

Enabling good relationships with young people: Keeping Scotland's promise

David Woodier

Abstract

Scotland's Independent Care Review made an unwavering commitment to ensuring the care experienced community would be at its very heart. The review concluded that the primary purpose of the care system needed to shift from protecting from harm to protecting all safe, loving, and respectful relationships. This shift puts the responsibility of change fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the workforce who care for young people. Supporting meaningful relationships with professionals in the lives of young people requires new ways of working. This article explores a central, but often overlooked, question: How do we ensure a relationship is good for a young person? The writer, with over thirty years' experience, reflects on how trust and the capacity to love can be enabled when the workforce has time to focus and reflect on relationships. Practical ways individuals, working as part of a team, can engage more insightfully and empathetically with young people are discussed.

Keywords

Scotland's Promise, relationship, trust, professionalism, conflict of standards.

Corresponding author:

David Woodier, retired teacher, goodrelationship@woodier.net

There are some decisions in life we cruise through without much thought. Others, like the ones that come with retirement, prompt us to ask questions about our relationships and how we can make a difference. Callum, one of my pupils, is 16 years old and has been asking me when I am going to retire. I have known Callum since he was four years old. I felt he needed reassurance, but I wasn't certain about what our relationship would look like in the future.¹

I tentatively asked, 'When I retire, would it be okay if we keep in touch?'

Callum looked surprised, cocked his head to one side and said, 'Of course! You're a father figure to me.'

There was an awkward moment while I tried to think of a response. Had I underestimated the role I had come to play in Callum's life? It had never been my intention for him to see me as a father figure. Was my reticence caused by my uncertainty about what others would think? After all, doesn't the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) warn against relationships that extend beyond the classroom? The GTCS code of conduct implies that these kinds of situations 'may be perceived to be of an inappropriate nature' (GTCS, 2012). There was another question, and I am not sure why it has taken me so long to consider this: How can I know if my relationship with Callum, or any young person, is good for that young person? It is this last question I want to explore, but first let's put Callum's comment in context in terms of what other young people are saying about relationships.

After listening to the experiences of over 2,500 young people and adults who were care experienced, a recent review of care in Scotland, called *The Promise*, arrived at some startling conclusions: 'Above all else the Care Review has heard, it is that children want to be loved, and recovery from trauma is often built on a foundation of loving, caring relationships. This requires a fundamental shift from protection from harm to protecting safe, loving, and respectful relationships' (Independent Care Review, 2021).

¹ Names and details of young people have been changed in order to protect confidentiality.

In respect of those caring for young people, the review stated: 'There are many stories of a teacher or another professional in a child's life providing a key relationship that has helped the child to recover. These are vital relationships that must be enabled. Notions of professionalism have got in the way of the development and maintenance of relationships' (Independent Care Review, 2021).

The way key adults in the workforce relate to young people needs to be conceptualised in a more loving and natural way, like the relationship between a young person and a 'grandad or auntie' (Independent Care Review, 2021). This places the onus on professionals to consider carefully the implications of closing a case or moving to a different role. One social worker told me that as she prepares to move to a different location, her team leader has asked her to consider maintaining life-long links with some of the young people.

Regarding how the workforce is supported, the review concluded: 'The future approach to care must be reorientated to protect and promote loving, long-lasting relationships. This must be done with the expectation that the approach is safe, upholds rights and is open to scrutiny. There should be no blanket policies or guidance that prevents the maintenance of relationships between young people and those who care for them' (Independent Care Review, 2021).

Far from detached, formal professionalism, *The Promise* issues us with a challenge: 'The workforce must be supported to bring their whole selves to work so that their interaction with children is natural and relational' (Independent Care Review, 2021). This all-in approach seems hard to square with the advice, for example, given to teachers in the Code of Professionalism and Conduct, which advises us to '...avoid becoming personally involved in a pupil's personal affairs' (GTCS, 2012).

Rather than enabling us to move toward young people who are seeking relationships, we feel trapped in a culture of detachment, fear, and over-generalised notions of risk.

In order to move away from this professional culture, we must consider what constitutes a natural or good relationship. We value freedom and spontaneity in relationships, and yet we live in an age in which we strive for perfection in both

ourselves and others. Relationships are seen as a form of making, for example, even something as natural as love is talked about as building a successful relationship (O'Donovan, 2021). It is within this context that a person may feel like someone else's project, wherein a good relationship is seen as one that achieves a desired purpose or yields some kind of benefit.

