CHAPTER 6

Making the Connection: Strategies for Working with High-risk Youth

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INTRODUCTION

High-risk youth are "the disconnected." Sadly, they rarely have family they can rely on. They rarely have a healthy support network to help guide them. They typically have difficulty trusting adults and perceive they are on their own in this world. High-risk youth struggle to be stable and, when involved in the child welfare system, use a disproportionate amount of resources, especially placements, resulting in greater vulnerability (Wilson & Woods, 2006). In general, they are hard to engage, slow to change, test frequently, and challenge one's practice, ethics, and boundaries. These youth also teach you to become intensely self-aware and thoughtful and to profoundly understand that they are very unique and deserve to be treated as individuals. These are not "at-risk" youth; they are "high-risk" youth. They are not heading in a bad direction or on

a path to self-destruction; they are there already. Despite this, all youth have strengths to build on and demonstrate resilience. A number of strategies offer direction and ideas to those who have a passion for working with high-risk youth. These strategies encourage a practice that strives to be anti-oppressive, flexible, responsive and harm-reducing. Such a practice is non-traditional and creative and, according to youth, a better way to meet their needs.

We have received feedback from a number of practitioners employed by child welfare jurisdictions from across Canada indicating that they, too, are struggling to meet the needs of this population (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2007). Our own experience has shown us that these youth are often seen as defiant and manipulative when in "the system" and, consequently, have difficulty accessing appropriate services. Many youth have shared that they expect their relationship with their child welfare workers to be problematic. We have come to believe that all youth want connection, but attempting to connect with high-risk youth is a risk-filled journey that requires patience. Although they have learned that they cannot trust, deep down they are hoping someone will love them (Kagan, 2004). When we choose to share powerful experiences with these youth, they teach us much.

This chapter will focus on our experience and observations, the voices of the youth we have worked with, and the strategies we have used in working with high-risk youth within the Edmonton High Risk Youth Initiative. Many of the observations made have been formulated through our direct experiences working with these youth since 1998. At the time the project was initiated, little (if any) research had been done on high-risk youth (HRY) within the child welfare system. Since then, the work of Ungar (2002, 2004, 2005, 2006) has been a philosophical "fit" for the work that we have been engaged in, and we have included this to strengthen the theoretical framework from which we work.

In a unique move for government child welfare services, a harm-reduction philosophy was adopted for the Edmonton High-Risk Youth Initiative, which allows for a focus on both relationship-building and working in partnership with youth in developing services that will meet their needs. The High Risk Youth Unit (HRYU) officially started on November 1, 2005, and is a partnership between Edmonton and Area Child and Family Services, Region 6 (Alberta Children and Youth Services), other government departments and community agencies. The initiative

uses a model that was designed in the Edmonton Region in 1999 (Smyth and Eaton-Erickson, 1999). While there are some risks inherent in a harm reduction approach, it is argued that these are fewer than in traditional intervention which appears adversarial to the youth.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The concept of working specifically with high-risk youth within Children and Youth Services in Edmonton emerged in January 1999, when the authors wrote a report for the Edmonton and area Child and Family Services agency titled, "High Risk Teen Caseload" (Smyth and Eaton-Erickson, 1999). As child welfare workers with Alberta Children and Youth Services, we acknowledged that, "High-risk teens are difficult for child welfare workers to deal with as they are often AWOL, defiant, and persist in engaging in behaviours that could jeopardize their safety" (Smyth and Eaton-Erickson, 1999, p. 1). In the report several barriers to working effectively with these youth were identified: high caseload sizes which made it difficult to spend time with youth and develop relationships with them; little time (and education) coordinating with other agencies who worked with the same population group; the community's lack of trust in the child welfare system; casework being reactive instead of proactive; and the reluctance to meet youth where they were at. It was clearly acknowledged and articulated that the current way of working with high-risk youth was not effective, because:

- High-risk youth continue to AWOL frequently, often for months at a time.
- These teens continue to expose themselves to high-risk situations that they often cannot control (i.e., sexual exploitation, drugs).
- There is a feeling of helplessness when youth are AWOL; thus, few efforts are made to find the youth and connect with agencies who work with street youth.
- High-risk youth become a low priority, as they are difficult to connect with, and this is perceived as being defiant and being resistant to change.
- It is not uncommon for high-risk youth to tell workers that "the system" does not work for them, does not meet their needs, or is a "joke" because they can manipulate it so easily (Smyth and Eaton-Erickson, 1999, p. 3).

There was a need to do business differently when working with high-

risk youth—to be available, to meet them, in colloquial terms, "where they were at", to develop significant relationships, to connect youth with appropriate services, and to connect with the community in a meaningful way. To accomplish this, the agency capped caseloads at 15 youth per child welfare worker, employed a full-time therapeutic youth worker, and adopted a strength-based, harm-reduction approach.

