

Can Street Youth Commit to Time? a reflection on the use of time commitments in youth programs

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I write this in support of a program model being implemented in Multnomah County, Oregon that has as a foundational technique the use of time commitments with street youth. Yet street youth are notoriously time-challenged. Anyone who works with this population knows how difficult it is to get them to keep appointments, to be on time for anything and in general to follow through with commitments. I personally identify this challenge in my manual *Street Culture: an epistemology of street-dependent youth*, dedicating nearly 22 pages to time concepts and time-related behaviors with additional references throughout the manual. But perhaps the most important reference to time that I make in *Street Culture* is this:

Despite the problems that we as service providers encounter when dealing with a street-dependent youth's concept of time, the biggest problem is that this concept of time doesn't work for them. When I say it doesn't work for them, I'm referring to the fact that their concept of time doesn't work outside of their culture. Obviously, it works very well within the culture of the streets, but a youth who does not transition out of street life dies -- maybe not today, but the streets mean death in the long run. Therefore, a youth who is going to survive must transition out of street culture and this transition can not be made unless concepts of time are addressed and changed. This 'time barrier' -- for lack of a better term -- is often overlooked in terms of its impact on keeping youth locked into street activities.

Creating opportunities for youth to make time commitments is in part driven by this mandate; that in order to assist youth with their survival we have to address concepts of time. We also have to avoid *supporting* and *validating* current concepts of time. But we have to do this in a way that works for them rather than against them. Using what I will hereafter refer to as the Time Commitment Technique (TCT) is one way to do that ... and it provides additional benefits, as well. The best way to address what those benefits are is to clarify exactly what the TCT is.

TCT Structure:

The TCT involves entering into a voluntary, regular, and specified time commitment. It requires each of these 3 elements to be in place.

1. **Voluntary:** The time commitment must be made voluntarily; that is, with the youth's full knowledge and consent. This does not mean that it can not be made in exchange for something the youth desires; more often than not, it is. A youth desiring personal attention, services, or goods may be asked to make a time commitment in exchange for these things; either to receive them or to earn them through some service or exchange. I would point out that unless you are running a 24 hour drop-in facility where everything is available on demand, programs are already doing this. If you are open certain hours, or a case manager works a certain schedule, or a service is only offered at certain times, you are in effect asking the youth to make a time commitment to receive them. The TCT is simply elevating that to a stated agreement where the youth recognizes and confirms that they are making such an agreement, rather than having the agreement implied by circumstances. In fact, an involuntary time commitment involves mandate or coercion beyond the authority of most non-profit youth programs; being a function of juvenile justice or other such authorities. It is a key to the TCT, however, that the time commitment be *acknowledged* rather than simply *implied*. By acknowledging the time commitment a youth can take ownership of the commitment and this ownership begins to become a non-random element of the young person's life. The more we can help young people create non-random reference points in their life, the more they are able to begin to take control of their life.
2. **Regular:** By *regular* we mean *on-going* and *consistent*; consistency being one of the most important supports for helping youth transition from the randomness of street life into the more structured environment of a safe and stable lifestyle. While a singular, non-repeating time commitment can have value in certain circumstances (such as addressing a pressing medical or legal need) it is the *repetition* and *consistency* of a regular time commitment that begins to

challenge street-developed time concepts. What this means in terms of application of the TCT is striving for a creation of the “youth’s time” -- e.g.; this (these) day(s) at this (these) time(s) belong to *you*, and I (we) will be available to consistently dedicate that commitment to be there *for you*.

3. **Specified:** This aspect of the TCT refers to the *why*. While voluntary and regular describe *what* the TCT is, ‘specified’ defines *why* the time commitment is being made. Exactly *what* is the *why* is less important than the fact that there *is* a *why*. Certainly it is better to have a *why* that is tied to other meaningful/supportive/helpful processes¹, but a simple “to be able to dedicate my full attention to you” can suffice. The important thing is to engage the youth in making a time commitment for a *reason*, rather than for some *undefined* or *unclear* purpose.

Benefits of the TCT:

In addition to the earlier referenced benefit of being one method of addressing street-developed time concepts, there are two other very specific benefits provided by the TCT.

