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Engaging with young people. What doesn't work and what just might

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The following are some thoughts about working with young people and about what might actually work. Some of these comments, for example the ones about resilience, are not only my own observations but are backed up by some solid research. Other comments are simply my own observations based on my experiences over the years. So you know where these come from I'll tell you that I've worked with young people, with their families and with communities for over 25 years now. And this is what I still do. These days I work freelance and get to do things across Australia and in places like Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada, East Timor and various other parts of the world. What joy! My aim is to keep on trying to find creative ways of helping people look at what concerns them in their lives, their dreams and their fears.

I should also say that there are absolutely no secrets about any of this. You are welcome to share these pages with anyone of any age. What I have written here covers the following:

- Some thoughts about the connection between the ideas of resilience, a strengths-based approach and motivation
- Some ideas about working with young people and what actually being young might mean
- Some ideas about things which get in the way of connecting with young people
- A simple description of what we might be trying to do when engaging with young people
- Some general comments about adults and young people working together

I hope these comments are helpful. You are really welcome to get in touch with me personally at any time if you would like to chat about anything you have read here, or anything else. I've also added a few websites below including my own which you might find useful. Good luck with all you do.

www.kids.nsw.gov.au www.usmob.com.au www.yapa.org.au

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BEARING IN MIND...

If we are working with young people who, for whatever reasons, have been through systems like school, or health or welfare, and have not flourished or have not found a place or warmth; then we need to do something which is not evocative of those systems. Something which does not evoke the same unhelpful or destructive responses. And yet it remains true that... working with young people means catching their attention, firing their imaginations; doing something so they will connect with what is happening and may just want to continue, to listen, to become involved.

This has to happen so that anything can follow. Lots of things are important but important doesn't equal interesting. Young people must feel that the topic or issue AND how it is being dealt with is of interest to them and personal meaning for them.

And some young people are not great at talking and some will be imperfect at reading and writing, so we also need to do things which do not rely only on these skills. Some young people may be (or seem to be), apathetic, sad, uncertain, angry or the ever attractive defiant and/or rude. And lots of young people tend to be pretty active too...so with all this in mind, these notes will take a wee look at what might be useful in connecting, and continuing to connect with a young people. That is, engagement, finding ways of catching a person's attention and firing their imaginations so together we can explore their lives, what matters to them, what scares or excites them, and hopefully how they can stay safe, be happy and healthy.

RESILIENCE, STRENGTHS and MOTIVATION

To me these three ideas seem closely linked. 'Resilience' is an idea which has developed some currency over recent years and while I do think it is an important idea, I think it is also in danger of becoming something of a cliché through over-use. This would be a pity because it is an important and useful idea and is supported by some solid research. To offer a definition, 'Resilience' can reasonably be thought of as the process of growing strong and developing as a person so that we can bounce back from hard times.

A 'Strengths-based' approach to working with young people is about focusing on the qualities, skills and talents that young people have and which help them manage the tough moments of life and move towards their hopes and dreams.

'Motivation' is about what propels us forward, what encourages us to continue, to have a go at anything. While there are external elements to this, such as rewards and acknowledgement, it is the internal ingredients such as finding something interesting, challenging and meaningful that link it to the idea of resilience.

So if I put these ideas together, I figure that focusing on a person's strengths means first us seeing with good eyes; being able to notice the qualities and the talents of the person in front of us, and being sincere and truthful about what we see. And once our eyes are working well, and sometimes this can be hard with some of the not-so-nice things young people do, our task is then to help these qualities and talents emerge and flourish. Which means creating a meaningful relationship which actively involves the young person and genuinely helps the best part of them come forward. This also means relating in ways which fit for the young person and addressing things that matter to them. And if the young person has been on the outside of society, then this first means me getting that person's attention, and firing their imagination so that together we can explore the things that matter to them.

RESILIENCE

The following ingredients pop up repeatedly in readings about ways in which people develop resilience; that is, an ability to bounce back from life's hardships and to push on. These ideas strike me as being simultaneously both common sense and quite profound. They also seem to apply to people of any age. They are really useful to bear in mind in how we relate to young people.

- **Having some sense of meaning in life**
- **Having a meaningful relationship with another or others**
- **Actively participating in what is happening around you**
- **Having some personal power or potency**
- **Others having positive 'expectations' of us**
- **Hope**

I think that all this means, that in our dealings with young people, those young people having a worthwhile, perhaps even pleasant or interesting experience with us, whether school teacher, doctor, social worker, counselor, mentor or someone else, and no matter how brief the contact. It also means that in this contact young people need to be able to participate and contribute in ways which fit for them. They also need to be an active part of this process, not simply passive consumers of it. And finally if we seek the best in people, the best in them may well emerge. I reckon that establishing this process is our task as the adults whatever role we are in. All this might help a young person identify or locate what is meaningful to them in life.

CONNECTING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE... SOME THINGS WHICH MIGHT BE TRUE

- If a young person has not flourished at school then what we offer needs to be different from this
- We need to focus on what matters to them not only what we feel is important
- We may need to help them identify what they are interested in/concerned about/excited by
- A process needs to balance comfort and challenge
- Playfulness is a useful ally
- So is humour
- Interactions need to be creative and based on more than an ability to read and write
- There needs to be ways of 'talking' with a person which are other than verbal
- Directness is usually good especially when balanced with sensitivity

- It helps to develop a process/relationship which makes it clear what is expected of all involved
- While directness and challenge seem useful, confrontation is rarely successful
- Expect the best, look for it, and help it emerge

IS THERE ANYTHING SPECIAL OR DIFFERENT ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE?

