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## Short Article

# Relational practice, professional identity, and lifelong commitment to care: A Scottish perspective

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### Abstract:

Identity and belonging are central to the experiences of children living in residential care and to the professional lives of those who care for them. Drawing on practice experience, Scotland's national commitment through *The Promise*, and a personal journey that began in 1986, this paper explores how relationships shape lifelong outcomes for children and determine whether residential child care becomes a meaningful, sustainable profession. It argues that organisations, leaders, inspectors, and commissioners must intentionally create the conditions in which relational practice, professional identity, and belonging can flourish. When these conditions are present, residential care is not only a place of safety and support; it is a relational community capable of sustaining commitment, hope, and purpose across a working life. Reflective vignettes\* shared throughout the paper, illustrate the enduring impact of ordinary, everyday relationships.

## Introduction

Recently a young woman, Toni, contacted me after a break of 34 years. She had lived with us for three years in a residential house I was working in, in the late 1980s. Her message was filled with details I had not realised she still carried so vividly; she described that time as affirming and life-changing. Then she asked a simple question that held extraordinary power: 'Do you still sing *New York, New York*?' In an instant I was back in 1988 - an ordinary evening of music and laughter that cut through uncertainty and said, 'you belong here'.



What Toni remembered was not a programme, a plan, or a form. She remembered relationship; the ordinary, everyday interactions that helped her feel seen. And I carry her too. Practitioners often hold children in mind long after direct care ends; it would be untrue to suggest those children do not also carry something of us. This mutual holding is the quiet evidence that relational practice matters and lasts.

Residential child care in Scotland has long understood that relationships matter, but the depth of their significance - how they shape identity, belonging, and the very architecture of a child's inner world - has not always received the attention it deserves. Compliance, procedure, and risk management too readily eclipse the relational labour that children remember, and that practitioners experience as the heart of the work. At the centre of residential care lie two profoundly human needs: identity, our sense of who we are, and belonging, our felt experience of being valued, held in mind, and remembered. For children whose early lives may have been marked by trauma, loss, and unpredictability, these needs become acute. For caregivers, meeting those needs becomes both a professional task and a source of meaning.

My own journey into residential care began in 1986. As a young worker I met children who had been asked, implicitly or explicitly, to fight for everything: for dignity, for recognition, for their right to be seen without stigma or the gravity of low expectations. Those early encounters revealed a simple but demanding truth, residential care at its best is not a system or a set of processes; it is a practice of turning up, with integrity and consistency, for children who have had to battle for belonging. This paper offers a practice-grounded argument for centring relational work across organisations and systems, supported by reflective vignettes that evidence its lifelong impact.

### **'You matter here': Identity and belonging in residential care**

Emerging from Scotland's Independent Care Review, *The Promise* calls for a care system in which children grow up loved, safe, and respected. Beyond policy aspiration, it is a relational imperative: the quality of relationships - attunement, consistency, curiosity, and hope - constitutes the primary mechanism through which children experience safety and develop a coherent sense of self. Within this frame, residential homes are not only placements but communities of recognition, where everyday interactions communicate dignity and possibility.



I am reminded of a young person I worked with in a previous organisation who told me she had lived in more than 30 care placements before coming to live with us. She was weary of repeated attempts to fit her into families that were neither her own nor of her choosing. At one point she described herself as 'a potato in a field of raspberries' - fundamentally different, always noticeable, never quite belonging. She spoke openly about how living in a family setting often felt forced, whereas living alongside other children who were not the birth children of the carers felt simpler and more honest. Relationships were easier to form, expectations felt clearer, and belonging emerged without pretence. What stayed with me was her clarity: identity and belonging could not be imposed through good intentions; they had to be experienced as authentic, chosen, and relationally safe.

Children make sense of themselves in and through relationships. How adults speak to them, remember them, and hold hope for them are internalised as messages about worth and place in the world. When placements have been multiple, histories complex, and trust compromised, belonging is built through the ordinary: shared routines, reliable boundaries, everyday rituals, and moments of joy that say, 'you matter here'. Relational practice is therefore not an adjunct to technical interventions; it is the ground upon which all meaningful help rests.

