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Youthworks

A very practical guide about working with young people

Chapter 1:

The Process And Your Part In It

Youthworks:An Australian book that looks at creative ways to make a difference for young people.

This book presents a way of 'talking' with young people that is both powerful and compelling. It combines the insight of therapeutic questioning with the intrigue of theatre; The joy of physical movement with the revealing openness of drawing; the power of humour with the depth of meaningful conversation.

The approach is uniquely creative yet accessible. This is an important book for anyone who works with young people either individually or in groups, in families or in couples.

Young people today face an 'interesting' and sometimes disturbing array of questions about the sorts of lives they would like to lead. Do I want to take drugs? Do I really want to have sex with this person? Do I want to leave home? Why am I so angry? What's important to me? What do I want out of life? Why do I feel so awful?

If you find this extract useful and interesting, the book can be bought through various good book shops, such as Gleebooks and the Feminist Book Shop in Sydney. It can also be bought directly from Peter.

THE PROCESS

This book is about a process and perhaps the easiest way of introducing this process to you is with a story.

‘Sandor’

Sandor is a 15-year-old young man who is generally feeling unhappy. He doesn't really know why. You have an opportunity for a couple of minutes' conversation, and you ask him if he would like to have a chat about this and he says he would. You let him know that this 'chat' might be a bit unusual, a bit creative, something more than talking. He says this sounds okay. You ask him to sit quietly for a moment and to think of an occasion when he felt terrific. He does so and you check with him that he has a time in mind. You then ask him to imagine that someone does a quick sketch of him just at that moment. He smiles and says that he can see it. You ask him if he thinks he could reproduce that sketch here and now. He says he can. So that this doesn't start to feel like an art test you ask him to take just a few minutes to draw it. Sandor shows you the sketch and says that he is happy to chat about it. You ask just what 'ingredients' were present so that he felt terrific. What was going on? Were others involved? Together you try to identify whether these ingredients are still in Sandor's life. He feels some are and some are not. You ask him what it is that is different now from then. What has changed? Are these things within or outside his influence? As your few moments together draw to a close, you ask Sandor what he thinks he would look like if life started to become terrific again. Would he look the same or different as he does in his drawing? He decides to do another quick sketch. Together you compare the two images, the similarities and differences. You discuss how he might start to move towards feeling the way he wants to. What things seem to be standing in his way? What can he do about them? And as before you explore what things in his life he can influence and what things he can't. Might he need help along the way? What sort of help and where could he get it? Do friends or family have a part to play in all this? How will he know if he is feeling a bit unhappy as a normal part of life, or if he starts to become really unhappy or even depressed? What would he need to do at such a time, and how would he go about getting some help? If he actually did nothing more than what he has done here, would this be enough? How is he right now? How can he keep a check on how everything is going? Does he want to talk again?

Let me leave this story here and take a look at what is happening. Whether the contact with a person is five minutes long or some hours, and whether a one-off event or one of several, the process on each occasion, at its most basic, works like this:

Stage of the process	The aim
At the beginning	To catch a person's interest
In the middle them	To invite responses and then explore
At the end	To identify new paths

At the beginning, you need to do something to catch a person's interest so that they will feel like continuing. Continuing is of course, necessary so that the process can be of some help to the person. You then need to do another 'something' so that the person can become more a part of the process and contribute to it. These 'somethings' might be an interesting statement, or a story, or asking a person to do a drawing. These are partly what this book is about. As a person responds to these 'somethings' and contributes to the process, you will develop a better sense of what matters to them, what interests them or what is troubling them, and what part you might play. Together you will then be better able to decide where you should proceed from here; what to discuss, what to reflect on, and perhaps even what to avoid.

The key ideas


Let me describe the process in terms of the seven key ideas which underpin it. I will comment only briefly on each here as they are all discussed fully later in the book.

- ◆ Engagement is the opening part of the process, where the person's interest needs to be caught. You need to do something so that the person feels inclined to continue.
- ◆ Participation refers to making sure a young person is able to have input into the process. As this is not always automatically possible, you may well have to do something to help this happen.
- ◆ Mutuality is about working together. It is about input from each of you.
- ◆ Questioning is one powerful way to help a person explore things which concern or interest them. Questions can be asked and answered verbally or non-verbally, by use of image, or by actions. They can be asked

with the intention of answers being shared, or with the intention of their being privately reflected on.

