

To get to easy, you have to go through hard

Moving from simple to complex in Developmental Practices

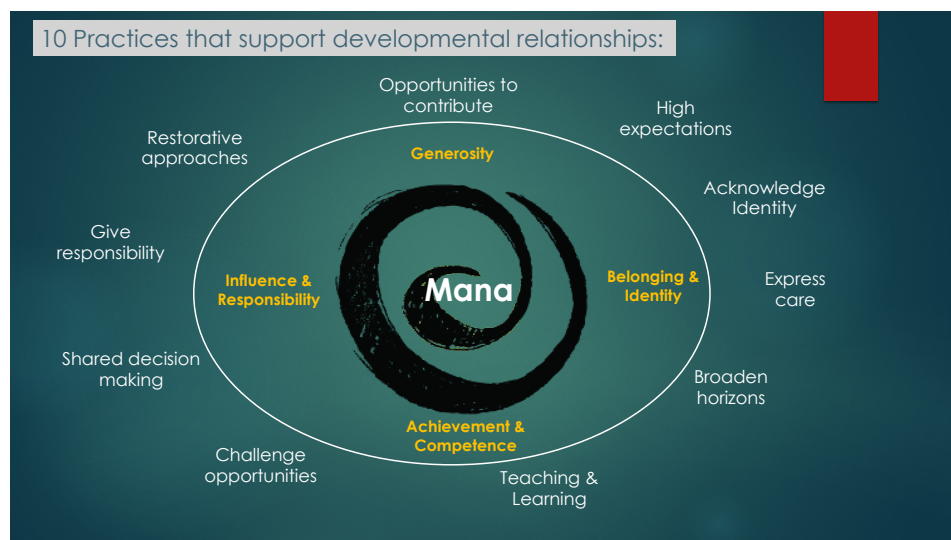
Lloyd Martin, 2020
Praxis Youth Development (EO1)

Nothing stays the same for long, and in the context of youth development, what starts as a simple task often becomes more complex as it is woven through the fabric of a relationship. Rather than seeing this as a problem Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979) recognised that movement toward increasing complexity is a key indicator that a developmental relationship is happening.

In this article we explore the Developmental Practices further, and discuss what they each look like using examples from *Small Stories* (2012). We also consider examples of what the transition from simple to complex might look like in a youth work context.

Developmental Practices

Based on the Circle of Mana, the Developmental Practices identify a list of ten practical things that we can do to support the developmental needs of a young person. The practices around where a young person's Circle is broken will be most important in meeting their needs.



Moving from simple to complex

Simple doesn't mean easy, it sometimes means moving through disappointment and rejection as foundation for trust is laid. The quote and the picture above (from an ad for Mountain Dew) recognise the importance of perseverance, in the process of achieving anything that is worthwhile. In this context the concept of 'simple' includes two important ideas:

- It refers to our initial intention, what we had planned and where we begin in our roles as youth workers, mentors and parents.
- It includes the 'hard yards' where we have to create connection, build interest, and establish trust.

The move toward complexity often involves a move from activity that is planned and initiated by the youth worker, toward activities that are co-designed, and led by young people -with the support of the youth worker. In the next section we look at each practice and discuss short examples of what the move from simple to complex might look like in a youth work context. Each example is linked to some examples from *Small Stories*, a series of reflections on our own journey as beginning youth workers, teachers and parents in Cannons Creek, Porirua.

The Practices

1. Express Care

Presence and connection. Staying in touch. Taking an interest in what they are doing. Listen, listen, listen.

Henri Nouwen (1974) suggests that care involves creating connection and spending time with someone by being present in their situation. He contrasts this with *cure approaches* where the focus is simply on delivering a service. Maia Szalavitz and Bruce Perry (2010) identify the critical role that human connection plays in the early development of children. Research into the outcomes for children in orphanages has found that in the absence of regular interactions with an adult who expresses care, many children will literally die, even if all of their physical needs are being met.

At a simple level care involves an adult (that's you) choosing to be present in a young person's situation, for example by setting up appointments and creating opportunities to do things together. At first you are usually the one who has to make the effort and initiate opportunities as you establish the foundation of your connection. It also involves becoming emotionally present in any of these ways:

- By doing good listening, and tuning in to what is going on for them
- By acknowledging what is going on in their lives (eg. birthdays and special events)
- By taking an interest in what they are doing (eg. going along to watch sports etc)
- By letting them know that they are a priority for you

As a connection develops, it will evolve towards greater complexity and shared power. For example; either you or the young person might negotiate some boundaries (for example, when it is okay to call etc), you may also have to re-negotiate your role as other events happen in their life, such as when they (or you) are falling in love, having children, or studying for exams. The move towards complexity, will often involve moving from a relationship which is initiated and maintained by you, to one that is re-negotiated by the young person as they work out what they want from it (something they often don't know at the start).

