

The worker comes to the place you have always called home and tells you that you have a new place to live.

The Children's Aid Society has decided for whatever reason, one's because of your age you may not understand that you cannot live with your parents anymore and you have to be taken into custody for the time being. This is every mother and child's nightmare and all too often harsh reality. Many children are either temporary or crown wards of the various Children's Aid societies in Canada. I grew up in the system, as did many friends of mine and we are still searching for answers. Maybe in this paper I can answer some of them.

Youth are in crisis at the point of admission to any residential environment. They need help managing this experience and integrating into unfamiliar environments. How children are integrated into a residential setting will influence how they cope within that program. Many workers that I had just moved me because of my young age. I have been a part of the system since 1984 when it was decided by my biological father that I was too uncontrollable to stay at home. Meanwhile this man is a convicted paedophile that had been abusing me and my sisters for years - myself physically and mentally, my sisters sexually. But I was the problem wasn't I?

When I entered the system I was scared to death. The first place I lived was Sacred Heart Child and Family Services, a Catholic group home in Scarborough operated by nuns. I was put into a Catholic public school against my will, forced to cut my long hair and dress in clothes that were hand me downs from the group homes because my clothing was deemed unacceptable by the school. Many times if I wore what I wanted I was grounded or put into holding (behavioural controls). Knowledge of rights varies widely in the system, most youth know some of their rights and are able to identify what they are. Some youth are not aware of their rights and many learn within the system. I did not know at the time, that I had a right to my own religion, which at the time was Protestant. I was forced to become a good little Catholic. That didn't work out too well. I think this is one of the main reasons I was at one time in my life a Satanist and the reason I now practice Wicca. I was ignorant of a great many of my rights. When I started to learn my rights I was made to feel that they were privileges more than my rights. One of my favourite sayings as a child was, "I'm a group home kid, I ain't got no right's." I was put into holding more than was necessary, and many basic needs were ignored.

Effective safeguards against abusive behaviours are lacking, because many are afraid to report abuses for fear of reprisals, the ineffectiveness of existing safe guards continues unaddressed. Twice while I was at Sacred Heart, and once at Haydon Youth Services, I had unfortunate accidents in a holding setting. I have had my arm broken twice in two separate incidents and my head busted open once by child care workers. Many ways that children retaliate to abuse is hurting themselves, running away or doing nothing. I was so afraid of the staff that I thought if I said something I'd just get my ass kicked again so I kept quiet when I went to see the doctor or my worker.

It wasn't all psychical abuse either. I was made to feel like nothing by the staff . Verbal abuse was quite common by the staff at both group homes and the schools I attended. "I was stupid, why couldn't I just behave?" Many of these I was told. I started running away and living on the streets at twelve when I was moved from Sacred Heart to Haydon House in Oshawa. It only got worse there.

Behavioural controls were applied anytime I would talk back or do something I wasn't supposed to. The time my skull got busted open I was caught smoking in my room. I was put into a holding position where my head was facing the worker and he had his body on my legs, one hand on my arms holding them crossed, and one hand on my head. When I tried to bite, he slammed my head against the paved

floor hard. This should have been unacceptable. Behavioural controls need to be applied judiciously and only in unsafe situations, after all other forms of deescalation have been attempted. I think that destroying my cigarettes would have appropriate punishment.

Things needed in a healthy relationship with caregivers are mutual trust, consistent caring, unconditional acceptance, communication and interaction, commitment, few or preplanned separations, promotion of self esteem, absence of trauma and protection. Sadly, many of these things are not present even in the system today. Residential programs depend on building relationships with children and youth in their care. Youth conditioned to protect themselves from loss and rejection pose a serious challenge to the ability of youth workers to effectively engage them. Youth may resist or sabotage efforts at relationship building. Many will re-enact past rejections by caregivers as a self fulfilling prophecy.

