

# Relational Language in Child and Youth Care: Lifespace or Battlefield?

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## Abstract

*This article is a reflective inquiry about the prevalent and continued use of military or battle-themed language that contrasts characteristics of relational child and youth care (CYC) practice. Examples of common phrases and words used in CYC are identified and historical and contextual considerations are discussed to highlight the need for more congruence in CYC practice. Readers are encouraged to consider how CYC practitioners describe, record, and reflect on interactions with children, youth, and families to avoid reliance on those unconsciously rooted in references to combat or war.*

## Keywords

*Child and youth care; language; noticing; congruence, relational; meaning*

## Child and Youth Care: Lifespace or Battlefield?

During a discussion over coffee about child and youth care, a colleague shared they had been “deployed” to another program. We questioned the use of this word to describe the process of providing transitional or ratio support (meaning the number of adults present with youth) within the context of group care for youth. The term deploy



conjures images of preparing to defend, strategize, mobilize or armor one's self in response to conflict or attack because two sides or groups hold incongruent or uncompromising positions. It is a troubling word to describe work between child and youth care practitioners and young people.

We discussed how this language could negatively impact children, youth and families, imagining how they might feel after hearing such language used to describe their lives and experiences. In fact, military language often links to power and control, othering or victimizing people, winning or losing a fight, or placing blame. This conversation caused us to listen and notice other words used to describe child and youth care practice, and we were alarmed by how pervasive battle-ready terminology is in discussions and literature related to working with individuals and families in the human service fields.

### **Examples we have heard repeatedly in practice**

The following list provides some examples of what we have heard, along with the assumed meaning in CYC practice that could be used instead:

- Front line (direct practice with children, youth and families)
- In the trenches (working directly with young people or families)
- AWOL (youth not adhering to a curfew or absent without permission)
- Half the battle or uphill battle (change occurring or dealing with behavior)
- Hill to die on (power struggles)
- Shoot yourself in the foot (making a mistake)
- Blew it out of the water (above and beyond or outside the plan)
- Tactical plan (determined or intended outcomes)
- Take the reins (charge in or lead the way)
- Stationed (assigned a position or place)
- Maneuvering (winning or means to and end)
- Bite the bullet (taking a risk, take initiative, or trying something new)
- Victory (winning or being right)



- Conquer (addiction or behavior modification)
- Blow up or explosive (describing challenging behavior)
- Call to action (inviting people to a cause or an intended outcome).

We know this is not an exhaustive list but it shows the many ways military language is used to describe child and youth care practice, instead of the words or phrases noted in the brackets. Language is contextual and powerful and militarized language is incongruent with a relational philosophy.

### **Incongruence with Child and Youth Care**

The profession of child and youth care is situated in relational practice. Twenty-five characteristics organized within a framework of being, interpreting and doing, illustrate the intricacy of this philosophy (Garfat et al., 2019). Child and youth care practitioners aim to move into the “space in-between us” while making meaning alongside others (Garfat, 2008). There is a focus on being flexible, adaptive and creative while making connections in the lifespaces where individuals and families live and grow. Ethics and boundaries are inherent in the work. Knowing this is the core tenant of our practice, we questioned why this language is so prevalent. Intentionally noticing made us acutely aware of the problem. We considered how we could do better in our own practice, while also highlighting our concerns with others.

### **Why is military language so common?**

There are a few plausible causes.

First, the lifespaces of individuals are the workspaces of child and youth care practitioners, evident through policy and legislation. Policies may prohibit touch, legislation may inform ratios of practitioners to youth, and both may prevent practitioners from working alone. These documents can also dictate how things are expressed and recorded. Throughout history, the Indian Act has been used to disenfranchise and control Indigenous people, and to this day, legislation impacts the amount of Indigenous children in governmental care. If you read legislation and policy



closely, you will notice links to military and colonial language. Consequently, rules and systems can make working relationally challenging.

Second, military language is intertwined with colonization and power. Colonization means that lands were conquered, and people were displaced and harmed. The resulting systems, many of which we work in, were designed to control and oppress rules, labels and restrictions. The treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada is a prime example. Combative or conflict laden language can create a sense of being empowered or resilient when overcoming something or dealing with a problem, however it can also impede reconciliation, empathy, or connection.

Third, military language is colloquial and embedded within our psyche. It can also be pervasive as many news headlines, media sources, and reasons for self, individual or group advocacy require an expression of power being sought or communicated. Likely most practitioners do not intend to be adversarial when using such language, but we still need to question the intention and relevance to child and youth care. The overuse of acronyms and battlefield terminology is problematic and often contradicts typical experiences. For example, a family does not refer to their child coming home late as being AWOL nor does the parent describe their role as being on the front-line.

Fourth, militarization is not unique to child and youth care. It is embedded in other human service professions such as healthcare where patients “battle” or “fight” an illness. Marey-Sarwan, et al., (2021) identified an increase of war metaphors used by nurses during the early stages of the pandemic as a way to cope with the unknown impacts for them and those that they were caring for. Globally medical professionals were referred to as “heroes” during this time of crisis and complex systemic trauma. We share this, not to minimize the importance of nursing, but to illustrate other ways military language is used to express meaning. Similarly, the use of war or conflict-laden metaphors has been noted in social work practice (Beckett, 2003). We could share many other examples.

## **Aiming for congruence**

Battle-themed terms have and continue to be used in literature, report writing, case planning, and in day-to-day communication, but this does not mean that we should continue without consideration of how these terms contradict or can undermine the complex and dynamic relational work of child and youth care practice. A beloved colleague used to say “context is everything” and language is part of every context. To refer to a program as “community-based” for many would signify a setting or image of a neighborhood, whereas for others the term “based” conjures up references to a station, post, or headquarters. Both examples are accurate descriptions that refer to a location, however each elicits different meanings or perspectives. Gharabaghi (2008) notes that without awareness and attention to chronic patterns of language and the use of jargon in child and youth care practice, the intentionality of an interaction can lead to potentially harmful or misleading communication (p. 284). However, a more intentional use of relational language could mitigate some of the disconnect and allow for more authentic interactions.

We offer some suggestions for consideration:

- We can refrain from using and normalizing militarized language in our work.
- Programs can review how language is used in policy, program documentation, and on websites. If needed, adaptations can be made toward more inclusive and strength-based language.
- Practitioners can actively consider their choice of words when working with children, youth and families. Every effort should be made to be relational and kind.
- Educators and trainers can intentionally discuss language pointing out origins, multiple meanings, and power implications for CYC practice.
- Writing about and researching CYC practice can challenge typical norms and standards linking to power and control.
- We can focus on best practices that are relational, anti-oppressive, and process oriented.



- We can listen to children, youth and families and mirror their use of language.
- We can advocate for change within all systems.

### Final thoughts

Some of the core characteristics of child and youth care practice are noticing, meaning making and intentionality. We have made a conscious effort to shift our own language, name and challenge when we hear military language from other people, and we demonstrate alternate words that can be used to communicate meaning. We hope our observations encourage you to also notice, reflect on the implications of using military language, and make every effort to instead use relational language in your child and youth care practice. We believe it is time to stop using language that makes our work sound like we are on a battlefield.

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