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Termination Issues in Residential Placement

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Abstract

The termination phase of residential child care placement has a powerful effect on post-placement adjustment. This article reviews relevant literature from a range of helping/caring professions and outlines implications for managing termination with children and youth in care. Major themes are: termination elicits ambivalence and can manifest as behavioural regression; intervention during the termination phase can have significant impact; and the capacity of child and youth care workers to deal with separation issues must be considered.

Keywords: Termination, Discharge, Residential Placement, Child and Youth Care Work.

About three years after I went into adoption, I used to go down to the children's home, Riverside, to see if anyone was there I remembered, and took a big chunk out of the wall and I've still got it. In fact, I've heard the place is going to be pulled down, I think I'll go in first and ask for a nameplate. The chunk of wall is out in the shed somewhere. I couldn't part with it (Kohn, cited in Bullock, 1996: 300).

Introduction

Separations are part of life. However, children and youth in placement come into care through a premature and wounding separation from family. At the same time, an innate characteristic of child and youth care intervention is that it is time limited and temporary. We come into the lives of these young people, who have been forced to leave significant others, always with the goal of leaving them.

Like every therapeutic endeavour, one of the major challenges of our work is to engage young people and their families and then to disengage gracefully, in a manner that promotes the consolidation of gains made during placement. The literature of counselling and psychotherapy is rich with writings on the delicate yet critical nature of termination processes. Many authors see the ending of treatment as an important phase that can make or break an individual's capacity to maintain progress in the real world. Just a few examples of problems that may result from inadequate termination from child and youth care settings are: the young person who "ages out" of placement into independent living, who has had little opportunity to work through the anger about having been in care in the first place, that he/she refuses any aftercare support from staff; a preadolescent who returns home after a period of treatment with unrealistic fantasies who is quickly disappointed in his/her family and starts to act up again. The termination of residential placement presents all the same challenges as ending psychotherapy and more: because of the intense nature of the relationships formed in a place where children and youth live; because the youth and families in our care, whether voluntary clients or not, learn to rely on us in the day to day living of their lives; and finally, because separation is a major theme from the beginning.

If, as pointed out, past separations permeate every ending (Malekoff, 1997), young people in care carry a heavy burden of loss throughout the treatment process, which is only amplified in the anticipation of the termination of residential placement.

The purpose of this article is to summarize theoretical literature on termination processes and relate them to the experiences of young people in residential care. While many of the writings reviewed are drawn from the literature of other helping professions, they have significant implications for Child and Youth Care Workers. Three major themes that appear time and time again in the discussion of termination are: termination is rarely a smooth process; poor management of the end of treatment creates obstacles to healthy development after treatment; and our own capacity to deal with separation has a direct and dramatic impact on whether our clients can successfully process the end of placement.

Termination is Difficult

Termination is not just an ending, it is a critical, distinct phase of any treatment process (Wolberg, 1997). This phase begins when a young person and the staff working with them begin to anticipate the end of placement. For some, this lasts months or years, while others may only become aware of an impending discharge within days or even hours. This last phase should not be taken for granted, but has unique challenges and requirements of its own. Under ideal circumstances, placement ends when the young person, their workers, and the family can acknowledge the progress that has been made and feel ready to end treatment. Often, however, termination does not take place under these optimal conditions. In either case, termination elicits a range of responses from youth in placement. While a common tendency on the part of Child and Youth Care Workers is to frame a discharge as a positive graduation, most clients experience leaving residential placement with mixed feelings.

While no young person wants to stay in placement, leaving a residential setting provokes powerful and unpleasant feelings. The end of placement stimulates a rethinking of the reasons for coming into care in the first place and forces a young person to relive the past (Wolberg, 1977). For many young people, this is a painful and angry experience. Gordy-Levine (1990) explains that the four greatest calamities of childhood are: loss of love, loss of loved ones, and loss of power and loss of self-esteem. All these losses typically accompany the transition into placement. Young children tend to idealize parents and blame themselves, while adolescents experience rage at what they perceive as betrayal by family. Shaefer and Swanson (1988) state that the experience of placement is extremely difficult to master psychologically, and that the anticipation of discharge is disorganizing for this reason.

At the same time, young people often fear giving up the protection of a residential setting. They may feel extremely apprehensive about their capacity to function on the outside, especially in light of past failures. The longer a young person has been in care, the more severe this anxiety will be (Escoll, 1996). Leaving care also inflicts multiple, new losses. Discharge represents the giving up of valued relationships with staff and peers. It may also result in the loss of improved living conditions and access to enriched schooling and activities. Swanson and Schaefer (1988) see these as psychosocial, physical and socio-cultural losses. Not only is this painful in the present, these losses further contribute to the rekindling of "residual feelings that flow from past losses" (Malekoff, 1997: 166). The result of all this is an uncomfortable mixture of sadness, fear, anger, and excitement.

