

# **We can't go on together with suspicious minds**

Andrew Bruun (1998)

Introduction

*"These kids have got either no one in their lives or a cast of thousands".*

Over the 15 years or so, since working in the human services field, I've heard that line about as many times as I've listened to the above Elvis song (which is a lot - believe me).

I'm sure everyone reading this article would also have heard it and I would say, in a general sense, would agree. The words "these kids" refer to young people, most often from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds, who end up in the protection and care of the state. A majority of these young people use drugs. Of course the majority of people in Australia use drugs. For the young people I refer to, their drug use often puts their safety and well being at risk. They are far beyond caring whether what they do is legal or illegal, they are motivated by a range of other factors. I have worked with over 500 young people with drug related issues. There were logical reasons as to why each one of these young people used drugs. A useful way to look at it is that in all cases the drug use had a function.

Understanding the reasons a young person has for using drugs and what function it serves is crucial but as professionals and members of the community the key question is "How can we respond in the most effective way possible?". It is my intention in this article to go some of the way to answering that question.

At the end of the day it's whatever works best for that young person and their family. This requires a diverse understanding of the case specific and general issues involved plus a range of approaches and interventions that may be useful.

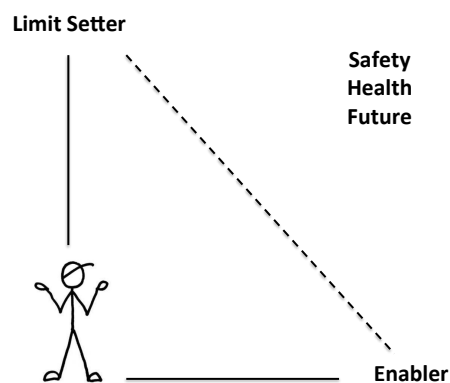
The focus of my intention in this article is on how best to structure the working relationships in a young person's life so as to:

- increase their sense of security
- reduce the risk of harm
- maximise the potential for them to gain the information guidance and support to negotiate the sometimes tricky path towards adulthood

What kind of relationships are necessary for the young person who has "no-one"? Particularly where more intensive and dependent drug use is involved. Also, how is the "cast of thousands" going to find a cohesive structure and an effective way of working together so that the young persons developmental needs are adequately catered for?

## Building protective relational structures with adolescents

Diagram 1 represents a model that some colleagues and I have used that relates to how the developmental needs of the young people are responded to by others in their life.



**Diagram 1**

For the model to make sense it is necessary to make some relevant points about adolescent development. To do this I will discuss the adolescent transitional process as a whole but am aware that the age range I refer to, 11/12 to 17/18 years old, covers a couple of developmental sub-stages.

As adolescents are in something of a transitional state, competing interests are at play. On one hand the young person will expect or yearn for the structure, support and nurturing that was available to them as a child (even though they will almost always be loathe to admit it). On the other, they want to bust out of the childhood role and demand to be treated as adults. Therefore, they question the order of things and are seen as rebellious and disdainful of authority. They thirst for experience. They take risks that many of us who are adults wouldn't take, but possibly once would have. They have an intense desire to be seen as mature, so they often try to send out a message that they have everything under control when it isn't the case.

This throws up a dilemma for parents and guardians. While they want the young person to develop and be successful in their quest to become a relatively autonomous individual, they have primary concern and responsibility for that young person's safety and well-being. Needless to say, a natural tension exists in relationships between teenagers and their guardians that stems from differing perspectives over what is safe and acceptable. Dissonance also develops where the young person's values and goals clash with those that their parents or guardians would like them to hold.

Young people want to make decisions for themselves and be the masters of their own destiny, whereas parents or guardians often doubt their capacity to do so and usually take a "not till I'm sure your good and ready" approach. It may hurt a young person's pride to be "underestimated" and provoke protests against such tyranny. However, in most cases young people share at least some of the same doubts about their ability to manage as their caregivers. The fact that there is someone who is acting to moderate their exposure to the big bad world, regardless of how attractive it may be, engenders a sense of security. As a protective worker you don't have to look to far to see what happens for kids when this role is not being fulfilled.

In the ideal sense a teenager will have a relationship or set of relationships where responsibility is taken for defining the parameters or "setting the limits" within which the young person is free to move and experience life.

It is a young person's job (in developmental terms) to push those limits in order to have them extended or removed altogether. This means that they will be constantly testing the response of those that set limits for them.

It's an age-old story dripping with tension and inherent paradox. It can be a tough time for all concerned. Very few parents or guardians would disagree. Even with the palpable excitement and the fond memories that thinking of being 14 stirs up, I wouldn't want to go back. Andrew, the gawky, naive, sometimes brave, self conscious, would-be Casanova with his jeans tucked into his uggs. One moment, I would dwell morbidly on the concept of death and the next be on a skateboard hurtling down the middle of a steep and normally busy main road at midnight. All this without even a fleeting thought as to my own mortality. I wonder what has changed. You can put me down as the never-was Casanova and maybe now I just deal better with being gawky and sex starved. As for the skateboard, bitumen is a hard teacher. Too much information? I think so. Back to the paper.

The key themes come through loud and clear:

1. The need for the young person to have experiences from which they can learn and develop.
2. The need to ensure that in the process of experiencing life and making decisions for themselves the young person does not get so out of their depth that their safety, well being and future prospects are jeopardised.

It is very important to own the fact that change and transition involves risk. Without risk constructive learning and self-discovery will not occur. The focus must then be on how the extreme and unnecessary risks might be removed and on how other risks are best managed.

What we do know is that it would be unnatural for a person to spend all their adolescent years living happily within the limits that are set for them. I can assure you that my reckless, midnight skateboarding descents of main roads in Brisbane were not sanctioned by my parents. Believe me I wasn't raising it at the dinner table

as a topic of discussion to check out how my parents might have felt about it. I was flying under the radar and that's the way I wanted to keep it.