RATIONALE AND PHILOSOPHY

It is important to listen to the voices and stories of high-risk youth in both the development and the provision of services to them. When a child welfare worker is introduced to a youth and their response is, "I hate fucking social workers," followed by walking away with a look of disgust, inevitably the worker pauses to think about what has just transpired. The first thought is: "This is going to be a challenge." The second is: "How do I approach this situation without alienating the youth further?" After getting past thinking that this is "about me," thoughts turn to why this youth is so hostile to child welfare workers and Children and Youth Services.

In our research report *"The Word On The Street: How Youth View Services Aimed at Them"* (Smyth, Eaton-Erickson, Slessor & Pasma, 2005),[1] most youth who fit into the category of high-risk youth reported that they had had negative experiences with "the system" and believed it either did not help them or made their situation worse. These experiences included a lack of meaningful relationships with social workers and service providers, a lack of support during life transitions, and not feeling heard by the system. A common theme was that programs were being developed that better met the needs of the system, rather than the needs of those who were the intended recipients of the services. Youth expressed feeling constricted by rules and expectations. While they saw basic rules as important to avoid chaos, they did not think that they had any input

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1   The report was completed by the High Risk Youth Task Force which was a sub-committee of the Edmonton and Area, Child and Family Services, Region 6, Group Care Sector. The Task Force was formed to examine issues around why a relatively low number of youth were using a high number of placement beds in group care yet there was little or no positive outcomes perceived among these youth. The Task Force, made up of Region 6 and agency staff, decided to hold a series of youth forums targeting areas in which higher-risk youth were known to hang out and access services on a more street-level basis.

into developing such rules, thus their relevance became suspect. They believed child welfare workers did not have time for them, did not hear them, and did not understand them. Most youth were not familiar with service plans, and therefore did not appear to feel connected to the helping process. The aforementioned made them suspicious of the system and generally, while they acknowledged that they needed help, they did not see Children and Youth Services as a viable provider of such assistance (Smyth et al., 2005).

   Despite this, an overall theme of the report was one of opportunity and hope. As the youth spoke, it became clear that, if they perceived that they had a positive relationship with their child welfare worker, they appeared to view the whole system in a positive light. Conversely, if they believed that they had a negative relationship with their worker, they saw the whole system as negative (Smyth et al., 2005). This was also true for youths' relationships with service providers such as youth workers, family workers, and therapists. This illustrated to the authors that it is important for youth to have a positive connection and relationship, even if it is difficult for them. Secondly, if workers focused on building relationships with youth, not only would youth be open to this approach, they may also attain a level of buy-in that could initiate a process of healthy change. Relationship-building also demonstrates to youth a collaborative *working with* stance (Masten, 1994), rather than doing to or doing for (Wharf, 2002, 13), which youth have identified as a barrier to feeling connected to the system (Smyth et al., 2005). There have been many examples in our practice to show that when youth are told what to do, where to stay, and how to behave, especially before any kind of positive relationship has been developed, youth do not "buy in." This often results in a power struggle and youth are unable to access the services they need.

DEFINITIONS

Because a wide range of concepts are used in this chapter, it is important to provide a common set of definitions that will be used. There is some confusion that surrounds the issue of being "at risk" (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004), and for the purposes of the High-Risk Youth Initiative it is important to distinguish between youth at risk, and those youth who are "high risk." As well, much research has been done on resiliency (Bernard, 1991; Masten, 1994; Ungar, 2005; Werner, 1996), and these writers

have developed strategies to build and strengthen resiliency. The work of Ungar (2002, 2004, 2005, 2006) has provided a philosophical and research base that has strengthened the work that the HRYU is doing. Definitions for *high-risk youth, harm reduction, resiliency, and "the system"* are included here to provide a framework and a rational for the strategies used to build relationships with and engage high-risk youth.

High-risk Youth

The following definition for "high-risk youth" was adopted for Region 6, Edmonton and Area Children and Youth Services, and acts as a guide when accepting youth into the HRYU. Besides the specified age range, which is 14–22 years, all youth in the unit fit into at least five of the following criteria:

- their use of drugs and/or alcohol seems to be interfering with their day-to-day functioning;
- the choices they are making may jeopardize their safety including where they are living and with whom they associate;
- they cannot identify a healthy adult in their lives outside of the professional community;
- there have been multiple placements, including Secure Services and/or Edmonton Youth Offenders Centre;
- there have been multiple file closures due to lack of follow-through by the youth;
- there has been multi-generational involvement with Children and Youth Services;
- they struggle with authority and have few, if any, people they can trust; and
- they struggle with mental health disorders and are living an unpredictable day-to-day existence (Smyth et al., 2005)

The definition of "high-risk youth" is to be distinguished from "hard-to-serve youth," which is a broader category under which "high-risk youth" falls.

