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# Child and Youth Care

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

Good Labour Practices  
By Fazeela Fayers

Building a Professional Identity:  
The Challenge for Residential  
Child and Youth Care  
By Margaret Lindsay

The Town Mouse and its  
Poor Cousin  
By Pam Jackson



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## Therapeutic Child and Youth Care

I remember knocking gently at the door which stood welcomingly ajar. Inside sat Sylvana, and right now I can feel in my stomach the horror I felt at that moment. It is strange how one's body remembers feelings. Tiny Sylvana sat with a blade gently cutting into her flesh of her left arm, and watching with interest as the blood ran down her arm and soaked into her skirt.

The cuts were not deep, but over the next year they were to become deeper. My horror too, deepened. My own flesh that flinches at the slightest pin prick, seemed to feel the pain that those wounds were causing. The cells clustered onto the frame that gives me physical form, seems programmed to react in ways that are beyond my own control - simply to protect it. This body of mine that Deepak Chopra says is "just a place your memory calls home", has powerful and instinctive ways of preserving itself. And yet here was this healthy young person deliberately injuring her flesh. How could I begin to understand what she was doing? How could I help?

The truth is that I never did help Sylvana. But luckily for her there was an older, wiser child and youth care worker on our team who did. I say 'luckily' because it really was luck (or providence, or fate) that had placed that particular worker in that Home at that moment. Because at the time the child and youth care system could in no way guarantee that such a child would be assisted. On the contrary, most of the Sylvanas of my child and youth care world seemed destined to go 'deeper into the system' (even though we didn't use that term at that time). They were moved from place to place as we tried in vain to search for an environment where "the behaviour could be contained". But for young people like Sylvana, it seldom could.

The frightening thing is that twenty-five years later, our child and youth care system still seldom provides for children like Sylvana. To some extent this is understandable in a country where more than half of our children live in poverty. But

is it really only the issue of resources that prevents us from helping such children? Many residential care facilities are rather well resourced, and theoretically should be able to provide a place for children where they are able to put down their knives, their blades and their compasses. Isn't it true rather that we still lack the capacity - the skills, the knowledge, the know-how - to help children who come to us in real emotional trouble?

Sylvana's door was open to me. I walked in, but when I got there I had no idea of what to do. She wanted me to be ahead of her on the path she was walking, to help her to avoid the holes that alone, she could not help but fall into. What she required was not the psychiatrist or the psychologist that we sent her to (as these people kept telling us), but rather effective, planned, therapeutic lifespace work. She needed to connect with someone who could understand the extent of her pain in the course of her daily life. She needed someone who was around her to know in a visceral way that physical pain was in some way a relief to her, given the overwhelming emotional pain that haunted her. She needed people to see when she was headed for a bad spell, and to intervene at these times. She needed to be taught how to make and keep friends. She needed to be mobilized so that she could get herself to school. She needed to see her father (the complex person that he was for her) and be able to talk about his visit as soon as he left. She needed to be able to be angry without being admonished for it. She needed professional child and youth care workers.

There are many Sylvanas coming into our child and youth care system every month. Is it really the issue of resources that reduces our ability to make an impact on such young people, or do we simply not know enough about our children and our profession to provide them with what they need? Surely it is correct that we spread our resources to reach as many of our country's children as we can. But surely the South African child and youth care system should also be developing the capacity to work well with our Sylvanas?

- Merle Allsopp

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHILD CARE WORKERS

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