

Karen VanderVen's **UPDATED 2016 DIGITAL POINT PACK**

A documented analysis of the literature on the destructiveness of "Point and Level Systems" commonly employed in group and residential settings, and schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

This Digital **Point Pack** supplants earlier “Point Packs” which were a collection of articles, mostly written by Karen and published in the professional literature on child and youth care and related fields. This literature specifically defined what point and level systems *are* and *are not*. Thus, the exposition here is specifically of *point and level systems* which should not be confused with natural consequences, logical consequences, (when these are used as learning opportunities rather than punishments), incentives, and clinical utilization of evidence-based applied behavior analysis. The pieces in this collection can be used as tools and resources to spearhead motivation and an informed approach to recognizing the pitfalls of point and level systems. Throughout are suggestions on rationales for and approaches to eliminating point and level systems from the settings that use them.

“YOU CAN DO IT!” Over the years programs and/or teams have taken a stand and gotten rid of point and level systems. Use these resources and get started yourself. Find other like-minded colleagues to develop a united front for healthier practices.

II. HISTORY

Before assuming her position at the University of Pittsburgh, Karen worked directly with children, youth, and families in a variety of settings: inpatient psychiatric hospitals, large institutions, and community mental health programs. In some of these roles she was an activity worker and learned how powerful activities could be in helping children control behavior and learn to be productive. Even after assuming her faculty position, Karen continued involvements in a large variety of settings. She began to ‘learn’ about ‘point and level systems’ which were pervasive. She decided to study them – how they got started, how they got implemented and what their effects were.

She began collecting point and level descriptive manuals and observations of point and level systems in place in numerous and varied settings. Others joined in her quest, sharing observations, anecdotes, manuals and other information. For example, one well-known inpatient center required that children (some as young as five years old) had to have sufficient points to ‘earn time alone with an adult’! This of course was appalling. The descriptions of some point and level programs would be pages long and require a nuclear physicist to understand. How could an upset child with special needs know what was expected and how to do it? It became apparent that the point and level systems were destructive, actually denying ingredients youngsters needed for effective treatment.

Combining the above material with knowledge sources on child development, group and residential care, and treatment and intervention design into a reasoned perspective, in 1995 Karen published her first article describing what point and level systems were and their negative impacts on the well-being of children, youth and staff. There was so much response that she continued to study point and level systems, publish articles and deliver workshops throughout North America. Soon she compiled a collection of her writings and other resources which were mailed worldwide over the years. As a result, numerous programs eliminated their point and level systems and replaced them with positive relational and activity oriented practices. Young people did not have to ‘earn’ caring attention from adults or participation in activities. These were the core of their treatment.

In recent years major child care and welfare organizations have taken a strong stand against point and level systems. With the emerging understanding of how trauma affects development, it has become very clear that point and level systems have no place in trauma-based care serving only to re-enact past traumatizing memories and conditions; however there are still programs with these unjustified relics today. Some people are deeply concerned about the damage they do. This **Point Pack** contains a collection of Karen’s articles, *some references to compelling writings by other authors*, and some recommendations for those who have to convince managers and administrators that point and level systems are not “the way to go”, rather that they “have to go” or should certainly not be instituted.

III. BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND SYNOPSES OF LITERATURE ON POINT AND LEVEL SYSTEMS

POINT and LEVEL SYSTEMS BIBLIOGRAPHY

Writings by Karen VanderVen, Ph.D., CYC-P

VanderVen, K. You didn't earn it! Avoiding re-traumatizing children and youth with point and level systems. (In preparation). How point and level systems violate the entire purpose of trauma-based treatment.

VanderVen, K. (2011). From the bully pulpit. A child and youth work approach to bullying. *Relational Child and Youth Care*. 24 (1-2), 86-95. (The concept of bullying is closely related to point and level systems. Point and level systems can be an example of 'adult bullying' and their presence in child and youth settings sets up a bullying-encouraging dynamic among the youngsters as well).

VanderVen, K., Rosenblatt, P. and Munoz, A. (2005). Beyond the culture of point and level systems to creating a relationship and activity rich environment. Based on presentation prepared for publication in *Journal of Group and Residential Care*.

Rosenblatt, P. and VanderVen, K. (2005) Perspectives on Point and Level systems in residential Care: A responsive dialogue. *Journal of Group and Residential Care*. 22(3),.

VanderVen, K. (2000). Cultural aspects of point and level systems. In "Healing Racism" issue of Brendtro, L. (Ed.). *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 9(1), 53-59.

VanderVen, K. (1998) Point and Counterpoint: On point and level systems. In *Residential Care*, publication of Child Welfare League of America.

VanderVen, K. (1995, December) Point and level systems: Another way to fail children and youth. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 24(6).