Harm reduction

Harm reduction has been a principle in the development of the High Risk Youth Unit (Edmonton and Area Children and Youth Services, Region 6), encouraged through consultation with community partners, and as a result of experiences from the high-risk youth caseload (1999). As

noted earlier, this philosophy has been used to build relationships with the youth and to involve them in the decision-making process. Adapted from the work of Richard Elovich and Michael Cowing (1993), this definition of harm reduction was incorporated into the report entitled *The Word On The Street: How Youth View Services Aimed at Them*:

> Harm reduction is defined as a set of strategies and tactics that encourage individuals to reduce the risk of harm to themselves and their communities by their various behaviours. Its major goal is to educate the person to become more conscious of the risks of their behaviour and provide them with the tools and resources with which they can reduce their risk. Some of the major principles include: a humanistic approach; does not deal solely with behaviours, but the whole person with complex needs; accepts that risk is a natural part of life; places risky behaviour on a continuum within the context of a person's life; looks at a person's relationship to the behaviour as defined by him/herself; accepts that behavioural change is often incremental, any positive change is seen as significant; interventions are not rigid but require creativity and innovation reflective of the person's life situation; builds on existing strengths and capacities; is helpful for communities most affected to be involved in creating safe places to get help by organizing harm reduction interventions and programs; and though commonly associated with drug use, harm reduction is applicable to any social welfare and/or public health issues. (Smyth et al., 2005)

Resiliency

The work of Michael Ungar expands on the traditional definition of resiliency as being solely *the capacity to overcome adversity*. Ungar suggests that resiliency is equally present in young people who have been labeled as dangerous, delinquent, deviant and/or disordered; that resilient youth take advantage of whatever opportunities and resources that are available—even those we consider negative or destructive; and that negative behaviours can be a pathway to hidden resilience … focused on the need

to create powerful and influential identities for themselves (Ungar, 2005, p. 1). Ungar (2006, p. 3) talks about how adolescents "seek something special to say about themselves, something that will bring with its next revolution the hopes of *power* and *acceptance.*" Ungar (2000, p. 5) adds that, in our haste to change our children's behaviour, practitioners overlook how these behaviours make sense to the children themselves, and how these may be their *search for health*. Building positive relationships with high-risk youth can help the practitioner avoid making the assumption that the youth's behaviours do not serve a meaningful purpose. Through talking intentionally with the youth, strategies can be developed to build on these strengths in a safe, non-destructive way. Ungar (2006, p. 7) describes this process as one that can help youth find substitutions for their behaviours—alternative behaviours that offer the same quality of experience as that achieved through his or her problem behaviours.

"The system"

"The system" is a term often used by youth, families, and the community, to refer to having involvement, or more formally having legal status (whether voluntary or non-voluntary) with Alberta Children and Youth Services (ACYS), and receiving services, whether provided through ACYS staff directly, staff employed through other government departments, and/or agencies contracted by the government to deliver a variety of services to children, youth (who may or may not be in care) and families. This definition was accepted and used by youth and facilitators for the study *Word on the Street* (Smyth et al., 2005).

STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH HIGH RISK YOUTH

Youth have spoken to us repeatedly about the importance of their relationships with their social workers and the impact these relationships have on the services that are offered to them (Smyth et al., 2005). Recognizing that the formation of these relationships is essential to youth, and in an effort to provide some feedback to practitioners who sought clarification into how to build these relationships, we developed a number of strategies that would articulate some values and principles that could assist in building relationships with youth. These strategies have been shared with youth, and their feedback has validated them for us. These strategies are not comprehensive, but serve to provide a guide to practitioners working with youth, whether in the child welfare system or the community.

Believe that youth are valued and are worth the effort

Believing that youth have value has to be the beginning. The soul-deep belief that youth *are* worth it—worth the acknowledgement that youth do fall through the cracks of a service system that does not adequately meet their needs, the courage to speak of these deficiencies and acknowledge *your* role in the creation or perpetuation of them. One must have the willingness to think, and act, outside the box, the philosophical belief that youth are the experts respecting their own lives, the commitment to listen to what youth have to say, and the passion (and persistence) to do things differently. This can, and will, be accomplished only if there is a driving belief that youth are worth it.