- ◆ Balancing means exploring all possible outcomes of any path: the terrific and the not-so-terrific; the advantages and disadvantages; the best things and the worst.
- ◆ Integration means that as you explore things together, you combine what you are doing with how you are doing it. Perhaps a playful approach combined with a serious issue so as to make it more approachable. Perhaps a quiet moment to reflect as part of a tense or emotional discussion.
- ◆ Difference is the final key idea. The more different the process is from what a person expects the more likely it is to be fresh and interesting and to invite new responses from them, and to bring into focus new options. As difference may well be an aspect of any moment in this process; it is shown in the following diagram as operating throughout and impacting on the whole process.

Stage of the process	Aim	Key idea
At the beginning	To catch a person's interest	Engagement
In the middle	To invite responses and then explore them	Participation Mutuality Integration
At the end	To identify new paths	Questioning Balancing



Difference

Overlapping ideas

The seven key ideas overlap and operate collectively throughout the process. You may open the process with questioning, but of course you will still be thinking about engagement. On the other hand you may finish with questioning because a question suggests there is more to do. And here you may be particularly thinking of difference because if the question is somewhat unusual it may fire the person's imagination and encourage them to continue exploring what's on their mind. While any number of the key ideas may be operating at any given time, some may have a stronger presence at a particular moment.

Activities — the tools of the process

The purpose of activities is to help advance the process in some way. You might ask a person to draw or write something, or you might ask for a comment in response to an image you or they have created. You might engage in physical activities, simple theatre activities or exercises of the imagination. You might ask a person to quietly reflect on something or to verbally respond to some creative questioning. The actual activities or strategies you can use are endless, and with some thought and imagination, those presented in this book can be adapted for individuals, couples, families or groups, and for just about any topic or circumstance. The idea of adaptation is explored in the final chapter. All activities seek to add something to the process. If they help, then by all means use them. If the process is established and flowing, it may need very little to sustain it and make it worthwhile.

Characteristics of the process

The feel of an interaction will be influenced, of course, by many things, including: what topic you tackle together, the depth to which you delve into it, the level of intimacy you share, and by how serious or humorous the interaction is. It will also be influenced by the activities or strategies that you engage in. A physical activity can lend a sense of energy to what is happening, whereas an activity of the imagination can lend a reflective feel to the interaction. Similarly, how you use activities will also impact on the process: whether, for instance, a reply is put into words or a question is simply reflected on; whether something is written down to be worked through now, or taken away to be considered at a later time.


The ‘conversation’ with Sandor developed in the following way, using a series of strategies which have particular characteristics.

Activity	Characteristics
Think of a time...	Quiet, reflective and introspective
Draw something...	Active, visual and non-verbal
Discussion	Verbal and interactive
Draw something...	Active, visual and non-verbal
Questions	Verbal and interactive

The process, key ideas, and process characteristics

The following diagram puts all these ideas together and gives an overview of how the interaction with Sandor develops based on the key ideas, the strategies used and just what the characteristics of the process are at different moments.

Stage of process	Aim	Key idea	Activity	Characteristics
Beginning	To catch a person's interest	Engagement	Think of a time...	Quiet, reflective and introspective
Middle	To invite new responses and explore them	Participation Mutuality Integration	Draw something...	Active, visual and non-verbal
			Discussion	Verbal and interactive
End	To identify new paths	Questioning Balancing	Draw something...	Active, visual and non-verbal
			Discussion	Verbal and interactive



 Difference

There is no formula to suggest what the appropriate feel of a process should be as it develops. In one instance the beginning may be playful and the end reflective; in another instance the reverse may be the case. The actual feel which is needed and appropriate at any moment will be determined by the circumstances, the topics you are addressing and the styles and needs of those involved. In the following example the interaction develops based on the same structure as above but the feel at similar moments in the process is quite different.