The same applies with drug use. It will almost always be behaviour that is subject to of some kind of limits or regulation. Young people will almost always try to keep their drug using behaviour (or at least the most risky parts of it) under the radar.

When the details of a young person's substance use are unknown, accurate assessment particularly in the area of risk to self or others is not possible. This renders limit-setters, with the health and well being of the young person at heart, powerless to address the drug related issues with the young person in any meaningful way.

The following is a list of what, in my experience, young people using drugs require if risk is to be minimised and their capacity to manage their circumstances enhanced:

- accurate, reliable and relevant information and education relating to the drug use (not scare tactics )
- knowledge of how to access information and resources for themselves
- knowledge of harm reduction strategies and protective behaviors, as well as how they can be put into practice
- advocacy and linkages with appropriate services, organisations or individuals that could be of assistance
- opportunity to debrief and learn from their experiences coupled with getting some guidance from a caring adult.

How can these essential services be offered to a young person and issues around substance use addressed when most of the relevant information is not "on the air"?

The tragic case of Anna Woods comes to mind. Anna Woods, a teenager, died in 1996. The coroner reported that it was due to water intoxication or internal drowning. It is widely believed that she was killed by ecstasy but this is not the case. An ambulance was called at 10.11am but she took the ecstasy with friends at a dance party the night before. Without going into the fine details, Anna Woods had drunk too much water, which is recommended for people at dance parties who dance vigorously for hours on end in order to prevent dehydration, and began to feel sick. Believing wrongly that the cure for someone who gets sick after taking ecstasy was to drink a lot of water, her friends kept giving it to her which kept making the problem worse. Anna Woods could definitely have been saved if medical help had been sought in time. Because Anna Woods and her friends didn't want their parents or others to find out that she had taken ecstasy, they waited all night to call for assistance. By then the situation was critical and it was too late. This is in no way a comment on Anna Woods parents who most certainly would have acted immediately to engage medical assistance. What if there was another person who the girls trusted that could have stepped in to act in the interest of Anna's safety as her parents would have.

### **Enabling relationships**

The example of Anna Woods illustrates how young people often act outside the protective influence of the person who has the limit-setting role in their life.

Other relationships involve enabling a young person to express and develop their own identity and pursue their interests. These relationships are an important source of information, support and guidance for the young person. They not only open up opportunities for new experiences but also help the young person to understand what these experiences mean. They facilitate learning. The people in these relationships can be friends, siblings, members of their extended family, the parents of other kids they know, local youth workers, teachers, sports coaches, etc. They are the significant others in a young person's life that I call "enablers"(as in diagram 1).

People in the enabling role can have a strong protective influence in the young person's life, just as limit-setters do, but in a different way. Why? Because young people can feel at ease to discuss their thoughts and experiences without expecting limits to apply or consequences to ensue. Of course, all relationships have limits, what really makes the difference is the power dynamic.

Limit-setters have direct or coercive power over a young person's circumstances. Young people choose who their enablers will be. To a great extent a young person bestows on these people the power to influence them. There will still be a power imbalance but this is usually due to the enabler having more experience and resources. Also, what they have to offer may be very attractive to the young person.

In diagram 1, these relationships are represented on the horizontal axis and limit-setting relationships are represented on the vertical. You will also notice that I have used the terms "Have to" and "How to" to define the different functions the different relationships serve. A point of clarification is required here. Those with the crucial "have to" role will also deliver the "how tos" for young people in a wide range of areas but not those that the young person keeps hidden or "beneath the radar". This highlights the importance of strong relationships with enablers, who share a common interest with the limit setter in the young person's safety, well-being and ongoing, healthy development.

Unfortunately, not all "how to" relationships are complementary in this way. A young person may learn how to steal car and go for a joy ride or be encouraged to have a go at train surfing. At times they might receive very unreliable information, like masturbation makes you go blind. That's fairly benign but it is much more concerning when information such as the following is being passed on and taken as fact:

- "Once you've got Hepatitis C it doesn't matter if you share with others who have it." or
- "When someone has a heroin overdose, shoot them up with saltwater, it will revive them".

Others, who don't know any better themselves, as in the Anna Woods case, often share this type of information, unwittingly. These may be people who care deeply for the young person.

Other times it may be someone who preys on the young person's inexperience and gullibility. At the extreme end of the continuum of exploitative "how to" or enabling relationships are those formed with paedophiles. They are often expert at "grooming" the young people that they target and make the relationships they offer very attractive. They often meet young people's needs on a number of levels, whether it's accommodation, money for activities and new clothes or affection and commitment from an adult. I realise that the underlying motives are related to using the young person for their own pleasure regardless of the impact it might have on them and for me that's what makes paedophiles' actions so despicable. However, as a community we need to face the fact that our response to the needs of many young people is vastly inadequate and we often don't provide the same opportunities.

To an adult seeking to ensure that the young person isn't being exploited, it might seem obvious which relationships are detrimental for a young person and which aren't. A young person is likely to have a very different perspective from the limit-setter and would have a different scale for measuring suitability. The decision as to which relationships are deemed acceptable or unacceptable is often a source of disagreement and conflict.

At times limit-setters exert their influence and endeavour to prevent a young person from entering or continuing enabling relationships they believe will have a negative influence. The inevitable result is that young people will choose to keep certain relationships "under the radar" or construct the people that they are hanging out with as virtual angels. The reality is that they are more likely to be the devil-worshipping tough guys from the pub rock band of the same name rather than the heavenly variety.

It is therefore preferable for the young person to be connected with an enabler who can explore what these relationships mean to the young person and offer another perspective. The guidance they receive may be virtually the same as what would come from the limit-setter but is more easily accepted from an enabler.