Be available

Our research clearly indicates that effective work with youth is done in their time frame, not that of the worker. The caseworker's desire to talk, address the issues and move forward can only be accomplished if the groundwork of acknowledgement, trust and comfort has been established with the youth. The worker's skills of engaging with youth and asking the right "open-ended" questions will not succeed if a youth is not ready to engage. Being available is about being available both physically and emotionally when the youth is ready to participate.

Youth have identified that a barrier to this availability is the nine-to-five routine of many professionals. Youth have made it clear that their lives do not move into this schedule very easily or successfully. Given the lifestyles of high-risk youth, whose schedules are more nocturnal, morning appointments and programming are rarely successful. Youth often find themselves in crisis situations when service delivery systems are closed, and express the need for workers to be available during these times.

Being available emotionally is also important—to be intuitive about what a youth is feeling and thinking, and when they need support and services. When a youth is ready to engage, it is crucial to be attendant, to be responsive to the youth in the "here and now." In theory, this sounds simple, but experience has highlighted some practicalities to consider when with youth, for example: turning off cell phones or pagers, pulling over if driving, having crisis services available if necessary, etc. Emotionally, this can be challenging. At 4:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon, after a long week of work, it is difficult to be "fully present" when a youth determines it is time to engage. Our research has shown that being self-aware

is vital. Being able to communicate to the youth where you are situated on an emotional level allows the youth to gauge what is being said.

Our experience has shown that youth understand that child welfare workers do have lives beyond their jobs, and they will respect those boundaries. However, it is important for the youth to become knowledgeable about the availability of both formal and informal supports that exist in their communities. This wider support network allows youth to access help as needed, rather than only during standard work hours. Wharf (2002) argues that this type of "community social work and community organizing are neglected but potentially powerful strategies for improving child welfare" (p. 9).

Go the extra mile

Sometimes going the extra mile is as simple as finding out what a youth's favourite chocolate bar is and bringing it to them. Sometimes it is finding out about the music they like and learning about it. Sometimes it is a visit to a youth correctional centre on a weekend because a youth is profoundly lonely and sad. Some youth believe that they are not worth spending time with, others blame themselves for their situation, and still others feel they are not worthy of being loved. Thus, small things can carry a lot of meaning, despite an often-portrayed overt "I-don't-care-anymore" attitude.

Our experience has shown that going the extra mile also forces the youth to ask "why is this happening?" Sometimes their reaction to the worker's additional efforts is positive. But the reaction can be negative if the youth interprets the extra attention as having a hidden agenda, or as a form of manipulation by the child welfare worker. Youth's view of the world can be threatened by having a person show they care, but, over time, the youth can take comfort in the fact that someone cares about them. Having someone care about them is also something the youth cannot control, and while they can find this frustrating initially, it can become acceptable given that the youth do want connection.

> *Monica's Story:*
> Monica, 17, has recently come from out of town and is with another youth who has an open file with the HRYU. They stay at the same place, though Monica is not there by choice due to a probation order. Monica states that she

thinks social workers are a "fucking waste of time and they have never helped me anyway." She states that she liked one worker in the past but, as usual, she didn't stick around. She wants her independence and doesn't need a "loser social worker" telling her what to do. I tell her I have heard stories like this before and that it is unfortunate that she can't get the help she needs. I see her a few days later and ask how she is doing. She tells me her social worker is a "bitch" and doesn't want to talk to her. Staff say Monica is cranky at times but has been doing well keeping curfew, not using drugs, and helping around the home. I focus on these positive aspects, suggesting she could be getting closer to a supported independent living placement. She doubts this would happen and again generalizes about social workers being quite useless and not following through on what they say. She says that once she turns 18 she is "out of here," so I congratulate her on her goal and ask how I can help her achieve it. Later she tells me she needs some clothes, so I tell her I can call her worker and discuss it. Having been able to facilitate this, she is curious as to why I would help her even when I'm not her social worker. Monica agrees to meet for coffee so I can learn more about her situation and we can look at options around her moving into an independent living program. She acts tough and swears a lot, though not at me. She is honest, tries to get a reaction from some of her stories, and agrees she has a very difficult time trusting anybody, adding "why should I?" I agree and tell her that trust must be earned, but in the meantime, she has to work with the system, given that she is under a permanent status with the government. She is thankful for the opportunity to talk, and starts initiating calls with ideas about how she can get support.

Be self-aware

Self-awareness is a critical aspect of all social work practice. It is especially important when working with youth. Youth have a keen ability to detect

authenticity, truth and integrity in others–in fact, they grow up honing these skills. High-risk youth have stated that this skill is essential in order to survive on the streets—knowing who to trust, who not to trust, and when you are being "played"—could mean the difference between life and death (Alberta Child and Youth Services, 2007). Youth have reported that they know whether their social worker cares about them or if they are "just another caseload" (Alberta Child and Youth Services, 2007). We have found that it is important to have congruency between beliefs and actions when working with this population group. As a youth recently stated, "My social worker is awkward around me; I don't think he really likes me."

