

Tree of Life at the Annex House

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[This document records some of the responses from both young people and workers of the Annex House, a residential youth service in Toronto, Canada, during a ‘Tree of Life’ exercise, facilitated by Ruth Pluznick and Natasha Kis-Sines of Oolagen Community Servies.

For more information about the Tree of Life methodology, visit:
www.dulwichcentre.com.au/tree-of-life.html For more information about Oolagen, visit:
www.oolagen.org]

Seeing the forest

How do we become a forest?

When the individual trees are placed side-by-side, do we think of ourselves as a “forest”?

“There are so many similarities, I see a forest”.:

- We all have strong ROOTS. Some of us mentioned our cultures and communities, and all of us spoke of families and friends...mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, cousins, babysitters, neighbors, teachers, social workers. Certain values, like looking after others, are nourished by people and places that are part of our roots. Religion was also part of our roots, and for many of us, music and dance. Sometimes difficult times...death or separation, violence in our neighborhoods...are also part of our roots and we know that we have gained learnings from these situations.
- The GROUND on which we stand. We all live or work at the Annex House, so we are part of each other’s days and life. We also have friends inside and outside of the residence. We like spending time with people who love us , and this includes family, social workers, teachers. Some of us are looking for jobs, and some of us have jobs. Some of us have started to help out with responsibilities at home, like helping Mom with bills to pay. Many of us are working on learning skills to be independent so that we can have our own places when we leave Annex House.
- Our TRUNKS. All of us have skills and knowledge of life that we contribute to our friends and family and to the group home. We know how to be good friends and part of being good friends is knowing how to care for others. Most of us have a good sense of humor, which helps when you live in a group home. We have all been through a lot, so we have skills of survival. We also know how to help other people when they are having a hard time.

- Our BRANCHES. When we look at our trees we can see that workers and residents of the Annex House share similar hopes and dreams. We all want to be happy, no matter what life brings us. We want to be educated, to have good jobs, to be successful and to “be rich and famous” (or at least have enough money to live well). We want to have good jobs and to travel to see different places. We want to get better at what we like to do, for example, performing or writing. We all want to be part of families, and many of us said that we wanted to have kids and “raise them well”. We want to live good. We want to be respected, not feared.
- Our LEAVES. All of us have special people who made a difference in our lives because they loved us, or cared for us, or taught us something important about life. We have mothers who raised us as sole parents, sisters who taught us everything about girls, brothers and buddies and best friends, babysitters and social workers. Many of us had teachers who would stick up for us when we went through difficult times. All of these people contributed to our lives.
- Our FRUITS. The people we care about and who care about us have made many contributions to our lives. They have given us love, good values, patience in difficult times (and taught us to be patient), friendship, happiness. They have brought us humor and taught us humor. Their love for us has given us pride in ourselves, and a belief that we could achieve our dreams. They have helped us to develop skills to get through difficult times and, in doing this, they have given us the gift of a future with successes. Their support has helped us to develop a determination to succeed in life.



Storms of life in residence

What are the storms of life in residence?

- We are being surrounded by the same people every day, encountering the same problems, the same questions.

- Space is a problem ... sometimes we want our own space and there is nowhere to go.
- Sometimes we are in a situation when it is expected we will get along, and you have anger issues and it makes it hard to get along.
- Some of the rules are a problem. For example, at home we might have a cupboard full of treats, but the pantry is locked at residence.
- CAS places kids in residence and they don't think who is in the program, they don't consider how kids 'fit' together. So you might be a first time person in residence and you find yourself with kids with are different from you, with issues that are new to you.
- You have to build a relationship with the other kids, and when it isn't working, you can't get away from kids that don't like you or that you don't like.
- If you're not getting along with the other kids, you feel all on your own.
- Sometimes you have to walk on eggshells at residence.
- Sometimes there are lots of secrets so you don't know what's going on, or the staff doesn't know.
- If you know a secret...someone is breaking the rules or in trouble...it's a dilemma whether or not to tell staff.
- When you live in a group home, you live in a forceful situation, in a situation that is not your choice.
- You are living with strangers, not family and sometimes people that you don't get along with.
- You live in a different world when you live in a group home and sometimes it feels like you are in a conflict zone.
- It's different for kids. Staff can go home, kids have to stay.

Effects of the storms of life in residence.

- At times, some of us felt our blood is "boiling" – it is hard to hold in emotions like anger. We needed to learn to hold back.
- Sometimes we feel that life in residence is like a reality TV show
- When there are storms in residence, it does have an effect on school and work
- At times in residence, you have troubles with other kids and you just have to get away
- Sometimes when there are troubles in residence, there is police involvement and then you have to deal with those consequences
- Sometimes when you are having difficulties, everybody around you makes you feel worse
- And we have to do chores. Sometimes we have other things we want to do, but we have to do chores.
- And we have to always be thinking about our "contract" – what we've agreed to do in residence
- In residence, at times, your life is the house, the workers and other kids there. Your life gets smaller.

Responding to the storms of life in residence

- Don't assume the worst when things go wrong
- Call friends to talk
- Talk to one of the staff
- Talk to one of the kids in the residence
- Call a family member
- Go to the computer, talk to friends on the computer
- Listen to music
- Watch TV
- Write in a journal
- Find a quiet place and withdraw
- Go to work or to school
- Go somewhere

Are storms always present in our lives?

Some days are cloudless.

These are the times when everyone is getting along and everything is going smoothly.

What do we do when the storms have passed?

- We socialize
- We go out
 - See our friends
 - Do something fun
- We play music
- We dance
- We goof around
- We are laughing
- People are laid out on the couch
- We are supporting each other with life
- We are interested in each other
- We are enjoying getting along
- We celebrate



We know how to get through the storms. We are people who have been through difficult times and survived. We have a lot of life skills. We know what to do.



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