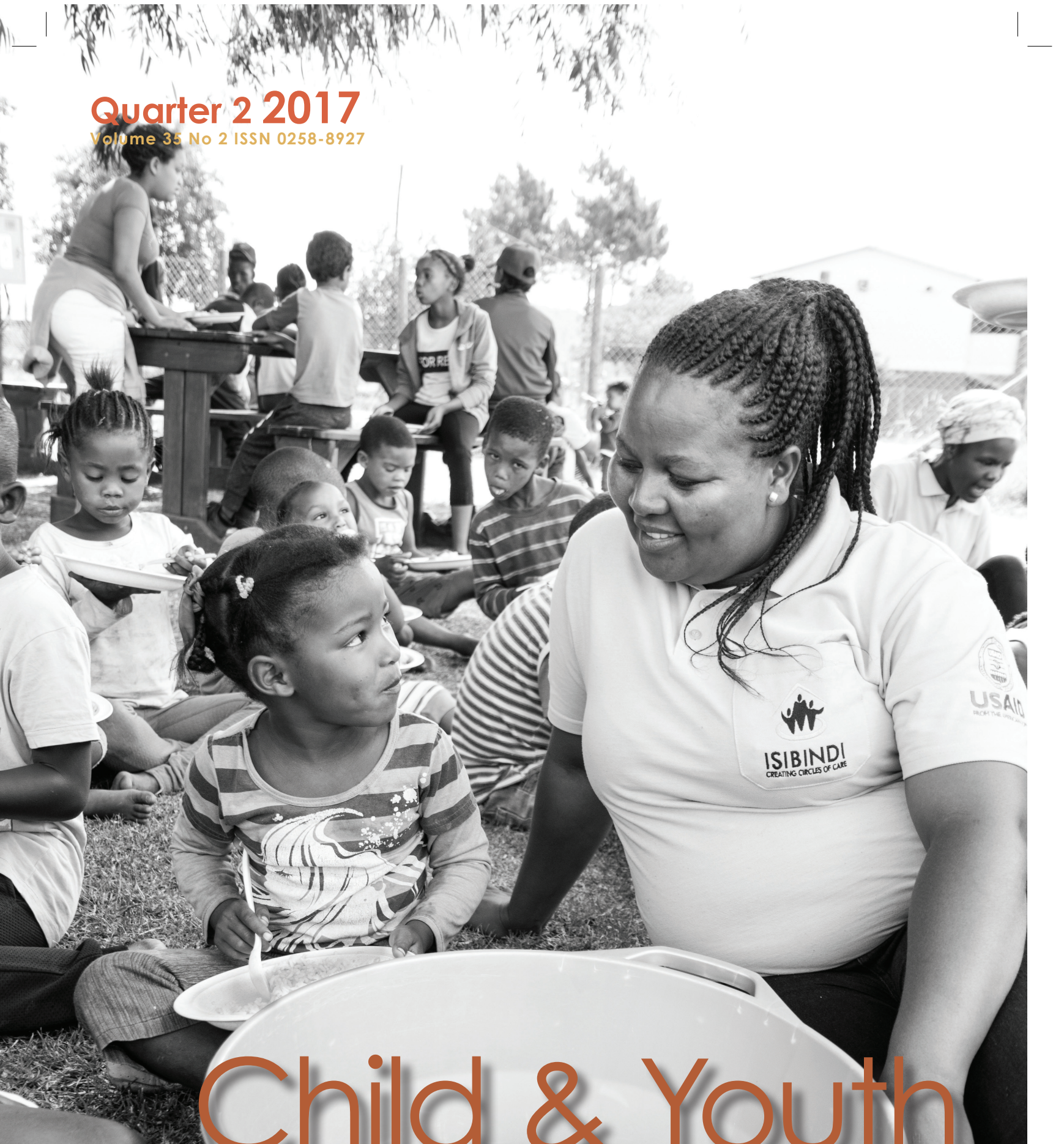


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# Child & Youth Care Work

A Journal for Those Who Work with Orphaned, Vulnerable and  
At-risk Children and Youth and their Families



# Can South Africa do without therapeutic child and youth care work?

By Merle Allsopp

Chatting with two veteran child and youth care workers recently a scenario involving a struggling child came up and made me think.