Youth present with a myriad of issues and experiences, and they report it is particularly important that they do not feel judged. When a youth perceives that he or she is being judged, an internal barrier rises immediately and a "flight or fight" response typically occurs. Youths either attempt to verbally (and/or physically) defend themselves from further feelings of pain and rejection, or they will emotionally (and/or physically) retreat to escape the judgment. Either way, the youth disengages, creating an imbalance that makes the helping relationship difficult.

It is critical that we are aware of who we are as people and professionals: our beliefs, values, judgments and power (Bishop, 2002). Each of these will affect what we believe about ourselves, about youth, and how the relationship between youth and ourselves will be perceived. For example, a white, heterosexual woman would be situated in a stratum of life that looks very different than where a two-spirited, aboriginal young man would exist. Being aware of these differences, acknowledging the power differential, and the diverse lived-realities of the two individuals allows for the youth to remain the "expert" in his (or her) own life, and enables the worker to become an ally with them in accessing relevant and appropriate services (Bishop, 2002; Madsen, 2001). Both the youth and the child welfare worker are aware of the differences, acknowledge them, and can discuss the strengths and limitations that both bring to the relationship.

Be consistent—"I will not give up"

Youth need the assurance that the adults involved in their lives are committed and will not give up on them before they will invest and engage (Kagan, 2004; Levy & Orlans, 1998). Many youth on the High Risk Youth

Unit have had childhoods marked by inconsistency, abandonment and physical or emotional isolation. Many of these youth do not believe that child welfare workers will be there for the long haul, that it is only a matter of time before they will "give up" on them. Many behaviours and choices of the youth will test the child welfare worker in an attempt to have the worker prove that they are committed (Kagan, 2004, p. 187). The consistent message—"I will not give up on you"—backed by visible actions, demonstrates to the youth both the consistency and commitment they need to begin to invest in the helping relationship.

> ### *Jennifer's Story:*
> Jennifer would scream, saying she didn't want anybody to "fucking care about me." She demonstrated this through her actions by disappearing into the street life of hard drug use, crime, violence and prostitution. It was rare that she would seek out help, although she had a small number of workers involved in her life over the years. She grew up independent, looking after her mother, who was a chronic alcoholic and whose life was wrapped up in meeting her own needs. Her father detached himself from the situation, so Jennifer never knew him. Jennifer's life became one of being in and out of jail. She often said that she could beat drugs if she chose to. She presented as an adrenalin junkie whose need for excitement was almost matched by her need to get high. There were violent relationships, drug debts, and warrants to beat. Jennifer was in and out of locked treatment facilities and while intensely angry at losing her freedom, she could understand that her life was spinning out of control. She never expected to live to be 18. However, shortly after turning 18 she found herself in adult jail again. She was tough and smart and could handle her own. Three professionals who had known Jennifer for a number of years decided to visit her in jail. We could see Jennifer coming toward the visiting room with her head down. She came in and looked up and saw us. She burst into tears and threw herself into the arms of her former foster mother. Her hug was intense and long, and one followed

for each of us. Since she had turned 18 and was in jail, she had expected that she would have been forgotten, and that people would have finally given up on her. She was shocked. She talked about her criminal life, that she was now pregnant, and how she needed to clean up her life. She readily agreed to accept help once she was released. She could articulate how she needed to keep some distance with her mother who had taught her to use needles and who maintained her dependency on Jennifer. Jennifer did give birth to a healthy baby and was, for the most part, able to control her addictions. While she has tried to "go straight," she still struggles. She continues to believe that she is not destined for anything better and has a lot of guilt for the things she has done over the years. It continues to be a challenge to convince her that she does deserve a better life, but there are flashes of optimism. She has finally accepted that we won't go away.

Remain committed during testing

Experience tells us that youth want connection; youth want positive relationships. However, if their past experiences have been negative, traumatic, or manipulative, they are not going to take the risk of forming a relationship with anybody without testing the waters first. This is simply part of working with high-risk youth. A majority of youth on the HRYU have had negative experiences with child welfare workers so are, rightfully, sceptical and suspicious. As such, they will push, swear, disappear, argue, challenge, occasionally threaten, sabotage, lie, say they don't care, threaten suicide, use drugs/alcohol, run away, and hide. The youth will expect the "power card" to be played: they expect to be told what to do and when to do it; they expect to hear that there will be consequences (perhaps file closure or residential treatment) if they don't do what they are told. They know how to read the script—they have been in such power struggles before and through practice are skilled. It is a survival technique—they force the rejection before they get hurt again (Levy and Orlans, 1998; Kagan, 2004). Often childhood trauma has made them wary of adults, so they become skilled at a young age in keeping people at a distance. The more adults reading their script, the more reinforced

the behaviour becomes. Youth have demonstrated that it is during this testing phase where they are often lost. If the youth's belief that adults do not help is reinforced, they will likely perceive that there will be little to gain from working together.

