

Thriving

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Placement Math: Where is Home?

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“Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them become what they are capable of being.” ~Goethe

Imagine you arrive at work today to find your office locked and all of your things stuffed in big black garbage bags and maybe a cardboard box or two. You discover, without warning, your office will now be located somewhere else because someone thought it would be best. That would be quite unsettling! You might feel violated, disrespected, or diminished. You might feel waves of emotion begin to well up inside. You might wonder how this happened and may be concerned about what may transpire next. Imagining this scenario can elicit significant discomfort in any of

us. If you have actually had a similar experience, you remember all too well your emotional and even physical distress. When this type of situation happens to adults, difficult as it may be, we can go home. Even before going home, there is likely a network of family and friends on whom we can call for comfort and support. We can express ourselves and be understood. The relationships in our lives provide protection. Our drive and need for belonging is well met. We turn naturally to them and know what to expect.

The experience described above takes place even more dramatically to thousands of young people in our systems of care every year. Abrupt, unplanned placement changes occur--quite likely due to some combination of their behavior that is considered too extreme and the lack of capacity in programs to adapt and meet their needs. When this happens to children and youth, it isn't just a significant loss in one area of their lives. It may be a total disruption spanning nearly every part of their existence. Besides having no home to go to, they are without networks of family and friends to offer comfort and support. The cost of these disruptions can be very high.

A few months ago, I was training staff at Casa Pacifica Centers for Children and Families in Camarillo, California. Walking across the campus with my colleague, James Freeman, we encountered Brian and another young person relaxing in the shade of a tree on a warm Southern California morning. We observed them moving their towels around to avoid the sun and enjoy the breeze. When we stopped to talk, Brian was willing to share things about the program and himself with us.

Brian, a 15-year-old, had been in the Casa Pacifica program for six months. He was hanging out on the campus instead of attending a morning summer school program because he "didn't feel like it." He expressed some frustration about being required to do school work in the summer, even though knew he needed the credits. As a result of his decision to skip school, he would not be able to go to the beach that afternoon with those who did attend. As he reflected with us he noted, with some insight, that he might regret his decision a little later in the day because it would "boring" to stay back while the others enjoyed the beach.

Brian said he thought the program was good for him, and he was proud to report that he had made improvements in getting along with others and managing his frustration and anger. Still, he had work to do. He also talked about his family. Family for Brian is a foster family--one with whom he has been connected for a number of years and where his younger brother currently resides. They have not given up on him and continue to offer him hope.

He also stated that he had experienced 14 various placements across his lifetime. Typically, a 15-year-old boy with anger management problems who

has experienced 14 placements in the system of care would be relatively unattached from family. While Brian's family is not his family of origin but a foster family, they appear to continue to provide him with the critical sense of belonging that so many young people in the system of care do not get to experience. Even after six months in the program, they remained central to his plans for a safe and loving landing. With his family pulling for him, Brian intends to keep working on his goals so he can return home as planned. Without Brian's basic drive for belonging being met from family and peers, one wonders if his intention would be so clear.

Multiple disruptions in the lives of young people...taxes even the most resilient among them.

Consistent and accurate records on the movement of young people through our systems of care due to placement disruptions are hard to find, but even if there were a better accounting it would not tell the whole story of what happens to young people like Brian. A report from the University of Illinois indicates that the threshold for placement instability is four placements (Children and Family Research Center, 2004). Many of us know young people with many more than four changes in placement. In order to understand the experience of any of these children or adolescents, it is important to look beyond only the number of placements and in to the details. Every placement counts as two transitions--out of one place abruptly and in to a new one. That sounds simple enough until we consider the implications. More than a change of a place to lay one's head, which could be unsettling enough, there are numerous other transitions to which the young person is expected to adjust. Many times these other transitions, including changes in primary care-givers, teachers, caseworkers, therapists, peers, and others, will not show up statistically but affect the substance of our work with children and adolescents

Multiple disruptions in the lives of young people, already considered to be high-risk or high-need, taxes even the most resilient among them. Resilience researcher Ann Masten citing multiple studies writes, "results pointed to the importance of relationships and opportunities in the lives of young people, as well as individual and development differences in stress reactivity, motivation, problem solving, or self-regulation" (Masten, 2014, p. 91). Lacking stability of place and significant people makes it very difficult to grow in healthy ways. Calling it one of the fundamental truths, Besel Van der Kolk states,

“Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being” (Van der kolk, 2014, p. 38). For many young people in our systems of care, relationships and community must still be created. The constant disruption of place and people may be the biggest obstacle to their sense of well-being.

From a program perspective, some of the young people we serve will benefit from our services and return home, but others will challenge us far more. It is essential for us to use more patience and be willing and able to adapt practices to meet the challenges they present. When we serve those who have had multiple prior placements, it is important that we are aware of what that means regarding their experiences and their expectations of themselves and their carers. There are things we can do to help with their transitions:

- Understand that a young person who comes to us by this developmental pathway has needs that are different than the needs of others.
- Facilitate a team approach among the direct care staff and support staff rather than allowing separate, silo, services to prevail.
- Provide values-based training in foundational and therapeutic skills for all staff.
- Give each young person a voice in the experience they have in the program.

All of these efforts are needed to build program capacity that will surround young people with a healthy and challenging environment (Freado & Desalvatore, 2007).

Thousands of young people do not have the benefit of relationships with caring, skilled adults who provide a sense of safety and belonging. The resulting challenges of this are significant, and the implications must be shared by programs and those developing policy and funding priorities. When young people “age out” of our systems of care without those basic needs met, the costs to them and society are heavy. “Five years after maturing out of care, some 60 percent will have been convicted of a crime, 75 percent will be on public assistance, and only 6 percent will have completed even a community college degree (Van der kolk, 2014, p. 340).

Creating services that focus on wellness and strength rather than deficit or pathology conveys an expectation of success. Understanding the power of therapeutic relationships and building skills and support for staff to create that kind of

connection and sense of belonging with the youth they serve is among the most important effort an organization can make. (Doncaster, 2007). Providing opportunities and challenges for young people to have a voice in their experience is the first step in helping them accept responsibility and supporting them in realizing more control and power in their lives. The Model of Leadership and Service as shown below emphasizes six drives and among them is belonging. Connecting in meaningful ways with young people who have yet to experience belonging in significant and positive ways may be what helps to change the course of their lives.



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