### **Why people stay: Identity, emotion, and commitment in care**

Residential care is emotionally demanding, intimate work. Over time, practitioners carry children in mind, often long after shifts end, because the work does not simply use professional skills; it draws upon the self. This ongoing 'carrying' is not a sign of poor boundaries; it is evidence of authentic connection. For that very reason, organisations must create intentional spaces for reflection and sense-making, such that emotional labour is transformed into learning rather than accumulated as unspoken weight. Where staff are supported to integrate experience, professional identity deepens, relational capacity widens, and commitment is sustained.

My own practice identity was shaped by those early years. I learned that children notice who turns up, and who keeps turning up for them, especially when life is messy. I also learned that the small things - humour, music, shared meals, predictable routines - often become the



memory-carriers of belonging. I describe this as the power of the everyday.

In recent years, my own practice and leadership have been profoundly reshaped by two developments. The first was engaging Dr Shona Quin as a reflective supervisor between 2018 and 2024. Her multi-layered approach to reflective practice provided a level of containment, inquiry, and support that was transformative, not only for me, but for the wider organisation. Her offer of reflective supervision has been nothing short of a lifeline: a protected space where complexity can be understood, emotions can be metabolised, and leadership can be exercised with greater clarity and compassion. For leaders in residential child care - who routinely hold organisational risk, moral responsibility, and the emotional weight of children's lives - such spaces are not a luxury but a necessity. Without intentional opportunities to reflect, leaders risk becoming reactive or procedurally driven, inadvertently reproducing the very conditions of instability we seek to protect children from. This relational container strengthened my ability to stay present, to think rather than merely respond, and to lead in alignment with the values we ask of our staff.

The second development was our decision, while at Aberlour, to bring the residential leadership team together to co-create a shared vision for our services. The vision we agreed was simple yet demanding: *to provide warm, loving homes where everyone laughs, learns, grows into their future, and is treasured always*. That shared vision became a practical compass for decision-making at every level. Most significantly, it created the conditions in which the use of physical restraint ceased, not because of policy change, external pressure, or a procedural mandate, but because the people who lived and worked in those houses collectively agreed that restraint had no place in the vision they held for children or for themselves.

More recently, at St Mary's Kenmure, we have undertaken similar vision-creating work with both children and adults. Together, they articulated a shared aspiration that St Mary's Kenmure will be *a place where people are valued, inspired, and thrive*. What has been most important in this process is that the vision was explicitly held for both children and adults; not for one at the expense of the other. In residential care, cultures flourish when the wellbeing, dignity, and growth of staff and children are understood to be interdependent. A vision that belongs



to everyone creates the relational conditions in which care is not simply delivered but lived.

These two developments, reflective supervision as containment, and co-created vision as alignment, have changed me as a practitioner and as a leader. They have strengthened my conviction that relationships are not only what we offer to children, but what must be cultivated within the adults who care for them. They are, in many ways, the deep structural supports that allow relational practice to flourish.

### **When organisations make relationships possible**

At Aberlour we faced persistent challenges in recruiting experienced and suitably qualified house managers. Rather than lowering expectations or relying solely on external recruitment, we made a deliberate decision to *grow our own* leaders. Creating space for relational practice to flourish allowed us to recruit confidently based on values, knowing that in reality none of us are ever the finished article. By prioritising relational capacity, curiosity, and integrity over technical completeness, a context of excellence began to emerge. We regularly took time away together as a leadership team, often annually, not to work through lengthy agendas, but to nurture the leadership community itself. What developed was a culture in which people cared deeply for one another, and from that relational depth came excellence in care for children. Even when circumstances were difficult, we protected time for reflection and growth, recognising that connection, not instruction, was often where the most meaningful change occurred. There was rarely a need for a long agenda; the relationships themselves were where change happened. I recall one-to-one reflective work with a colleague where we consciously challenged phrases such as 'it is what it is', recognising how such language prematurely closes down curiosity and brings important conversations to an end. Over time, those same colleagues grew into leaders who could hold reflective space for others and speak with confidence at conferences. When I see this demonstrated now, I do so with a deep sense of pride, not because of individual achievement alone, but because we have travelled the same developmental journey. I see that same pattern emerging again at St Mary's Kenmure, where creating space for reflection, connection, and shared learning continues to shape leaders who are grounded, relational, and aligned with the values of the organisation.