Child welfare workers/intake workers/investigators/assessors may label the youth as defiant and/or manipulative and conclude that they are not ready for services. Some youth come to believe that they are beyond help or that they are too insignificant for anyone to worry about them or care about them. Workers must pass the test and take seriously their threats about our safety and their own. The message conveyed must be that they are still important and that they can't push us away so easily.

Be intentional in your interactions

Relationships with youth should be intentional, significant and purpose-filled. Relationships should be based on shared power (Bishop, 2002) and a desire to learn and understand, and should have specific goals and outcomes. Our research has shown that, in general, youth can understand the extent of these relationships, the boundaries that exist and the roles and responsibilities of the worker. It is extremely important for youth to understand what they can expect from their social workers, as child welfare workers have specific provincial/territorial legislation under which they must work.

Don't make gaining trust the main goal

Kagan (2004), Neufeld and Mate (2004), and Levy and Orlans (1998), among others, outline the importance of gaining the trust of children and youth. Of course, if this happens, there are many benefits; however, our experience with youth indicates that this does not need to be the end goal. The child welfare worker sets out to support, advise, guide, help, and learn from the youth. If through this process a trusting relationship emerges, the connection will definitely be stronger. The concern when the push is to establish trust is that the helping process can very easily become the child welfare worker's agenda, rather than having the youth set the agenda for what makes sense to them.

Despite the efforts of the child welfare worker, it is possible that youth are still not able to see the relationship as one of mutual trust. Youth have reported to us that it is important to them to know that their worker

will not hurt them emotionally, that they will be heard, that they will not be judged, and that they will not be rejected or abandoned. Youth demonstrate that it is at this level where there can be some "buy in," and work can be accomplished. An example of this are the youth who do not maintain regular contact with their workers, but will reach out to their workers for help when experiencing a crisis, acknowledging that they cannot manage everything on their own.

> *Annie's Story:*
> Annie, 15, had been through a number of foster homes, group homes, and family placements. In each case, she either left or the caregiver asked for her to be removed. She actively sabotaged placements and could articulate that she was not going to let anyone get close to her. Every significant person in her life had either abandoned her and/or abused her, sexually, physically, mentally and emotionally. At times Annie was the tough street kid, while at other times she was a little girl who wanted a mother to love her and cuddle her; what she wanted most she fought so hard to avoid. It took time and patience to get Annie to a point that she could see we were not trying to hurt her. One day, out of the blue, she left a voice message on my cell phone. She was trying to get words out through heartfelt sobbing and said her mother had asked how she was doing for the first time in her life. Her mother, who had serious health problems due to chronic drinking, could never be available for her daughter, but Annie could not get over this. Slowly, she started to reach out despite risking further hurt in life.

Create healthy confusion

Related to avoiding the scripts that youth set out for us is the strategy of creating healthy confusion for the youth. This entails challenging the youth's negative belief system (Levy and Orlans, 1998) and their dark view of the world. Our work with high-risk youth has demonstrated that such thinking can be challenged by doing things they don't expect, including being a safe, consistent, and genuine adult in their lives.

All of the youth in the HRYU have relationship, trust, and bonding

issues. This does not mean that they are all youth with Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), though a number have been diagnosed with this, meaning their attachment process was disrupted before they reached the age of 36 months (Kagan, 2004; Levy and Orlans, 1998). While patterns of behaviour are identifiable for those who are diagnosed with RAD, attachment in general remains a core issue with all of the youth. By the time the youth have come to the HRYU, they have built thick walls around themselves to keep people at a distance and have developed sophisticated skills in reading people and avoiding any kind of emotional connection. Although this could be viewed as a dark and lonely place to be, youth say it can be a comfortable place for them because there is less fear of being rejected and hurt again.

Our work with this population has shown the effectiveness of challenging youth on their beliefs that they have to rely on themselves to get by in the world; that others will take advantage of them; that adults cannot be trusted to help; that people who say they care are not telling the truth; and that people do not understand them. The challenging should occur in a sensitive and respectful way (Levy and Orlans, 1998), as the tendency to push too hard results in the youth pushing back. In such cases we end up back in the power and control relationship, with the youth being labelled uncooperative and defiant, and with very little progress being made. Our experience has shown us that the youth will go at their own pace—one that is safe for them. If this safety is evident, then there is a better chance that they will allow their view of the world to be challenged.