This means that the person in a complementary, enabling relationship with the young person, who may be an older cousin or a professional helper like a Youth AOD worker, will have different or more detailed information than that of the person in the limit-setting role like a parent or a protective worker. With their shared interest in health and well-being of that young person in mind, answers will need to be found to the following questions:

- What information would be passed on?
- How are decisions made regarding what information is to be passed on?
- What is done with the information when it is passed on?

In determining the answers to these questions, there are 2 major issues of overwhelming importance that must be considered. They are:

1. The health and safety of the young person and others involved  
Sometimes guidance, encouragement, information provision and support will not be enough for this to be achieved. There are times when limits will need to be imposed and a young person contained. In circumstances where a young person is clearly in danger or is putting someone else at serious risk, information clearly needs to be passed on to someone who has the responsibility and capacity to act. Protective workers will often undertake this role in discharging their statutory responsibility.

Remember that different people have different perceptions of what is risky and dangerous and it is also relative to the particular profile of the people involved and the context they find themselves in. I recommend that professional limit-setters like protective workers and enablers such as an AOD worker or a youth worker have established processes and consultative forums in place for determining the level of danger/risk presenting and how it might be acted upon. Protective workers have the "Victorian Risk Framework" as a tool to use but there are always grey areas. The issues faced have to be worked through and all factors considered. The alternative is to rely on rigid, prescribed responses. The result of which is to simply apply set strategies regardless of context. The risk here is that risk and further harm can inadvertently be increased.

How and when this information would be shared and acted upon needs to be pre-determined and clearly communicated to all concerned. An underlying concern for most in the enabling role is that the relationship with the young person will end if such information is shared without the consent of the young person. In my experience this is rarely the case. What usually transpires is that the young person and the worker have some issues to work through. This process can be developmentally very beneficial for the young person. The worker needs to explain why the decision to pass the information was made and invite the young person to view it from that perspective. Sometimes the young person is unable to do this. Sometimes it will take time. Other times the perspective of the worker is based on assumptions that have no basis in fact and the course of action taken has been poorly conceived. In many cases the penny drops pretty much straight away and young people realise that the enabler (and the limit-setter) were acting in their best interest. This realisation will be easier for the young person to make if they have moved beyond the high risk or crisis period that they may well have been in and are in a position of relative stability.

When an enabler has an established, trusting relationship with a young person this whole process becomes easier. This is because the young person probably has more invested in such a relationship and will care enough about it to try and work things through. Also, in my experience when a young person is convinced that you are "alright", meaning that you are trustworthy and honest, he or she will usually respect your discretion. Young people will often be grateful that you cared enough to step in even if they didn't like it at the time. Very often the workers that are most fondly

remembered by young people when they are older are those that had the limit-setting role in their life.

2. That lines of communication with the young person are kept as open as possible.

If information is continually transferred from an enabler to the limit-setter without discretion, communication between the enabler and the young person is likely to shut down to some extent. This means that certain subjects won't be "on the radar" or "on the airwaves" and worker or enabler in a complementary relationship with the limit setter will not be in a position to have any influence over the young person's behaviour. In circumstances when limit setters feel anxious about where the young person is at or when they suspect that their authority is being threatened they will often pressure enablers to hand sensitive information over.

### **Effective limit setting**

Limit-setters have the potential to bring great benefit or harm, depending on how they perform their role. Regardless of whether there are 1 or more people in the limit-setting role, it is essential that the young person receive a clear message about where the limits lay and how they are to be applied.

Messages that are contradictory will be confusing and leave the way clear for the young person to split those that have a limit-setting role in their life. Too often young people get labeled as manipulative and held to blame for operating in a way that is to be expected given their developmental imperative to test and extend limits. It is the responsibility of the limit setters to be co-ordinated and even when there is disagreement, come to a decision about what message to send and stick to it. This can be difficult for parents but even more of a struggle when there are several workers involved all with a limit-setting role, particularly when the parents are also still in the picture.

For anyone in this role there are several questions that need to be answered. They are as follows:

- What contexts or behaviours are the limits to apply to?
- Where are the limits drawn?
- How is this determined?
- How much say, if any, does the young person have?
- What strategies are used to ensure the young person stays within the limits?
- When a person has moved beyond the limits that have been set what, if any, are the consequences?
- How are these determined?
- How much say, if any, does the young person have?
- How are the particular limits and corresponding consequences communicated to the young person?
- How prepared is the limit setter to enact the consequences?
- What processes are in place for the limits to be reviewed, renegotiated and adapted to suit the young person's increased maturity and expanded capabilities?



- What is the young person's role in this process?
- What inducements are there for the young person to stay within the limits?

In answering these questions it is essential to remember that different young people have different needs and personalities so what works well for one will not automatically work in the same way for another.

The fact that one person or others care enough to stick with a young person over time will go along way to delivering the sense of security and belonging most young people yearn for. As has been mentioned, young people often complain about the limit-setter and describe their practices as oppressive or unjust. It is possible that this is the case but on most occasions these protestations are a part of the cut and thrust of the developmental process. Typically, when adults look back on their adolescent years they are grateful to those that had the limit setting role in their life.

In the ideal sense, the person or people in the limit-setting role would have a genuine care and commitment to the young person. When a relationship has been made over time and there is a sense that it will exist into the future it's significance for the young person is heightened. This increases the possibility that the young person will have more invested in staying connected and riding through tough times with the limit-setter.

The following are what in my experience are guiding principles for effective limit setting with adolescents:

1. The ability to communicate with the young person and understand their perspective

Effective limit-setters have the capacity to understand the young person's perspective and evolve their own. It is essential to be open to feedback from the young person and capable of changing the approach being taken so as to stay relevant to the current circumstances of the ever-evolving adolescent. Being understanding and open to feedback is different from agreeing with the young person or doing their bidding. I have seen several cases where limits have been set that the young person has outgrown. If the limit-setter isn't tuned into where the adolescent is at developmentally and ignores their increased maturity and experience, turbulent times may ensue. In a sense the young person has to shed many skins (which are like protective coatings) in the transition through adolescence. Limit-setters have to keep developing new ones that fit well until finally, the young person is capable developing their own.