## **'We help each other to be great': Relational leadership in practice**

One of the most formative lessons in relational leadership I encountered came during my time at Aberlour, where I was fortunate to work alongside one of the most relational leaders I have ever known. I owe a great deal to Jim Wallace for his mentorship. His influence on how I understand leadership, supervision, and organisational culture has been profound and enduring.

Jim's mantra was simple but powerful: 'hard on the issues, soft on the people'. This was never an excuse to avoid difficult conversations or shy away from accountability, with tough issues being addressed directly and clearly. What I learned, however, was the importance of being *beside* people while doing so. Another phrase Jim often used was, 'be on their side, not on their backs'. At the time, this felt like wisdom I had not previously encountered. It challenged assumptions about power and authority, and reframed leadership as something grounded in solidarity, trust, and shared purpose.

I remember preparing for supervision with great care, arriving with meticulously structured notes and a clear agenda. On one occasion, I was working through these notes in what felt like a focused and engaged conversation. Jim appeared attentive, even captivated. Then, unexpectedly, he raised his hand and said simply, 'stop'. I assumed he wanted to explore one of the agenda items in greater depth.

Instead, he turned his laptop towards me. On the screen was the Netflix logo.

He explained that he wanted to show me something and began to take me through a short slide deck on Netflix's organisational culture. He paused on a single slide that read: 'We help each other to be great'. No explanation followed and no commentary was offered. The moment was allowed to speak for itself.

That moment has stayed with me ever since. It was my *Netflix moment*—and it is one I have never turned back from.

In that silence something fundamental shifted in how I experienced leadership. I felt safe, I felt trusted, and I felt I had permission to be at my very best. It was not a permission granted through words or instruction, but through relational presence and intent. That experience



awakened a new understanding of leadership for me, one rooted in psychological safety, belief in others, and the deliberate creation of space for people to flourish.

From that point onwards a different way of working became possible. It created the conditions in which vision could be genuinely co-created, restraint reduction could be pursued with confidence and integrity, and Aberlour's residential child care portfolio could grow and develop in ways that had not previously been achieved. None of this was driven by command or compliance. It emerged from an organisational culture where people were actively helped, explicitly and implicitly, to be great.

This experience illustrates why relational practice cannot be sustained through values statements alone. It depends on leaders who model relational intent through everyday actions; who create safety through presence; and who use power to enable rather than constrain. When organisations invest in these conditions, relational practice ceases to be fragile or individualised. It becomes cultural, durable, and transformative - for children, practitioners, and systems alike.

I would encourage leaders at every level to create the space, safety, and permission for their people to be great. In doing so, we do not weaken accountability or leaders' authority. We strengthen commitment, unlock potential, and create organisations capable of growth, integrity, and lasting impact.

### **Relational consistency across leadership, inspection, and commissioning**

Leadership, inspection, and commissioning shape what residential care becomes in practice. Leaders signal priorities through presence and behaviour; inspection frameworks reinforce what counts by what they attend to; and commissioners determine what is resourced. Funding reflective practice, workforce development, and stable staffing is not a luxury but a preventative investment. High turnover and fragmented relationships carry moral and financial costs that far exceed the investment required to protect relational continuity. How we treat caregivers - with respect to trust, recognition, and support - directly shapes how children experience care.



Having worked across leadership and inspection roles, I am often struck by how frequently consistency is called for across systems, and how challenging that aspiration can be in practice. We all bring different lenses, experiences, and responsibilities to the same situation, and from my own time working as an inspector I know that two people can witness the same moment and understand it very differently. The task, for me, was never to dilute safeguarding or responsibility, but to create sufficient relational space for understanding and context to emerge alongside professional judgement. This is where relationships matter - not to soften scrutiny, but to strengthen it. *The Promise* calls for systems that are relational, trusting, and grounded in shared values, and this requires leaders, inspectors, and commissioners to work in ways that are both rigorous and humane. Where respectful relationships exist across these roles, there is greater opportunity for alignment: clarity of purpose, proportionality in decision-making, and a shared understanding of how values are lived in complex environments. The skills I developed as an inspector - curiosity, careful listening, and the ability to hold multiple truths at once - have profoundly shaped my leadership practice. Equally, my experience as a leader has reinforced the importance of inspection and commissioning approaches that recognise context without compromising accountability, understanding that consistency is not achieved through uniformity, but through shared values, trust, and ongoing dialogue.

