

CONNECTIONS:
Examining the Personal and
Philosophical “Glue” that
Connects us to our Profession,
Each Other, and the
Children/Youth and Families
We Serve

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Let's face it, we in CYC work know very well how we are **not** connected. We can go to a Child and Youth Care conference, sit in workshops with others sharing our position title, and still encounter some people who would be our "colleagues" that we don't sense any kind of connection with at all. Even at work, there are some "colleagues" you wouldn't have lunch with if you were free to choose who to spend time with. And yet here you are, you and some of your colleagues, feeling like an old married couple raising kids together.

We work in a profession that many, if not most, people don't understand at all. It's hard to talk to others about our work – about how and why the kids come to us, about what it's like to group abused, neglected, troubled, disturbed, and troubling kids together in tight groups. Not just groups, but "living" groups. Groups where they spend all day, every day together. Or groups of kids suffering the effects of maltreatment in classrooms where they try to learn with FAS/FAE/FADE; ADHD; PTSD; LD's; BD's and undiagnosed limitations. Our lack of "connection" to the mainstream, even in the human services, makes it all the more important that we feel connected to each other. Isolation is not only lonely, it's spirit killing. Abraham Maslow told us that "belonging" is the third most basic need for human beings. I want to talk about the importance of recognizing how we belong to our work, and what connects us to those we work with.

Throughout history there has been a human tendency to create borders and boundaries between people, creating insiders and outsiders. Research reveals that children begin to experience this separation between people as early as pre-school, and difference and separation then continue for life. We have borders and barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities, intellectual abilities, ideologies, and class. These serve to keep people at a distance from one another.

In attempting to build community and connection we need to respect that we are trying to change a powerful status quo. The task is not for the weak, the weary, the unsure, or the

unmotivated. It is entirely appropriate that we talk about “connection” in our work, because if we can’t do it among ourselves we have nothing to offer to those of our clients who are feeling outside, disenfranchised, and disconnected, and with whom we are trying to connect on a variety of levels.

We’ll consult our dictionaries to be sure we understand the meanings of our language. **Connect:** Join, Attach, Unite, Fasten together, Couple, Tie, Hinge, Combine, Merge, Associate, Relate, Compare, Correlate, Combine. **Connection:** Fastening, Link, Bond, Linkage, Connector, Attachment, Nexus, Tie, Junction, Relation, Relationship, Interrelation, Association
Correlation, Affinity

In this article, rather than focusing on what connects us to our child and adult clients, we’ll examine what connects us to each other. I would like to identify **21 ingredients** that I think form the professional “glue” that connects – unites, joins, fastens together - those of us in Child and Youth Care Work.

1.COMMONALITIES

Like members of a family, or a group of old friends, we feel like insiders when we are together. We have, like many other inside groups, our very own language that leaves others wondering what in God’s name we are talking about: “going off” (workers with deaf children also have a “sign” for what we mean here); Redirect; He’d better be careful or “He’s Going down”; He or she (staff person) just doesn’t have “it”; Calming rooms; Mystery meat; Having an ability to fix toilets as a criteria for evaluating potential job applicants, Etc.

As I pondered some of the language that only we understand, I suddenly realized that when CYC’s talk about connection we are sometimes talking about a **literal** connection as well. We have in common with each other something that few other people with jobs can imagine – the fact that we are very likely to make a literal, physical connection with those for whom we work and with

whom we work. These connections are particularly unusual because they may take dramatically forms.

We may make nurturing physical contact as we brush their hair, hold their hands, give them a hug, play games with them.

But unhappily, research and our own experience tells us that violence begets violence. Our children and youth know more about violence than most people will ever experience other than through their televisions or movie theaters. Our kids never needed to go outside or turn anything on to see traumatic and violent attempts at problem solving. They saw it inflicted on their mothers. They felt it inflicted on their own bodies. And now, unhappily, but not surprisingly, they sometimes attempt to use violence to solve problems with us or their peers.

And so it is that sometimes in our work, in order to keep people safe, we have to handle them in controlling ways. We have to interfere with their attempts to harm themselves or others using our own bodies. We sometimes connect with them in a literal, tangible way. It's hard to imagine what this kind of connection feels like unless you've had to do it.

