Professional Frontiers in Child Care:
Unfinished Business and New Priorities

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ABSTRACT: Recent developments in the professionalization of the residential child care field are reviewed with particular emphasis on beginning steps in certification, which is viewed as having shown itself to be a particularly important and productive factor in the professionalization process. The need for a stronger national voice and the case for a broader coalition of youthwork professionals encompassing, among others, those in the traditional leisure-time, youth-serving agencies are explored.

Recent professional activities, such as the 1978 Annual Conference of the Texas Association of Child Care Workers at which this paper was first presented and other meetings like it across the country, bear eloquent testimony to how far the field has come in a few short years. We have a unique, multidisciplinary body of knowledge, which is increasingly being defined through conference presentations, publications, and informal professional interaction. We certainly need to upgrade our training, our standards, and our professional practice, but this is true of all professional groups and, indeed, of each individual professional. It seems to me that we have crossed an important threshold in this regard. Professionalism is...
no longer a dream nurtured by a few of us; it is a reality that imposes special responsibilities on all of us.

Not only has the field begun to behave as a profession in the best sense, but it has also begun to be recognized as such among a widening circle of colleagues and the public. For example, in an earlier Child Care Quarterly editorial (Beker, 1977) the present author referred to a well-known article that appeared some years previously in which child care was viewed as a segment of social work (Maier, 1963). When the editorial was published, Henry Maier promptly responded indicating that both the field and his ideas have changed in the interim, and that as a result he no longer holds that view (Maier, 1978).

That is a straw in the wind. It tells us the direction in which things are moving. Due to our determination as well as, we must admit, the failure of the social work field to carry the ball effectively when it had the chance, I think we have turned the corner. We can build our profession from its current, tenuous state to one of strength and maturity. If we should fail now, we will have mostly ourselves to blame.

What are the new challenges, the new frontiers that confront us? The first, it seems to me, is to continue to develop internally, pushing back the frontiers as we go. This not only means strengthening our state associations; it also means investing much effort in developing the national group as an effective voice for the child care field. It means working harder on training, standards, research, and specifying and detailing the critical body of knowledge. It means undertaking activities that will continue to broaden our membership base at all levels of practice by attracting colleagues who have so far remained uninvolved.

Certification

The experience of the Association of Child Care Workers in New York State (ACCW) is instructive in this regard. ACCW established a certification program several years ago after careful consideration and specification of standards and criteria, and many child care workers in New York have now been certified. At first, there was no financial incentive for individuals in the field to become certified. Even now only a small percentage of child caring agencies have agreed to include recognition of this achievement in their salary scales. The typical pattern among those few is to give