### **Counting what endures**

It was the moments when relationships guided our work, when reflection was protected, and when stable, values-aligned teams focused on what truly mattered, that shaped the deepest change.

I am reminded again of the same young woman who once described herself as 'a potato in a field of raspberries'. Years later, she passed her driving test. She came to collect me so she could show off her new car, and there I was, sitting in the passenger seat, being driven along the road by a child I had once looked after, feeling an enormous and unexpected sense of pride. It was the kind of pride I had felt with my own son - quiet, affirming, and deeply human.

Moments like this rarely find their way into reports or inspection frameworks, yet they matter profoundly. Who knows, perhaps in 30 years' time she will remember that day: the laughter, the shared



nervousness, the way I told her to slow down, then speed up. I often think of the children I have cared for as always being children, even as their lives move forward. What endures are not the interventions or the paperwork, but the relationships that held them.

These are the things we should be counting. Not simply whether a policy was followed to the letter, or whether staff can recite, with poetic precision, the required temperature of a cooked sausage in case someone asks them. Safeguarding matters, and accountability matters, but they are not the sum total of care. The bedrock of children's lives is built in moments of connection, pride, shared laughter, and recognition. It is in these ordinary, relational experiences that identity and belonging take root - and it is these moments that sustain children long after they leave our care.

### **A moment of choice: Leadership and the future of care**

At a recent event I spoke about the opportunity we have in Scotland not simply to be led into the future of residential child care, but to *shape it*. That distinction matters. In 1992, Angus Skinner, in *Another Kind of Home*, spoke of residential child care as a *placement of first choice*. More than three decades later, we are still returning to that aspiration. The question, perhaps, is not why it has taken so long, but what will finally allow us to realise it.

My experience tells me that the answer lies not primarily in structures or strategies, but in people and culture. When organisations invest intentionally in the adults, when they create cultures of reflection, trust, and relational safety, something powerful happens. Children experience greater consistency, deeper belonging, and more hopeful futures. The workforce grows in confidence, identity, and purpose. Practice becomes more humane, more courageous, and more sustainable.

I am proud to be part of a moment in Scotland where residential child care is beginning to claim its identity with confidence. We are increasingly showing what is possible when leadership is built on what truly matters: relationships, values, and shared responsibility. This is leadership that is not performative, but relational; not imposed, but grown.

If we continue to invest in models of culture development, if we genuinely hold the hands of those who hold the hands of children, by creating reflective spaces where people feel safe enough to think, to feel, and to



grow - then who knows what we might yet see? Perhaps then Scotland's residential child care sector will not only fulfil Skinner's long-held vision but will rightly take its place as world-leading. Not because of what we say, but because of how children and those who care for them experience belonging, dignity, and hope in everyday life.

*\*Note:* The vignettes were anonymised and shared with respect for privacy; identifying details have been altered.

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## About the author

John Ryan is a qualified social worker and seasoned leader in residential child care, with a career spanning Scotland and Ireland since 1986. He holds a postgraduate certificate in social services leadership and has worked across frontline practice, senior leadership, and the regulation of care services, including five years in regulatory roles that strengthened his commitment to high-quality, compassionate care. Since June 2024, John has served as director of services at St Mary's Kenmure, one of Scotland's four secure care children's centres, where he continues to shape safe, relational, and therapeutic approaches to care. He has also chaired Social Work Scotland's residential child care sub-group since 2017 and mentors leaders across the sector, supporting reflective and confident practice. During his tenure with Aberlour Child Care Trust, John led a transformative programme of change that eliminated the use of physical restraint—an approach that was independently evaluated and later trialled by other organisations. He is a strong advocate for psychologically informed, relational leadership as a driver of meaningful and lasting improvement in care environments. Alongside his professional work, John serves as a trustee with Covey Befriending, a Lanarkshire-based charity supporting vulnerable young people and families.