Sometimes a therapeutic breakthrough happens during, or after, a young person has been held by two, three, four CYC's – literally connected on their arms and legs. Not because they've been controlled, but because they realize that we care enough about them not to let them hurt themselves or anyone else, even at our own risk. And during these tense moments we are also intimately connected to our team members, who we depend on to keep both the child and us safe. This is a way of connecting that is powerful, adrenaline pumping, intimate, and brings us together in ways unimaginable before we entered our world.

Our willingness to engage children and teens in this life protecting and physically intimate way gives a message more powerful than any words or sentences could ever convey. Holding them safely says, we value you. Working together in acts of mutual

protection says we value each other. It is a scene that few people will ever witness – adults and a young person literally connected, one flailing, cursing and sputtering and the others reassuring, comforting, calming, protecting.

More benignly, as in families, we are also connected through our stories. Go to any staff meeting, any bar, any coffee house after work and you will be reassured that CYC's are great storytellers. And the stories are real. I love to read stories written by Mark Krueger or Thom Garfat. Wherever I am when I'm reading one of these stories, at home, on the plane, in a hotel – I instantly feel like I'm in a group home or child care facility. I can smell the smells, hear the noise, feel the tension. My mind paints the picture and it's like watching a movie I've seen before but don't mind watching again. I've never worked with Mark or Thom, or in any of their facilities, but the themes of the stories are all familiar. The themes connect us to our work, and to each other. I sometimes wonder what it would be like to be someone from another profession reading the same stories. Would they get it?

2. We are also connected by **HOPE**. Faith, confidence, belief, assurance, encouragement, trust, reliance, conviction, optimism, expectation, anticipation, desire, wish, longing, craving, dream. Isn't it amazing how we keep coming back to work. We throw up our hands, carry on with each other at the "attitude readjustment" watering hole, threaten to quit and daydream about an easy job – and then we catch a few hours sleep and come back in. Despite all the rationale that tells us that most likely today will be just like yesterday – or even worse, we come in for another shift thinking that maybe things will be different. Hoping. It gets us up in the morning. Maybe she will get up for school. Maybe he will call me by my actual name. Maybe they did all come back from the outing. Maybe we'll finish an activity without a tantrum or tears. Maybe.

We also carry the light of hope in every intervention – with a specific young person or with an entire family. We hope that with help, they will stop hurting themselves and each other. We hope

that we can be the one who helps. If not for hope you wouldn't be reading this, you would have left ages ago.

3. INTEGRITY. Integrity is the reason we have hope! Integrity: Honesty, uprightness, moral soundness, principle, character, virtue, decency. We do what we do because it is the right thing to do. It doesn't always feel good, but it always feels right.

Our kids did not get the beginning to life that they deserve. We know this. We know it is moral, and decent, to give them the healing they need to recover from their pain. They wear their pain all over their faces and express it in their angry, tormented voices. We are willing to catch the rage they throw because we know they are not responsible for the abuse and/or neglect that brings them into treatment. We are joined in our "mission" to give them a chance to have a better life than if we didn't try to help them heal.

4. LOVE. Love is both a Noun – a feeling, and a Verb - a practice. The Greek word for love – agape – combines feeling and action. Love means to will the best for others and to do all we can to see that it happens for them. This is what we do.

Online discussions (CYC-online) have gone on for months with people from all around the world debating whether or not we should tell the clients that we love them. I haven't really participated in the discussion because it's not really that complicated for me. Of course we can tell them we love them. They're children. Wounded children. Lonely children. Confused about the word, yes. But human beings who have the need for love as one of their basic needs. Maslow told us it's our fourth most basic need. My partner and I had a history of adopting dogs from the pound that no one wants. We tell our **dogs** that we love them!

Interestingly enough, one can practice love without feeling love I'm guessing that's why loving one's neighbor is a commandment. If it was easy to always feel love we wouldn't

have to be commanded to practice it. We are connected to each other because we choose to love these snout nosed, swaggering, sulking, purple haired, multiply pierced, third finger wagging, creative, clever, funny children of God.

