

The Orders of Helping

How can we make appropriate and strengthening interventions?

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ecl is about finding new approaches to improve how we develop and care for children and young people. Both are a form of 'helping' in ways that support wellbeing, learning and creativity. Helping and nurturing run through all **ecl** activity but what does 'helping' actually involve? How can helping strengthen the child – but also how can it weaken them? This paper explores these questions and suggests a number of simple principles we need to attend to as we offer support to others.

The notion of '*orders of helping*' was first described by the German philosopher Bert Hellinger in the therapeutic context of family constellations, but in an organisational and educational context they also inform the roles of teaching, counselling, coaching and catalysing – indeed most kinds of change agency. 'Helping' fundamentally underpins all of the work of education and care leaders and practitioners.

Seen systemically, helping is not a straightforward process. A great deal of help is wasted, either because of what the helper does or does not bring, or because the systemic conditions that underpin the relationship have not been considered deeply enough. Helping is a demanding art, needing skill, practise and insight into what is genuinely appropriate. It is also something mysterious that draws on the greater field.

The 'orders of helping' is a guide for leaders, practitioners and parents to work out what is appropriate, possible, strengthening and enduring. They always need to hold a bigger framework and a sense of what is developmentally appropriate. Without careful thought, helping can actually weaken people and establish dependence. At the beginning the relationship may seem gratifying, but unless it is also capable of being frustrating, those being helped are not spurred into finding their new place as people who can feel their strength and are able to give. So helpers have to guard against their inevitable narcissism.

There are two key principles to bear in mind constantly when in a developmental or caring relationship.

Exchange

Because helping involves an exchange, the issue of balance between helper and helped needs constant attention. When considering adult to adult relationships helping also has to be good for the helper; it has to be mutual at some level. Often this is managed by finding

the right payment, but in the case of charities or voluntary work the balance of giving and receiving can be extremely tricky. Sometimes balance is impossible – the one who needs help cannot pay, the one who offers has an abundance, or has already been given enough in the past.

Helping presupposes that we have first received and taken for ourselves what we need. Giving out of unmet needs does not have a good effect, and usually ends up in burn-out. Helping also presupposes that those whom we wish to help actually want and need what we are able to give. Otherwise our attempts to be of use will separate us rather than connect us.

Importantly for **ecl**, parents, carers and teachers are invariably ‘net givers’ which means the framework must change to suit. Exchange between adults and children isn’t reciprocal and needs to flow into something bigger, with a consciousness of time, external reward, legacy and mortality. What the future will bring is always important in striking a balance between adults and children.

Soul, fate, and respecting limits

Helping must also be in tune with soul and fate. This is not a matter of ‘what I am for or against’ but with ‘what the soul of this situation requires in order to restore movement’. Idealism often overlooks the constraints of fate, that which is already set and cannot be changed. Both soul and fate create limits.

Helping is always about doing the least, and it looks not for completion but only for a restoration and support of movement. Helpers are transitory, perhaps wise but basically detached so that they can report accurately on what they see and therefore be genuinely trustworthy.

Below the five orders of helping are described briefly.

The First Order: Helping has definite limits

We can only give what we have and only expect what we need. Sometimes we are spurred to try to give what we don’t have, or expect something that we can’t give, or we try to take on something for a person or organisation that only they should carry. Ownership for action needs to remain with the person being helped.

The Second Order: Respecting circumstances

Circumstances have to be respected, and helping has to be restrained by that. These may be inner circumstances or outer ones – entanglements, an inability to bear the suffering we see, or an impatience with the developmental level or loyalties of the ones who want help. All these circumstances need to be faced side by side, between helper and helped, before action can be usefully taken.

The Third Order: Sidestepping transference

Helping tends to elicit the powerful transference or paradigm of parent and child. There are many times within the work of **ecl** that it is appropriate to 'stand in' as parent, but only with real respect for those who actually are the founders, leaders, or bosses, and parents, and only if the people we help remain responsible for what belongs with them, and are not taken on by the helper, as if the one who needs help is a child.

The Fourth Order: In service to the greater whole

The one who needs help is always part of a wider system and all that has gone before in that system. The kind of help that truly helps is, therefore, in service of the whole system, especially those who have been overlooked or who have suffered at the hands of the system. Sympathy with the client can impede this.

The Fifth Order: Beyond Conscience

Working systemically joins what has been separated. It supports reconciliation, but this is not possible if we as helpers become focused on our own moral preferences, our biases, loyalties and conscience – or the force of public opinion. True helping is done without judgement, and without the moral superiority that judgement always presupposes.

In attending to the emotional wellbeing of children and young people, and indeed the adults who support them, these five guidelines can make a considerable difference to the success and sustainability of our effort, guarding against collusion and confluence with the individuals we are supporting, and encouraging them to find strength in their own capability to act.