- Young people often tend to be more active and energetic than adults
- They are still learning, still developing what they think and feel, how they learn, what they want and who they are
- They may be less accepting of some of the silly stuff that adults tend to put up with stuff which is boring, inflexible or meaningless. Their responses can be open and scathing

SOME THINGS WHICH CAN GET IN THE WAY OF RELATING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

- They may not actually know, physically or emotionally how they are
- They may not be good at putting things into words
- They may not trust us or like us
- They may not want to speak with us
- They may have been forced into speaking with us
- They may be sad, angry, bored or disinterested in us and/or themselves
- We may have very little time

USEFUL BEHAVIOURS AND QUALITIES OF 'HELPFUL' ADULTS

For engaging young people in helpful relationships

- Humour
- Relating at the 'level' of the young person
- Being non-threatening
- Developing a relationship of trust, consistent limits and honesty
- Sharing common interests, being friendly, a good listener, able to play, being actively involved, knowing what might be needed
- Having access to resources

To maintain a helpful relationship

- Being reliable, demonstrating care, providing support
- Provision of a safe environment, providing a sense of belonging
- Ongoing contact
- Maintaining trust
- Being honest, allowing freedom for a young person to make choices

Howard J and Kearney J (1989) *Difficult and marginal: a survey of Sydney street youth* (Sydney, School of Behavioural Sciences, Macquarie University.)

BEING A HELPING 'OTHER'. 'CONVERSATIONS', PROCESSES, RELATIONSHIPS WITH A YOUNG PERSON

What are we trying to do?

The process, in many ways, is pretty straightforward in what we have to do:

- We need to do something to establish rapport with the person
- We need to find out/get some sense of what is happening for them
- We need to work out with them, what to do next

Of course this simple process is often not quite so simple in the doing.

Four (process) ideas

To engage

Engagement is about 'connecting' with a person. It is about 'catching their attention' in a meaningful way. It is about establishing a process within which issues of importance to that person can be addressed

To elicit

A person may not always be immediately aware of just how their life is going or if they are distressed, just why they are. So this means that we might need to do 'something' to help us both find out. This means doing 'something' so that the young person is able to:

- respond to what is presented
- make independent contributions

To explore

Once a person's concerns, interests, worries, hopes or dreams are identified, together, we can explore them further

To extend

The purpose of this process is to in some way create with a person, the possibility of them being different; of being able to see new options or pathways, perhaps being able to pursue these old options not previously taken up, or to pursue the new paths. To 'extend' themselves

Two BIG process ideas

In this process, there are two key ideas worth bearing in mind:

Engagement

Catching a person's interest. It must happen or nothing else will!

Engagement is about a person 'connecting' with what is happening and how it is happening. It is about the person feeling that what is being explored and how it is being explored has personal meaning for them. This must happen or nothing else will. If a person is engaged they will feel that they want to continue or at least are prepared to continue to see what happens next. There are many issues which are important, but importance does not guarantee interest. Working with young people means catching their attention about these matters; it is about firing their imaginations so together we can explore with them their lives, what matters to them, what scares or excites them. Engagement is certainly about getting a person's attention, but it is also about doing this in a meaningful way. It means thinking about what we are hoping to do together and thinking about what might fit for this person, on this day, about this topic, with the time available, so that we can establish the atmosphere, the 'feel', the process that we need to start to look at what is important for that person or group.

Difference

Creating the opportunity for a young person to experience themselves in new ways

There are a number of aspects to this idea. Firstly, that difference in what we do as a mentor/counsellor/facilitator/educator is more likely to maintain interest in the process. Secondly, such difference in what we do is more likely to touch more often, the different styles of the variety of young people we will encounter. And thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, if topics/issues/problems are approached in unusual, provocative, stimulating and unexpected ways, responses are equally likely to be new and different. This demonstrates that change (difference) is a realistic possibility.

ADULTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER

- When adults and young people get together, adults will often dominate unless we actively create a process where this does not happen
- If we are working with young people who have not had meaningful opportunities to be part of the world then we need to do more than make offers. Simply saying 'you can speak to me anytime' or 'my door is always open' is not enough.
- So, as adults we need to actively create opportunities for young people to participate in the world, interact with it, and have an impact on it
- If adults genuinely leave decision-making to young people, then some decisions may be made that we don't agree with
- As adults we need to genuinely listen to what young people have to say. We may not always like what we hear, nor agree with it
- Adults listening and taking up issues, points, ideas raised by young people can be respectful. Being 'challenging' can be respectful. Adults have been on the planet for a while, some have even been paying attention and have something to contribute
- There is not one 'youth voice' but many. We need to hear as many as possible
- It can be useful to have times when adults and young people work in partnership, times when adults work alone and certainly times when young people work alone
- The hard-to-reach young people deserve special attention and creativity, for exactly the reason that they are 'hard-to-reach'
- To find out the wisdom of young people, as adults we must be wise in what we ask about and how we ask. Asking young people to be expert on things they do not know about is simply unfair and sets them up to either fail or to feel they have to know. What young people are expert about is how they and their friends live their daily lives
- It is Australia and it's now (which at the moment is 2009) and all that this means. Some things from times gone-by are still valid, and some are not. Working out which is which is the challenge!