VanderVen, K. (1993, Fall). Point and level systems: Do they have a place in the group care milieu? *Research and Evaluation in Group Care*. 3(2)

VanderVen, K. (1993). The case against behaviour point and level systems. *Journal of Child and Youth Care*, 7(3), 97-99. Reprinted in *Die Kinderversorger (The Child Care Worker)*, publication of the South African Association of Child Care Workers.

"From the Soapbox – Again" (Newsletter of the Association for Child Care Practice. (ACYCP)

* *Don't provide a sanctuary for point and level systems.*

"From the Soapbox" Child and Youth Care Net

* *Token economies, point and level systems, whatever we call them, let's rethink them*

* *Bedtime – Serve it with a Cup of Cocoa.* Bedtime is often a punishment related to point and level systems. "Early bedtimes" are particularly damaging for young people who have been abused and neglected. Gives them an opportunity to ruminate on the past.

“I’m Not the Only One Who Thinks So”:

RECOMMENDED WRITINGS BY OTHERS ON and PERTINENT TO POINT and LEVEL SYSTEMS

Armstrong, L. (1993). *And they call it help. The psychiatric policing of America’s Children.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Brendtro, L. & VanderVen, K. (Eds) (2009, winter). From Power to Empowerment. Theme is of *Reclaiming Children and Youth*. Collection of articles oriented towards the work of Fritz Redl and his contributions towards “developmentally-oriented, strengths-based approaches” (Beker, J. p.5) 17(4).

The Child Welfare League of America. (2002) *CWLA Best Practice Guidelines (Behavior Management)*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

Holden, M. (2009). *Children and residential experiences.* Arlington, VA: Child Welfare League of America.

Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit.* New York: Scribners. Describes how passion and persistence lead to achievement. (*My comment:* Youth do *not* develop grit when they have to earn the right to participate in activities that will help them learn what they love and how to go for it. Rather they develop unhealthy strategies for evading adults who implement point and level systems)

The Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Hospitals (JCAHO Advisor for Health Care Providers.) (2006, March). On the level: New standard renews the debate over level systems. 10 (3).

Mohr, W. K., Martin, A., Olson, J. N., Pumariega, A. J. and Branca, N. (2009, January). Beyond point and level systems: Moving toward child-centered programming. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. 79 (1). Pp. 8-18.

Quote from this piece: ***“In this article we offer a criticism of point and level programming. In the spirit of critique we argue that the assumptions upon which point and level systems are based do not hold up to serious empirical scrutiny, ignore individual differences among children, and that point and level system programming may be counterproductive. By virtue of not taking into account individual differences and symptoms, it may undermine their progress, and at time can precipitate dangerous clinical situations”.***

Fox, Lorraine. (1994) The catastrophe of compliance. *Journal of Child and Youth Care*. 9(1),
Can be downloaded from website drlorrainefox.com

Gagnon, J., Rockwell, S., & Scott, T. Positive behavior supports in exclusionary schools: A practical approach based on what we know. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 41(1)

Kohn, A. (1993) *Punished by rewards.* Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt. Other writings by same author.
Nowicki, J and Pastine, A. (2015). Transitioning from level systems to youth-centered programming in residential treatment centers as a strategy for reducing restraints and seclusion. *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*. 28 (1). Pp. 45-52 (on-line journal).

Pastine, A. and Nowicki, J. (2015, Spring). Transitioning from level systems to youth centered programming in residential treatment centers as a strategy for reducing restraints and seclusion. *Relational Child and Youth Care*. 28(1).

HOT OFF THE PRESS! MUST READING!!!

Kohn, A. (Sept. 7, 2016). *Why punishment won't stop a bully: Punitive discipline for bullies can be counterproductive.* Education Week. edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/09/07/why-punishment-wont-stop-a-bully.html

This piece attacks the notion that underlies point and level systems (although it focuses on bullies, not point and level systems per se): that children must be punished for their transgressions. While focusing on schools Kohn points out how those who “break the rules or otherwise displease us” are subjected to... loss of opportunity to participate in enjoyable activities” (p. 1)

(Sound familiar?)

(As well, “Taking away recess” is mentioned as one form of punishment. As with so many other activities, children who need them the most, are denied them. I remind us of the research that shows that recess is related to better behavior and increased learning.)

Kohn continues to say that “I’ve been unable to find any evidence to support the claim that punishment makes schools safer or leads the children who have been punished to become more ethical or responsible. Indeed, punitive responses – even if they’re euphemistically called “consequences” – are often not merely ineffective but actively counterproductive”. (p. 1)

As to bullying, punishments are forms of ‘adult bullying’ with strong power dynamics. They exert power over those with less power with the result being increased anger and learning that getting your way means exerting power over those who are more vulnerable.