Some of our people need us to help them to love themselves. No one loves themselves if they are not loved by someone else.

And because of the extraordinary character, quirkiness, and uniqueness of the people we work with, we love each other. Whenever I go to a conference I run into CYC's that I love, and that I have loved for years. I am still friends with Don, who I worked with 52 years ago on my first job. Although separated by location, I keep up with my best friend Connie, who I hired twice, and who was my mentor although she technically worked "for" me. And Margaret, who lives in Philadelphia, is still in my life. We shared a job in the early 1970's. If I were to list my CYC colleagues that I love the column would be too long. They know who they are and my life is beautiful because of them. And my Partner, companion, and love of my life for 33 years was a CYC. There are no better people than those you will meet in our work.

5. DETACHMENT. In a paradoxical way, we are connected by the opposite of connection. Sometimes, in our work, learning to disconnect is as important as learning to connect. Detachment is defined as: Separation, disengagement, impartiality, objectivity, neutrality. We are connected to each other because we need each other to remind us, constantly, that we are not the ones who hurt them so badly they need treatment for their hearts and minds. Their anger lunges toward us, but was not caused by us.

We are connected because we know when we hear some child or youth cursing vindictives toward one of our team mates that it does not mean that they actually did what they young person says they did. And so we whisper in our teammates ear - "detach": Keep their anger separate from yours.

If we do not learn to construct our emotional barriers, to keep clear who is responsible for what, we cannot last in our work. And of course, if we cannot last, we cannot be connected.

And so we move rhythmically between connecting and detaching.

Connection # 6. ANXIETY – shared anxiety

We know all about: Uneasiness, worry, apprehension, foreboding, distress, fretfulness, disquiet, concern, tension, angst, dread, fear,

Our nervousness keeps us vigilant. Our anxiety keeps us from making assumptions. We know that quiet is not necessarily a good thing. We stay on our toes. We listen to everything; watch every gesture, and prowl around like a lurking jungle cat. We know we might have to “pounce” – interfere with potential chaos with gestures and/or words that we don’t have much time to think about.

No one else goes into a building which is totally familiar and approaches it like someone on safari in the jungle. We give each other the same glances we see cops on t.v. give each other when they break into a house. Only they have weapons. All we have is our well founded suspicion that they will not be able to stay safe if we don’t stay on top of them. And so we do. And we count on our team mates to do the same. We are connected because we cannot afford any weak links.

7. NEEDS – theirs and ours

Abraham Maslow spent his life trying to figure out how all of humanity was connected; what bound the human species together. Maslow’s elegant theory of Basic Needs pointed out how we strive both individually and collectively to have our needs met.

It's part of on-the-job training 101: Learn the six basic needs: Survival; Safety and Security; Belonging; Love; Self-esteem; Self-actualization.

It is the job of the parent to meet all six needs for babies and young children. As children mature, it is the job of the parent to teach them how to get these needs met in safe and successful ways. If these needs had been successfully met for our children, we wouldn't know them.

And so we are connected to each other in our understanding that while meeting our own six needs on a continual basis, we are challenged with meeting the needs of children and youth who have learned to live without their needs being met, or who meet their needs in self destructive ways. Many of our young people have no idea that they deserve to have their needs met; they are threatened by their own vulnerability when they let us do what adults are supposed to do. They don't feel comfortable depending on others to meet their needs. But we are committed to doing what should have been done, and so we cook, and clean, go clothes shopping, read bedtime stories, come in on time, keep our word, post schedules, keep them without constantly threatening to throw them out, build on their strengths rather than their limitations, and find those "gifts" contained in the same brain that has been traumatized by maltreatment.

We are bound together because we get it. Chores are not scut work in child care. Chores are the act of saying you deserve clean, your muddled mind needs order at least on the outside, we want you to stay healthy, so pick up the broom and sweep, and we'll put up with all the muttering.

Every time we show up for work we are joined together by an hour by hour struggle to meet the needs of too many children by too few adults, respond to the behavior of children whose needs have not been met, and panic about our teenagers who shop in all the wrong stores in unsuccessful attempts to get their needs met.