However, once you have done the hard yards to create connection at the simple level, it never goes away. There are young people and Praxis students that I haven't seen for years, but when we meet our connection is immediately reaffirmed. You are an actor on the stage of their lives. Once your character (as a helpful person) is established, you may come and go from the stage but your part is assured.

Small Stories: The underground language of care, Saving the galaxy, A brief kindness,

2. Acknowledging Identity

It's okay to be who you are around me.

We give people space to be who they are in obvious ways, such as taking the time for introductions (pepeha) -these allow us to acknowledge each other and weave our stories together at some level, before we begin an activity. We also acknowledge others in more subtle ways such as taking the time to pronounce

their name, or language correctly. Acknowledging identity extends beyond culture to include acknowledgement of religion, gender and sexual identity. Brendtro and Du Toit (2005) describe these acknowledgements as micro interactions, or 'bids'. When they are present in our interactions they deactivate the young person's amygdala and create a space in which the young person feels able to let their guard down and take risks.

As our interactions become more complex, we will sometimes be invited to sit with a young person in the pain, fears and frustration they experience around their identity. As Ricky's relationship with Hec deepens, he begins to talk about to a girl who was in a home with him (and his fears for her when she disappeared). Sometimes the frustration is directed at us because it is the people that we represent (through culture, faith or job) who have caused the pain. Often there is nothing that we can 'fix' during these difficult conversations, we can only help to carry their pain by acknowledging it and carrying their story with us.

Small Stories: Visiting hours, The first tour

3. Broadening Horizons

Expose them to new experiences, go to new places, try new stuff, sometimes just let them tag along.

Our involvement in a young person's life should aim to leave their world larger than what it was. A key developmental change for a young person during adolescence, involves re-negotiating their relationship with the world around them. Rather than having their experience of life filtered through their parents, they now have to deal with the big wide world of love, study, earning money and making friends. One of the helpful ways that we can support a young person during this time is to get them away from a screen (in which they are passive consumers of other people's experiences) and expose them to new experiences and situations in which they have to find their way themselves.

At a simple level, every time you go and do something new together (and put up with the 'this is dumb/boring' comments along the way), you are expanding their world and in the process building resilience, adaptability and confidence. All of which are helpful ways of responding to a young person who is experiencing anxiety or depression. Broadening horizons through new experiences can be as complicated as going on a trip to a new place, or as simple as involving the young person in some aspect of your own life (eg. taking them to work, or engaging them through culture, art or sport).

At a more complex level, are concepts of initiation and liminality; in many traditional cultures the pathway from childhood to becoming an adult is marked by a structured process of going away, finding yourself, and returning in a new role. The way this was done has varied from culture to culture, and this is discussed further in *Small Stories*. However, many of the traditions that surrounded this process are being lost and replaced by the influence of globalised media (now you just have an adventure on your screen). Whether we reclaim old traditions or invent new ones, we have a really important role to play in initiating our young into adulthood, an African proverb warns us that:

'If we fail to initiate our young people, they will burn down the village'

Small Stories: Taking Lucky home, The Eel Steal, The first tour, Liminal moments

4. Teaching & Learning

Teach by letting them 'have a go'. Scaffold and fade. Mutual learning.

At a simple level; a young person is motivated to learn something, so you teach them. For example how to drive, or play guitar, or bake a cake. Having the young person feel some ownership of the learning process is vital to maintaining their interest and commitment. So we try and make the experience as 'hands on' as possible (their hands!), because doing it for yourself always beats doing it efficiently. So teaching with a light touch is essential. This is sometimes called scaffolding; a temporary support that is put up to help get the job done, but which is taken away as soon as it is not needed.

Increasing complexity and sharing power will often mean becoming learners together; the concept of *ako*. The term means to both teach and learn, it recognises that teachers don't have to pretend that they know everything, and students are not empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. In *ako* each person has something to offer, and something to learn (reciprocity). Research suggests that when we use this approach to facilitate learning, we both uphold the mana of our learners, and improve their achievement.

Small Stories: Saving the galaxy, Scaffolding and skills for participation, Legends in our own time/Everyone has something to offer.

5. Challenge opportunities

Create challenge situations, manage safety, stand back and let them figure it out for themselves!

In ABL we learned the difference between a comfort zone and a challenge zone. Each time we face a challenge, and move through it, we grow in confidence and resilience (less likely to give up). How often have you listened to a young person moan all the way through a camp (or new experience) and then (afterwards) say it was the best thing they have ever done? Work in their challenge zone (from ABL) whenever you can, it's where we learn best. Challenge activities support both independence/responsibility, and self-efficacy (confidence to persevere when things are tough). They will fall back on these experiences when they go into new situations or face new challenges.