Schenk, K. and Moreno, C. *Eliminating level systems in residential treatment centers.* Texas Network of Youth Services. <http://tnoys.org/eliminating-level-systems-in-residential-treatment-centers/> Reports study of positive results and transformational change for the better based on direct experience of staff and residents. **MUST READING (as well)!**

De Nim, Sue. (2005, January). Child and Youth Care as Healing. *CYC- Online*. Issue 72
This compelling article describes the feelings young people bring to a program or setting.
Read it and note the total disconnect between a point and level system and the young people’s inner pain.

To see other **Youth Comments** on point and level systems, see p. 8, bottom of page. (VanderVen, K. “What works...”)

ANNOTATED POINT and LEVEL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Following are summations of some of Karen’s major writings on Point and Level Systems that include possible access sources (on-line, resource center) as well as the original publication. A summary of the major ‘points’ of each piece is included.

VanderVen, K. (1995). “Point and Level Systems”: Another Way to Fail Children and Youth. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 24(6), December 1995. 345-367.

This article will “describe what we mean by “point and level systems’ “, name domains of developmental and staff issues on which they have an impact, and give examples; and make suggestions for system-wide alternative approaches” (p. 315).

Among the major contentions of this article : The complexity of the actual practices of point and level systems (which are hard for children to understand and to comply to; the pervasiveness of point and level systems in determining the nature of a milieu setting, how point and level systems “create unnecessary

crises”, are “detached from the wider culture of society”, “decontextualize “ i.e. “ do not take into consideration the circumstances under which a behavior incident occurs” (p. 354-355).

Point and level systems “take away treatment”. Point and level systems are frequently linked to activities that can be “taken away” or “earned”. Activities are not a ‘privilege’ – they are the ‘core of treatment’ (Read work by Fritz Redl and David Wineman). As well, they punish symptoms rather than enable youngsters to develop greater understanding and learning. Point and level systems reflect “clinical inappropriateness”. An example is given of early bedtime for a sexually traumatized youth. (pp. 354-355)/ As I have said elsewhere, early bedtimes as punishment in a program that claims to be trauma informed immediately shows that the program isn’t trauma-informed. There is “abandonment of hope” where a youngster feels so deprived by the point and level system that they buy out of it, feeling that “they may never be allowed to do anything ever again”.. The reader is referred to an article “‘Michael’ who, having been shuttled from one restrictive program to another, finally committed suicide”. (p. 368).

A crucial comment is that many point and level systems are so complicated that many children cannot understand them and before they are ‘applied’ have no chance or time to ‘learn’ them.

The impact of implementing point and level systems on staff who must apply them is strong although rarely discussed. Staff experience “disempowerment” ... and they are dehumanized (p. 369).

The article continues to discuss alternative practices and indicates areas where change must occur. These include economic factors, values, implementation of a child and youth work model by trained staff. Needed are responsive interactive rather than unidirectional environments, positive expectation, disengagement from power struggles, developmental consequences (where the worker supports the youngster in learning from a behavioral situation), even “normalized” points. This is attaching points to *just one aspect* of life in a milieu, not everything; e.g. for doing chores. (pp. 364-366). *Levels* can actually be useful in encouraging positive behavior as long as they are attached to an individual treatment program with goals that the program provides activities and guidance to attain. *Individualized behavior programs* in which there is something a child or youth wants to work for and is designed just for him or her, have place “if they are implemented with clinical and developmental sensitivity”. p. 366).

VanderVen, K. (2000, Spring). Cultural aspects of point and level systems. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*. 9:1. Spring 2000, pp. 53-59.

Also available from ERIC. ERIC # EJ616111

“This article contends that point and level systems constitute a powerful “culture” in education and treatment environments. Most level systems deprive youth of normative needs such as privacy, decision making, and group participation in stimulating activities. These ...systems also distort professional thinking because discussions about problems and treatment goals are carried on in a contrived language of “pointese” (use of such words as ‘consequences’, ‘gone down a level’, ‘counting up’, ‘taking away’, ‘you didn’t earn it’, etc. This...culture compromises sensitivity to cultural differences among clients and interferes with healthy overall development....” (p. 53).

There is a belief system accompanying points and levels that suggests that they are perpetuated through an informal process of cultural transmission. Everybody knows about them: “this is the way we’ve always done it” although they may certainly never have learned about them in professional education or training. The underlying belief is that children and youth must be actively controlled, or they will be totally unmanageable. Unfortunately, this leads to a deviant subculture that pits everybody against each other. “Pointese” takes over and continues to shape the culture. Point and level systems do not respect multicultural backgrounds and punish for behavior that is acceptable, even favored, in a youth’s particular culture.

The article describes how the core ingredients of a therapeutic milieu – relationships, activities of daily living, communication, group process and community resources – are diminished by the ‘takeover’ of a

point and level system and violate children and youth's basic needs. A 'developmental culture' is proposed for installation rather than point and level systems.

