

The **child care worker**

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ESSAY: KEITH WHITE ON DAILY RHYTHMS AND BEDTIME READING	2
JOHN SEITA LOOKS AT CARE ENVIRONMENTS	3
CHILD SAFETY WEEK: SOMETHING WE ALL OWE TO CHILDREN	4
BY REQUEST: REPRINT OF LORRAINE FOX ARTICLE ON CHILD CARE	5
THE MESSAGES OUR YOUNG PEOPLE RECEIVE	6
THE TORMENTORS: SPECIAL REPORT FROM THE UK ON BULLYING	7
FIRST IN IMPORTANT NEW SERIES: THE SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR OF CHILDREN	8
CHILDREN: LOOKING BACK AT THOSE SMALL EXPERIENCES OF SUCCESS	10
A SMALL SOUTHERN CAPE TOWN WORKS WITH ITS STREET CHILDREN	11
SOUTH AFRICA RATIFIES THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD	12
ROGER NEUGEBAUER ON THE QUALITIES OF THE EFFECTIVE DIRECTOR	13

Cover Picture: "A baby grasping its mother's finger is one of the first forms of physical communication between parent and child." Photograph by Ian Bradshaw in *The Thinking Photographer* (Macdonald)



NACCW

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHILD CARE WORKERS IS AN INDEPENDENT NON-RACIAL ORGANISATION WHICH PROVIDES THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND INFRASTRUCTURE TO IMPROVE STANDARDS OF CARE AND TREATMENT FOR CHILDREN IN RESIDENTIAL SETTINGS



Fédération Internationale des Communautés Educatives
International Federation of Educative Communities (UNESCO)



Association Internationale des Educateurs de Jeunes Inadaptés
International Association of Workers with Troubled Children

Often the institution's timetable imposes its will on all who live in it. Just as often, the children and their neediness impose their own timetable. **Keith White** reminds us of a more enduring timetable — and stops to consider one of the day's seasons in more detail

Daily Rhythms and Bedtime Reading

Each day has a rhythm. From dawn to dusk the day moves through its own seasons. It begins in winter (sleep and hibernation are natural comparisons) and moves through spring (waking, getting up, preparing for the rest of the day) to summer (noon, the heat of the day, with work, tasks or school), through autumn (homecoming, a gentle winding down as evening falls) to winter and sleep once more. When recently we explored this relationship between a day and the four seasons in our staff group at Mill Grove, we were struck by the number of times significant events and outbursts occur at the point of transition between the seasons of the day. The waking moment is for some as cruel as T. S. Eliot's "midwinter spring". For others, leaving for school is a daily crisis. Homecoming, with the release of stored up tension, often proves a difficult time.

Transitions

We noted how gracefully nature manages its own transitions. Far from there being friction and problems, the greatest visual beauty and physical sensations seem to occur where the seasons interact. Our daily transitions seemed abrupt and clumsy in comparison. There are, as every parent or residential worker should know, certain rules of thumb about the different daily seasons. Confrontation is best avoided in winter and spring; a routine is vital in spring; a structure and purpose is necessary for summer. Autumn is the time when reflection, confrontation and shared experiences are most likely to occur. The day seems to have its own moods. I only wish that we had the sensitivity to choose the ap-

propriate seasons of the day for those times of sharing, decision making and open chats. (Steiner is one of the few educationalists who realised the need to organise timetables around the seasons of the day.) Sometimes events will overtake us and leave us with no choice, just as the natural yearly seasons sometimes take us by surprise. Often we are just not aware of the rhythms of each day.

