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Child and Youth Care

A Journal for Those Who Work With Children and Youth at Risk and Their Families

Unifying Values and
Practice in Child and Youth
Care Programmes
By Prof. Herbert W. Vilakazi

Your Pain Or Mine?
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HIV/AIDS:
Children and Youth
By Prof. FJ Veldman



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Putting children first in residential care?

Merle Allsopp

Another two children's lives have been lost in places of care and protection. Recently, at the school of industry by the name of George Hofmeyer, in Standerton, a teenage girl hanged herself - allegedly in response to being placed in a 'punishment unit' where privileges are removed until the child displays more acceptable behaviour.

Another girl who attempted to hang herself a week after this incident in the same facility has sustained brain damage (apparently of a permanent nature) but is still alive. And in Dyambo Youth Center in Gauteng, a child was murdered by another child in the five hundred bed facility.

Presumably there will be an enquiry into the circumstances that led to these avoidable tragedies. But to date these children seem to have passed from this world with a whisper rather than a bang. Little or no media coverage of these events has taken place.

Have we sunk to a level where we accept the occasional death of a child in protective custody as if such happenings 'go with the territory'? Do we consider such tragedies as commonplace? Do these children's lives not mean anything to us at all? What is wrong? What is wrong with residential care in South Africa? One is left, time and time again with the thought that perhaps many of those working in the system do not understand this particular and unique service delivery area at all well. We may recall the classic statement on national television by a representative of a profit-making organization in response to an incident of gang rape "Do you expect us to baby-sit these children?"

We have come to expect little from investigations into happenings of this nature. A lot of money tends to be spent on dragged out enquiries, which yield important reports to be filed somewhere equally important, and no-one is found to be ultimately responsible. Perhaps the only process that will yield results will be through the courts, and it is likely that these deaths will be taken up in this arena.

Perhaps though, some heart can be taken from a recent initiative by the Western Cape Department of Social Services and Poverty Alleviation. It has commissioned the development of a model for residential care in the province. Albeit that it may seem strange to try to develop a model for residential care, this process, undertaken by veteran child and youth care practitioner, Annette Cockburn, has resulted in the development of a comprehensive manual outlining all of the many non-negotiable elements essential in the provision of any residential care service. A small step forward it may be, but this document articulates in a user-friendly manner the 'business' of residential care. It makes the complexity of this service understandable to those who do not grasp the less obvious, more ephemeral aspects of what we term milieu treatment.

In the context of children losing their lives in a violent manner while in care, it may seem ridiculous to point to a document in a hopeful manner. But perhaps our only hope for the improvement of residential care services lies in more people developing a real understanding of this extraordinary field. It is this that must change to bring about the appropriate resource allocations, capacity building and monitoring processes needed to prevent these travesties. The attention of the Western Cape Province to residential care is thus warmly welcomed in the context of these unnecessary deaths. As is true in every other sector, the residential care sector must heed the call to put children first. May the passing of these children spur us to action that will lead to us consciously and mindfully doing so. ●

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The National Association of Child Care Workers is an independent, non-profit organisation in South Africa which provides the professional training and infrastructure to promote healthy child and youth development and to improve standards of care and treatment for troubled children and youth at risk in family, community and residential group care settings.

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| | |
|--|-----------|
| Editorial <i>Merle Allsopp</i> | 2 |
| Unifying Values and Practice in Child and Youth Care Programmes <i>Prof. Herbert W. Vilakazi</i> | 4 |
| Famous Practice Hints <i>Brian Gannon</i> | 7 |
| Your Pain or Mine? <i>Lesiba Molepo</i> | 8 |
| Personality Profile <i>Lizzy King</i> | 10 |
| Personality Profile <i>Makhosi Ndlovu</i> | 11 |
| Perceptions of Adolescent Sex Offenders: from punitive to growth promoting <i>Grant Charles and Jennifer Collins</i> | 12 |
| Communication <i>Edna Rooth</i> | 14 |
| HIV/AIDS: Children and Youth <i>Prof. FJ Veldman</i> | 18 |
| Financial Management <i>Vanessa Rockey</i> | 20 |
| Accreditation: The New Face Of Naccw Training <i>Kathy Scott</i> | 23 |
| New accredited SAQA training is now available | 25 |
| Spotlight on Students <i>Sue de Nim</i> | 27 |