2. Involve the young person in a process of consultation and negotiation over what the limits and corresponding consequences might be

This approach engages the young person and offers them the chance for the to learn why and how limits are being set. Young people are most likely to respect limits if they understand why they are in place (It does not mean that they will stay within

them). This approach teaches a young person better communication skills and also encourages them to think more for themselves about their actions. Communication of this kind offers the limit setter is the chance to assess where the young person's maturity level and capabilities are at and eventually set more relevant limits.

3. Take responsibility for setting the limits and applying the relevant consequences

It is of prime importance that the adult with responsibility for setting the limits does so. The young person has a chance to participate but the final decision must rest with the adult. The same applies when the young person has moved outside the limits that have been set. The young person needs a chance to explain how and why this has occurred and this needs to be carefully considered but the adult with responsibility for applying the consequences needs to apply them.

4. Be clear and consistent

It is important to establish exactly what limits are in place and double check that the young person understands. It is also crucial that the limit-setter is very clear about what will happen when young people move beyond the limits that have been set out. We know that young people will test these limits out. What they will also test is the resolve of the limit-setter to enact the processes that have been laid down for when limits have been breached. Confusion and inaction undermines that respect the young person will have for the limits in place and the processes that are to follow. It also undermines the sense of security that clear limits can offer as well as the chance to define oneself by pushing against them.

5. Put words into action

Limit setters must be prepared to back up their words with action. If a young person "breaks the rules" and the promised consequences do not eventuate the limit-setter risks being seen as a paper tiger. This means that limits set in the future may not be taken seriously. So, when a parent finds marijuana in their kids bag and says "if I catch you with this stuff again I'm kicking you out. No son/daughter of mine is going to be a drug user" and the kid accidentally-on-purpose leaves some more marijuana on their dresser, what will the parent do? Kicking them out of home will only increase the risk of the young person becoming a "drug user" but not following through sends a message that the rules are somewhat meaningless. This obviously leaves parents or limit-setters in a quandary. I don't recommend the strategy of moving young people out of sheer bloody mindedness. I do recommend talking to the young person, explaining the nature of the dilemma, and putting a new process in place that will be followed through on. The behavior that this models suggests that people make honest mistakes and it is possible to learn from experience and make changes when required.

The answer for limit-setters is to set "graded limits" The opposite of the "1 strike and you're out approach". I like to refer back to old Buster Keaton movies to explain

what I mean by graded limits. Buster falls out of a tall building (presumably to his death) but on every floor there is a canvas awning through which he falls, breaking his fall bit by bit until he eventually hits the ground, slightly shaken up but without injury.

#### 6. Consequences that have meaning and build capacity

When consequences need to be applied it is ideal if they connect the young person to constructive options and contribute to a young person's ongoing development. Dishing out a consequence like cleaning a toilet with a toothbrush is demeaning and unlikely to achieve anything more than send the message that "what you did is wrong". (Don't laugh I've seen it dealt out as a consequence in a behavior modification based drug treatment program.) It actually says a lot more about the limit setter than the "at fault behaviour".

When I worked at TaskForce in Prahran, every morning I came to work I walked past a notice board with a message on it that must have been there for years. It read:

- Challenge without opportunity is demeaning
- Challenge with opportunity is empowering

It wasn't referenced, so I apologise to the person that wrote it for not giving them the credit they deserve but it always made a great deal of sense to me. A limit set is like a challenge to a young person. Every effort needs to be made by those making a challenge to a young person to ensure that they have the opportunity and capacity to meet it.

I'll give you a case example from an organisation I was involved with in Queensland some years ago. The scene is a residential unit connected to a youth work service for "disadvantaged" young people. There was a day program and outreach youth workers attached to the facility. A worker had left the keys to the unit's car on the kitchen table. A young man, 18, who was living in the unit, seized the opportunity and went for a joy ride. It happened in the morning. With the safety and well being of the young man in mind the police were contacted. The insurance company was also contacted. Late in the afternoon the young person contacted the day program. The kid said that the car was not damaged and said what are you "gunna do". The worker then made an arrangement with the young person. It involved the young man telling the worker where he was. The worker would go with another worker to pick him up and that if the car was not damaged no charges would be laid. Then they could talk about consequences. The young person had priors and didn't want charges to be laid. He also trusted the worker and he agreed. It turns out he had run out of petrol. They picked him up and as it turned out the car was unscathed. They all went back to the unit. The young man waited as the manager and the worker determined a course of action.

They decided that he needed to know that it is not alright to steal cars or in fact anything from their organisation or anyone else. They were concerned with finding

the best way to get this message through to the young man and having him understand why it is being sent as well as work out what it means for him.

Instead of excluding or rejecting him at this stage, which is what he expected would happen and may at some level had even planned for, they bought him into a process. The fact that this response surprised the kid made the effect more powerful.

The manager and the worker involved bought him into an office and gave him a chance to explain his reasons for taking the car. I wasn't there but I know this would have been very uncomfortable for him. He couldn't articulate a reason.

The manager then explained why the organisation was so concerned. First, it was very unsafe for him and by driving he had also put others at risk. Second, the car was needed to drive other young people to appointments during the day and to do the shopping. It might also be needed in an emergency. Finally the car was valuable and the organisation was struggling for funds. After a period of silence the young man said that he was sorry. The workers felt like the message had got through.

The next step was to ask the young person what he thought they should do, to which he replied, "call the Police". The workers then explained that in this instance they didn't think such an approach was necessary and probably wouldn't be helpful. They did, however, express their concern at the risk that he put himself and others in and the difficulties he had accused to program staff and other clients. The question of a suitable consequence then had to be resolved.