Again, being respectful, thoughtful, and non-judgemental are basic but crucial professional stances. In general, people do not give up their belief systems easily, and when trust is not present, it can become more difficult. We have observed that when one is consistent and patient, it becomes possible for the youth to slowly allow you into their world. This process is important as it can encourage youth to take further risks by allowing others into their world, which builds their external support network.

Celebrate small successes (inspire hope)

When working with high-risk youth, it is essential to remain hopeful—to believe that youth are not "stuck," that change can occur, and that youth are strong and resilient. Working from a harm-reduction approach

is about being aware of what the young person sees as important, and remaining focused on their individual definition of success. It is a philosophical shift to define success through the eyes of a youth, and not as the "expert" (Elovich & Cowing, 1993). It is important to celebrate the success, no matter how small, and maintain communication to assess that progress is being made in a way that makes sense to the youth. For example, when a youth returns from the streets, rather than punishing them, celebrate their return and use this as an opportunity for relationship-building and learning. These situations will present themselves daily, and workers have the opportunity to remain intentionally focused on "celebrating the small things" and inspiring some measure of hope in all situations.

Work from a strengths-based perspective

Discussion in the area of strength-based practice has increased; however, there continues to be emphasis on the deficit or "at-risk" paradigm (Hammond & Nuttgens, 2007), or the traditional medical/pathology paradigm (Blundo, 2001). Blundo (2001) notes, "We look for what is going wrong, symptoms, what might be failings, pathologies" (p. 297). He adds that changing to a "strengths/solution-focused perspective is a considerable challenge for social workers," especially given that students come "ready-made with a bias toward seeing problems and then trying to fix them by making suggestions to the client." We tend to use "problem-saturated" language (Madsen, 2001; Worden, 1999), which again, conforms to the expectation of disconnected youth who have heard such language most of their lives. Michael Ungar (2005) tells us that youth who receive the most attention in our communities are labelled into four categories: dangerous, delinquent, deviant, and disordered. However, he notes that resilience is equally present in these youth as they survive and take advantage of any available opportunities and resources—even those we consider negative or destructive.

And survive they do. High-risk youth have many skills that they use to get by and to create their identity. "Couch surfing" is a way to solve the problem of not having a placement. Pushing people away and "manipulating" is a way to avoid more rejection and hurt. Dropping out of school is a way to avoid feeling like a failure. Committing a crime and getting caught is a way to gain safety and structure when feeling out of control, or when wanting a feeling of power and status to be re-established. The

key is to provide substitutes for the problem behaviour rather than trying to suppress the behaviours (Ungar, 2005), which is what youth would expect and is part of their scripts. When the substitutes we offer meet the needs of the youth for a powerful and socially acceptable identity, they are far more likely to take advantage of them. Once we understand what children/youth gain from "playing at being bad" we can offer substitute behaviours that reward them with the same power and control derived from the problem behaviour (Ungar, 2005).

Blundo (2001) claims that

> [t]raditional social work practice is disempowering as workers use technical skills such as confrontation, overcoming resistance, and managing the "manipulative" client while at the same time manipulating the relationship to enhance compliance with professional decisions …. In contrast, from a strengths perspective, the "manipulative" client is understood as using considerable skill and thought for a purpose that is meaningful to that person. It is resistance only when these actions are perceived by the worker as the client challenging what the worker wants to take place (p. 302).

Blundo (2001) challenges the worker-is-the-expert perspective, which he believes is the prevailing norm in social work, resulting in the worker feeling it is their duty to impart wisdom to the client to help bring about change. Strength-based practice views the youth as experts on their own lives; therefore, working together is productive, empowers the youth, and enhances the relationship.

Explore the youth's motivation to change

Our experience indicates that it is erroneous to believe that youth don't want to change. They try, and they try again. As previously stated, it is difficult to make changes without a sense of connection and support. High-risk youth often have little or no belief in themselves that change can occur. Setbacks are extremely difficult and reinforce the negatives they already believe about themselves. If these beliefs have not come from their family circumstances, they will arise from the labels that have been attached to them as they encountered human service systems such as medical, school, child welfare, and justice. They learn they are "problem

children," that they have behavioural issues, are conduct disordered, ADHD, ADD, depressed, learning disordered, attachment disordered, anti-social and *high-risk!* They also hear it from peers who label them as "druggies," "criminals," "psychos," "sluts," "hookers," and/or "stupid." How does a youth find an identity through all of these labels? How does a youth find some measure of motivation through all of this "deficit-based" talk?