At a simple level we create challenges (for example the rules of an ABL activity, or a physical challenge), and debrief with them afterwards. As complexity increases, the young person will set their own challenges and monitor their own performance.

Small Stories: Just like on TV, Ditch diggers, The Bus Stop/Young people as agents of change

6. Shared decision making

Do it too early and you freak them out, do it too late, and you stifle growth (and they will get frustrated). Create opportunities to make decisions together.

In order to maintain their interest in and commitment to an activity, the ownership of it must move from you to the young person over time. At the simple level, we are often the one who is suggesting, initiating and motivating. There are two ways we can move out of this dynamic; the first is to build activities around their ideas, while this doesn't often work at first ('what do you want to do?'.... 'nothing'). Keep listening for their suggestions and ideas and be ready to adapt what you had planned to go in these directions. The second is to move into a co-design approach, the easiest way to begin to reframe the activity as a problem you could solve together.

So instead of: 'for our fitness activity today we are going to....'.

Try: 'To help us meet our challenge, what activities could we use for our fitness sequence today?'

Small Stories: Chooks and cars, Miles and the car parks, The Bus Stop

7. Giving Responsibility

Only responsibility teaches responsibility. Giving it can feel scary for both of you. Timing is everything.

Closely related to shared decision making is the practice of giving responsibility. Even in the smallest interactions, our rule is to never do something for someone that they are capable of doing for themselves. Sometimes our own need to be helpful can get in the way of this important discipline. Doing baking with the kids? Touch something only if you really have to. Who cares if it takes longer to measure a cup of flour! This is about learning, not about efficiency.

When we give responsibility, one of the hardest things to do to negotiate distance; by staying too close you stifle them and communicate a lack of trust. On the other hand; stay too far away, and a challenge can quickly turn into freaking out!

Small Stories: James and the kayaks, Meal time at Tipan House, The Hui

8. Restorative approaches

After a mess, a restorative approach creates a safe space for the young person to take responsibility for what they have done, and for putting it right.

Our word for punishment comes from the Latin word for pain. After something has gone wrong, punitive responses are based on two questions: 'who is guilty?' and 'what do they deserve?'

Restorative approaches are based on three questions: what has happened, how have people been affected, and how do we put things right? They invite the young person who has done something wrong towards responsibility by asking them to take responsibility for what they have done, and for doing what they can to put it right. They also invite them to consider the impact of what they have done on someone else (generosity).

Small Stories: The Story behind a headline, The truce/putting it on the table

9. Opportunities to Contribute

Generosity builds resilience/mana

Having positive experiences of giving back makes us feel good, and the research suggests that it is a key factor in predicting resilience (Benard, 2004). At a simple level creating a culture of generosity within a group involves helping each young person take responsibility for each other, and the place. At a simple level we do this with a young person -together we do the dishes, and provide manaakitanga (hospitality) towards guests.

Moving towards complexity means moving from doing something because there's something in it for me (reciprocity) and doing it because it's part of our kaupapa (values). The focus often shifts from creating opportunities for within the group to doing something for a person who is outside of the group, or who can't pay us back. As we involve a young person in these experiences, we are nurturing their mana. .

Small Stories: The Hui, Ditch diggers, Reframing young people as citizens

10. High expectations

Having high expectations will often mean looking past the present realities, and seeing the potential. High expectations will change our language to and about a young person, but they should never become another thing that we beat them around the head with.

This practice sits near belonging and identity because our expectations of a young person feed into their own beliefs about who they are and what they are capable of. Waikato based education reformer Russell Bishop and his colleagues (2014) suggest that the biggest single barrier to achieving higher rates of school achievement for Maori is the expectations of their teachers. Low expectations are toxic, not just around achievement, but also in how people construct their identity.

When high expectations exist on their own, they can easily become punitive. However, when they sit alongside high levels of support, connection, and a sense of belonging they open possibilities.

At a simple level, Mike Ross suggests that high expectations recognise the mana of both the young person, and of the youth worker (interview from session 1).

Small Stories: Sunday morning at Tawa, The best day ever.

References

- Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.
- Bishop, R., Ladwig, J., & Berryman, M. (2014). The centrality of relationships for pedagogy: The whanaungatanga thesis. *American educational research journal*, 51(1), 184-214.
- Brendtro, L. K., & Du Toit, L. (2005). *Response ability pathways: Restoring bonds of respect*. Capetown: Pretext.
- Nouwen, H. J. M. (1974) *Out of Solitude*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press.
- Szalavitz, M., & Perry, B. (2010). *Born for love. Why Empathy is Essential— and Endangered*. New York: HarperCollins.