Together the three of them worked out the consequences but it was clear who had the final decision, the workers. It was his choice as to whether he wanted to follow through. He decided he would. If he didn't follow through a consequence was put in place. He would be banned from the day program and residential program for a month. Even so, the organisation's outreach workers would still stay connected with him and help him find accommodation or be around in case of any emergencies. Then he could come back.

At dinner that evening the young man apologised to the young people in the unit and the residential staff for taking the car and "mucking them around". He washed the car, as arranged and he worked with the residential worker during that week, to plan what groceries needed to be bought. He then went with her to buy them. By doing this he learned the value of groceries, a little bit about budgeting and a lot about meal planning and shopping.

I'm not sure what was arranged to happen if he damaged the organisation's property or stole a car from them again. As far as I am aware that didn't happen. If it did, more extreme consequences would need to apply which could eventually mean exclusion from the program or involving the police.

The workers in this case had followed through on the promise not to call the police. The kid stayed connected and had the opportunity make amends. The workers involved believed he learned something from the experience.

What might have happened if the worker had found out the young mans whereabouts and simply called the police? There are those who favour this approach in all cases. The rationale is that the young people need to be “taught a lesson” so they won’t continue to behave in the same way in the future. The goal is behavior change.

The lesson this kid would most surely have learned is that his core beliefs about himself and the world are right. I can just hear them ringing in my ears.

*“I’m trouble, I’m no good, I’m hopeless, no-one cares about me, you can’t trust adults”.*

By acting in an antisocial way these core beliefs are played out and the expectation is that they will be confirmed. These workers positioned themselves in such a way as to be able to explore such beliefs with the young person and help him to understand more about himself. There is then reason to hope that he may find more responsible ways of behaving in the future

Does anyone think that the Police are going to challenge these negative core beliefs? Who will enable him to understand himself more and endeavor to find new ways of operating that are not so destructive and confirming of his negative core beliefs? One thing is for sure the service that excluding him won’t be undertaking such work, because in most cases they will have nothing more to do with him.

Where the application of the limits are handed over to another body, such as the police, with their own set of policies, procedures and agendas the limit setter can lose control of the process.

There certainly are times when the police need to be called, particularly when the safety and security of others is being put under threat. It is most effective when this is a part of an intentional and clearly defined process.

#### 7. Constantly negotiate

Arrangements between young people and limit setters need to be reviewed and renegotiated on a regular basis. It is usually preferable for the young person to talk this through rather than act them out.

#### 8. Sharing experiences outside the limit setting role

Sharing experiences with the young person outside the limit-setting role offers the young person the chance to view the limit setter in a different way. Depending on the activity, rapport can be built which may lead to a stronger commitment to understanding where the limit setter is coming from. The same applies with the limit-setters view of the young person.

9. Ensure that protective enabling relationships exist and are robust  
Given the entire thrust of this article this point has already been made.

10. Processes for determining action when applying predetermined consequences is inappropriate

As important as it is to be clear and to follow through, every contingency cannot be covered. It would be sad to think that someone insisted on enacting a particular consequence even when it could seriously increase harm to the young person and/or others. If a decision is made not to follow through, it is essential all parties involved know why, especially the young person. Once this has happened a more appropriate response can be worked up and communicated to all involved. It is important that this doesn't happen on a regular basis.

### **Statutory workers as limit setters**

The State is often called on to intervene when in case when:

- no-one is performing the limit setting role
- the limit-setting role isn't being performed adequately
- whoever has responsibility for the limit setting is exploiting or harming the young person or unable to protect them from the same

When a protective worker or contracted case manager takes on statutory responsibility for the "Guardianship" of a young person a core role is to set limits aimed at reducing risk and promoting healthy development. This clearly is commensurate with requirements of the Children's and Young Person's Act.

As mentioned above, this means that there are issues that young people will not discuss at all, or at least in any detail, with their Protective worker.

Protective workers routinely assist young people with substance related problems and issues that don't involve setting or maintaining limits. The instances where young people are likely to keep details relating to substance use hidden are when:

- They feel like it is more out of control or high risk
- He or she is highly dependent on substance use as a way of managing his or her life circumstances and believes that there are no other effective options (these young people are often referred to as self-medicators)
- A young person is either not interested in changing their drug using behaviour or only contemplating it and is being coerced into doing so.

These are the very times that some kind of protective influence is required. It is logical then for a protective worker or case manager to engage one or more professional enablers plus enlist the support of other enablers already in a young person's life who are capable of having a protective influence. It is advisable to work with those others that a young person naturally gravitates towards. These relationships are rarely totally constructive or destructive. The idea is to understand what they mean and what part they play so as maximise any beneficial aspects and reduce harm.

### **The complementary role of the AOD worker**

An AOD worker is a professional enabler in the perfect position to provide a complementary relationship to that of the Protective worker. There is an opportunity to establish a relationship with the young person that provides a forum for the information regarding the substance use and related issues to be raised and dealt with. Of course there will always be things a young person won't discuss. The aim of the AOD worker is to maximise the potential for issues to be raised, discussed and worked through.

There will be times when the protective worker forces the young person to see an AOD worker. Strategies that the AOD worker might adopt to maximise the potential for the young person to choose to engage in the relationship in a meaningful way are discussed below.

It is worth noting that it is useful for the AOD worker to be from a different organisation with different requirements for recording and acting on information passed on by a client. The issues associated with what information would be passed on, in what form, and for what reason is also dealt with below.

There will be times when the AOD worker disagrees with the decision of the Protective worker. At those times it is essential that a process be in place where this can be dealt with. Exacerbating conflict between a protective worker and a young person will put the young person more at risk in almost every case. The same goes for complaining to a young person about the worker.