Tompkins-Rosenblatt, P. and VanderVen, K. (2005). Perspectives on point and level systems: A responsive dialogue. *Residential Treatment for Children and Youth*. 22(3) pp. 1-18.

This article was written in response to an earlier piece in the same journal "The Application of a Reinforcement/Level System in the Residential Treatment of Adolescents" by Don Pazaratz, Ed.D. Dr. Pazaratz, subsequently published a critique of our article in the same journal. In fairness, I would suggest you read all 3 articles and draw your own conclusions.

The discussion in our article is complex and thus hard to summarize in a few paragraphs. Among the main threads how the system as described in the article punished for symptom expression that needed support and real treatment. The article analyzes a long list of them. The reinforcement system is tied into such things as becoming easily frustrated, having difficulty with routines and chores, inappropriate seeking of attention, complaining of physical ailments and lethargy, isolates self or is unable to be alone. Another aspect of the reinforcement system was tied into bedtimes. ("Early bedtimes" imposed because of points is one of the most clinically contraindicated by-products of point and level systems. Going to bed before sleepy or when upset allows time to reflect on past traumas and can lead to sleep problems (among other things). As to attention seeking, I suggest reading my "From the Soapbox" (CYC-Net) making the case that when youth seek attention – why, give it to them! The need for attention diminishes when the need is met, not repudiated.

Interestingly we found and stated in conclusion that when the 'reinforcement' aspect was removed from consideration in the article, a strong program was described which made us wonder "why use points at all?"

VanderVen, K. (2009, winter). Why focusing on control backfires! A systems perspective. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 17 (4). Pp. 8-12.

This article is one of group assembled for this special issue of *Reclaiming Children and Youth* on the theme "Controls from Within" and shows how "a narrow focus on *reward* and punishment works against creating a rich milieu of activities and relationships. Principles from systems theory show why external controls fail. The term "controls from within" was created by the famous Fritz Redl who worked in and wrote about residential treatment. The notion that children and youth in treatment should be given a rich diet of activities and relationships that help children learn that adults may not always be the enemy was advocated by Redl. Failure to 'earn' things through point and level systems actually causes youngsters to stop wanting to be involved in developmental activities and withdraw. They just stop wanting the rewards. Obviously, such detachment is not healthy.

I introduce concepts from chaos theory ('non-linear dynamical systems theory' into the discussion showing how attempts to control a complex system - certainly any child and youth program or center – leads to more and more out-of-control behavior. A major concept is that of *recursion* – described by the famous anthropologist Gregory Bateson. In a recursion effect in a controlled system, new information being fed back the system – feedback – tends to create more of the same phenomenon it was designed to control in the first place. An example is controlling pests with strong pesticides. The pests develop resistance, their numbers actually increase, and the strength of the pesticides concomitantly has to increase. Recursion explains why 'logical' actions don't always obtain the desired result.

When youngsters simply decide not to participate in the 'point and level system' they concoct more and more clever, but not always healthy ways, to evade it. They may decide they just don't want the 'rewards'. They may try to get other children in trouble so *they* are punished.

An *attractor* is another concept in dynamical systems theory. It is "the source of energy that drives the system and to which its development constantly reverts. When a point and level system is in place, it becomes the attractor in the setting's system, drawing focus and energy towards it and ultimately becoming

the shaper or frame of the culture and practices. Everything... is oriented towards how many points a child or youth has. Like bad money driving out the good, the point and level system takes over and becomes a culture of its own”.

Then there is *disequilibrium* which refers to some disorganization and movement in a system. *Change* can only occur in disequilibrium. Disequilibrium in group care does not mean an absence of structure or focus, but rather some tolerance for ambiguity, avoidance of a ‘one size fits all’ approach, and the ability to accept and constructively redirect some misbehavior without universally applying a punishment.

NOTE ON CITATION BELOW: YOUTH THEMSELVES SAID IT!!

VanderVen, K, (2001) What works? Why don’t you ask us? Youth speak out about what works for them in group care. Residential Services Newsletter. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

“Based on interviews with youth, this article describes in some detail what report ‘what works’ for them in group care. ‘Fewer controls and less regimentation’ was among the areas identified. “A major factor in contributing to youth’s sense of depersonalization and disempowerment is the degree to which they sense they are being controlled and held in a regimented, rigid environment. They say youth would have less ‘need’ for restrictions if they had more to do and more opportunities to move around and work off energy. There would be also be less trying to circumvent the rules and the staff who enforce them. They want to participate in negotiating rules. Youth remind us that one day they will be on their own and that too much control prevents them from learning the things they will need to know to manage independently. More flexibility and trying things differently will aid them in this, they say.”

