Youth in conflict frustrate efforts to teach, counsel, or guide them. While the importance of trusting relationships is clear, few have formal training in building such bonds. The challenges of building different levels of therapeutic connections with youth are explored.

Three Levels of Therapeutic Connections

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Many troubled youth show developmental problems in attachments to family, school, and community. Past experience causes them to be reluctant to trust adults as reliable mentors and life teachers. Attachments are repaired and strengthened by establishing healthy relationships. Secure belonging is the foundation to the development of autonomy and self-control. The twin challenges of attaching and being autonomous are vital to a successful life (Maier, 1988).

This article describes the complexity of creating relational connections in skillful work with children and youth. Relationships occur at three levels: connections of trust, connections to the ecology, and the deep alliance. Workers with limited experience will find the struggle to create trusting bonds a sufficient challenge for their developing expertise.

**Trustning Connections**

The first layer of relationship building is creating a safe, trusting connection with youth. These Level 1 relationships can include the straightforward ingredients described many years ago by Brendtro (1969). Helping adults can measure the strength of the relationship with a youth by noticing increases in communication, social reinforcement, and the willingness to accept the adult as a role model. Workers who establish these powerful therapeutic bonds are able to tap the strengths and resiliencies of the youth. They are able to use relational motivation instead of punishments and rewards to foster self-control and pro-social behavior. As both individuals become safe and more connected, they will each see the value in the other person’s point of view.

**The adult’s ability to demonstrate caring in consistent, non-judgmental ways can lead to success when more intrusive methods have failed.**

Strong connections between youth and helping adults counter the interpersonal response style of distrust which has dominated prior relationships. Youth develop personal boundary skills and become comfortable in asking for help when needed. Workers at this level tend to drop the label “client” when referring to youth, since they have positioned themselves alongside rather than above the youth. Trust enables youth to be less guarded and to share the private thoughts and feelings which formerly kept the youth stuck in unsuccessful behavior. As the adult empathically joins the youth, this broadens the options available to the young person.

Bruner (1990) describes the gradual increase in “meaning making” which enables both partners in a relationship to connect more powerfully. Skilled youth professionals recognize the adult tendency to overestimate the developmental capacity and comprehension of the young and adjust their language and perspective to more closely mirror the view of youth. Novice workers may be unprepared for the world view they encounter, e.g., if one is not an oppressor, he or she is a victim; the only sin is getting caught; and it is every person for oneself.

The adult’s ability to demonstrate caring in consistent, non-judgmental ways can lead to success when more intrusive methods have failed. Austin and Halpin (1987) declare that the knowledge gained in caring interactions in the child’s life space is the real power in the professional role, something
which only those persons who are removed from the shared lived-in experience deny” (p. 38).

This Level 1 relationship is the fundamental goal of most helping interventions. Without safety and trust, there will be little developmental growth. Overcoming mistrust, influencing the youth's story of self, creating shared meaning, and establishing basic empathy all grow out of a safe relationship. This occurs best in the natural space (Garfat, 2004), not in an office. In these real world encounters, the adult has to balance unconditional acceptance with limit setting—not an easy task.

Connections in the Ecology

The Level 2 relationship expands the professional role to become a support in the larger world of the youth. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed the concept of an Ecosystem, a total life space that surrounds each person, which is a substantial expansion of the immediate life space described in Level 1. The youth is now seen to be the nucleus of a system which may include family, peers, school, work, community, culture, and spirituality. The focus of Level 2 relational work is to become a life coach supporting the youth who is navigating various realms of the personal ecology. This has been described by Anglin (1984) as "relating to the relationships" in a person's life. The goal is to replace strains with supports in the ecology of childhood.

Influencing a youth through a trusting relationship is an important step, but the real work is to re-integrate the youth into the natural environment. The sophisticated practitioner, who is no longer preoccupied by the challenge of gaining a youth's trust, can now explore the multi-faceted layers of this relational approach. Family members, community contacts, employers, teachers, friends, and authority figures all become potential relational focal points. The Level 2 worker helps the youth not only to explore his or her story of self but also to see one's self as an agent in the world.

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Family support workers often describe their work as helping families to get the social services system out of their lives. Many youth who are victims of oppression and limited skills and resources need support to develop successful coping strategies. Reintegrating into family life, creating healthy intimate relationships, maintaining positive connections at work, and dealing with peers and community are all major challenges. The relational work at this level is to create autonomy and attachment simultaneously, without intruding into any system which would not be helpful. This Level 2 work is conducted in a variety of locations, with a greatly expanded cast of characters which depend on the connections of the youth. Level 2 relational practice is the province of practitioners who are already grounded and successful in Level 1 practice.

The Deep Alliance

Level 3 work, a further expansion of the relational process, is the most personally challenging and complex connection. Krueger (1995) has coined the term Nexus to describe the intimate connection that can occur at this level of practice. The basic physical presence that occurs in the life space, which in a Level 1 relationship creates support and empathy, is intensified here into a mutual co-experiencing of life events. As Garfat (2001) suggests, what is important is being
with the youth, instead of doing to, doing for, or doing with the person. This relational sharing, co-experiencing perhaps, has a mutual effect on both persons. In this three-level progression the relationship shifts from sharing different opinions, to coaching as an observer, to finally being mutually affected by the same experience. Basically, when helpers recognize that they might act similarly if they were the youth, they enter this level of relational awareness. The danger here is that mentors can join with the youth in despair and defeat rather than becoming a source of hope and support. These intense connections can challenge the values and beliefs of both adult and youth at a fundamental level. A practitioner who is not firmly grounded will be tempted to either argue with the youth's point of view or be inclined to join him or her.

The ability to calmly move ahead from this place of connection is only available to mature practitioners. There is a balancing point of empathy and separateness which can be precarious to maintain unless one is differentiated, yet simultaneously close. The worker is a guide and a mentor, and yet not aloof from the source of confusion or pain. Kagan and Schlosberg (1989) describe families in perpetual crisis who need others to be able to stand alongside them as they dance around a pit of emptiness—one false move can result in a fall. It does no good to stand safely away from the terror and give advice; professionals must see the world as the youth do in order to be helpful. By joining as partners at this Nexus, adults can help youth rewrite their life story.

**Transitions**

Level 1 relational work requires the adult helper to be invested in joining youth through shared interests, empathy, presence in the life space, and mutual trust. Level 2 work expands to the role of a life coach, encouraging young persons as they build various relationships within their social system. Level 3 practice entails an intense connection which requires personal reflection and self-awareness at a very sophisticated level. Although Level 3 workers are the most capable, they require the availability of competent supervision and peer support.

The connections of the professional helper seldom become permanent. Youth who have finally allowed themselves to be open and available can be easily bruised by poorly managed goodbyes. Closure and healthy separation are important issues at all levels of relational work. The goal is to create the desire for greater attachment, while also struggling with the need to let go and move away. Denial, anger, and sadness all must be seen as predictable and manageable stages which can potentially be used for strengthening future relational connections. Failure to negotiate a healthy end to any relationship will endanger the success of present, but also future, efforts. There is a saying in this field that the three most important things are Relationship, Relationship, Relationship! This also applies to the three levels of therapeutic relationship.

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**References**


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