I wonder if as professionals we truly appreciate what it feels like to be a task on someone's to do list, or for our success to be used to boost someone's approval rating. That wasn't part of my experience growing up, but I have heard how hurtful this was from some friends who are care experienced.

Instead of thinking about the qualities of a good relationship, as if it were an artefact, what if we try to define the good in a relationship? I propose the good is not something we do or achieve, but something that is met with; as we interact with others we discover their intentions, consciousness, and feelings (O'Donovan, 2021; Trevarthen, 2005). With this interpersonal awareness our focus can shift from 'how can I change you?' to 'what kind of person do you encounter when you relate to me?' 'Am I respectful of a young person's emerging agency?' 'Can I offer the possibility of change without being distracted by my own needs?' Similarly, we share the good in a relationship as a gift, and even when I look for some response my intent is always selflessly generous.

This good is often missed because we fail to recognise the opportunities in which it appears. On a family holiday, quite a few years ago now, I hurt my back. As my children ran to the beach, I trailed behind everyone except my niece, the youngest in our group. I don't remember what was said as we walked together, but I remember the joy of listening to her. I found her perspective on the world delightful, and she enjoyed having an audience.

That kind of mutual awareness and enjoyment of another's presence can happen spontaneously (Trevarthen, 2005). However, the unpredictability and lack of control often makes us anxious. The sense of reciprocity, the source of shared meaning, can also be experienced as a threat. Instead of an openness to understanding how other's perspectives are different from our own, our thinking turns in on itself. I remember, to my shame, being upset with one of my sons when he was a baby and wouldn't stop crying. In the dark hours of the night, I convinced

myself that his distress wasn't about his need for food and comfort, rather he just wanted our attention. Thankfully his mother didn't share my limited perspective! I had lost my capacity to imagine how different my son's perspective might be to mine. He wasn't being manipulative; he was expressing his need in the only way he knew how.

Being open to imagining motives and intentions that I cannot see has been something I have wrestled with many times as a teacher. One of my pupils told me his foster parents wanted him to be vaccinated; I didn't think much about it, but I said I would go with him when the time came. However, when we got to the school hall, Harry broke away from me and joined his classmates and ignored my requests to come back. Very quickly, I felt irritated and anxious. Harry's behaviour would no doubt get him into trouble with the other teachers. I said, 'If you don't wait with me, I am going back to my room,' and I stormed off in a huff.

By the time I got to my room, Harry had made it there before me. He looked at me with big tears in his eyes: 'I thought I would be less afraid if I was with my friends.' I had badly misjudged the situation. When Harry ignored me, I felt I had been taken advantage of and I wanted him to face the consequences of his choice. Perhaps I mistook the certainty of what I was feeling for reality. In the immediacy of it all I lost my capacity to imagine the fear and anxiety he was feeling.

Alternatively, we may overthink everything to the extent that our intuition about another person's behaviour becomes disconnected from reality. We babble on, becoming more speculative and convoluted in our explanations. Almost imperceptibly our thoughts about that person take over more and more of our headspace. We focus more on our own theories than on the actual person. When that happens to me, my sense of personal agency jumps to superhero status, and I find myself thinking I'm the only one who really cares and can make a difference.

When under stress, my capacity to understand the nuance in a young person's motives and intentions tends to become strained. I can become too certain that

what I am thinking about another person is reality, or the opposite, and I become lost in my own ideas about a person's behaviour, losing that all-important feedback about what is really going on. This change in thinking can be subtle and difficult to spot in myself without others helping me. Peter Fonagy and others have written extensively about these changes in thinking and how they can be remedied when we support one another (Duchinsky & Foster, 2021).

Paradoxically, the very thing we fear, the lack of control, experienced in separation and ultimately even in the death and loss of a loved one, might be a necessary corrective, steering us back toward the good in a relationship. I recently had the pleasure of a visit from my nephew. He lives thousands of miles away and during his time here I thoroughly enjoyed his company, but I also knew that I would have to say goodbye and that would be hard. However, living in anticipation of that separation enhanced the quality of our relationship. In order to just enjoy being in the moment, delighting in who my nephew is, I needed to be reminded that I could never know everything about him, or get him to like Scottish food, or change his political views! Ultimately our time together was a gift and not something to be grasped, and recognising my limitations was the only way to truly value his freedom to be just who he is.

To be reminded of the limits to my influence over those whom I love is a severe kindness (Gibson, 2016). Severe because I fear loss and being alone more than just about anything, but also a kindness, because it gives me a way to experience true companionship.