A boy in a child and youth care center refused to go home. This is not unusual in child and youth care centers. This child though, runs and hides under a bed and will not come out after he is told that he must go home to his mother for a visit. The child and youth care workers in his lifespace are puzzled. He has been under the bed for a number of hours. They do not know what to do and at first try to coax him out, then offer him food if he will come out and finally shout at him. The shouting also does not bring him out.

"What," I said to my colleagues, "would you do in such a situation?"

Both brightened up at the question, as if I were asking them a question both fascinating and important. "Fetch some pillows" said one. "And a blanket" said the other, as if they were already in synch on the matter. And they proceeded to sketch out a whole scenario of therapeutic child and youth care work in operation.

"Lie down on the floor next to the bed and slowly start talking to the boy. Offer him a pillow, and slowly get under the bed with him. See if he will accept being covered with a blanket. Blankets are nurturing and safe. Just be under the bed with him, but do not intrude into this safe space of his, move in slowly as he is comfortable with you being there. Start to talk about feeling safe under the bed, and about being safe, and unsafe. Take your time. Do not rush. Say something and see how he responds. Talk about being unsafe, and how that feels. Give him the chance to talk about what makes him feel unsafe.

Most importantly, maintain a calm and neutral demeanor. Be sure you are not threatening him further, but *joining him* in his safe space at a rate that he allows. Do not intrude. Move into his space, physically and emotionally as he allows. I bet you he will be able to say how he feels and what scares him about going home. Then you can reassure him about not being forced to go *anywhere* where he does not feel safe. If he tells you awful stories about being scared or hurt, you can reassure him that what has happened to him was horrible and should not have happened. You can listen to his pain. You can *feel* his pain, and in doing so you can convey the sense that what he feels is actually what *anyone* would feel in such a situation. Then you can perhaps

talk about what kind of plans would work for him to see his family, and how that could happen in a way that he would feel comfortable.

Once you have an understood, and found a way of managing what he is afraid of you can start to help him to transition out from under the bed – in a dignified manner. You can say you talked nicely under the bed, but now you are getting hungry or hot, or something, and suggest a move out. Be with him if he has been vulnerable and help him to grow his emotional skin back over his vulnerability – just by being a safe person to be around and shielding him from others before he is ready to face the world again. Be sure to have colleagues distract other children so there are no taunts as he emerges, as he will have no option but to defend his vulnerable self with aggression – either verbally or physically. Food is a great comforter, and drinking some tea together and eating something may just help to round up the interaction.

This may take ten minutes or it may take an hour or two. That is why it is so important to have teamwork in child and youth care centers, and to know that if you are the person focusing on this kind of situation, that the rest of the team is getting on with managing the other children, and the daily routine."

My take away from this conversation was simple yet profound. Children (and most of us as adults) struggle to express our deep feelings in a coherent, packaged form. Our behaviours are often expressions of our feelings, and this is very much so for children who have not yet developed the capacity to express their feelings verbally. South Africa has terribly high rates of sexual abuse of children and violence in communities. All of our citizens, and especially our children, feel unpleasant emotions when they are involved in scary, difficult situations. We need people who are able to understand that trauma may lead to children behaving in ways that may appear strange – but that such behavior has an internal logic that must be understood. We need people who are able to empathise with children in a way that is both palatable and felt by children. We need people who can help to mobilise children suffering, yes, suffering, and help them to cope as well as they possible can with the demands of existence.

My take away was simple and profound. South Africa cannot do without child and youth care workers capable of therapeutic lifespace work. ●

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