And we connected because we have the same needs. We love the kids but meet our need for **survival** because although we don't get much, and we certainly don't get enough, we do get paid and thus can pay for food and shelter. We go to workshops and training to help us learn interventions to maintain our **safety and security**. We learn together, eat together, and laugh together and realize that work and CYC conferences are probably the only settings where we feel like we truly **belong**. We are reminded that we **love** the kids but do not look for love from them. We go to our stress management workshops to hear again how important it is to find your love away from work and then bring it in. It's not that the kids don't want to love us; it's that their own unmet needs leave them unable to love us. And so we love each other and love the work so we can love them. We look for even the slightest reinforcement that we've done some things right and thus feed our constantly wavering **self esteem**. And we strive through it all to reach our **potential** – to be all that we can be even though we'll never get even one minute to sit and contemplate our naval as those self actualized guru's that Maslow studied were able to do.

8. OUR DIFFERENCES. Look at any collection of CYC's and you'll see a motley crew. We are actually connected by our differences, because the needs of our clients demand that we not be clones. We've got Type A's and Type B's; We've got Right brain's and Left brain's; We've got introverts and extroverts; In working styles we've got Tortoise's, Hares and Thoroughbreds; We've got our assertive team members, as well as our whiners; our chronically pissed; our passive-aggressive's.

Thus, our world is arranged like the rest of the world: nature is nothing if not diverse. Out there in nature we have our anteaters, aardvarks, spotted leopards and striped zebras; three toed sloths and winged birds of prey. In our group homes, foster homes, and institutions we have an equally sparkling array of various forms of humanity: the solemn and the ridiculous; the creative and the stodgy; the rigid and the wishy-washy; the

outgoing and the introverted; the loud and the quiet. And it is this variety that allows us the greatest opportunity to connect with our diverse children and families, because it is definitely Different Strokes for Different Folks while we hunt for ways to connect.

9. YEARNING: Craving, longing, aching, strong desiring,

We yearn to give kids what they deserve; we yearn for our Families to learn to have needs met in ways that are socially acceptable and actually successful. We yearn to be able to do what is required to stop the pain for our clients. We go about our jobs differently, and although we have different positions/titles, but we are joined in our quest. We ache for those we are trying to help.

10. OPENNESS. Everyone wants “the manual”. The source containing “the” answers. But it is clear that no such source exists. There are many answers, but none that are always clear, none that always work, none that apply to everyone. So we remain open, to others, to new ideas when ours aren’t working.

The fact that no kid is like any other kid, that no situation is exactly like any other, that even the same kid is not the same from one minute to the next is interesting, challenging, frustrating, sometimes overwhelming – but – it plants the understanding that we will never know it all, we will never have a supply of guaranteed interventions that will work with all kids in all situations at all times, and so we remain open. Without openness we’d lose our ability to connect with some of our puzzling and wonderfully complicated kids.

There is a Buddhist concept I am very fond of – you’ll have to check with your resident Buddhist for a full understanding – but I’ll give you a brief and inadequate introduction.

It’s known as “skillful means”. The concept is that the ability to bring out the potentialities of different people is achieved by statements or actions which are adjusted to their needs and

adapted to their capacity for comprehension. We learn to speak a truth in whatever way another person will be able to understand it.

Such an idea, and such a skill, will keep us open to our peers to see if they can provide a way of understanding something that we struggle with, and open to our young people to learn how we can adjust information in ways that reach them, that connect with them.

11. UNDERSTANDING. Both the Native Americans and my professional mentor, Carl Rogers taught the enormous value and effectiveness of “empathy”. The Native Americans used the metaphor of “walking a mile in someone else’s moccasins”; Rogers referred to “empathic understanding”. We get so stressed out knowing what it’s like to be us, working with them, that we sometimes forget to wonder what it would be like to be them, living with us. To help them, we must understand that **everything they do makes sense.** I think the first supervisor I ever had is responsible for my ability to stay in our field for over fifty years. Whenever I became frustrated and overwhelmed with a particular client, he would take me over to “pull the file”. What had happened to that young person to bring them into care? How does an understanding of their trauma, their neglect, their particular form of abuse shine a light on the meaning of their symptomatic behavior? Of course. Looking at things through their eyes helped me make sense of what seemed absurd in their thinking, or behavior.