Because of the complex emotions it elicits, termination typically stimulates renewed behavioural difficulties in young people in placement, even those who have made remarkable progress. Common reactions are: reawakened dependency needs that may be expressed through old forms of acting out (regression) or the development of new adjustment problems (Rose & Fatout, 2003), forms of flight that range from avoidance to running away (I'll leave you first) (Malekoff, 1997); devaluation of the staff and the program (Meeks, 1971) and even self-destructive fantasies and behaviour (Meeks, 1971). Sometimes these reactions lead to premature discharge, because our programs may not tolerate or understand these forms of acting out. Rarely can a young person "terminate smoothly and with finality in one try" (Meeks, 1971). Even when ideal conditions are met, and a young person, their staff and their family agree to the termination, no young person leaves placement free of difficulties. "If residential placement continues until new behaviours are consolidated and setbacks never occur, it will never end" (Durrant, 1993: 23). The discharge process exacerbates all difficulties. At the same time, the reality is that most terminations from placement are complex and messy, and as such, create specific difficulties that are unique for each young person (Martin, 2003).

The circumstances of the individual discharge bring with it complicating factors that will make reactions more acute. Research suggests that clients who return to their families, while usually thrilled, have fantasized throughout their placement about this return and have particular anxieties about failure (Durrant, 1993). Young people who have not had a say in the timing or discharge destination may experience depression and hopelessness as the termination date draws closer (Martin, 2003). Clients who are discharged because of behaviour may perceive that they have been kicked out and may express their grief and anger in their mistrust of the adults in their next placement (Meeks, 1971). Lastly, adolescents who age out of care and go into independent living mourn anew for the family they have lost in coming into care, which has abandoned them once again at the end of placement (Gordy-Levine, 1990). Along with the specific features an individual termination, each young person's history with separation is relevant to understanding how they will react (Malekoff, 1997). Related to this is the child or adolescent's attachment style (Swanson & Schaefer, 1988). Insecurely attached young people are exquisitely sensitive to loss and will react with great anxiety to the inevitable uncertainties of any discharge.

Termination must be Processed

Because termination provokes a complex array of feelings no matter what the circumstances, adequate preparation is critical (Geldard & Geldard, 1997). "Unskilled management of issues and technical problems raised in the termination phase" (Meeks, 1971: 166) can lead to even more dramatic relapses in behavior and the development of new problems. In many senses, discharge from care precipitates a crisis (Swanson & Schaeffer, 1988), which can also be an important opportunity for child and youth care intervention. A skilfully planned termination can assist a young person to: begin to rework past losses; achieve a degree of closure in relation to placement; and to enter the next phase of life with more realistic expectations and awareness of available supports.

It is vital that discharge from care be planned far enough in advance to allow for some working through of the issues, yet not so far as to cause more anxiety than a young person can tolerate (Malekoff, 1997). The youth's age and developmental status should be taken into account,

because preadolescents may even have difficulty visualizing exactly how long it will be before they really leave. Rose and Fatout (2003) suggest that the element of time should be concretised with all young people as much as possible, to the point of marking days off on a calendar or placing pennies in a jar each day. While optimal timing may vary a little from individual to individual, Swanson and Schaeffer (1988) suggest that termination work should begin three to six months before discharge.

A common tendency of youth workers is to begin their discussion of discharge with a future focus. An important part of termination work is to anticipate and ending and what comes next, however, the literature stresses that these issues represent a later emphasis, which should only become more explicit with the passage of time (Durrant, 1993). The initial goal is to support a young person to re-examine feelings associated with past losses (Malekoff, 1996). A starting point is to review the conditions of initial placement and to ask about significant separations that preceded placement (Bullock, 1996). The role of the worker is to encourage the ventilation of feelings, to listen, and to provide emotional support. Helping a youth to face difficult feelings by being present and communicating acceptance is an important first step and one that takes time. This can assist a client in their learning that loss and letting go are a part of life and can be important developmental experiences (Lanyado & Horne, 1999).

The next step in termination work is to participate with the youth in evaluating their time in placement (Durrant, 1995). This evaluation should focus on feelings towards staff and peers and the identification of gains made by the young person (Swanson & Schaeffer, 1988). In a sense, the theme should be "what do we mean to each other" (Stein, 1995). It is important that the worker remain undefensive in these conversations (Rose & Fatout, 2003) so that the young person has the opportunity to air grievances and express any anger or disappointment in relation to experiences in placement. Once again, the focus is on helping the young person to become aware of feelings and to express them constructively.