'Self image'

Imagine that you are running a workshop with a group of 16-year-old students on the topic of 'self image'. People know each other, so you decide

to open with a physical and playful activity. You ask the group to move around the room and to simply greet each other, but to add interest you ask them to do so using only a gesture or a single word. They do this with some laughter and of course with the occasional vulgar gesture. You then ask the group to sit quietly, and you ask them the following: ‘If someone had been observing you just now, how do you think they would describe what they saw?’ Group members think quietly about this for a moment. There are some smiles. You ask for comments and a discussion develops as to how people see themselves, how others might see them, and what it might mean if these views differ. Questions start to emerge. To what extent does our sense of ourselves derive from others? How can we hear what others have to say about us and still be able to assess the truth and value of what they say? How could people here make personal comments to each other if this was appropriate, but still be respectful and constructive? As the group moves towards a close you ask them to sit quietly again and for each person to think of themselves. If they wanted to check out another person’s view of them, who could they ask? What would they do if they heard something which was difficult to hear? And if someone were to ask them for a view, would they be prepared to give one? Could they do this respectfully yet truthfully?

This process has the same simple structure of beginning, middle and end and rests on a number of the key ideas discussed above, but the characteristics here vary considerably from those of the earlier example.

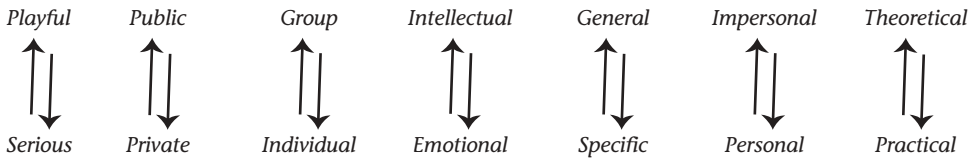
Stage of process	Aim	Key idea	Activity	Characteristics
Beginning	To catch a person’s interest	Engagement	Move around room	Physical, playful, light-hearted minimally verbal
Middle	To invite new responses and explore them	Participation Integration	Think of how you would be described	Reflective and non-verbal
		Mutuality	Discussion	Verbal and interactive
End	To identify new paths	Questioning	Questions	Quiet, reflective and introspective



 Difference

Levels of process


Another way of thinking about characteristics of this process is in terms of levels, or opposites or contrasts.



In the above example the idea of ‘self image’ is introduced by asking people to walk about a room and greet each other. This is physical, light-hearted and minimally verbal. The process moves to a more serious level as group members are asked to imagine how someone watching them would describe what they saw. This starts with a private reflection and becomes more public through discussion. As the group approaches a close it returns to a more private level, with group members being asked to reflect on a number of questions.

A diagram describing the ‘self-image’ activity would now look like this.

Key idea	Activity	Characteristics	Level
Engagement	Move around room	Physical, playful light-hearted, minimally verbal	◆ Playful ◆ Group
Participation Integration	Think of how you would be described	Reflective and non-verbal	◆ Private ◆ Serious
Mutuality	Discussion	Verbal and interactive	◆ Group ◆ Public
Questioning	Questions	Quiet, reflective and introspective	◆ Private ◆ Personal ◆ Emotional


 Difference

The impact of moving between levels

You may introduce a quite serious topic to a group by doing something playful and light-hearted, creating an opportunity for people to get to know each other in relation to the topic while establishing an atmosphere of trust and openness. This atmosphere makes it possible to then ask about the significance of this topic for each person in the room. The process moves from an impersonal to a more personal level, perhaps also from an intellectual to a more emotional level. You may move away from this serious feel back to a more playful mood if emotions become too intense.

You may ask a person a general question about the nature of conflict, its possible impact on people and relationships, and the sorts of things which might help sort out conflict and what might make it worse. The general nature of this exploration can help free a person to notice options that they might not otherwise consider. You can then move into a more specific and personal exploration of what matters for them and what might work for them.

Moving between levels can create contrast, introduce moments of relief and help people consider options previously not considered. The following conversation with Amber demonstrates some of this.

‘Talking with Amber’

You are talking to Amber, a 16-year-old girl, and trying to help her think through a tough decision. You suggest that it might be useful to start quite generally because this can help free up thinking for a while, taking the pressure off having to ‘find a solution’. She is happy with this. You ask her what she thinks holds most people back from tackling difficult issues in their lives. She identifies a number of things. Together you keep note of these. You ask her if she knows of any friends who have been stuck with a problem and what they did to get started on sorting it out. She develops a list of things she has seen friends try. Together you identify items on the list which might apply to her, both things that might hold her back and solutions she might try. You cross out things that don’t fit and add new ideas as they occur to each of you. As you start to run out of time, you ask Amber how she thinks she might feel in a month’s time if she has not done anything about what is worrying her. How might she feel if she does do something? What might hold her back from acting? And what might help get her

started? What else does she need right now? Has this been useful? Does she want to chat again?