Youth also want emotional safety, caring and nurturing, relationships, being seen as individuals., participation in decisions that affect them, guidance in problem solving (author insertion here: Point and level systems do not teach problem solving), They want “more activities and recreation” Overwhelmingly, youth describe how significant to their overall development was the chance to discover a talent or interest and have it nurtured by staff..

(Author insertion here). Attaching access to activities to point and level systems is *denying treatment*. *Activity programming is a core therapeutic and developmental intervention that develops crucial life skills. It is not a frill or something to be ‘earned’ by ‘good’ behavior.*

“Youth want staff to ‘help me treat school as if it were my job” The structure and organized content of school for many is comforting and a refuge from emotional turmoil and the chaotic aspects of other parts of their lives”.

VanderVen, K. (2008, July). When good people make bad things happen: The 10 worst practices in child and youth work. CYC-Online.

The 10: Point and level systems, early bedtime, allowing boredom, prohibiting touch, TV, Game Boys (and similar occupations), provoking an outburst and then restraining and punishing for it, dingy, poorly maintained physical settings, shabby clothing, emotional intrusiveness, demeaning families

IV. MAJOR CHILD SERVING ORGANIZATIONS TAKE A POSITION ON POINT AND LEVEL SYSTEMS

Note: The material in this piece can be particularly useful to use with administrators, managers, officials and other workers who either want a point and level system installed or will not support one in place being eliminated. Excerpts from the cited publications are presented.

* **The American Association of Children’s Residential Centers. Two position papers available from www.aacrc-dc.org**

1. ***“Redefining Residential: Trauma Informed Care in Residential Treatment”***

“Environments are designed to be collaborative and supportive, as opposed to controlling”

“Organizations adopt a treatment philosophy focused on relationships”

“Coercive interventions and interactions are recognized to be re-traumatizing and to recapitulate victimization, and are therefore contraindicated.

“Eliminate point and level systems which by their nature re-enact the experience of the child having to “work” external systems to gain even an illusion of control over his/her life, and are most difficult for the most seriously traumatized children”.

Develop and sustain a rich variety of opportunities to be active and to learning by doing.

Activities are critical in helping children and youth develop a positive sense of control over their experience that can generalize to other experiences

Assure that the program creates opportunity for relationship development...

2. ***“Redefining Residential: Creating Non-Coercive Environments”***

This provides an excellent developmental and clinical rationale as to why such procedures as restraint and seclusion (unless under certain circumstances), and point and level systems are coercive and contraindicated.

“Beyond the overtly coercive practice of restraint and seclusion, milieu programming in residential treatment has a range of more subtly coercive aspects. **Points-based behaviorally-focused level systems, prescriptive rules governing many aspects of daily living, and even aspects of the physical environment can remove the sense of self-control and volition for the clients. These circumstances insidiously recreate experiences in which youth feel they have no self-control, feel the world is unsafe, or see relationships as unpredictable”.**

* **The Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO Advisor for Behavioral Health Care Providers.) 10(3), “On the level: New standard renews debate over level systems”.** March 2006.

This publication reports that a “‘new standard renews debate over level systems’ - also known as point or phase systems – (which) are standard operation in many facilities across the nation”. Based on a discussion at a conference, the publication indicates that there is considerable debate as to the merit of these approaches, and that that some report positive results. However, the publication quotes Dr. Mary Cesare-Murphy, executive director of JCAHO made a number of comments about ‘level systems’ and the new standard. “Cesare-Murphy’s comments reflect of the sentiment against level systems that has grown in recent years. Critics say it’s too subjective and can quickly become punitive in the hands of well-meaning but untrained line staff.” Cathy Kunz, Director of Quality Assurance for the House of the Good Shepherd in Utica, NY. is quoted; “They’re very deeply embedded, But certainly in behavioral health care for children they are often poorly implemented and used a much more punishment type of focus” Kunz says. “It becomes very warped when there are not a lot of incentives. Everything has to be earned, including recreation”. (Note: Incentives and points are not the same thing)

A piece in this *JCAHO Advisor* “When levels don’t work: The case for alternative approaches” includes many comments from Karen who was interviewed for this piece and quoted extensively. This article includes samples of level protocols from several residential programs.

KV comment: Point and level systems must not be confused with well-designed *treatment plans* with *individual* goals (that have included youth input) and a way of assessing progress that may lead to greater freedoms. But these do not “take away”, do not govern the entire culture of the setting, and are not punitive. More about this in another section.

* **The Child Welfare League of America in *CWLA Best Practice Guidelines (Behavior Management)*** Child Welfare League of America, Washington, DC (2002) does not describe point and level systems. Factors such as “a positive, structured environment”, “Relationship between the child or youth and caregivers” and “quality educational and activity programming”, and “de-escalation methods based on Redl and Wineman are described. (I contributed material on the Activity Programming section – as many know I recommend a rich and varied activity program (that is *treatment* and *does not have to be earned*) as a powerful way of guiding and promoting positive behavior and developing life skills).