As our research and conversations with youth have shown, high-risk youth have very limited access to resources, little help to find resources, and a deep mistrust that such resources will result in a positive experience. A youth's mental health, internalized beliefs and addictions may be barriers that prevent them from meeting their basic needs, such as finding a place to live, escaping hunger, and even arranging transportation to appointments.

Finding solutions to these issues with the youth can be a monumental task requiring much patience. It takes time working with the youth to get permission to involve other resources whether a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a school, a life skills program, a placement, a physician, or a dentist. It can be very much a "seize the day" mentality in being ready to act when the motivation is evident. As tough as the youth may be on the street, this process can involve a lot of hand-holding, otherwise the appointments simply don't happen. For most youth, being pushed into a series of meetings means being put into a situation of repeatedly taking risks and this can be overwhelming. This doesn't reflect a lack of motivation by the youth, but rather that the process is moving at the pace of the worker rather than the youth. This speaks to the need of constant "checking in" with the youth to ensure they are feeling safe, have appropriate support, and can handle the speed at which events are unfolding.

Build relationships and community networks

By extending our own networks of support, we inevitably expand the networks of support for the youth. The youth are part of the community, so we in child welfare services need to be part of the community. Outreach workers and service agencies are working with high-risk youth in the community. Child welfare needs to be partners in the human service community. The community represents an important resource for youth, rich in wisdom, ideas, creativity and support resources.

In interacting with outreach and agency partners in Edmonton (Alberta), community members (professional and non-professional) have proven to be invaluable in their role in bridging the "disconnect" between the youth and the system. By developing partnerships with outreach and service agencies, there is the opportunity to expand the support network for youth to access a wider variety of services (mandated and non-mandated). It is also very important that the youth perceive their support people working together; that they have a team on their side.

The HRYU and the community work closely together and have developed a strong relationship. Concerns, criticisms, and constructive venting are put on the table to ensure all are accountable in best supporting the youth. Most referrals to the HRYU come from the community, which, in itself, shows a willingness to work with the child welfare "system" and an expectation that the voice of the youth will be respected. When working in partnership, the message to the youth is this: "These people (from the HRYU) are good people and they will go out of their way to help you." This can give permission to the youth to accept services and make connections. The partnerships promote the sharing of ideas, the use of natural resources in the community, and the importance of demonstrating to the youth that they have a team of support behind them.

Of particular importance is the connection with cultural supports and services for HRY. One such agency for the HRYU is Boyle St. Community Services. This Edmonton inner-city agency offers a continuum of services to meet individual, family, and community needs. This community partnership tries to ensure that work with Aboriginal youth is as culturally sensitive as possible, and that Aboriginal resources are accessed (slightly over 50 percent of the youth involved with the HRYU are Aboriginal). Boyle program manager Karen Bruno believes that, in working with Aboriginal clients, it is particularly important to know the community. She believes that the community values relationships, views life as a journey of discovery, sees strengths, and supports people to be successfully independent. Aboriginal cultural norms are acknowledged as strengths to incorporate in meeting the needs of youth.

CONCLUSION

We do not believe that we have all of the answers but, instead, continue to look to the youth who have articulated what *does not* work in the system. Through partnership with the community and others who share a

passion in working with high-risk youth, attempts have been made to ensure that the voices of these youth are heard and their needs are better met by a child welfare system that has acknowledged a need for this to happen. Edmonton and Area Children and Youth Services, Region 6, and the community have started an initiative through the High Risk Youth Unit incorporating a harm reduction and resiliency/strength-based approach that relies on meaningful community engagement. Relationship-building is a key focus area in working with these youth, as outlined in the strategies discussed above.

Every youth that comes into the unit presents new challenges and new understandings, which encourages workers to ally with them and provide services creatively. This is our gift from the youth. Our gift to them is not to judge, but to listen, to try and understand what they are going through, to help them be accountable to themselves, to help create some happy memories, and to give them hope for the future.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There is very little research on child welfare practice with high-risk youth. As child welfare workers begin to partner with youth and work creatively with them, research will need to be done to evaluate outcomes and measure effectiveness for youth, families, communities and child welfare agencies. Until such time, work needs to continue in an effort to challenge traditional practice to better engage youth and build relationships.

The High Risk Youth Unit does not reach all high-risk youth in Edmonton and area, so work will continue to support the expansion of the initiative, and the philosophy behind it, both in Edmonton and throughout Alberta. This is not just about changing the way day-to-day practice is done, but also allowing for a non-traditional framework with this population of youth. This means giving caseworkers permission to think and act differently and to work creatively *with* the youth; this means providing access to appropriate training and allowing caseworkers time to grow comfortable in the role. In addition, the continuation of the development and modification of services and programs for this challenging population will aim to ensure that the voices of the youth are being heard.

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