The process has moved from the general to the specific, from the intellectual to the emotional and from the impersonal to the personal.

At the end of a meeting

This approach does not ask that we ‘wrap up’ and come to any conclusions. On the contrary, the aim is for something to continue. It is a wonderful thing if a person departs with some sense of having moved, shifted, or developed, and feeling that they are able to continue this process. It may just mean a person leaving with a sense of their own resourcefulness whereas before they thought they had none. It may be enough for a young person to leave with some sense of optimism or hope that whatever concerns them can be tackled. Sometimes this hope is just a spark.

A person also needs to leave with a sense that they are not alone on their journey. There is support if they need it, and you may help them identify just what they need and where they can get it. And there is always you as Guide.

Spontaneity and planning

The process is presented here as thought-out and having a clear purpose, as indeed it is. Yet analysing it in this way can make it sound somewhat contrived. It is anything but this. As we are dealing with people’s life issues it seems only respectful that we devote some thought as to how we might help people approach these things. The ideas and activities in this book aim to help you do this, but flexibility and spontaneity are essential ingredients in this process.

THE ROLE OF THE GUIDE

I have been strongly encouraged by many colleagues to include this next section and so I have. This process is about change in a person’s life, or at least the possibility of change, and as Guide you have a crucial role to play. So it’s important to say a few words about this role. If you are an experienced worker then I expect that much of this will be very familiar to you. You might just want to scan the headings and skip on ahead. However, if you are new to such a

role, a careful consideration of the following issues and dilemmas may help both you and those you seek to assist.

An active role

The role of the Guide in this process is a very active one. If a young person is sad, desperate, bored, confused or angry, clearly it would be good if they were able to make their life better in some way. As Guide you are likely to be constantly devising ways of involving a young person in the process, asking questions and raising ideas. But while the spirit of this approach is that you work together, your roles are neither the same nor equal. As Guide you are in a unique and powerful position. It is the life concerns of the young person, not yours, which are being addressed. With these thoughts in mind, the following are important considerations.

Information, opinions and advice

We all give and receive advice at different moments in our lives; offer opinions, pass on information. Yet these are options for a Guide which need to be approached with some care.

All of us do things which aren't good for us. We may eat poorly, not exercise enough, smoke cigarettes, or perhaps neglect friendships. Having the information about the harm we might be doing just isn't enough for us to change what we do. And of course giving opinions and advice may just sound like a lecture, as if we are telling someone what to do. Hardly helpful.

Giving information or advice also has particular importance if we really can influence a young person, perhaps because they like or respect us. Accepting our view may not necessarily help them work through a decision for themselves and develop the personal resources they need for doing this again when they need to.

There is a place for information, opinions and advice. When, how and if, is something we need to keep an eye on. We need to continually ask just what impact it might have on the young person: Will it help or hinder them?

Your values as the guide

Even in the role of Guide we are still individuals with our own values. Our views about politics, gender, drug use, culture, sexual behaviour and a whole stack of other things will always be present in one way or another, so we need to carefully monitor the impact our values have on the process. And we

owe it to the young people we work with to talk this through with others from time to time. And not necessarily just those who will agree with us!

Whose needs?

This is closely related to the above comments. It is very easy when trying to be helpful to someone in need to confuse our issues with those of the person in front of us. We may feel that a particular choice is a good one because it is what we have done, or we may just believe this is the best choice for the person. It is our duty to constantly ask ourselves whose issues are we dealing with. Whose needs are being met?

Boundaries

A boundary is just what the name suggests. It is limit or a line, and is determined by a set of ethical, moral and/or legal rules. In this process these rules determine how we should or should not act. In youth work it is not regarded as appropriate, by most people, for a worker to enter into a sexual relationship with a young person, to 'hang out' in a pub with an under-age person, or to take drugs with them. The purpose of a boundary is to protect a young person particularly at times when they might be most vulnerable. It is about making sure that their needs are being met. A person in need is a vulnerable person. It is part of our role as Guide to make sure that we do not act in any way which exploits or weakens this person. If we feel we cannot help them we may need to suggest that they talk to someone else. This does not mean conveniently switching roles: 'I am no longer your Guide, so let's go out on a date.' It means always acting in the best interests of the person we are trying to help.

