# Enduring Wisdom: Towards a Comprehensive History of Professional Child and Youth Care

**James P. Anglin and Larry K. Brendtro**

## Abstract

In this article we trace some of the important eras in our child and youth care history and highlight a number of the early and more recent contributors to our evolving field whose legacies deserve to be passed on. We can trace the roots of our work to at least the Byzantine era and the founding of the first group care homes and orphanages. The notion of consilience is used to link longstanding practice wisdom to the findings of modern science. The movement towards community-based, family-supportive child and youth care is likely to be dominant in the future, especially in "majority world" countries, and this is to be welcomed. At the same time, we suggest there are good reasons to value and find potential in good residential care. It is proposed that the 2,000 year history and unique role of residential care may offer a defining and unifying theme for the future of our discipline and profession.

## Keywords

### Article history

## Corresponding author:

James P. Anglin janglin@uvic.ca

# Introduction

Each year, thousands of students enter schools of Child and Youth Care, Child and Youth Work, Child and Youth Development, Child and Youth Counselling or Child and Youth Studies at colleges and universities across North America and around the world. The large majority of those beginning their formal education have little or no sense of the impressive history of this field of work and professional discipline. Those of us who have been in the field of child and youth care (CYC), and who have been following and researching the development of this now global profession, need to pass on to the new generations of practitioners a sense of the enduring wisdom and values of this foundational field of practice, and to share some of the inspiring stories of our past in order to inform the present and help to shape a better future for children, families and communities.

One of the great tragedies of our CYC history is that we have had many charismatic leaders around the globe who create programs, and even movements, that often die at the end of their 'reign'. We have not often created organisational structures that would consistently and reliably pass on the wisdom and powerful practices of this discipline. However, with the advent of an increasing number of formal educational programs, including at the Master's and Doctoral levels, and accessible means of professional communication (e.g., CYC-NET), a growing body of research and scholarly thinking is being created and shared within the CYC profession. But as with Rome, CYC was not built in a day. There is a need to situate this process of knowledge development more clearly within the almost two-thousand year emergence of this unique and continually evolving discipline.

Musicians rarely start out blank. They learn the notes, scales, and principles of music. They know something about the history of music and they build upon it. In contrast, every new youth worker seems to start as a tabula rasa ('blank slate'), and to the extent that they are not versed in 'tried and true' principles and practices, they end up 'doing their own thing'. This reality creates significant problems at many levels: workers do not practice effectively; agencies and programs do not work consistently or efficiently; and worst of all, children, families and communities are not well served. While history by itself is not enough, the transmission of practice wisdom is an essential feature of any worthy discipline or profession; the people we work with should not be subject to ad hoc 'trial and error' and 'hit and miss' techniques.

# The Origins of Child and Youth Care Work

It is certainly true that the care and upbringing of young human beings has been an important task of humankind since our earliest beginnings. We are a species that, relative to others in the animal kingdom, has a long period of total dependence on the care of others. It is also true that we have surviving written records of how such care was provided for just the past five thousand years, or so, and we only have any account in Euro-Western history of the care of children outside their own biological family for about two thousand years (Miller, 2009).

We need to acknowledge that there are surely many traditions of extra-familial care around the world, many of which have been based in oral traditions, with little or no written record. Some of these histories are now being told and documented, and this is important work that needs to be done. In this article, we draw primarily upon the written accounts to be found in early Greek documents, European literature, and the past century of North American child and youth care publications.

While there are many ways one could approach the evolution of thinking and writing about the care of young people over the past two millennia, identifying some broad historical eras can perhaps assist in organising this overview.

# Pre- and Post-Constantine Eras

There is ample evidence that the ancient Greeks developed quite sophisticated guardianship and child welfare laws and policies, at least for the minority who were classed as 'citizens' (Miller, 2009). One can also see in the use of educated slaves as tutors and mentors for the children of wealthier Greek families perhaps the earliest Euro-Western form of child and youth care workers. Indeed, some contemporary child and youth care practitioners still perform similar functions for affluent families (as 'nannies' or 'au pairs'), and many provide similar types of support for families with children who have various forms of 'special needs'.

A major development occurred during the course of the Byzantine Empire when Emperor Constantine the First converted to Christianity, and built the first orphanage ('orphanotropheion') in Constantinople in the mid-4th century. Interestingly, historians have documented the creation of many 'group homes' (the term used by historians) that existed as 'satellites' (a modern term!) of the large orphanage (Miller, 2009). This innovation of what is now called

'institutional', 'residential' or 'congregate' care marks an important innovation in the evolution of child and youth care as an occupation and profession.