Bedtime

Bedtime is a unique moment of the day. How often a child who has acted out a situation with bravado all day, will become relaxed and open at bedtime; an emotional wound inflicted at school or earlier in the day will come out quite naturally then; privacy is possible in the quietness of the bedroom; questions, often deep and searching ones, seem to fall naturally from the most humdrum conversation; longings and anguish, anxieties and worries often come to the surface in a way that makes it possible to share them. It is so vital to be ready for the opportunities that each bedtime may present. A starting point is, perhaps, the realisation of the vast potential of each bedtime. For younger children, prayers are an important part of this shared experience in many families and I have sometimes been moved to tears by the insights and transparent honesty of children's prayers. But equally important are bedtime stories — not just any stories, but *bedtime* stories. Apparently little attention is given to books in many residential units, and I have been disappointed to find a lack of good reference books for homework, and poorly thought out selections on the bookshelves. Sometimes there seems to be a total

absence of literature. Obviously television is now taken for granted as part of many evenings in residential units, but when it comes to bedtimes, only books will do.

Stories

A good bedtime story is one which adults and children can read with equal pleasure — one that has a clear narrative and is written in such a way that the reader and listener can identify with characters and situations at different unconscious as well as conscious levels. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is a good example of a recent bedtime story we have read. It has all the childhood wishes and the morality of a fairy story. (And talking of fairy stories, when will we realise with Jung and Tolkien how vital they are in the twentieth century?) My personal favourites are the Narnia stories by C. S. Lewis. There are seven of them in all, beginning with *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* and ending with *The Last Battle*. For six to 14-year-olds they are as thrilling as they are moving to parents. Let me give you an example of the effect they can have. One of our staff, Mike, was reading *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* to two Nigerian boys (twins, aged 12 years) after much thought about how appropriate such English stories would be to children whose first language and culture until 1980 had been Yoruba. We decided that they were universal enough (as are all good myths or stories) to be worth a try. All went smoothly until Aslan, the great and mysterious lion, was cruelly tortured by the followers of the wicked, white witch. They even cut off his magnificent mane be-

fore the final deathblow is administered on a table of stone, by the witch. At this point the Nigerians seemed to lose interest. Mike feared that they had lost the thread of the story. He continued reading, however, and came to the passage where Lucy and Susan are weeping beside the body of Aslan. They walk away. At dawn, the table cracks and the body is gone. Their sadness and confusion are compounded until suddenly they hear Aslan's voice. He is alive again. At this point the two Nigerian boys leapt up, hugged each other, and for at least a minute rushed round their bedroom, jumping over beds, dancing sometimes in tandem, sometimes independently, shouting with joy "He's alive!" Mike watched in utter (British) amazement until they finally sat down, eager to hear what happened next. The story continues and this is what it says: "A mad chase began. Round and round the hilltop ... It was such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia ... " In a remarkable way, the Nigerians had entered into the story. C. S. Lewis would have been thrilled. Today I took the third Narnia story off my shelf for the same boys, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. They are now firm Narnia fans, and in the process have helped me to see the importance of bedtime stories. As I heard the Christmas story this year in their presence I felt like crying out: "He's come!" Even though I didn't go any further, I'll always see Narnia, Easter and Christmas in a new light. □

Reprinted with permission from: *Social Work Today* 13 (9).



In considering the resilience which helps so many youngsters to persevere, John Seita looks back on factors that influenced his own experience in care

Qualities of Care Environments



“My first placement was in a stereotypical children’s institution. The building had five floors. We lived in large rooms with what seemed to be hundreds of other kids. ‘Matrons’ provided our care, and we were fed ‘mess style’ in the cafeteria. Everything was painted gray or stark white; our bunk beds had steel frames. The pungent smell of urine filled the large dormitory. The first night away from home, when no one else was awake, I kneeled by my bed and started to pray. Why me, I asked myself; why was I taken away from my family and abandoned? Where was my mother and Jimmy? How could I protect Jimmy if I didn’t know where he was? And who would protect me? I felt desolate, abandoned, heart-sick and heartbroken. I was bitter and angry.”

In examining my personal history, I identified factors that contributed to my life and my own ability to overcome potentially debilitating obstacles. To consider only the abuse and indignities that I experienced is to understand only part of the story.