There is sometimes a temptation (and a danger) for a Guide to decide to be a young person's friend. Friends might do all sorts of things together that would be totally inappropriate for a Guide to do. Friends might talk about other young people; or they might go to parties together. They might even get drunk or take drugs together. They might share a bed. These are hardly behaviours expected of a Guide. The relationship may well be friendly, certainly human and warm, but it always puts the needs of the young person first. If you are a teacher, a therapist or youth worker, your role should be clear to you. If you are also a young person and in fact the friend of the person you are trying to help, then your role may be less clear. It may be useful to ask yourself: What can I really help with and what can't I help with? Do I need to get some advice myself about this? Do I need to refer my friend to

someone else? Sometimes a person at some emotional distance can be of more help. If you decide to proceed and try to be of help, then setting a few ground rules can help. 'What do we do if you become upset? What should we do if you get angry at me? Or me at you? What should I do if I feel you need more help than I can give?'

Only you can decide what is an appropriate way for you to conduct yourself, but it is a vitally important issue. If you are in any doubt, then consulting someone else may be useful, perhaps someone professionally involved in working with young people.

Confidentiality

It is respectful to regard as private the things people tell us. At the same time, the aim of confidentiality is to keep people from harm, not expose them to danger. Confidentiality is not about keeping secrets. When working with young people one of the greatest traps can be: 'Please don't tell anyone.' What we are then told can terrify us, or we can come to realise that we are confronted with something we cannot handle. A person may tell us that they are being sexually abused, or that they are going to hurt themselves, or someone else. We may feel we need to take some action, including involving others, to keep this person safe. As a way of avoiding this trap some Guides will say something like: 'I do guarantee to treat with respect what you reveal to me, but I do not know what you are going to tell me, so I may need to tell someone else if I feel this is what needs to happen to help you.'

Rules and agreements

The seven key ideas of this approach, when used effectively, can ensure privacy if this is needed; they can make sure that each person's individual style is taken into account; and they can help establish ways to manage conflict or differences, or people becoming distressed. These are the very issues which an agreement or ground rules are intended to address. Sometimes, rather than setting up a rule which can be broken, it can be useful to build these safeguards directly into the process.

At times a safeguard can simply be built in with a comment: 'I know this is something which is really difficult to talk about. What can we do if you become upset?' Or: 'I know you all have strong feelings about this matter and there's a good chance there will be some disagreement about how we should proceed. Is there anything we can do now to prepare for those moments?'

Such questions alert us to some of what might lie ahead and how we might handle it.

On the other hand, it might be more useful for you and the young people you work with to establish a more formal agreement. Rules and agreements are individual choices, and each of us will decide, together with the young people we work with, what safeguards or rules we might need.

Consulting others

Sometimes, as Guide, we might need help, and one of the most respectful things we can do, is to let a young person know that we regard what they are telling us as so important that we would like to get some advice before proceeding. There are few people who will feel anything other than pleased that we have taken them seriously and have such genuine regard for them that we want to do the very best we can.

When further action seems absolutely necessary

There are extreme times when it seems impossible to allow choice. If someone is going to harm themselves or someone else, most people would feel required to act to prevent this. If a person is suicidal we need to take whatever action is necessary to keep them safe. If we are aware of violence within a relationship it is not respectful to allow it to continue. If sexual abuse is occurring, the person being abused may well be disempowered by the abuse and unable to act. Action is then required from us. If a person is going to commit a crime, we may decide we need to call the police, a government agency, or notify a family member. Again, all such actions require our constant review.

If in any doubt, do not even start

Before entering into a process with another person we need to be really clear as to what we will do if things become too difficult for us to manage or if we are uncertain as to how to proceed. This might mean spending more time with a person than we had expected to. Or it might mean not leaving them on their own at all if there is any chance that they will hurt themselves. We might make a phone call with them; or even for them.

We might need to find someone for them right now. This might be a friend or a family member or professional support.

Of course sometimes things do just happen unexpectedly and we suddenly find ourselves trying to help a person in extreme distress or even crisis. There is a section in the chapter on Participation which specifically identifies ways of helping people stay safe.

Sometimes there are also issues to do with culture, gender or sexuality, and it may seem like an imposition for us to become involved. Or someone else might just be a more useful person for the person to speak with. There are many reasons why we might exclude ourselves as Guide.

With the exception where things just happen accidentally, a good rule is: If in any doubt, do not even start!