



Young Parents Support Network

Creative Outreach 101

When working with women whose lives are complex, complicated or chaotic

Below please find some tips and tools for working with women facing conditions of complex risk. These ideas come from both practitioners who work with women, and from the women themselves, and are designed to help you engage more effectively with women you may encounter in your practice.

- 1. The most important tool you have for working with marginalized women is your authenticity.** Women in these complex situations can spot a fake from a mile away, and being who you really are is the best thing you can do to build trust. ***Trust is the single most important thing in developing a relationship with the women you will encounter.***
- 2. Offer practical assistance first.** Food, bus tickets, diapers, baby clothing – these basic needs are often unmet, and practical assistance is a way to begin a connection if you have access to these things through a community agency or support. Learn about the resources in your community.
- 3. Recognize and acknowledge the strengths, uniqueness and survival skills of the women you serve.** Even the most challenging behaviour has a reason behind it, and often is the result of developing a strategy for survival in a very difficult environment. Identify strengths and work with them, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. There is no one "type" of woman – each has her own individual story, and if you are fortunate enough to be invited in, hold that story carefully and with respect.
- 4. Create opportunities for empowerment and self determination.** Present options and possible consequences, and create a safe space for

exploring decision making. Avoid solutions, listen well and maintain a balance of power between yourself and the woman you are working with. If you have all the answers, you have all the power.

5. *Treat every woman with respect, empathy, and positive regard.*

This may seem basic, and may become difficult when faced with challenging behaviours, activities or presentations that come into conflict with our own core beliefs, values and ethics. Replace judgement with observation.

6. *Be aware of where you end and the woman you serve begins.*

Good boundaries will help you to serve the needs of the women without compromising your own. Be flexible, realistic, and conscious about setting and maintain boundaries.

7. *Don't drive the bus.* Her life is HER life and she drives the bus. You are the passenger to accompany her, you sometimes have a map, and you assist her to remember the luggage. If she takes a wrong turn, that turn is ultimately her responsibility. Allow her the dignity of making her own mistakes, and learning from them. If you are doing all the work, then you need to reassess your boundaries, her participation and ownership in the relationship and the power dynamic.

8. *Recognize your limitations and ask for help when necessary.* No one can do this work in isolation, and everyone needs support and help doing this type of challenging (and rewarding!) work.

9. *Don't forget to have a sense of humour.* Sometimes laughter really is the best medicine, and it can go a long way in building and maintaining relationships in a complex and chaotic environment.

10. *Listen, learn and celebrate.* The very best things I have learned in 20 years of work often came from the most surprising sources. The women you will work with teach you and make you laugh, bring you to tears of sadness and frustration and give you incredible hope. Celebrate the small successes, listen to the powerful stories of loss, love, and survival, and be open to all that this work can teach you.

*Jacquelin Green
Prenatal and Family Outreach Coordinator
Young Parent Support Network – Victoria, BC Canada*