V. POINT and LEVEL SYSTEMS and APPLIED BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS ARE *NOT THE SAME!!*

“Too many point and level systems are bastardization of behaviorism and behavior therapy. This is *not* an attack on behaviorism as a theory, nor on the empirical research on behavior therapy. In fact, we would go so far as to state that many behavioral techniques – positive behavioral technique – positive / contingent reinforcement, feedback, modeling, shaping, generalization and behavior rehearsal (Shinke and Wong, 1978) can be useful within the context of an ongoing therapeutic relationship and in a therapeutic setting. All of these can be used *without attachment to points and levels based on rewards and punishment*’. - (VanderVen, K. Point and level systems: Do they have a place in the group care milieu?)

SEE THE DIFFERENCES

<u>POINT AND LEVEL SYSTEMS</u>	<u>APPLIED BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS</u>
“Folk culture” often justified by “That’s the way we’ve always done it” “That’s what we did at the last place I worked.”	Tied into empirical research base with careful attention to how applications are made
“Folk culture” transmission	Designed and utilized by professionals with proper training and in proper contexts
Others unilaterally determine behaviors they desire to be changed	Usually targeted to assist client in changing behavior s/he wants to change
Governs all aspects of daily living and activities	Governs a targeted issue or behavior
Does not belong in the skill set of the professional Child and Youth Worker	With proper training and supervision can be utilized by professional Child and Youth Worker

TRAINING IN POINT and LEVEL SYSTEMS (and replacing them with positive practices)

I strongly recommend that staff trainings provide knowledge and skill development in positive practices in relationship building, communication strategies, attachment dynamics, activity and program design, environmental design, among others.

* My most effective trainings were those in which a simulation that put onto a point and level system. Behaviors such as nudging a seatmate, looking out the window, etc. that might happen in a seminar situation, were ‘awarded’ negative ‘points’. A disturbing situation readily ensued, and in one of these several participants expressed strong anger towards each other. There was a lot of energy focused on the ‘reward’ for the least points (in this system) which was one piece of hard candy!

VI. POINT and LEVEL PRESENTATION

CONTROLS FROM WITHIN

A Presentation by

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For a copy of “Beyond Game Boys, Walkmans, and
TV: The Significance of Activities and Activity
Programming in Group and Residential Care go to:

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED486024>

OBJECTIVES:

- * Recognize how over-controlling and control drive practices actually lead to more out-of-control behavior
- * Know the pitfalls of point and level systems – an almost ubiquitous control practice in group and residential programs for children and youth
- * Recognize organizational dynamics associated with a change of approach
- * Change perspective towards relationships
- * See value in enhancing activities. More effective activities not only modify behavior problems and enhance relationships but also promote skills for successful post-discharge.
- * Develop an individual activity-oriented treatment goal leveled model
- * See that change is possible – point and level systems can be eliminated

WHY POINT and LEVEL SYSTEMS ARE DEVELOPMENTALLY DESTRUCTIVE

- * Many confirm: “They don’t work” – they create more, rather than less, difficult behavior.
- * Absolutely contradict Redl’s “clinical exploitation of life events”
- * May not be understood by children
- * Have no legitimate theoretical rationale
- * Deny crucial treatment. Activities and relationships aren’t ‘privileges’, they’re treatment.
- * Another form of abuse for the abused that lead to further destructive practices, e.g. early bedtimes

- * Encourage youngsters to be manipulative
- * Promote unhealthy compliance
- * Pit youth against each other.
- * Dehumanize the staff
- * Insidious effects of external rewards
- * The 'points are needed for structure & routine' fallacy

WHAT YOU MAY HAVE ALREADY DONE

- * MADE THE DECISION TO GET RID OF THEM.
- * ENTERED A PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY and TURBULENCE. "But we don't know what to do, and neither do the kids"

SO NOW WHAT?

- * RECOGNIZE UNCERTAINTY and TURBULENCE AS IDEAL TIMES FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CHANGE
- * SET UP ENOUGH STAFF MEETINGS TO PROVIDE SUPPORT and PLANNING FOR THE TRANSITION TO A NON-POINT SETTING
- * What are people afraid of? What are their ideas as to what to do instead?
- * CHANGE YOUR LANGUAGE to CHANGE THE CULTURE OF POINT AND LEVEL SYSTEMS. Don't talk about 'what level is he on', 'how many points do we take off', "privileges" and the like. That will help change the culture.
- * ENDORSE RELATIONSHIPS.
- * From adversarial to supportive
- * Consider "primary worker" model
- * Life space interviewing approaches as 'pioneered' by Redl and Wineman; and Life space crisis intervention (LSCI)

THE POWER OF ACTIVITIES

Developing an enhanced milieu based activity program

How to get started:

- * Make sure all material and equipment in your setting is good quality, complete and in good repair.
- * Do a staff inventory:
 - What did the staff like to do as children?