We are able to keep loving them because we keep working on understanding them. And because we are different from each other, we can turn to one of our colleagues who seems to have a better understanding of someone we are struggling with, to help us find the window into their hearts and minds that will help us hang in and keep trying. Maybe we should try another approach. Maybe even ask them – the client - to help us understand them. What a novel approach! Ask the victim him or her self to open a

window of understanding, help us take a look inside, give us more information about something they know that we don't.

12. TRUTH. We are connected by our willingness to face the unpleasant reality of our client's lives. No psycho-babble. No "b.s." Just the facts of the matter. Most people don't want to know or believe what some adults do to some children. But we know. The kids know. They need to know that we know, that we do not shy away from the very unpleasant details of the harm they've endured.

Sometimes others find CYC's a "bit much" at inter-disciplinary meetings because we say things differently. Directly. Bluntly. We learn from the kids: put it out there. People long to have their reality validated and not sugar coated, and the kids will cut you no slack if you start talking jargon or junk.

We're not afraid to talk about what happened and what's happening. We're there when they wake up at night and scream out their nightmares. We're there when they return from their visit and once again got lied to, set up, blamed for something they're not responsible for. We're there when their parent shows up drunk or high, or not at all. We're there when the phone calls come in, or don't. We believe them when they tell us what someone did to them. We've heard it before. We know it's true.

It's tempting to turn away and look for the rainbow. We need each other to give us the strength and the integrity to keep owning what's true. Very few things make people feel crazier than having their reality denied. This willingness to acknowledge what's true is one of the great gifts we can give to our children

13. HUMOR

As the archangel Michael (disguised as John Travolta) said in the silly movie Michael: You need to learn to laugh.

As bad as some of the things that happen can be, sometimes we're secretly enjoying the outrageousness just because we know how much fun it's going to be to share the story later.

I have some very good news from evidence-based practice. We all know about the "Stress hormone" – cortisol and all the bad things it can do to us. We also know about the fabulous laughter produced hormone – endorphins. It has been proven that endorphins counter-act cortisol. So enjoy the absurdities. Enjoy the ridiculousness. We are connected because we know that being "professional" has nothing to do with not being silly. We don't laugh because we want to; we laugh because we have to. We laugh at the clients, and we laugh at the situations we get into, and we laugh at ourselves. Good for us. It is my belief that you cannot last if you cannot laugh.

14. COMPASSION: Tenderness; Heart; Merciful; benevolent

Please notice that the root of the word is passion. This is not some namby-pampy way of responding to people.

We are connected because we respond with compassion to children that many in society would like to lock away and not have to confront. We show mercy when they spit on us, call us bitches, and tell us to drop dead. We are connected because we respond with compassion to their families – the drug addicts and alcoholics and incest perpetrators that our children love and want to return to if only they can do so safely. When others think we should respond to hurtful behavior with anger and punishment, we know that what the child or young person needs is tenderness. We know we don't forgive kids for what they've said to us or done to us because they deserve it, but because they are in need of maybe the first taste of "grace" in their lives.

We talked earlier of how we can tell if someone who wants to work with our kids has "it". The "it" is heart.

15. ANGER. Let's face it, we are the kings and queens of righteous indignation. We are connected because we share an amazing amount of anger at the way some children are treated. We are furious at the people who hurt them, and sometimes at the people who say they want to help them, but show no mercy, no understanding, have no heart. Sometimes the "system" makes us as angry as the clients do.

There is so much to be mad about, that we need each other to vent, to spout off, and to help us sublimate our extreme anger into extreme action to help those who are hurt, as well as help those who hurt them to find better ways to deal with their challenges.

16. REALITY

One of the reasons CYC's have trouble participating in meetings, I believe, is because they know more about the reality of the harm that's been done from abuse and neglect than others sometimes want to hear about. It's easier to blame the symptomatic behavior from their mental and emotional wounds on the inadequacies of the caretakers – foster parents or CYC's – than to face up to how much damage has been done. We know why it's a crime: we live with the effects of the criminal behavior every day.