Indeed, the first orphanage in Constantinople was under the auspices and administration of the Bishop of Constantinople, and thus the notion of profession referred to the profession of one's faith in God. Accordingly, a central focus of the earliest orphanages and other group care settings was the 'saving of souls', and the direct care workers were religious people, whether monks, nuns, or lay people working under their direction.

It wasn't until 1421 that the Ospedale de Innocenti, in Florence, Italy, the first orphanage in Europe, was founded. In the decades to follow, many foundling homes, children's hospitals, and orphanages of various types were created throughout Europe and in the colonies in other parts of the world. The central guiding philosophy of these homes remained largely religious as did the motivation of those who worked in these institutions.

## Pre-and Post-Modern Eras

The term 'modern' is used in many disciplines to refer to a 'seismic shift' that occurred with the advent of the industrial era in Europe. This dramatic change that affected the lives of individual citizens and families in profound ways began in the mid-16th century, however there is less consensus about when it ended and the post-modern era was born.  Historians tend to use such terms as 'early modern' (e.g. up to the mid-18th century), 'late modern' (e.g. up to the early 1900s) and 'contemporary' (e.g. since 1900). Whatever specific markers one chooses to use, the advent of the modern era brought with it the dramatic impacts of an industrial revolution and the gradual shifting of social philosophy from a highly religious orientation to an increasingly secular ethos. Of course, there was a long period of tensions and strife associated with these changes, all of which brought new challenges to the lives of young people, their families and communities.

## Pre- and Post-Rousseau Eras

Another social 'tectonic shift' occurred with the publication of the writings of Geneva-born Jean-Jacques Rousseau, especially the highly influential book *Emile, or Treatise on Education* (1762 [1979]). His views on the education and upbringing of children represent a major departure from prior thinking and

practices in the area of child-rearing and education. Indeed, Rousseau has been considered by some as 'the founder of modern thought'. Ironically, while his views on the care and education of children were quite revolutionary, he placed his own offspring into orphanages. However, he inspired Pestalozzi who applied these ideas in residential settings for street children (Silber, 1960).

## Contemporary Era

While we tend to use the notion of 'contemporary' to refer to 'what is happening now,' in historical terms 'contemporary' can be used to refer to a longer span of time, such as the most recent 50 or even 100 years. In this sense, most of the history of child and youth care work in North America which we shall address in this article pertains to the past 100 years, since 1935 and the publication of *Wayward Youth in the United States* by August Aichhorn.

The Roman poet Juvenal born in the 1st Century described the link between scientific evidence and philosophical wisdom: 'Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another'. Early North American pioneers in child and youth work, such as August Aichhorn (1935), Gisela Konopka (1949), and Fritz Redl (1966), intuitively discovered the essential principles for what today is called positive youth development. Their historic importance comes because these reformers challenged punitive autocratic notions that prevailed in Western culture. Of course, many Indigenous peoples had greater depth of understanding since rearing respectful children was the primary value of these societies, and the documenting of this aspect of North American and global history is very much needed.

## Consilience of Research on Positive Youth Development:

Examples from Practice Wisdom and Modern Science

| Developmental Need | Early Pioneer | Recent Research |
|---|---|---|
| **Belonging** | Johann Pestalozzi | Roy Baumeister |
| **Mastery** | Maria Montessori | Carol Dweck |
| **Power** | Janusz Korczak | Edward Deci |
| **Purpose** | Kurt Hahn | William Damon |
| **Safety** | John Bowlby | Bessel van der Kolk |
| **Adventure** | Jane Addams | Valerie Reyna |

The accompanying table highlights the consilience of practice wisdom and emerging science (Brendtro & Freado, 2016; Strother, Maikoetter, Freado & Brendtro, 2016). In all cultures and eras, children have had the same basic developmental needs. Four of these are products of the higher biosocial brain of homo sapiens whose very survival has depended upon a supportive human community. In psychological terminology, these are brain-based drives for attachment, achievement, autonomy, and altruism. These drives are designed to meet needs for belonging, mastery, power, and purpose.