When I was twelve years old, following many failed placement attempts, I was banished (or so it seemed) to what was known in 1967 as Starr Commonwealth for Boys in Albion, Michigan. I lived there for nearly seven years. Starr Commonwealth was an oasis.

At first, I refused to let anyone get close to me. In fact, I was so quiet and full of pain that one social worker’s report referred to me as being nearly autistic in appearance and behaviour. Eventually, I slowly came out of my shell. I started to approach others, especially the staff. I didn’t trust staff or kids, but the staff were less likely to ridicule me than were the kids. I found that the staff provided a daily source of interaction that I wanted and needed. However, when they got too close to me, I could back them off with a vile and aggressive verbal barrage. Because most staff seemed to take my verbal assaults in their stride, and always came back for more interaction, I had created a safety zone for interaction.

Starr Commonwealth was not perfect; few parents are. But

the foundation provided there has served me for a lifetime. Exposure to such values as honesty, loyalty, integrity, spirituality and fairness eventually influenced and guided many of my actions. And while many staff members rotated in and out of my life, I did manage to connect with a special few. Besides, I found almost all staff to be remarkably consistent in their tenaciously caring attitudes and behaviour. Some of these factors include:

Relationships

These were the foundation for my being here today. Martin Mitchell (1994) suggests that youth workers’s “care through the anger.” Dr. Mitchell was a child care worker while I was at Starr Commonwealth. Mitchell’s point was that caregivers often are repeatedly rebuffed in their attempts to establish and maintain relationships with angry youth. Caring through the anger means persisting and not allowing the anger and rejection by a youth to torpedo the relationship. I know, I torpedoed more than a few relationships with caregivers.

Talent Searches

Almost all youth have something that they do well. Strive to identify what those sometimes hidden abilities are and seek to foster and promote them. For me, this was basketball. Mr. Wilson and many oth-

ers saw and nurtured my talent for basketball even before I knew it existed.

Values

It is vital for caregivers to model such values as honesty, fairness, industry, integrity and perseverance. The lessons I learned from caregivers throughout my journey have served me for a lifetime.

Goals, Dreams, and Imagination

Goals and imagination were part of my ticket out of what was sometimes a harsh and horrific childhood. Caregivers constantly challenged me to achieve my greatness. That in turn evolved into specific and concrete goals that I continue to pursue.

Spirituality

People were not always there for me, or sometimes I would not allow them to be. Praying was a way to talk and reach out to God. I knew I could talk to Him anytime I wanted. He listened as I poured out my heart. Youth can be encouraged to explore their spiritual selves and connect with a higher spiritual power without promoting a specific dogma or doctrine.

Opportunities

We need to provide opportunities for youth that are consistent with their interests and talents but that also fill a role for society. Although I seemed to be adrift for years at a time, opportunities were still just below the surface. I was aware of and exposed to those opportunities, even if I was not always able to take advantage of them. These opportunities included sports, education, and exposure to career options.

Looking back, I remain convinced that relationships were and are the cornerstone of my personal resiliency and undergird all other factors. For years, I intuitively understood the necessity and power of relationships; and in spite of being outwardly resistant to relationships, inwardly I craved them. I further understood that the nature and strength of these relationships transcended any particular model of programme or treatment that I experienced.

“Caring through the anger means persisting and not allowing the anger and rejection by a youth to torpedo the relationship.”

“Adults who work with children have long been aware of the awesome power of relationships. This was a dominant theme in education, counselling and youth work. However, as professional literature became more scientifically oriented, relationships were increasingly ignored. Now there are signs of a renewal of interest in the synergistic power of human relationships.” (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990, p. 58)

My suggestions for working with troubled youth appear on the surface to be deceptively simple. Still, providing an atmosphere that promotes resiliency in youth may be a product of factors identified through my experiences and through research. Seeking to understand troubled youth through aggressive listening, paired with valuing the experience of youth and recognizing the “strength of the reformed” (Vorrath and Brendtro, 1985) will serve to promote a true partnership with youth that promotes resiliency. While these shared personal experiences are from inside my own heart, perhaps they are generalizable. An awareness of these resiliency factors may serve as guideposts as we grapple with the increasing numbers of adrift youth who need our support to become adaptive and resilient. □

Reprinted with permission from the Journal of Emotional and Behavioural Problems. Today Dr John Seita provides consulting services and evaluation for programmes serving youth at risk, and conducts seminars on strategies for working with challenging children and adolescents.