At the same time, it's hard for direct caretakers to listen to platitudes, or diagnostic psychobabble, when discussing kids who spit on them last night, woke up with a nightmare, wet the bed or smeared feces on the wall. The real life consequences of maltreatment are seen, heard, and felt every minute of every day by CYC's. It's different than talking to a kid in an office for an hour, or having the ability to send them home from school. For us, it's in your face 24/7.

And frankly, some people don't want to know what we know. And so we often experience the subtle condescension or dismissal of our insights or feel the discussion turning to a failure to

maintain the milieu as others would wish, while we recognize that what we see, what we hear, what we smell, what we feel, is real.

And so CYC's need to gather together – after work, at conferences, around a publication to be with each other, to share our stories and realize that none of our colleagues will do anything but nod with empathy and total belief.

17. ENERGY. For CYC work, The Energizer Bunnies should apply. Some display the necessary energy because they are still young, new, perky. Others – in a nod to us Oldies - because their batteries stay charged. We dinosaurs stay charged up by being with each other and with those of you who are just starting. We stay up for the task by reading Child Care Journal articles, settling in with a newsletter, checking in with CYC online to read the familiar questions and quandaries; to be part of the struggle to get it right for our kids.

I've always noticed that we keep our energy up because when CCW's see each other they connect – they hug, they sit and stand close, they tell new and old stories, and feed off each other's energy. The emotional and spiritual fuel to do the work is as important as the knowledge and wisdom required.

18. WONDER. I think CYC's fit all the definitions of wonder, which is: To think or speculate curiously, and sometimes doubtfully; To wonder about the truth of something; To be filled with awe; to marvel; A cause of surprise, astonishment. A feeling of amazement, puzzled interest, or reverent admiration; A remarkable or extraordinary phenomenon, deed or event.

Which make all who do the work with love and persistence nothing short of **wonderful**. Excellent; grand; marvelous; exciting; and a wonder to behold

19. OPTIMISM. If we're going to last in our work, we must choose to see the glass as half full! Attitude is as much as part of

our work as checking chores, helping with homework, and teaching how to get along and settle disputes.

Perhaps you've heard someone say: "I can't help it – that's just how I think". Well, that's just pathetic. Of course we can help how we think. Attitudes don't just "happen"; Attitudes are chosen. If we're going to last, if we want to end our career with as much zeal for aiming to give our clients what they truly deserve, we must pay close attention to how we look at things. Under stress, it's easy to slip into negative, glass-half-empty thinking. We need to stay connected to our values, our strong beliefs in the value of helping and offering kids a connection to caring adults as nature intended.

20. RESPECT. The wonderful "person-centered" Psychologist Carl Rogers taught that all human beings deserve "Unconditional Positive Regard". That doesn't mean that we approve of everything they are or everything they do. It means that we value them, esteem them, as children of the Creator – capable of good and not-so-good – but always capable of change. We appreciate their unique journey and all that has gone into causing them to be who there are. We offer them affection, consideration, and kindness. We respect both our clients and our colleagues. Respect keeps people close; disrespect causes distance.

21. KINDNESS. The Old Testament Prophet Micah: What does the Lord require of thee? Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

Walking humbly, of course, is no problem. The tasks we are confronted with daily – repairing the damage from abuse and neglect, trying to build in strength and resiliency for the years ahead – these keep us continually humble.

We've missed the opportunity for justice. Child abuse is a crime where the victims of the crime do the time.

Our young children, tween kids, and teens, are all in desperate need of kindness. If life had offered it to them, we wouldn't know them. And so it falls to us. Kindness not because it has been "earned", but because it's the only "glue" that will help them, heal them, and give them at least a better chance at a satisfying life than if they hadn't come our way.

Conclusion

The clever among you divined a pattern as you read. Indeed, put all of the ingredients in our glue together and they spell: **CHILD AND YOUTH CARE WORK**

Commonality

Hope

Integrity

Love

Detachment

Anxiety

Needs

Differences

Yearning

Openness

Understanding

Truth

Humor

Compassion

Anger

Reality

Energy

Wonder

Optimism

Respect

Kindness