### **Effective “complementary” enabling relationships**

I have already covered what enabling relationships are and the role they play in a young person's life. I have mentioned that not all enabling relationships have a protective influence on the young person involved. The following are the features of what I believe to be effective enabling relationships:

#### **Trust and open communication**

If an aim of an enabler is to get as much relevant information on the air as possible, trust is essential. This illustrates the importance of following through on commitments that are made and being up front with young people.

#### **Accessibility and desirability**

Young people and their families should know exactly how and when they can access an enabler. It is preferable for professional enablers to be flexible with the hours that they offer young people for contact and also as immediate in their response as possible. The aim is to make being this relationship as easy as possible for the young people. This does not mean availability 24 hours, 7 days a week. Everyone has limits and young people need to learn how to respect and live with this fact. Organisations who make such promises of availability need to be able to follow through or risk losing all credibility with the young person and others involved in their lives.

Thought also needs to be given to the health and well being of workers under such expectations.

The relationship also needs to be attractive to the young person. This highlights the need for workers to be approachable, friendly and willing to listen. Workers also make themselves desirable when they have something to offer that the young person is interested in.

### **Practical applicability and usefulness**

A sure fire way to interest a young person is to assist them in getting results. This involves understanding the issues and knowing the options available to young people as well as how to access them.

### **Clarity and flexibility**

A lot has been said about why being clear is crucial. Enablers also have to show themselves to be flexible and responsive to give the young person the maximum possibility of being understood for who they are. The secret is to maintain a dynamic balance rather than being too one or the other.

### **Resilience**

The relationships that professional enablers have with kids need to be able to ride the bumps and stay on track. They are best when they exist in young people's minds as a consistent force over time. Even for a young person to know that someone is there that cares for them and can assist when necessary increases a young person's sense of security.

### **Contact with limit setters**

Professional enablers should at least understand how the limit setting function in a young person's life is being carried out. In many cases it is essential for a professional enabler to be in touch with the limit setter/s. However it is always crucial that the young person knows that this doesn't minimise the space you have for them or the fact that you are there for them.

Relationships are a two way street. The following is an attempt to define what, in general, are the personal qualities effective enabler might possess:

- Concern for the safety and well being of the young person
- Something to offer and an interesting way to offer it
- A willingness to listen and understand
- Respect for the young person's story and dreams for the future
- Realistic optimism
- Practical ability and strong self efficacy
- Creativity balanced with a preparedness to be accountable
- Clarity around their role in the young person's life as a worker but not a friend.

### **Professional enablers**



I would expect that most people being paid to adopt enabling roles in young people's lives, such as youth workers or AOD workers, would have the above traits to at least some extent. They should be able to articulate the intentions or goals that underpin the work that they undertake and be accountable. Each course of action should have an accompanying rationale and its effectiveness evaluated.

Young people will at times actively seek assistance from a professional enabler. When I worked at Task Force through the early and mid-nineties our self-referral rate was consistently over 40%. These were young people, often from very marginalised backgrounds, who were experiencing difficulties relating to their drug use and wanted help. In many cases that did not mean that they wanted to stop using drugs, it meant that they had a range of associated problems to sort out and didn't know how to manage themselves.

If the young person wanted to stop using drugs, we were in there helping them to do so. For us it wasn't about whether someone did or didn't use drugs it was about:

1. Helping them develop or find some tools that will increase their capacity to cope better with their circumstances and make their developmental journey easier.
2. Offering support and refuge along the way when the going gets rough

Often it is a parent or guardian in a limit setting role that encourages or even forces a young person to meet with a professional enabler. The young person may attend voluntarily but in these cases it is usually under sufferance.

If this counsellor is to have any impact in that young person's life the young person will have to choose to allow them to do so. Before a young person shares intimate details regarding their life or takes any cues from an enabler, trust and respect needs to be developed. Time for a cheesy cliché'

*You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink.*

Flowing from this old saying is a question that all professional enablers need to have an answer for, "how can I make 'drinking' an viable and attractive option"

The best way to put forward my ideas on how this question may be answered is to use a case example.

### **The story of Mark**

Mark was just turning 16 when I first met him. He was in protective care, living in what was then a short-term unit. He was also on a Youth Attendance Order with Juvenile Justice. He had been forced to come and see me for "drug counselling" against his will. So our relationship started with him giving me the silent treatment.

I was expecting Mark to react this way as I had been involved in a case planning meeting prior to his referral. I was invited there to give my perspective and see what I might be able to offer. At the meeting I heard that Mark's placement at the short

term unit he lived in was close to breaking down. The staff were frustrated. They said that he was constantly aggressive, he'd damaged property on several occasions, he'd spray painted the fence and the side of the building and he often disappeared for days on end. Mark wasn't involved in any constructive activities like school or sport or the like. The big concern at the meeting was that he was smoking marijuana intensively, although they had few details. Of course he was keeping it "off the radar". My big concern was that all the professional relationships in his life at that stage had been "tarred with the limit setting brush".

Consequently, his relationships with workers were conflictual although he did get on better with some more than others. His Juvenile Justice worker was one.

When I asked about other relationships of significance I was told about his older brother who was 19 and dependent on heroin. He was the only known enabler.

He was definitely at risk in the immediate sense and in the longer term. I suggested that I could see Mark but the focus wouldn't be on drugs, it would be on engaging him and building rapport. I wanted to position myself as someone he could trust and would turn to when he needed information or to sort something out. I explained that I needed to set myself up as a worker discrete from those with the limit setting role. In my opinion, taking drugs off the agenda was the only way to get them on it.

Of course, clear about arrangements around confidentiality and in what circumstances would I deem the risk to Mark or others to be enough to pass information on had to be established.

The arrangement was for his Juvenile Justice worker to use her powers to make him see a "drug counsellor" for at least 6 sessions. My agency was some distance away and she pretty much dragged him over, kicking and screaming. Actually kicking and screaming may have been better for her than the loud, hard core, death metal that she had agreed to let him play on the way over.

