

# **International Online Child and Youth Care Education: How to Train Care Worker Groups**

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## **Introduction: Setting Global Standards for Caregiver Training**

Due to migration, urbanisation, natural disasters and political unrest, millions of children and youth worldwide grow up outside their families. In underprivileged orphanages, foster care systems, in migrant camps, and as homeless youth. Long term outcomes are sad: only half of children in care ever pass the 9th grade or get a job, suffering from poor mental health. This applies also to wealthy countries like Canada, Denmark and Sweden in spite of huge investments (MacKean et al. 2018, Vinnerljung 2005). The poor outcome is due not only to economy – a major cause is the lack of education and support for child and youth care workers, foster parents, and all other frontline staff practicing relations-based work (Rygaard 2017).

Local governments are often unable to support, educate and monitor care work systems effectively. As a result, most care work is performed by volunteer, professional and non-government organisations (NGOs). Growing numbers of high risk children and homeless youth calls for large scale education and supportive training of care workers at low cost, in how to learn and practice quality care work.

To meet this challenge, the Fairstart Foundation gathered a network of international researchers to design international trainer’s trainer educations, and caregiver group training programs. Outcomes of this effort include 420 instructors from organisations and government agencies in 26 countries graduated their four



**CYC-Online October 2018**

**ISSN 1605-7406**

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month education, creating a global child and youth care network. In two year co-creation projects with local organisations, the 20 free language versions of training programs online used by instructors have trained the care worker groups of some 30.000 children and youth worldwide, creating a community working from uniform standards for training.

## **The Workplace Environment of Child and Youth Workers Causes Frequent Burnouts – Why?**

As a Danish-American child psychologist and researcher, I worked ten years from 1981 in a therapeutic school home with traumatized children and youth suffering from early deprivation, insecure attachments and behaviour problems. This taught me how difficult it is to translate research into daily reality. In 2005 I published “Severe Attachment Disorder — a Guide to Practical Therapy,” published in 14 languages within a few years. This sent me on a world tour to lecture and study care systems on all continents, providing a global overview. I learned from conversations with experienced frontline workers in CYC and organisations worldwide that the poor outcomes for children in foster and institutional care are mainly due to a universal challenge. Hopelessly overworked staff facing large numbers of severely disturbed kids and youth, and limited knowledge of how to practice research-based care practices with a documented effect. This work environment causes frequent burnouts and excessive stress, crippling the mental health of dedicated professionals, in particular that of young volunteers. Why is the mental state of care workers so important for the lifespan success of children and youth?

## **Four Dimensions of Successful Lifelong Development**

During a visit to Peru in 2006, I was awed. An orphanage in Arequipa run by five volunteers hosting 36 girls on a 10\$ daily budget were able to help most girls into higher education and academic careers! Staff practices were quite simple and consistent with current research: The basic needs of any child or youth include



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having a few committed long-term adult caregivers, and membership of a group of peers over a long time span. These five caregivers worked all year round for practically nothing to provide the girls with a secure base, enabling them to erase the effects of truly horrific childhood histories. I learned that this amazing outcome was caused by their ability to form a strong and supportive staff group and workplace environment. They and many others inspired my idea of the need for online based training.

To determine the core elements of professional trainer education, I gathered a network of 28 researchers in placed children and youth from all corners, ranging from Ed Tronick, Bob McCall and Charles Zeanah in the US, Yvon Gauthier in Canada, over Europe to Rukhsana Saddul in Pakistan and Kamikado Kazuhiro in Japan, etc. For two years, they generously shared and discussed their answers to a simple question: what works in daily care practice for children and youth without parents? Summing up their recommendations, the state of mind of care workers was one of the four basic conditions for lifelong success in care. Any of these are equally important:

1. *Continuity in caregiver relations.* A long term secure attachment and relation to a few caregivers. Continuity in caregiver relations applies not only to parents, but for all ages to care workers, teachers, etc. Professional care work can erase the impact of former trauma, even if this work starts in youth (Crockenburg et al. 2008, Vinnerljung 2016).
2. *Peer group membership.* Being an accepted member of a long-term group of peers. Small child/ youth groups yield the best results (Christoffersen et al. 2014). Having a long-term group of peers is important for adult life. Care leavers living in supervised peer groups after care show increased educational and employment success, as opposed to living alone (Moelholm et al. 2012).



3. *Continuous education and supervision of care workers.* The mental wellbeing of care workers, and knowledge about how to meet disturbed behaviour is paramount for their ability to form secure relations with children and youth. The more care workers, foster families or residential staff are isolated, the higher the frequency of burnout, abuse and use of violence in care (Rutter, Ijzendoorn, et al. 2008).
4. *Agreement between those the child or youth has bonded with, and those who manage the placement.* Conflicts and contradictory agendas between social workers, local authorities, parents and foster parents, schools, etc. create paralyzing loyalty conflicts in the child, causing serial shifts in placements with deteriorating mental effects and increased homelessness for care leavers. So do frequent shifts in the child's social case worker (Rygaard et al. 2014).

Any efficient intervention and daily organisation of care work must include these qualities. They became cornerstones in the international instructor (trainer's trainer) education.

### **Forming a Strong Instructor Community and Strong Training Groups**

Realising the importance of care worker wellbeing and organisation for child development, the design of the international online education aims not only at improving care practices. The four-month curriculum provides an online classroom where instructors share experiences from training with fellow students, provide peer feedback (proven by research to be more efficient than teacher feedback) and support. Other topics include how to meet resistance and motivate when training groups, learning theory, and group development dynamics. Creating a strong sense of group commitment also applies to the instructor's work when training a group.