Many youth describe multiple placements in the children's service sector. I can attest to this as I went to two group homes and one residential school in Hamilton, before I was 16 and struck out on my own. I think this is why I live a nomadic lifestyle today and I don't care where I go because I've never put down roots anywhere. I lived in so many cities that it doesn't matter, as long as I have a roof over my head. Many kids get lost in the system as they pass through jurisdictions and may have one or more workers that handle their case. Sometimes, in this instance, you will have a child referred to a place that is not appropriate to their situation. For example, I was referred first to a group home run by my psychiatrist after Sacred Heart. Small conflict of interest there, you would think, especially after the fact that he dealt with my paedophile father and manic depressive step-mother. He said that my mother was unfit, tied us up in court for years. After Haydon, I was again referred to a place that I could live with my mom, but I had to go to this special school called Cornerstone. Its a school for adolescents with psychiatric and extreme emotional problems. I don't think that I have ever fit either category. Of my friends from school at Cornerstone, only one is in college, one is a whore that works the street, three have had children of there own, one had a child and had it taken away by Hamilton's Children's Aid, a few are living on the street, and at least one is dead. Two, out of a class of twenty-five, pretty good odds you would think. Definitely a case of wrong referral. I think that going to that school and Haydon's isolated classes contribute to the fact that I never got my high school diploma, as all you have to do in these classes is behave and not be out of control. It doesn't matter if you listen to the radio, draw pictures, pass notes to your friends etc. The emphasis is to behave.

The Child and Youth Advocate of Toronto has suggested a few recommendations that could possibly improve the system. They are as follows:

Care System Journey Recommendations: acknowledging the impact of multiple placements and the need for stable and consistent care givers, the children's service sector must make stability for children in care the priority.

- i. the government should develop a computerized tracking system to monitor movement of youth across all residential service sectors. A computerized tracking system will, reduce the movement young people in care, enhance safe guards, help to determine the efficacy of existing programs and reinforce accountability.
- ii. Establish a threshold indicator at which a child's movement will be reviewed. This indicator must begin tracking at the point of service activation.
- iii. Ensure that the first out of home intervention is decisive, and is of sufficient intensity to meet

identified needs of child and family.

iv. The treatment plan for an out of home intervention is derived from a comprehensive need and risk assessment that is holistic and accountable to the child's community.

v. The children's service sector and ministries providing service to children to children must develop clear guidelines for supportive admission processes to any residential setting and recognize that an admission is a crisis to the child.

vi. A single case manager should be assigned to follow each child from point of entry into the system to discharge, regardless of the program, service sector or ministry involved.

vii. Child welfare agencies must honour their obligation to investigate allegations of excessive force in the management use of force in the management of children under the age of 16 in Ontario's care system.

viii. The Ministry of Community and Social Services must take the lead in the development of new methods for the restraint of children and conduct research to determine which youth are amenable to certain physical restraint methods. Any form of physical restraint needs to be viewed as a serious occurrence with all implications this entails.

ix. A clear, standardized definition of isolation needs to be developed. The administration of this intrusive measure needs to be regulated across service sectors.

x. The Ministry of Community and Social Services should conduct research to determine the psychological impact of isolation on children to determine what is appropriate.

xi. Training and supervision in deescalation strategies must be provided to all front line staff. Intrusive measures should be used only in response to verified security needs and therapeutic purposes.

xii. All ministries serving children should improve the culture experienced in care by reducing harsh and disrespectful treatment and reinforcing the establishment of meaningful relationships.

xiii. Transitional age youth should be eligible for child welfare care.

I feel that this last one is a major need because if you are a crown ward until you are 16/18 yrs depending on jurisdiction most times you are cut loose without knowing most of the support systems in place.

While I have not addressed all of the recommendations or everything that goes on in this system I believe I have focused on some of the extreme factors in the field and the steps that could, should and are being done in the field. I believe that the book I have taken many of my notes from is a valuable addition to any child youth workers library, as well I believe that it should be part of any training class.

~ Nick (CYW II, written 1999)