When he arrived I tried to make him feel welcome. I offered him tea, coffee or hot chocolate but he refused.

I knew that he would think that I was going to try to "get him off drugs" and give him the "drugs are bad" line. I also knew that he thought that I would be the hired hand of his Juvenile justice worker. For this reason I asked Mark and his Juvenile Justice worker into my office to inform them both at the same time where I was coming from. This included:

- That I wasn't here to get him off drugs but that I would be available to discuss any subject relating to drugs with him
- That there was no pre-requisite for him to talk with me about drugs
- That I could give him a hand with a whole range of issues and gave examples like Housing, health, legal problems or questions, personal stuff, etc
- That I am available for the next 6 sessions and that within the bounds of the organisational policies, he could choose how we spent the time. The Juvenile

Justice worker confirmed that she was the one requiring Mark to show up for the 6 sessions.

- Finally, I explained that our conversations would be confidential and that I would not run back to Juvenile Justice or Protective Services with the details of what we discussed. There was the obvious proviso that if I thought he was at risk to himself or others I would pass information on but only that relating to the particular risk situation.

Neither Mark nor his worker had any questions. His worker then left.

I asked him what he thought of all that to which he barely grunted. The next thing I asked was how he felt about being forced to see me. To which I received another non-committal grunt. I explained that it would piss me off. I then asked him what he wanted to do. He shrugged his shoulder and I made a few suggestions: the pool hall for a game, checking out the local shops, playing basketball. Nothing registered until I mentioned the local amusement parlor the prospect of free video games for an hour was too much to pass up. The rest of that session involved me being hopelessly out driven on the Daytona car racing video game. He was the expert and I the novice. He loved beating me and I was a dramatic loser. I try hard and I would say that I'm fun to beat. By the end of the session his resentment had turned to pity for me. We finished up and I knew that even though in one way he hated having to come back next week, he was kind of looking forward to it.

In the following three weeks the sessions were almost exactly the same, a chat in my office to start and then off to play Daytona. Mark and I were getting on well and I was getting better at Daytona (I would say in fact that I am one of the best over 35's around in the Daytona world). I kept letting Mark know that I was there for him if he wanted to talk about anything but the offer was always declined.

Week five was different. The talk started in my room and didn't finish until the end of the session.

The first thing I noticed that day was that he had a copy of "For Whom the Bell Tolls" by Hemmingway. It turned out that Mark was a voracious reader and in his own way very articulate. This had nothing to do with his "problems" and he felt confident about discussing books with me. He was actually quite passionate about it. I suggested to him that he explore the option of going back to school and, while he had his doubts, he told me he would like me to give him a hand to do just that. Then the conversation moved to drugs and other issues. I don't need to go into detail but it is important to say that he had a lot of questions about marijuana, which was his drug of choice, and heroin. He had already used heroin 4 times in the past 6 months. Of course no-one in a guardianship role had any knowledge of this. His brother had injected him each time and at that stage it still made him feel sick when he first used.

The big concern was the risk that he put himself in, unwittingly. He had found out most of his information about drugs from friends and his brother. Most of it was

inaccurate or more to the point downright dangerous. So, I was in a position to fill him in. I also found that he had real doubts about where he was heading in general and in relation to the drugs. He mentioned his hurt and frustration at not being able to live with or even see his parents in an unsupervised visit. I won't go into it but there were very good reasons why these limits were in place.

The discussion that I had with him about his relationships, in particular those he had with limit setters, was most interesting. He actually had some capacity to see it from their perspective on some issues but struggled to manage his feelings of anger when he felt they were being unfair or when he didn't understand why they were doing what they were doing.

It raises an area in which a professional enabler can be very helpful. A professional enabler like an AOD worker can assist the young person to:

- Work through how they feel about the limits being imposed
- Work out how they will manage with those limits in place
- Understand the rationale of the limit setter for working to contain or limit behaviors that are risky or harmful.
- Assist the young person in defining for himself or herself where they believe the line should be drawn around particular behaviors. In other words enabling a young person to develop ideas around what they believe to be fair and reasonable.

My discussions with Mark covered those issues. Remember his Juvenile Justice worker was picking him up and taking him to see me. The process of doing this week in, week out meant that Mark bonded with her and actually had a lot of respect for her. To him now, she was a human being not just a faceless limit setter from the "department". He came to realize that she was setting limits because she cared about him not because she was a tyrant out to push him around. She was reliable and caring and through spending time together outside that of limit setting she came to know Mark in a different way. One day we all had a big bowling date. It was great fun and very good for Mark's relationship with her.

This was the profound shift for Mark and he went on to make a lot of constructive moves, which included going back to school and maintaining a place of his own. He was still using marijuana but not heroin. He chose to continue seeing me and Juvenile Justice worker well after his order finished.

I do know that he is still alive and that he has had no further criminal charges. I don't know how he is going otherwise but they are good enough indicators for me.