For example, in a cooperation with SOS Children's Villages, 20 staff from five East African countries became Fairstart instructors, training groups of kinship and foster parents hosting 660 in care, using Fairstart's Swahili and Kinyarwanda



**CYC-Online October 2018**

**ISSN 1605-7406**

sessions. These parent groups (mostly poor women living in remote areas with 6-9 foster children and teenagers) spontaneously created mutual WhatsApp support networks, and even started advising village neighbours in problems with their teenagers. The development of those in care improved by 20%, measured on five dimensions known to predict adult life success (Fairstart, 2017).

## **Active Co-Creation and Inclusion of Creative Participant Knowledge and Expertise**

Many educational designs are top-down teachings from experts, telling people what to do while ignoring the most valuable assets: people's own prior knowledge and firsthand experience. Here, participant's professional and personal life experiences are a core element in training, enabling participants to understand child and youth behaviour as normal responses to loss and lack of stable care. Instructors and group members share personal childhood and work experiences in inspiring frequent discussions. For example, one session about working with teenagers starts by a group interview about how participants experienced their own puberty, their fears, dreams, and their transition from depending on adults to peer group dependency. At the end of each group training session, the instructor helps each participant design a work plan: how they will apply what they learned and discussed in the session at home, presented at the start of the next session. The principle of any participant being an active co-designer of improved care practices and new mindsets applies to all levels, from the partner organisation to the children and youth involved. Children and youth learn to understand and cope with their own behavioural and emotional problems through dialogues and evaluate their own development before and after program completion.

## **Instructor Education Modules and Sessions for Group Training**

Fairstart offers two instructor curriculums: one for family-based care and one for group based care. Before signing up at either, the student makes appointments for eight three-hour sessions with a training group. When participating in the four-month online curriculum (see [www.fairstartinstructor.com](http://www.fairstartinstructor.com)), students work in the



**CYC-Online October 2018**

**ISSN 1605-7406**

EdX platform classroom, developed by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Between modules the instructor trains a group using Fairstart sessions.

The curriculum contains eight four-hour modules to be followed from home or workplace. Each module introduces theory in depth and video lectures and prepares the student for training a group of care workers between each module. In the first group session, the instructor introduces training and interviews participants about their workplace quality and stress levels, and the state of each child or youth in their care. In the following six sessions, the instructor trains six Fairstart session topics, only needing a projector, a laptop and internet or a USB flash drive.

In the last session, participants evaluate and score the initial questions again. Instructors register answers in their module, allowing to measure care worker and each child/ youth's progress. The instructor writes an exam paper and gives and receives peer feedback. Once educated, instructors can train any number of groups and combine any of Fairstart's many additional sessions and resource sessions at no expense (see [www.fairstartfoundation.com/programme-overview](http://www.fairstartfoundation.com/programme-overview)).

## **Blended Learning Offers Versatility and Low Costs for Users**

Offering the basics of attachment theory and relations work applied in everyday situations – by combining online education with local group training – has created an exponential demand for partnerships from organisations and professionals worldwide. Feedback from instructors show that they are now local experts in quality care training (a few video testimonials from Canada and other countries are available at [www.fairstartfoundation.com/feedback-and-reflections-from-fairstart-instructors](http://www.fairstartfoundation.com/feedback-and-reflections-from-fairstart-instructors)). Organisations reduce their expenses for physical seminars, travel and hotel expenses, as well as for developing their own training programs. Instead, they are inspired by the one to two-year partnership process of creating local versions adjusted to language and culture.



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**ISSN 1605-7406**

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## **Examples of Ongoing Partnerships and Partnerships in the Waiting Line**

Cooperation with SOS Children's Villages is now expanding to Ethiopia and Somaliland, and another 20 instructors will be educated. For Greenland government, Fairstart recently developed a cross-professional education and training program in Danish and Inuit. Participants are school teachers, residential and school home staff. In Spain, professor Eva Gomez from Cantabria University runs an umbrella organisation for all foster care and residential homes. Accompanied by representatives from Chile, Mexico, Peru and Honduras, she has initiated a cooperation. Portuguese psychologist Margarida Gaspar de Matos has applied her government for foster care versions in Portuguese.

Two NGOs in Egypt applied for versions in Arabic, and likewise organisations in Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and Belarus. American Dana Evans living in Yekaterinburg was educated as instructor and now trains leaders, professionals and groups across Russia. A local instructor has included Fairstart in the government foster care program of Kyrgyzstan.

The only limitation to this expansion are the challenges for partner organisations to find funding for cooperation to co-create and implement new versions. In many countries, the 950 € fee for individual students represents a huge investment, even when a 20 % discount for student groups is offered. Fairstart is financed by a mix of donations from other foundations, the selling of individual instructor spaces, and by joint funding applications with partner organisations. This finances the work of the four staff members, author included, and the volunteer board.

To participate students must: Speak English besides any local language, have some experience in child and youth care, invest 65 hours over four months to study modules and train a group, make appointments for eight three-hour sessions with a group of care workers, and have access to internet and basic computer skills. Participants range from experienced frontline workers wanting to train colleagues, to educated professionals and academics.



At Fairstart, we're constantly amazed by the engagement, dedication and support from researchers, professionals and care workers. On behalf of the team, my thanks to all enthusiastic professionals and partner organisations who make this effort work around the globe to empower the care workers of children and youth.

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**ISSN 1605-7406**

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