Two additional developmental needs are anchored in the brain stem of all living creatures: avoidance and approach. Avoidance involves experiences that produce pain and threat while approach involves experiences that produce pleasure and well-being. These survival level drives are tied to needs for safety and adventure. Ironically, child rearing philosophies in Western culture exploited these needs by relying on pain and pleasure to coerce and reinforce behaviour. In contrast, traditional Indigenous cultures were built around values and support systems that better met the needs of all children for both safety and adventure.

Following on the table above, some examples of the consilience between the wisdom of representative child and youth care pioneers and the findings of noted researchers include:

- Belonging was the core value of Pestalozzi (1897 [2002]) who reclaimed street children following the Napoleonic wars as he operated with the principle, love is the essence of education. Two centuries later, psychologist Roy Baumeister (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) documented the research foundation for belonging as a prime developmental need.

- Mastery was the goal of Maria Montessori (1967) who dedicated her career to cultivating the absorbent minds of children from slums of Italy and India. Psychologist Carol Dweck (2006) challenged the myth that intelligence is a fixed inherited trait since engagement in learning produces brain growth.

- Power involved self-governance in Polish orphanages developed by Janusz Korczak (1901). Edward Deci (1980) conducted research to support Self Determination Theory, showing that individuals have intrinsic motivation to thrive while extrinsic reward and punishment can diminish this drive.

- Purpose in the lives of adolescents involved finding their *grande passion* and Samaritan impulse as shown by Kurt Hahn (1959) who established Outward Bound in Scotland. William Damon (2008) studied how the need

for purpose among young people is fulfilled by commitment to some cause greater than self.

- Safety was identified by John Bowlby (1950) as the biological foundation of attachment in infants and children. Emerging research on relational trauma by Bessel van der Kolk (2014) shows the need of children for security and protection as a buffer against stress and a basis for healing trauma.

- Adventure is the goal of adolescents and leads to delinquency unless adults tap the spirit of youth, according to Jane Addams (1909) who founded the juvenile court. As Valerie Reyna (Reyna, Chapman, Dougherty & Confrey, 2012) showed, the brains of teenagers seek risk and stimulation and must be regulated through mature adult bonds.

Over the past century, there has been a call from important CYC figures (e.g., Henry Maier, 1987; James Whittaker and Albert Trieschman, 1972) for the identification of a unifying theme, or theory, at the heart of our practice, teaching and learning. What is it that has necessitated the creation of this profession and spawned hundreds of programs across North America, and thousands around the globe? Are there elements of a unifying theme that give spirit and substance to child and youth care practice, education and research?

A prime candidate for an essential element of CYC is the notion of respect. A culture of respect is a way of dealing with young people quite different from the more prevalent power-oriented, control-coercive orientation. A current view of socialisation is that the socialisation process is an active process where young people themselves are forming their own culture independent of what adults are transmitting (Corsaro, 2011). Each person is helping to co-construct a view of the world, which also applies to groups of professionals as they are trying to develop a community practice, or a professional learning community. Such a collective process requires a respectful ethos.

One of the challenges of this more open approach to understanding a professional learning community is that even when people are responsible for creating their own sense of what is 'good', 'right' or 'true', the enduring wisdom and enduring values of the professional culture need to be passed on. Imagine if every hospital reinvented its own procedures for sterilization, patient safety, and so on. What they would be doing is discarding all of their hard-won cultural wisdom that came through hundreds of years of their profession.

## Is the Provision of Residential Care a Defining (and Unifying) Feature of CYC?

The movement towards community-based, family-supportive child and youth care (such as the Isibindi program in South Africa) is likely to be dominant in the rapidly growing 'majority world', where the numbers of children are growing at far greater rates than in more demographically stable societies. In many ways, this approach is getting back to the principles that guided the early leaders in the CYC field. For example, Don Bosco writes in his old age to the young priests who no longer immersed themselves in the world of youth, but sit in their own little offices communicating across a desk. Or at Fresh Air Camp, William Morse (2008) required that a psychologist follow a child around for an entire day before testing them. At the end of the day, they probably didn't have to test the child because they knew so much about him.

At the same time, an important part of our history as a discipline has come from work in out-of-home settings where young people lived with care workers 24 hours a day. Residential care can be understood as the exemplar of what is now called the ecological model of development because no other micro-intervention begins so intensely with the peer group, the teaching process, the parenting/formation process, and relationship-in-community. The power of using the knowledge that has developed out of residential work is that, by definition, almost all other sources of knowledge are not as highly consilient. For example, teachers can look at rows of children in a classroom and create theories of education without knowing what is going on in the parenting relationships, without knowing what is going on in the peer relationships, and without knowing what the child is bringing from their family and community.