### **When Limit setters and enablers don't work together**

There are times when limit setters and enablers become conflicted and end up working at cross-purposes. It usually occurs when the limit setter and the enabler have:

- different intentions or goals
- a lack of respect for and belief in the importance of each other's role

- shared intentions or goals but are unaware of this fact. Thus engendering a lack of trust and knowledge of each other's respective rationales.
- different interpretations of how these intentions or goals should be enacted
- differing perspectives of risk and danger and how it should be acted on
- differing assessments and understanding of the drug related issues and how they are best dealt with
- a lack of preparation and case planning
- a lack of review and ongoing communication processes

If the divisions that can exist mean that responses for young people are rendered dysfunctional, careful evaluation is required, so the issues can be identified and resolved. It all sounds a bit too simple. I understand that it requires a commitment of time, resources and will and that these commodities aren't always readily available. Still, it is a worthwhile investment to make. If practitioners and agencies continually work at cross-purposes and end up spending time and energy engaging in power plays the people that pay are the young people themselves. See if you recognise some of the accusations enablers sometimes level at limit setters:

"You're a nazi"

"Talk about being a megalomaniac"

"You've got power issues"

"You don't understand this kid"

"You can't see it from this kids perspective"

"you're such a busybody"

"I don't trust what you are going to do with this information"

Of course there is always the possibility that in what the enabler is saying has a kernel of truth. Some limit-setters do act in their own interest and are operating in an oppressive manner. Even if this is the case, what good will making such charges do. How will it lead to the limit-setter operating more effectively or the young person to handle these circumstances. Very often these complaints are not even raised with the limit-setter. It is a very big problem when professional enablers raise these complaints with young people. In one sense it may strengthen ties with a young person but to what end. As mentioned above the objective needs to make the limit setting more functional and beneficial for the young person.

Of course on the other side of the ledger limit setters make accusations that may also hold water but are equally problematic:

"you're just on the client's side"

"You're colluding with the client"

"You just want to be popular"

"You don't understand what this kid is really like"

'you're turning this kid against me"

At times the lack of communication and the dysfunction present in the relationship between the limit-setter and the enabler is projected on to the young person. The following are examples of how one worker might frame it to another:

"This kid's sucking you in"  
"She's got you wrapped around her little finger"  
"He's manipulating you and you don't even know it"  
"This kids running rings around us"

It gets very concerning when the limit-setter and the enabler, have unresolved their own issues, but decide to agree with each other about the young person. Remarks like the following often follow:

"This kid is manipulative"  
"This kid is selfish"  
"This kid is all over the place"  
"This kid is recalcitrant"

From here it's easy to take a further step. Qualified, semi-qualified and totally unqualified people to start making assessments or assumptions about what particular psychological disorder the young person must have. Borderline personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, conduct disorder are labels routinely applied to young people inaccurately and without relation to context. These tags can be hard to shake and are loaded with associated assumptions that may bear no relation to this young person.

I've been invited to case conferences where there the frustration and pessimism coming from workers is obvious and the young person is framed as the common foe. These tend to be the very cases when workers loathed bringing their own practice or motives into question.

### **Imperatives for striking a healthy balance.**

I would expect that organisations with statutory responsibilities, as well as those receiving funding to deliver services to young people who use drugs, employ workers who are able to account for their actions and explain their rationale

Effective and efficient collaboration requires preparation.

### **Relationship development**

Collaborative working relationships must be established between agencies at an organisational or managerial level and at the level of workers at the coalface. Preparatory forums where information about each others services and the policies under which they operate is desirable. The objective is to understand more about each others service requirements and practice approach. When this has occurred it is possible to establish processes by which the respective agencies can work together.

It is also beneficial that workers from different agencies who routinely work together have the opportunity to get to know each other and trust each other on a professional basis.

The key to effective working relationships is in determining realistic and well understood expectations. For this to occur it is necessary for agencies and workers to overt the assumptions they make about each other and the clients with whom they both work.

### **Common assumptions and realistic expectations**

Expectations must focus on what can realistically be achieved.

Expectations based on an assumption that a young person can be changed or fixed, particularly in terms of drug use are sure to result in disappointment. How can one worker or another be held to account for the fact that a client did not change? As workers, regardless of our particular role, we can create a climate that makes change possible but safety is not ensured.

It is reasonable to expect workers or organisations to undertake particular processes and work practices that can be communicated, agreed upon and directed toward achieving a common goal. Workers and the organisations that they represent can then be held accountable for their actions.

### **Identification of Shared Agendas/Goals:**

In terms of Protective units and AOD workers there are several shared interests:

- The young persons health, safety and well-being
- Reducing high risk behaviors that threaten the young persons safety
- The safety of others in the young persons orbit and the in the community in general
- The young persons development
- Opening up as many life opportunities as possible
- Enabling the young person to make the most of those opportunities

In the ideal world a process for sharing this information would have occurred prior specific casework. However processes for working together around a particular case are required.

### **A clearly defined and detailed referral and case planning process**

It is effective for statutory workers and AOD workers to meet to share their concerns and interests in this “case” and develop a common intention. With that common intention underpinning the work that proceeds from this point the workers engage in strategic planning to determine:

- How the requirements of the particular statutory order can be met in a way that focuses on the young person’s health and well being and maximises their life opportunities in the future.

- Particular strengths and attributes of the young person and other protective factors in their lives that can be utilised and developed
- What is going well for the young person
- The particular roles each worker will adopt and model for collaboration.
- The particular risk behaviors around substance use that will need to be effectively managed in order to assist the young person
- When risk to the young person and others has become so extreme that information needs to be shared and acted upon
- A clear understanding of processes that will be enacted if a young person's high risk behaviors need to be contained.

### **Strategies for Managing Potential Disagreement**

In this article I will refrain from going into detail about conflict resolution or grievance procedures. However, there should be clear agreed upon measures that can be used to manage potential or actual disagreements before they impact on the young person involved or their families. It is preferable that the young person isn't involved in this process or that if they are involved, that it is planned and functional.

### **Competent, realistic, optimistic staff**

Finally, Staff are the most valuable resource that organisations have. As mentioned above it is essential that the core belief that workers hold is that change is possible.

Agencies need clear principles from which staff work by and must uphold high standards of professional conduct while at the same time valuing diversity in its staffing group.

### **Conclusion**

Common goals for workers focus on protecting the young person and building their capacity to better manage their circumstances. This reduces the necessity of young people to rely on substance use for solutions. Workers and parents can save themselves a lot of anxiety and reduce danger and risk to the young person and others by preparing well-balanced relational structures.

Thanks for your patience and I hope this article has been thought provoking and is of use in practice.