- What staff like to do now (their hobbies and non-work interests)
 - * Put these into a schedule (time/activity format) appropriate for your own setting
 - * Encourage a value system of “activating” and “doing” rather than “taking away”.
 - * Consider the “Domains of Activity” and “Activity Adaptation” **
 - * Set up staff activity planning sessions
 - * Enable securing of resources
-

VII. RESPONDING TO COMMENTS ABOUT POINT and LEVEL SYSTEMS: WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO HEAR WHEN YOU BRING UP ELIMINATING A POINT and LEVEL SYSTEM AND WHAT YOU MIGHT SAY:

* **“But the county wants to know what level the youth are on”.**

Reply 1: A well designed and implemented treatment plan will tell what the youth are capable of doing and how they are functioning.

Since ‘levels’ are subjectively set and vary from place to place, they can be little help in assessment.

Reply: “A strong activity program and a well thought out daily program provides structure – and a constructive one. Similarly, a well-designed treatment plan with youth contributing to it and with specific review and guidance towards meeting goals also provides structure.

* **“We need to keep order”**

Reply: Point and level systems drive behavior underground so that youth covertly try to evade the system and eventually may decide the ‘rewards’ are not as much fun as misbehaving. As well they pit children against each other even to some trying to set others up so that they will ‘gain’ or ‘lose’ points’ depending on the ‘system’ in place. This adversarial subculture can cause ‘worse’ behavior than would be the case in a more supportive setting.

(This explanation is based on systems dynamics. Point and level ‘systems’ introduce over-control which in turn sets up dynamics that lead to out-of-control factors. So, attempts to over-control behavior with point and level systems actually increases out of control behavior. (See VanderVen, *Why Focusing on Control Backfires* (cited in reference list).

I used to do workshops in which I simulated a ‘point and level system’ appropriate for a workshop experience. ‘Points’ were awarded for a compliant behavior – watching the presenter, taking notes, etc., while they were ‘taken away’ for nudging a neighbor, looking out the window, etc. The person with the most ‘points’ got a ‘reward’ of a piece of hard candy. It was amazing how quickly this procedure threw the group into turmoil and disarray. In one, two participants almost got into fisticuffs.

* **“We need to be objective”**

Research (i.e. Buckholdt and Gubrium (1979) *Caretakers: Treating Emotionally Disturbed Children*) shows that point and level system applications is not objective. They require judgement which can be very subjective depending on the person, the situation, and take behavior out of context.

“But then what can I do”?

Reply: “Talk to the youth about what is going on. Use Life Space Crisis Intervention Act as if you are on his side and want to be helpful, despite the troubling behavior at the time. “Think about an activity you and/or the youth like. Start it. Handle behavior as it comes up *within the activity.*”

“But if I can’t take activities away, what can I take away?” (Actual statement by a child and youth worker in a workshop).

HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND TO THIS?

VIII. SAMPLE WRITINGS ABOUT POINT and LEVEL SYSTEMS

From the *Association for Child and Youth Care Practice Newsletter*
January 2014:

From The SoapBox...Again!

Don't Provide a Sanctuary for Point and Level Systems!

Somehow, the issue of point and level systems never dies. While many programs have taken steps to eliminate them, and have done so successfully, still there are too many who revert to and perpetuate this destructive aspect of the "folk culture" of child and youth care programs. Without careful thought, practices are carried out because "this is the way we've always done it".

I have already given dozens of reasons in other venues of the reasons point and level systems are poor treatment, along with suggestions for programmatic and relational approaches that are more curative. Point and level systems are so ingrained that they are automatically installed as an automatic add-on in any program without much thought as to how they fit - or perpetuated if they are already in place - and too often, they are.

Just as an example of how pervasive point and level systems are, like kudzu vines on a southern brick wall, we can take a look at programs that claim they are implementing a Sanctuary model. This current, well-researched and deservedly respected model is designed to enable implementation of a "trauma-informed" philosophy and practices that respond to the reality of the traumas experienced by children such as abuse or loss of a parent, that are behind their entrance into care settings. The kinds of behaviors associated with having experienced trauma, to name just a few, are aggression, frustration, avoidance of eye contact, depression, and anxiety. Interestingly, there have been programs that penalized with their point and level systems youngsters who did not make eye contact (even though their culture had taught them that it is polite not to do so.)

