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THE DEFINITION DEBATE

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“A Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose”: The Definition Debate

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There has been much discussion and debate among child care workers about the definition of “child care workers.” Who is a child care worker? What does the child care worker do with children that is unique and different from what the teacher, the nurse, the social worker, or the psychologist does?

Some define the child care worker as one who works in a residential setting with children, or as one who works in preschool day care. Others limit the definition to those who work with adolescents in group homes or in halfway houses. There is still more controversy as to whether a psychiatric nurse or a teacher’s aide can be considered a child care worker or not.

At every workshop and conference, this confusing debate is certain to emerge from the discussions. A child care worker should *not* be defined by the type of facility that he or she works in, nor by the type of child that he or she works with. The definition of the child care worker should be determined in accord with his or her primary function. Whatever the setting or the type of child served, the child care worker’s unique role is that of a “teacher of life skills” through the constructive relationship and the positive adult modeling that is provided the children and adolescents with whom he or she works. Therefore, when we define a child care worker, we are defining a human services professional who has special skills in working directly with children and adolescents.

The primary function of the school teacher is to teach academics; the role of the psychotherapist is to work with intrapsychic development in a prescribed, individualized, and intensive way. It is true that

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the role of the child care worker often overlaps with the roles of other professionals, but the specific, initial expertise of the child care worker is in helping children develop emotional and social competence in dealing with day-to-day problems. With these crucial "life skills," along with the necessary roles played by the other professions, children and adolescents are provided the opportunity to grow, to overcome problems, and to reach their potential as adults in society.

Thus, by defining the child care worker in accordance with his or her primary role, we can eliminate much of the confusion and debate that threatens to continue *ad infinitum*. Obviously, there are numerous specific functions that a child care worker might have in any given setting. Different facilities have different objectives, and child care workers will be utilized in accordance with the various objectives of these facilities. Yet the major function remains essentially the same.

As the profession evolves, diversified levels of child care professionals with varied skills and specialties will emerge. Some will have particular expertise and proficiency in residential treatment, work with the physically handicapped, etc. As mechanisms for implementing standards and certification are put into operation, these numerous areas of child care specialties will need to be identified more clearly.

Too often, the child care worker is perceived as having no unique skills. When a worker leaves one institution or program and goes to work at another facility, he or she must often start from the beginning to demonstrate to the new employer that he or she brings an appropriate body of knowledge and skills to the job. The popular misconception among other professionals and even among many child care workers is that when the worker leaves the traditionally perceived child care setting (e.g., the residential facility), that person also leaves his or her skills behind. This is clearly not so. If a doctor decides to leave a hospital to work in a community center or to be a consultant to a federal agency, does this exit from the halls of the hospital mean that he or she is no longer a doctor? Thus, whatever program or agency a child care worker goes to, he or she should be recognized as having special skills. The qualified child care worker can be effectively utilized in any program that requires the expertise of a professional with special insights into the needs and development of children.

Another misconception among some within the field, and one that is growing, is that those former "line workers" who have moved from direct work with children to supervisory or administrative positions can no longer be considered child care workers. In conceptualizing

the child care worker and the worker's role, it is essential that the professional scope be broad and not myopic. If the professional view is limited and shortsighted, so will be the potential and viability of the profession itself. The profession must be dynamic enough to encompass the varied talents of all child care professionals. (I define child care professional as one who is or has been a line worker and has had a minimum of two years of full-time experience—or the cumulative equivalent—functioning primarily as child care worker in direct contact with children and/or adolescents.) This would include those who desire to continue working directly with children and those who choose to move into another aspect of the child care field—be it administration, supervision, teaching, writing, consulting.

The most logical choice of supervisor for a child care staff is a qualified former line worker. The most obvious person to direct a child care agency is a qualified former line worker. The emphasis is on the word "qualified," for it is clear that not all line workers would make competent supervisors or administrators. Nevertheless, former line workers should not be stripped of their child care worker credentials and identity because they have the inclination to develop talents and expertise in areas other than direct work with children. The important insights that they have gained from their previous direct work experience cannot be denied or taken away.

It is true that these former "direct work" individuals can no longer be referred to as "line child care workers," but they most certainly should continue to be considered as "child care professionals." To impede or exclude such vital potential from our emerging profession would be to unwittingly preclude the very growth that has been struggling so long for life.

In short, child care work is a profession that requires special skills. The main function of the child care worker is the teaching of "life" skills" through a constructive, modeling relationship. The particular title is not as important as the main function. The child care worker may be referred to as "mental health specialist," "group counselor," "psychiatric aide," "houseparent," etc., etc., etc. The important point is that the essential function is the same. The role that the child care worker plays in the growth and development of children is unique. "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet."