recently spent a fair amount of time supporting a very disturbed eight-year-old boy within a classroom setting. Despite trying several avenues of communication, thus far he will only engage with me when we talk about boats while looking at a picture-book of boats. So what do I do? I bring new picture-books every few days and we talk about boats. What else can one do? This may not sound like tremendously therapeutic or brilliant work, but he is able to spend time with someone who shows up when they are supposed to and does not hurt him, and my sense is that this alone will be therapeutic to some extent.

Courage and the need for self-transcendence

If one can speak at all of issues such as courage and self-transcendence, perhaps it is best to speak for oneself rather than

presume that one's experiences are universal. Working beside children with challenging behaviour can mean spending time in an arena which is uncertain, emotionally charged and fraught with conflict. Will he run out of the classroom? What do I do if she starts shouting and refusing to follow directions again? He's telling the classroom assistant to shut up and the classroom teacher probably expects me to do something about it but what? I can't believe I'm standing in the playground trying to reason with a child who is throwing stones at me. Is this stupid? These are actual thoughts I have.

My work with such children has often proven personally difficult, and yet I am deeply grateful for it. By character type I am uncomfortable with conflict, and yet I have chosen a vocation whereby I work with many children who have, on one level, a strong psychological need for conflict. The result is a lot like two weather fronts meeting over the Atlantic. In short, my work has been a fast track to personal development. The intensity of the experiences I have had with these children has taught me in 11 years what might have otherwise taken a lifetime or two. I have learned that courage does not mean not feeling anxious or fearful — courage means facing difficult experiences despite fear and anxiety. I know that today I have a greater resilience to 'existence pain' (as the existentialists would say) because I have learned how to 'be with' and stand by children who, in their anger, fear and confusion, wanted to hurt and reject me. I have also learned that there is a reservoir of grace and skill which comes to me at those moments when I am wise enough to transcend the personal need for success or for things to go as I feel they must. Over the years I have seen colleagues who were quite attached to being successful with these children, and they suffered for it. I still experience egoistic attachment to success to a certain degree, but I have been humbled too many times by my work to take the attachment too seriously. I have found the words of Petruska Clarkson, said to me in 1996, to be a good antidote to the lure of attachment: 'Take full responsibility for your efforts, and then be unattached to the fruits of your efforts.' This is as it must be if I am to use my intelligence well, have a modicum of contentment and take enjoyment in my work.

Further reading

Carl G. Jung, 'Analytical psychology and education', in *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (trans. H.G. and C.F. Baynes), Trench Trubner, 1928

Irvin Yalom, *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy*, Penguin, 1989