



STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Should children become active stakeholders in the outcomes of their mental health care? In the 1990's many factors led to the inclusion of adult recipients of services into decision making. Whether the "consumer-driven" reinvention of government and public services, or the attempts at "customer satisfaction" by managed health care in the private sector, such efforts at "quality management" were born of goals to improve efficiency, effectiveness, or other market-oriented outcomes. But the idea of including children's and youth voices into planning their own care harkens back to earlier times, with simpler, and perhaps nobler, motives.

Sitting in the audience of the Saturday Plenary sessions of the PSU Family Strengths Conference this past April, gazing up at the youthful faces among the panelists, listening to the hesitant voices of the earnest self-advocates, I could not help but feel a surge of optimism and hope for the future of mental health services. Despite the inevitable grave warnings from someone who feared that progress at including youth should not be at the expense of parental inclusion, the majority of the attendees seemed intrigued with the idea of client/ youth empowerment. "Were the youth advocates involved in the hiring of staff," one curious listener queried. This concept seemed too extreme for even the progressive agency folk at the table, apologetic though they were. Here was a quiet revolution which was not likely to be televised; the logical next step in fully integrated service delivery was in nascent bloom before the conference participants' eyes. Small steps though they may be, the words of Neil Armstrong echoed in my mind: "Here's one small step for man, a giant leap forward for mankind." I wondered whether the youth panelists knew how significant their presence was. Did they have any comprehension that their participation was the culmination of generations of efforts to establish and maintain children's rights? What did they know of the history of the struggle to treat children with dignity and respect? Would their generation have to recapitulate the learning, the hard won advances, or would they be lost, to



be promoted yet again in some future enlightened time? How I wanted to reach out to tell those young pioneering people: take pride in your roles! This is something significant, not just a small piece of your life. Persevere! Stay involved! If only they knew of the sacrifices made by those who preceded them. Was there anyone here who knew the stories of the giants in the field of championing children's rights like Pestalozzi, Mann, Montessori, Dewey, Makarenko, Korczak? Or would they care about their heritage?

Janusz Korczak was a name as familiar to parents through many parts of pre-War Europe as Benjamin Spock has been in post-War United States. When the United Nations declared 1979 as "The Year of the Child", that year was also dedicated to the memory of Janusz Korczak, as it was the centenary of his birth. As early as 1911 he became the director of an orphanage, The House of Children, in Warsaw, Poland, and stayed in this post until annihilated by the Nazis in 1942. Unfortunately, he is most remembered for choosing to go to the death camps with the 200 orphans under his care rather than escape death himself. But those who knew him and his work testify to the real reasons he should be remembered. In the course of his career he was a playwright, a pediatrician, an educator, a novelist, a child advocate and philosopher, devoted to meeting the needs of children. He sought to rectify the conditions of neglect, abuse and disempowerment of children, regard less of their nationality or religion. Known as the "Champion of the Children", in the course of his life he wrote some twenty books related to the care and upbringing of children, and received Poland's highest literary award, as well as the German Peace Prize, posthumously.

Korczak's ideas about youth empowerment and self-governance by contemporary standards seem either obvious, radical to the extreme, or hopelessly idealistic. Yet his writings were unclouded by sentimentality; many even find his clinical observations as tinged with pessimism, his despairing conclusions about human

nature a product of his war-torn times (Korczak served in the military as a physician in both WWI and the Polish-Soviet War that followed). Given that his vision of treating youth as human beings first, and as children second, is still not commonly accepted in any culture nearly 100 years after he began advocating it, perhaps ultimately Korczak was simply a realist, who saw the long road ahead of humanity before respect for children would be acknowledged and practiced as he espoused.

Seeking to reach as many people as possible with his message of inclusion and respect, Korczak was a pioneer in the use of mass media, even hosting his own radio show, to promote the cause of child advocacy and to teach parenting skills and attitudes which could redress the effects of the disempowerment of children. He attempted to put into practice what he preached, giving children a voice, and by giving them real opportunities to take part in decision-making. His famous experiments in juvenile justice, the Children's Court, actually had children as judges presiding over the proceedings—even adults had to submit to their judgments. He founded *The Little Review*, a successful national weekly newspaper produced by and for children, edited by himself, a boy and a girl.

Dr. Korczak opposed the use of punishment, viewing its use as an instinctive response born of frustration when an adult does not know what else to do. Ideas he promoted are now considered as basic tenets of child psychology. His view that how a child is treated will affect how he later behaves, although more commonplace now than during his life, still is being verified in contemporary research (e.g., in *The Men They Will Become: the Nature and Nurture of Male Character*, (1999), author Eli Newberger, M.D., explores the connection between how male children are raised and the subsequent incidence of violence and abuse toward others). Dr. Korczak once rebuked a reluctant employee of the orphanage, who had refused to deal with the excrement of a minority youth, by washing out the diaper himself, reminding the staff member that it was a child's need being met and not that of any particular ethnic group. He regularly participated in the "menial" chores of caring for the children in his charge, whether clearing tables, washing dishes or serving food, declaring often that every encounter with a youth in the course of their day was an opportunity: to express love, to build

confidence, to offer protection, to extend support, or simply to engage in dialogue.



The NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) in Great Britain has declared the elimination of child abuse as its top priority and “the” social cause of the new millennium. Per their website, the organization has set a goal to accomplish this “fundamental shift in our society’s values, attitudes and behaviour towards children” within one generation. Towards this end, the NSPCC is supporting the publication of Korczak’s ideas in an edited

English language version. *A Voice for the Child: The Inspirational Works of Janusz Korczak*, edited by Sandra Joseph, is composed of excerpts from many of his texts, including *How to Love A Child* and *The Child’s Right to Respect*, and reflects to English readers the charm, warmth and wisdom of this caring man.

It was not until 1979, at the request of Poland, that the United Nations began to draft a convention on the Rights of the Child, to be based on ideas promulgated by Korczak more than 50 years earlier (see the appendix to Jean Lifton’s biography of Korczak, *The King of Children*, for Korczak’s *Declaration of the Rights of a Child*). In November of 1989 the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, passing it unanimously. Ironically, the last entry in Korczak’s *Ghetto Diary*, written before he joined his children in the gas chambers at Treblinka, was the following entry: “Who will care about what I am writing here? Perhaps fifty years from now someone will care.” On that final day as he marched with his charges out of the orphanage, he had them proudly carry a green flag through the streets of the Warsaw Ghetto, onto the cattlecars and to the death camp, refusing to abandon once again the orphaned children who had already suffered the greatest abandonment a child can suffer. Much has been made of his final act, interpreted through various lenses of politics, spirituality, morality and psychology. But perhaps Korczak’s final choice was predominantly an expression of ultimate commitment to the children for whom he had assumed responsibility; what other choice could he make? Today a monument to the victims stands at the former death camp in Poland; many stones, inscribed with the names of towns and nations from which the victims arrived, are scattered throughout a field.

Only one inscription includes the name of an individual who perished, simply reading in Polish, “Janusz Korczak i dzieci” (Janusz Korczak and children).

Dr. Korczak would in all likelihood have had no problem answering the question posed at the start of this article; *isn't empowerment and inclusion of children into decision making about their mental health treatment an idea whose time has finally come? What possible reason could there be to deny a child such a right?*

For more information, visit the website www.korczak.org.uk; also, the English language

biography of Korczak by Jean Lifton, although out of print, is available on the site among the links, as is a link to the NSPCC.

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Photos: *Primary Colors Choir* from Boise Eliot School performing at the Research and Training Center's Building on Family Strengths Conference.