Keep our children safe

For those of us whose lives have never been touched by the tragedy of a child accident it is difficult to understand the turmoil associated with it. It is however a chilling fact that trauma (childhood injuries) kills more children over four years of age than all diseases combined. Every year more than nine children die daily and thousands more are injured due to injuries or so called “accidents”. The Child Injury Prevention Week is a time set aside to concentrate on children’s safety. It is an arguable fact that most “accidents” can, with a little thought, be predicted, and can therefore also be prevented. The following are just a few tips of some “accidents” - take action and prevent injuries to children:

Drowning

Drowning is the second greatest cause of “accidental” death amongst young children. Daily, more than one child drowns in South Africa:

- Always supervise all children near water.
- Teach children to swim and also survival skills as soon as possible.
- All swimming pools should be fenced — pool nets are available as an added precaution.
- Never leave children under five years alone in the bath.
- Keep nappy and other buckets firmly closed or empty after use.



- Beware of farm dams and ponds. Children should never swim alone.
- The sea is unpredictable. Constant supervision of children is necessary.

Burns

Year after year burn accidents claim their death toll amongst the children of our country. The majority of burns occur in and around the home. A burn takes a second to occur, but a lifetime to overcome and leaves permanent blemishes:

- keep matches/lighters out of reach.
- Never leave a child alone in a room with an open fire burning, candle or lamp.
- Place guards in front of fires and heaters.
- Never place hot liquids or food near the edge of a table.
- Always turn saucepan handles towards the back of the stove.
- Always put cold water into the bath first.
- Children should never play around any fire.
- Place primus stove out of reach of children, and away from curtains.
- Keep electrical cords short and out of reach.

Poisoning

Every year thousands of children swallow dangerous things at home. These include medicines and tablets, sedatives, household products, garden and garage preparations:

- Always lock up all medicines and potentially dangerous household products. Even a high shelf is not safe. Do not forget children are curious.
- Always read instructions on medicine bottles. Keep medicines separate from other products and never store cleaning agents with food.
- Children should be taught never to eat anything from the garden before asking an adult.
- Keep paraffin out of reach

of children. They might think it is water and drink it.

- Dispose of unwanted, left over medicines and pills by returning them to your pharmacist.

Choking and suffocation

- Keep small objects out of your child’s reach.
- Never give children under five years peanuts because they frequently cause choking.
- Never leave a baby to drink his bottle by himself.
- Ensure that cot bars are properly spaced.
- Remove bibs or any clothing with ribbons or cords before putting baby to sleep.
- Children should not play with plastic bags or ropes.

Falls

- Never leave a baby alone on a high surface.
- Place safety gates at top and bottom of stairs.
- Place guards on windows and balconies.
- Always supervise children on playground equipment and teach them how to use them safely.



Prevention Week

Child Injury Prevention Week takes place this year from 6 to 12 August. The Child Accident Prevention Foundation of Southern Africa urges you to join in the effort to keep all children safe, happy and healthy. Every child born in South Africa has a right to be protected, a right to develop and achieve its full potential without the threat of hurt. More information: P.O. Box 13115, Sir Lowry Road 7900. Telephone (021) 685-5208.

What I'd like to do for my address today is to look at our profession and our title. Professional titles are meant to tell you what somebody has expertise in. A lawyer has expertise in the law. A teacher has expertise in teaching. A physician has expertise in the physical body. Titles are meant to let people know what you're good at. So let's look at our title "Child Care Worker". That's our professional title. But only the middle word defines our area of expertise.

