A Child Care Worker’s Casebook

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ABSTRACT: Three child and youth care scenarios are presented, illustrating (1) how young people’s behavior can obscure what they really need from us, (2) the empowerment and disempowerment of direct care workers and those in care, and (3) vicious cycles that can “catch” us if we are not alert to avoid them, followed by an analysis of the implications of each of the scenarios.

I. The Smiler, the Dragon, and the Clown

Richard was small for his nine years when he came to the children’s home. Slightly built, he had an air of innocence and vulnerability which drew strongly protective and maternal responses from the child care workers. He soon became ‘Ricky’ to everyone, and with his undemanding and affectionate nature, a firm favourite with most of the adults. His ready smile softened the hardest of hearts, and he easily slid into the hug which that smile invariably invited.

Many staff would recall that, after working with a rowdy group, settling an argument, or coming up against a particularly scratchy child, it was wonderful to bump into little Ricky, whose responsive smile warmed up the human landscape. Over the months, staff grew more and more fond of Ricky. It was like having a beautiful painting in otherwise ugly and gloomy surroundings. Child care workers came to use Ricky as a benchmark for how they wished other kids would be. “That Paul!” they would say. “He’s so mean with the others. I’m always having to correct him. I wish he was more like Ricky.”

Ricky never figured on the list of ‘problem kids’ to be dealt with at staff meetings. With so many other troubled and difficult kids, Ricky was regarded as more of a positive in everyone’s lives than a negative. As he got older, Richard grew just like any child. At ten, he

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looked more like an average ten-year-old, then eleven-year-old . . .

but to the staff he was still the sweet kid who lit up the corridors with his smile, who provided the respite and reward in the tough environment of child care work. Little Ricky was always there with his winning smile, his prompt return of a hug, his friendly and reassuring greeting . . .

A terrible shock it was to everyone, therefore, when the school rang up one day to report that Ricky had gone out of control, had lashed out viciously at another pupil and then sworn at the teacher who intervened before running off from school.

Dealing with 16-year-old Margaret was a fearsome task. There was no more prickly girl in the unit. Headstrong, impatient, critical, argumentative and uncooperative, she made any child care worker think twice before approaching her. A new child care worker thought she could reach her by a more affectionate overture:

"Hi, Margie. I'm Kate, Kate Fielding."

"I don't much care who you are," spat back Margaret, "but I'm not 'Margie.' My name is Mar-gar-et!"

When asked by a staff member to do something Margaret would not reply; she would simply look ahead of her, sigh to indicate her irritation at being interrupted, and then consider whether or not to comply. Even when she did choose to comply, she would flounce off, her mouth set in resentment and annoyance. At meals, she sat aloof and unbending, regarding all with towering contempt. It took some courage to ask her to pass something at the table. If the child care workers had a hard time of it, the other children were even worse placed. The full brunt of her scorn constantly burned into them as she commented sarcastically on everything they said or did. She often hurt them. One girl, Carol, had spent the last few weekends at home with her mother making a frock for a school dance. When she came into the sitting room on the night, proudly wearing the dress, Margaret threw her eyes to the ceiling and proclaimed: "How utterly dowdy! So sleazy! So homemade!" Carol fled in tears.

If ever something had to be done, staff would agree: "Whatever you do, don't ask Margaret!" There was to be a social evening with management committee, fund-raisers and friends of the children's home: "... and for goodness sake, don't include Margaret!" Margaret went on to a very unsuccessful marriage, making a husband and two children very unhappy.

If you tried to picture George (15) in your mind's eye, it would be with anything from a wry grin to a loud laugh on his face. When we talked, he seemed to be waiting for every word, like a puppy for a ball, in order to turn it into a joke. In many ways, when there was so much hurt and anger around amongst the kids, it was a relief to have