Anticipation and exploration of the future is a third element in a well-managed termination. This means a thorough exploration of the young person's expectations, as well as any concerns that they may have. It is vital that the child and youth care worker predict problems and relapses (Wolberg, 1977), especially because many young people idealize conditions after discharge. Youth workers need to remain aware that "the focused, change oriented tasks of residential placement will give way to the ongoing tasks and ups and downs that will continue in day to day life" (Durrant, 1993: 171). If they have visited their next placement, the transition from "guest" to "resident" may be sobering, even if they are returning to their family home (Stein, 1995). Helping the youth to accept that there will be problems in the future is an important goal of termination work. It can then lead to a discussion of possible supports (Hummaker & Lager, 2001) so that the young person is aware of where and when to seek out help. Some authors have said that, in fact, the treatment process really begins with discharge, because that is when the young person will really have to exercise learnings from placement (Durrant, 1993). It is extremely helpful if the youth in the midst of termination can have an increasingly active role in decision-making in relation to their discharge, even if it is only relative to the details of their departure. Giving an adolescent or even a child a greater sense of control is an important act of empowering them as they move out into the world (Swanson & Schaeffer, 1988).

The last step in a termination is the actual goodbye. For some young people, this is the most anxiety-provoking piece of the process, and their emotionality will escalate until their last day, no matter what the quality of the preparation. It is those youth whose departure is imminent who may test the skills and patience of child and youth care workers the most (Swanson & Schaeffer, 1988). It often happens that, despite much planning, some youth act out so much that they arrange to be ejected so as not to face saying goodbye. Rituals are important, and a party, gifts, and farewell speeches from staff all serve to mark this milestone. It is most important that departing clients hear that we care about them (Shulman, 1999). Mementos or symbolic keepsakes serve an important function in providing a young person with something that they can take with them (Durrant, 1993). These provide concrete evidence of a significant part of their history, which has changed their life forever (Rose & Fatout, 2003), as was illustrated so poignantly in the opening quote of this article. Rose and Fatout (2003) remind us that discharge celebrations are both happy and solemn for this reason. Workers need to be aware that participation in a goodbye party also has a profound effect on the residents who are not leaving, and they may experience grief whether or not they were close to the young person who is being discharged (Stein, 1995).

Our Feelings as Workers are Relevant

Supporting a young person through termination can be a harrowing and provocative process. Not only is it painful to share the turmoil, it elicits our own feelings about separation and loss (Malekoff, 1997). Any youth worker who participates in discharges from placement needs to become aware of their own issues with saying goodbye. An important component is that we "acknowledge and express our (their) own feelings of loss in order to be accepting of similar feelings of the children in our (their) care" (Swanson & Schaeffer, 1988: 29). An inability of a worker to face separation can block the capacity of their clients to express feelings. We have a critical role to play in modelling self-expression and ownerships (Meeks, 1971), even to the point of acknowledging our own emotions in relation to a young person's upcoming departure.

Aside from our own history of losses and our readiness to acknowledge their lasting effects, the experience of a termination with a client has a very real and present impact on a child and youth care worker. We, too, are letting go of a valued relationship (Meeks, 1971), sometimes one that met many of our own needs. We may have been dependent on a young person for our sense of accomplishment and professional self-esteem (Geldard & Geldard, 1977). We are often more important to a young person than they will ever let us know (Meeks, 1971) so as we say goodbye, we are often unsure of what our influence has been. A worker may experience relief at the same time, because a challenging young person is no longer demanding their attention. We may have concerns about a client's capacity to function outside of placement and even wonder if the gains we perceived were real (Malekoff, 1997), leaving us with nagging questions about whether we have done enough (Stein, 1995). At times, workers are not in agreement with a specific discharge plan (Layado & Home, 1999). At other times, they may experience the termination process as so rocky that they doubt the wisdom of letting a young person go. Because most discharges from placement do not occur under optimal conditions, staff "need to be ready for considerable frustration over unsatisfactory terminations" (Martin, 2003, p.70). Like the young people who are leaving placement, workers need to acknowledge unresolved feelings so that they do not contaminate our functioning in the future. On the other

hand, facing and expressing these feelings can free up our energies for the challenges ahead. As concluded by Meeks (1971: 194), in his description of the complexities of the termination process with youth:

... who will replace his departing young friend? As noted earlier, the new client (patient) will probably be an angry, devious, defended, difficult youngster who will carry little of the load of treatment for some time to come. In short, in many respects and for everyone concerned, termination is always a new beginning.

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