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The Central Challenge

Howard Bath

Margot, age fourteen, stomps into her foster home yelling that she hates *that* school and will not be going back. "But you like it there," her foster father replies, exasperated and a little worried. Margot screams and swears at him, "I hate them, and I hate you as well! You're all f....g stupid!" In rising anger, the foster father retorts, "You know you can't use that language around here. Go to your room and do your homework, and you can forget about going out with your friends this weekend!" Margot screams abuse at him, kicks over a chair, and tearfully runs into her room slamming the door behind her.

Many of us provide care, support, and education for young people who have experienced abuse, neglect, separation from family, and exposure to domestic and community violence. This sort of adversity in childhood can lead to a lack of trust in adults and a range of behavioural, social, and learning problems. Such young people are also likely to struggle with the self-management of troubling emotions and impulses.

But what do you think is the Central Challenge—the one that we will all face, the one that we most need to understand and develop skills to overcome, the one that can undermine the best intentions of caring adults?

James Anglin spent a lot of time talking with young people in care settings and watching their interactions with care workers. He saw that many of the young people struggled with troubling emotions such as grief, sadness, fear, and anger, and that they tended to act out these behaviours verbally or physically. He coined the term “pain-based behaviours” to describe behaviours that are rooted in emotional pain.

Unfortunately, most of these pain-based behaviours frustrate, annoy, anger, or revolt us, and some can even make us fearful. Such emotions motivate us to act, and when we experience this sort of emotional pain, we instinctively want to do something that immediately stops the problem, like punishing or sending the young person away.

And that is why James Anglin suggested that the *Central Challenge* is dealing with **primary pain** without unnecessarily inflicting **secondary pain** through punitive or controlling reactions (2002, p. 55).

But why do caring and committed workers sometimes end up being coercive and punitive?

Years ago Nicholas Long made the telling observation that “kids in stress create in us their feelings, and if we are not trained (to recognize this process), we will start to mirror their behaviors.” At one point he called this the “double struggle”—the young person is struggling to safely manage his or her emotions, but so, too, is the adult (Long & Fecser, 2000).

He went on to suggest that when we experience a little of their anger, sadness, or confusion, we can either use our own feelings to help us understand what the young person is experiencing, or we can choose to blindly follow the impulses associated with those emotions.

This then is our *Central Challenge*—to understand how, in crisis encounters, their emotions can quickly become ours and to develop responses that do not rely on the imposition of secondary pain. As much as possible we must suppress the impulse to punish, lecture, threaten, or argue with them—these will only compound the emotional pain. We must seek first to understand what happened and the emotional impact it has had on them.

We can only do this if we are willing and able to track our own emotional responses and then track and name theirs. Ignoring the language, Margot’s foster father could say, “I can see that things did not work out for you at school, and I’m sorry that it has made you so upset and angry. Can you tell me what happened?” In avoiding the impulsive use of secondary pain, we set the stage for positive engagement and effective problem-solving.

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