The voices of those care experienced young people in Scotland are saying something profoundly important. Those of us who are professionals may call it work, but from their perspective it is a relationship and with that comes a promise, usually implied. It says something like: 'If you have trusted me enough to call me a father figure, it is up to me to work out how to relate to you with the kind of love that a good father would have.'

It may be that some expectations need to be worked through. Callum will have to realise, if he hasn't already, that I can't be everything he needs when he thinks about a father. I will have to be wise about our relationship, if it is to be good for Callum. Over the years, I have come to recognise some tell-tale signs

of when I am not relating well. Having the time and space to reflect without becoming morbidly introspective is helpful. Also being part of a team of people, where I can talk openly and know I will not be judged, is vital to guarding the good in my relationships with young people.²

Tell-tale signs my relationships need some adjustment

1. Am I finding it hard to say 'no' to a young person? What am I uncertain about or afraid of? Can the rest of the team help me think about how to do this while reassuring the young person that I am not rejecting them?
2. Am I thinking that I am the only one who understands and can help this young person? Is there some way for me to step back from the raw emotion and consider why I am thinking others are not good or sincere enough to help?
3. Is risk becoming harder to assess? Am I ignoring obvious risks, or becoming obsessed with potential risks? Can I see this individual and their specific situation in the proper context, or is the stress and worry from other situations overwhelming me?
4. Is this emotion my own emotion or the young person's, and is it becoming harder to differentiate between the two? I want my response to the young person to be appropriate to their needs rather than my own.
5. Do I share details about my life and then wonder afterward why I said that? Not all young people are good at signalling their desire for a relationship. Perhaps I need to give them more space to respond without them feeling abandoned.
6. My thoughts are frequently turning to the young person; I wonder if they are safe and well. I run scenarios through my head and imagine them being in some danger or being distressed. Can I lean on others, like my supervisor, to help me maintain perspective?

² This author has found the Adaptive Mentalization Based Integrative Treatment approach to supporting key workers within a team of professionals very helpful. Further information is available at <https://www.annafreud.org/clinical-support-and-services/adaptive-mentalization-based-integrative-treatment-ambit/>

7. I may not be allowing the young person to express a need without wanting to immediately fix it. In trying to be emotionally responsive, I may have lost some sense of what makes me me. My need for reassurance that I am an okay kind of person might become intrusive, if I don't also invest in a variety of relationships in which I feel accepted and valued.

8. Do I make excuses for a young person? Can I allow them to face the consequences of their actions? Am I still able to challenge them without shaming them?

9. Am I distancing myself because I am disappointed or hurt by a young person's actions? Am I still able to empathise, or am I feeling compassion fatigue? Keeping others at some distance emotionally can be exhausting.

10. Can I reframe challenges in the relationship in terms of a young person learning to trust? Is an invitation to trust in our relationship made without putting too much pressure on the young person?

References

Duchinsky, R., & Foster, S. (2021). *Mentalizing and epistemic trust: The work of Peter Fonagy and colleagues at the Anna Freud Centre*. Oxford University Press.

General Teacher Council for Scotland. (2012). *Code of Professionalism and Conduct*. <https://www.gtcs.org.uk/fitness-to-teach/code-of-professionalism-and-conduct/>

Gibson, D. (2016). *Learning to live by preparing to die*. Inter Varsity Press.

Independent Care Review. (2021). *The Promise*. https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Promise_v7.pdf

O'Donovan, O. (2021). *Good, doing goods, and the good*. Trinity International University. <https://vimeo.com/537741509>

Trevarthen, C. (2005). 'Stepping away from the mirror: Adventures of companionship'. Reflections on the nature and emotional needs of infant intersubjectivity. In C.S. Carter, L. Ahnert, K.E. Grossman, S.B. Hardy, M.E. Lamb, S.W.

Porges, & N. Sachser (Eds), Attachment and bonding: A new synthesis. Dahlem Workshop Report 92 (pp. 55-84). Boston Review.

About the author

David's interest in teaching began in a gym in the inner city of Chicago in 1987. His passion to include young people from diverse backgrounds took him to the University of Illinois in 1994 to study Special Education. After graduating, he taught in two Chicago schools.

Seventeen years ago, David moved to Glasgow and taught in a primary school in an area of deprivation and then in a residential school. For fourteen years, he supported the inclusion of young people who were care experienced and in mainstream schools. He has recently retired from teaching, and he is the author of *Healing trauma through relationships: The dignity of the inner life and the gift of self*.