Children will be children without us. The *Child* in the Child Care Worker is the *Who*. The *Work* is defined by your agency. They'll tell you what to do. They'll tell you when to show up and they'll tell you how many days you work. They tell you when you are off and when you're on, and what you're supposed to do when you're there. The work is defined by the agency. The *care* is defined by you. This is the area of expertise that gives meaning to our job title, because the *Child* is there and the work is there, defined by others. But we are not *child workers*. It's a mistake to say that you're a child worker — that you work with kids. People who do a lot of things work with kids. People who take kids swimming work with kids. That's not what we do. We *care* for kids.

That's quite different. So I'd like to look at what makes caring work.

Usually caring is not seen as work.

Caring is supposed to be a joyful experience. Caring is supposed to be something that happens and is often associated with violin music playing.

Caring is supposed to flow from us in times of elation. So why do we say that we do Child Care Work?

One of the reasons I am convinced that we're still not receiving professional recognition, and in some places we're still having trouble being recognised as even paraprofessionals, is that we're not doing a very good job of communicating the skill that's necessary to *care* for kids.

When you see these little and big creatures that we take care of, you don't automatically flow with love. And that's been one of the problems. People have thought that because they were

Who put the CARE into Child Care?

Some years ago we published this powerful address given by Lorraine Fox to the first-ever Child Care Conference held in the Los Angeles area. By request, we are reprinting the address in two parts starting this month

children, that caring for them was something that just came to us.

Well it doesn't just come to us. It's work, hard work. And that's why we're professionals. Because these are the type of kids that ordinarily, if I saw them playing in my backyard, I'd tell them to go play in their own yard. I wouldn't want them in my yard. I wouldn't particularly want them playing with my kids. So why do I give my life to taking care of them? Because that's my profession. That's what I chose. Also what you

chose. So I think that one of the things we need to do to enhance ourselves professionally is to stop saying "I work with kids", and let people know that you *care* for very troubled youngsters whom nobody else will care for. If somebody else eared, they wouldn't be in your face. If somebody was willing to have them in their home, they'd be in their home. If Aunt Martha was willing to take them, they'd be with Aunt Martha. If they hadn't messed up in four foster homes, they would be in a foster home. These kids don't

come easy to care for. That's why we have them. So let's look at our caring.

I went to my little desk dictionary and I opened it up and found four definitions of "care". One was to handle with care. That's one of the things we get paid for.

To handle these kids with care. Because the fact is that they're pretty broken up. I like to think of them as something like a treasure, and if you had something like this that's broken and damaged, you don't just toss it casually to someone and say "fix it". When something precious is broken and damaged, you carry it carefully, and you ask "Would you please fix this". Those are our kids. Our kids are all broken up. Someone has whacked them silly, either emotionally or physically or otherwise. And we are the ones who have to handle them with care. They look pretty good and sometimes it doesn't occur to you when you see them on the street corner that they need to be gently carried. They look like they need to be kicked across the street maybe. That's why they get in so much trouble, because they look like they need a good swift kick. But we know that they need to be carried.

Sometimes, of course, it takes three or four of us to carry them, but we do it, and we do it carefully.

The dictionary also said that caring means to like or regard. This is not easy.

Give yourselves permission to find this hard. The defensive behaviours that our kids resort to are the very things that make our work *work*. They're defending themselves against a world that they expect will hurt them, and it takes a lot of work to look under that and see a child who needs to be cared for. The world can't see this because most people in the world don't work in our field. They don't know how to care, so they give them another kick, or they put them in jail, or they turn them in to the cops, and they don't see their brokenness and frailty. But we see, and we call them "honey", and that's care and liking.

Another thing that makes it work is that our kids don't respond very well. Remember "caring" is when the violins are supposed to play, and then I start walking across this stage