1. The TCT helps workers address youth issues in a more organized and structured manner: By creation of a “youth’s time” resulting from the TCT, workers themselves begin to experience less randomness in meeting with young people. This allows for a reduction of “let’s see what we can get done when we have them” intervention styles and increases opportunities for planned interventions that build upon each other.
2. (And this is perhaps the greater of the two additional benefits) It gives the young person the needed support to turn down or disconnect from competitive street-related relationships and activities: In the random, present-oriented, spur-of-the-moment street sub-culture, young people sometimes need an excuse for choosing healthy alternatives over unhealthy ones. When program options are *purely* voluntary a youth has to publicly state that they’d rather do this than that. This disarms them in the face of peer pressure, or choosing activities that are less face-saving than unhealthy street alternatives. If they have agreed to a time commitment, however, the voluntary aspect of the choice remains, but they have locked themselves into a commitment that removes the “in the moment” choice. A young person may have a hard time saying; “I don’t want to hang out and smoke weed, I’d rather create an eco-map with program staff” -- but they may find it easier to say; “I wish I could hang out, but today is my time commitment.” It is a way of giving them an excuse to make their lives work, choosing themselves over the culture of the streets without incurring the negative street pressure that such a choice might otherwise entail.

How to sabotage the TCT:

That may sound like a funny heading, but so far I’ve only discussed what the TCT is and how it works. I need to also point out under what circumstances the TCT *won’t* work -- or, at least, how it may be impaired -- and I should begin by answering the question in the title of this article: Can street youth commit to time? This is all a moot point if street youth are unable to make time commitments, or if attempting to do so causes more problems that it fixes. The answer is similar to the answer to another question; can a child learn to ride a bike? The answer is, yes -- but not the first time they get on. They need guidance, practice, and perhaps even progressive supports such as three wheelers to training wheels to a regular bike. Youth -- even street-dependent youth -- can and will make time commitments ... but they need training and our help.

The Multnomah County model defines this as follows:

This time commitment is not intended to be a standard that a young person is accountable to; rather, it represents permission for staff to assertively engage with the youth. It is our job to utilize this permission to create opportunities and supports that are relevant and attractive enough to each individual youth that dedication of time becomes voluntary and desired as opposed to an obligation or mandate.

¹ For example, in the Multnomah County program model, the ‘why’ is described as: *to develop and implement one or more projects and/or goals initially related to an area of interest or an area of personal growth or stability, with the goal of leading to engagement in projects or goals that facilitate greater community investment and connection and stabilization.*

This is a critically important concept to understand. When a youth makes a time commitment the burden does not shift to them to keep it. The burden is on us to make it *worth their while* to keep it. We are not creating a situation where they keep it out of obligation or fear of punishment or retribution; we are creating a situation where they keep it because it is the better option from their perspective to not keeping it. This may take some time, but the process is as important as the outcome. In order to make the process work, there are specific things we need to do in relation to the time commitment.

1. Honor the commitment: Do not be distracted. When it is the youth's time it is the youth's time. Nothing should compete with or distract from your ability to be fully present during that time. Do not be late, even if they are. Do not reschedule, even if they do. Do not end early, ever. Lateness and rescheduling, however, have one caveat: There should be an agreed upon cutoff. For example, the agreement might be if the youth shows up more than 20 minutes late, you reschedule rather than go ahead with a shorter time, or the same length of time that runs over the agreed upon commitment. This both honors the agreement and helps to create consistency in the schedule.

Note: I cannot over-stress the importance of not being late. One of my pet peeves is how so many youth service workers are late to meetings or other time commitments when we work in a field where abused and neglected kids lose services and shelter for the same behavior. It is ultimately poor role modeling that confuses and ends up hurting our clients. In the case of the TCT, it completely undermines the structure. When making time commitments with youth, make sure you only agree to something where you can be fully present and ready to go *exactly* on time. I even recommend atomic clocks for this purpose.

2. Have a plan: Remember ... it is your job to make the time commitment worth the youth's follow-through. If a youth shows up and the reason is vague, irrelevant, or downright boring, you can bet they will stop showing up. Your goal is to ensure that no matter how reluctantly the youth comes *to* the commitment, they leave *from* the commitment feeling like it wasn't a waste of their time.

Summary

The TCT is a technique that helps transition youth out of street life by addressing the randomness of the street sub-culture and providing for a repetitive and consistent opportunity to work with youth in a way that helps them choose healthy alternatives over unhealthy ones. Youth can and will make time commitments, but their follow-through depends on us honoring the commitment and making it worth their while. The success of the TCT depends on your ability to use the opportunities it gives you, not on the youth's current relationship to time or efficacy at following through with commitments.