Given the degree of antagonism being expressed in recent times towards out-of-home care, why should we continue to believe in the value and potential of good residential care? There are several reasons.

First and foremost, it is very clear that many young people cannot live safely and with proper growth and development in their own families, nor in foster families. In general, it would be more accurate to replace the term 'foster care breakdown' with the term 'misplacement'. What is usually called 'problem behaviour' in foster children is usually 'misplacement behaviour'. If we cycle a child through 10, 20 and even 30 or more foster homes, we need to ask ourselves 'who is the slow learner here?'.

A second reason is that quality residential environments can help young people turn their lives around, redirecting their trajectories away from deteriorating mental health or escalating destructive behaviours into positive developmental pathways.

A third reason for the need to understand and promote good residential care is that it has existed for 2,000 years, and thus is quite likely to continue to be a part of our social care system for some time to come – perhaps forever (Barth, 2005). Therefore, let us do it well; our young people deserve good care and we are negligent if we don't do our best to provide it.

We would be so bold as to propose that child and youth care is the 'master profession' from which related education and youth services fields have emerged. All specialised disciplines can be understood as a subset of the whole residential experience. Most professionals focus on small parts of the ecology of childhood: the school, the peer group, care-giving/parenting, or the broader community. However, an informed residential group care program is designed to meet the holistic needs of children across the life space. A residential placement may help distance the child from negative peers in the community. When the child's school experience has been destructive, this may be an opportunity to re-establish a positive educational environment.

Extensive research by the University of Michigan (Gold & Osgood, 1992) has shown that even if other areas of a child's life, say the family, is flailing and failing, a child can establish success in the school ecology; that becomes the predictor of outcome. Thus, a residential setting is a kind of metaphor; it is a total living, learning environment where the entire ecology can have a positive impact.

Of course, many CYC workers will still specialise in working in one or another domain. A community-based CYC practitioner may be much more active in the parental and recreational realm; the social educator in the skill development and knowledge transmission realm; the group counsellor in building positive peer groups. And faith-based practitioners will work at linking youth into their religious and cultural community. But the fact is that much of the powerful knowledge on which such practice is based came from those who saw the big picture because they lived totally immersed in the lives of young people – in residential settings of various types. To what degree we will need to have separate residential institutions, with cottages and shifts of staff, is open to debate. However, with 2,000 years of history behind us, they—in some form—

are likely to continue to make an essential contribution. Thus, we need to understand such 'total environments' as offering not only powerful milieu for care, but also important opportunities for developing knowledgeable and ecologically proficient workers.

It is not enough to understand what happens in the family; it is not enough to understand what the life of delinquent peers is about; it is not enough for school personnel to work on their educational objectives. Each of these becomes powerless to the extent that they are disconnected from the broader ecology of the youth across their whole life space. Residential care settings of the future need to be places that are intense living and healing environments, and probably assessment centres as well. They must also be intentional and intensive training centres for the staff so that they can come to understand children in their total life space and across developmental dimensions.

By definition, nothing can be more complex than the total milieu. Everything else is a splinter of that, and to the extent that we understand what is needed in the total environment for young people, we can create powerful interventions. But, if we are just keeping busy chasing silo-based strategies and techniques, even if they are 'evidence-based,' these will lack the cohesive power that comes when one can impact the whole life experience of the child.

## In Conclusion

Pioneers in CYC understood that if we give up on our most difficult young people, we not only weaken them but ourselves as well. Those who abandon a difficult youth will never learn how to succeed with similar youth in the future. But if we can work with the most challenging youth, and walk through the storm with them, we and our fellow workers will be able to respond more compassionately and effectively to the next young person who comes along.

Our predecessors have much wisdom to share; we must reclaim these enduring values and pass on our learning to those who will come after us.

## About the author

James P. Anglin, PhD, is a Professor in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, Canada. His recent research focuses on the implementation of therapeutic residential care, quality enhancement in group care, and understanding psycho-emotional pain and pain-based behaviour of youth in care utilizing dialogic and grounded theory approaches

Larry K. Brendtro, PhD, is Director of the Resilience Academy and Professor Emeritus at Augustana University, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He has broad experience in child and youth care, including fourteen years as president of Starr Commonwealth in Michigan and Ohio. He is author of numerous books and articles in this field.

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