

Transitions and Early Learning

Jenny McGrath

I met Anne many years ago and despite the passing time and now physical distance between us, we are still connected. I requested her permission to discuss our relationship and asked if she would like to be involved in the process. We talked about what we learned from one another and she read and edited the draft before it was submitted. It is important for me to start with this information because one of things I learned from working with Anne is that honesty, genuineness and transparency matter. I learned plenty from Anne, likely much more than she learned from me, so it is impossible to share everything here. As such, I have chosen five key lessons.

First, whenever possible, include family when working with youth. In Anne's case, there were already several family members positively engaged in her life. They became regulars in our program playing games, attending events or simply hanging out. I too had many visits to their family home or together we would do things in the community. I also had the privilege of supporting Anne when her first child was born and attended important events like christenings and birthday parties with her and her family. Anne's family and I helped her move into her first apartment and we were available for support in navigating this important transition. I knew that the involvement of Anne's family mattered and I believe Anne felt more



March 2019
ISSN 1605-7406

support and accountability because her family and I were on the same page.

However, one significant family member who lived in another province was not involved, but as is often the case, she still impacted Anne's thoughts, emotions and choices. So, we talked about her and when Anne was ready, she made contact. These interactions were emotional and sometimes challenging but Anne was able to express long held hurts and process through them. This proved to be a healthy and positive transition. I learned that youth work needs to include family even when the family member(s) cannot literally be in the picture (as can happen with death, distance, court orders or incarceration). The absence, if not acknowledged, can be very detrimental but the inclusion can create space for healing. Although I had minimally engaged with families in previous roles, working with Anne and her family with intention and purpose was new for me. I began to question all I knew about child and youth care and because of this experience; I pursued a graduate degree in family support. Now family informs all of my work.

Second, create individualized experiences. Far too often, I hear people say that we should treat all youth in a program the same. I disagree. In order to make meaningful connections and develop genuine relationships, we need to dedicate time and attention to the individual. Otherwise, how else can the interactions be genuine? How can a youth feel important and special? Anne and I did many fun things together. We spent a lot of time in the kitchen and she gradually gained confidence in cooking, but only after much experimentation, epic failures, and laughter. I was thrilled to have a delicious meal of spaghetti at her apartment, with a sauce that I taught her to make! I introduced Anne to live theatre and helped her register for her first dance class. We learned a lot about one another through these interactions and activities. I am always excited to hear that Anne is



spending the day at the beach with her children, collecting beach rocks and then going home to paint them. She is a wonderful mother and is consciously creating those special moments for her family. But all interactions were not about fun and activity. We also devoted one-to-one time to work on goals, have tough conversations, and to process her fears. I know these conversations were possible because Anne felt safe and supported in our relationship. I was able to be honest with her when I was disappointed or frustrated by her choices. At the same time, I could celebrate her successes. Our relationship had space for both.

Third, let youth lead and walk alongside them when they change direction. Anne is very smart but she often doubted this. When we met, Anne was not registered in an education program. I wanted her to complete her high school diploma and I worked very hard to make this happen. With some trepidation, Anne registered in a grade-equivalent degree program but soon after decided she could not do it. I was disappointed and we talked about this but the reality is that she was just not ready. I supported her decision. But I also did much reflecting and apologized if I had pushed her too hard. A few years ago, Anne registered for her grade-equivalent degree and she is now a college graduate. I like to think some of the early seeds we planted together helped her feel confident to try again. But the goal and the decision to follow through had to be hers, not mine. An important lesson for sure.

Fourth, always give youth credit when they make positive choices. Anne had struggled through much of her adolescence and made several questionable decisions. Some of which resulted in dire consequences. I met her when she was almost eighteen, at a time in her life, when she was ready to make significant changes. These changes were not easy and in order to successfully move forward, Anne decided that she had to sever



most of her friendships. In essence, she had to recreate a social network. It was an isolating and lonely process, but she stayed the course.

I know my relationship with Anne was meaningful and helpful but she made the choice to change and she has followed through. What I noticed during this time was that I received much praise from my work with Anne (and this was nice to hear), but her efforts were rarely mentioned. I also noticed that when Anne struggled, more emphasis was placed on her. I often pointed out this discrepancy. Professionals need to stop taking credit when things go right and blaming youth when things go wrong. Instead, we should praise the youth for their efforts and when they struggle, consider what we can do differently.

Fifth, if it feels right for both of you, maintain connection after the 'job' ends. This sounds simple, but it is actually very complex. It comes back to my earlier point about transparency and honesty. I worked for an organization that understood that caring for youth (and families) does not stop when a youth turns eighteen or when the funding runs out. My supervisor trusted my judgment, but also expected open communication, reflection and debriefing.

Every interaction I had with Anne and her family was thoroughly processed with my team. Anne always knew this as well. When we wanted to do something out of the ordinary, which we did a lot, it was analyzed from multiple angles. For example, Anne asked me to be a bridesmaid. I was delighted to be asked but could not accept without first discussing it with my supervisor. Without getting into the particulars, we decided that it made much sense for me to accept her invitation, but we also set some parameters around my role. Our boundaries were fluid but they were always clear. Anne and I remained connected over the years because that is what Anne wanted. Of course, I wanted this too, but I did not take the lead on continuing our relationship. She did. Now that we are both adults,



and have known one another for almost twenty years, communication is more reciprocal. I have worked with many youth and families but have only maintained a connection with a few. There are many that I wonder about but have not heard from since we worked together. That is okay because I trust that our relationship, although brief, still holds meaning and purpose.

I carry these lessons into each and every interaction I have in my life. They have not only helped me a better child and youth care worker and educator, they have made me a better person. When I asked if there were other things that she hoped I learned from her, Anne added one: "I hope that I taught you that people can change. People can do bad things but they can change their life around when their desire to do so is greater than their impulse to do wrong". Indeed dear friend. Indeed. You taught me to remain hopeful. You reminded me that every person deserves love, care and compassion. I am privileged to know you and proud of all you have accomplished in your life.

AVAILABLE FROM THE CYC-Net PRESS