While many of you may be familiar with the Sanctuary model as it is increasingly being adopted, there are pitfalls. The danger is not with the model itself - in fact far from it! To me it's the best approach I've seen yet. The Sanctuary model is the most comprehensive and the one that truly embraces and addresses the needs of the children and youth to whom it is offered. Unfortunately, with whatever model- if any- that may be utilized in a particular setting, there is always "model drift". This occurs when over time fidelity to the model is eroded sometimes by unwittingly poor decisions, which either haven't eliminated a practice that is not congruent with the model's intent when it was initiated, or has simply added it on. Point and level systems are an example.

What is the message point and level systems give? It is, "We are in control. We can give - or take away - as we see fit" (Contrary to common belief, point and level systems are notoriously un-objective). "We do not understand, nor are we interested in, what little you may have been given in the past the traumatic experiences that brought you here, how they affect your

behavior, and how we should adapt our practices to address these. We aren't going to guide you towards what you want to work on to enhance your strengths. Rather we are simply going to impose what we want on you so that life is easier for us. For example, if you compile too many negative points, you are going to have to go to bed early". (I can never rant enough against that practice. The trauma-based care philosophy gives me more good reason: extra time for those disturbing memories to break through).

If your setting claims to have a Sanctuary model and if it includes a point and level system - then think a bit. *Why?* What kind of sanctuary takes away treatment (e.g. activities) if it isn't 'earned', posts tabulations of everybody's status and levels on a board for the world to see, focuses staff efforts on tabulating rather than interacting, promotes anger and mistrust among both staff and children... all of the reasons that have been given already.

We can decide now. Are we going to be mindful, thinking about what we are doing, or mindless, simply perpetuating the status quo? Do we want to raise or care for youngsters in a way that prevents them from developing the altruism and empathy that enable the development of harmonious relationships, who distrust the very adults whom they should view as supportive, and who are ridden with anxiety and relationship problems? Or do we want to give them the opportunity to feel secure and connected to adults who become meaningful and true agents of positive change?

If we do, we will finally take that step to get rid of point and level systems, whether or not our setting purports to have a Sanctuary - or any other model, and replace them with a relational, activity-rich truly caring and supportive approach to individualized care. That will be a true Sanctuary in line with the model- a "safe haven" as the term has been defined.

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BEYOND THE CULTURE OF POINT AND LEVEL SYSTEMS TO CREATING A RELATIONSHIP AND ACTIVITY RICH ENVIRONMENT

This article is based on the presentation given at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Children's Residential Centers given by Andrew Schneider-Munoz, Peter Rosenblatt, and Karen VanderVen; and was written by Karen VanderVen. The article emphasizes some of the 'points' already made, but also includes some suggestions for what can be done in the place of eliminated point and level systems and describes a phased treatment plan in which youngsters complete with staff support tasks designed to increase their understanding and competence.

Point and level systems are ubiquitous in group and residential care settings. Basically, they entail child and youth clients being awarded points in return for complying with the rules of the setting. As a result, they receive 'privileges' and the opportunity to move up to a 'level' allowing even more privileges. While point and level systems have been constructed without connection to any pertinent theory or empirical grounding, they nonetheless have taken foothold as a governing aspect of many programs. Thus, they have become a major cultural feature of these programs with a language, value system and even a language of their own. Despite their pervasiveness there is growing recognition that ultimately, they are a destructive, rather than positive force in the lives of children, youth and staff who must 'live' by them in an artificial, limiting way that distorts relationships and deprives youth of crucial developmental experiences – as well as staff of the true meaning of relational youth work (a little recognized fact). Even when group and residential practitioners become convinced of the ineffectiveness of these practices, however, the issue remains, "What can be done instead?"

This paper, and the presentation upon which it was based describes cultural aspects of point and level systems, their negative influence, and specific approaches to replacing them that not only are more healthy developmentally, but also enable positive behavior management.

The Point and Level Culture

Any group or residential setting has a culture of its own, constructed out of its past, and maintained by the people who are there now. The culture includes both individual and collective values and belief systems. Where children and youth are involved, individual perspectives are fueled both by memories of "the way I was brought up" and of "that's the way it was done where I used to work". Some administrators may go along with anything that "keeps behavior under control". For whatever reason point and level systems developed within the group and residential care culture and are now assiduously maintained by it. The driving force in the point and level culture becomes as expressed to the youth, "How can we control you?" Unfortunately, many do not realize that the more we attempt to impose strong external controls, the more we create new ways of evading such control, and behavior becomes harder to manage than ever – a paradoxical effect. The culture of a setting usually drives the kinds of practices that are carried out there; because the culture is so pervasive, it is difficult for people in it to realize that there is any other way of thinking and doing than the one that is in place. Thus, it is important to state the indicators of a point and level culture explicitly.

Pointese: The Language of Point and Level Systems

One cultural manifestation is the presence of a language which has been referred to as “pointese”. The nature of language actually helps to create a particular culture. In “pointese” the language of both staff and youth is replete with such expressions as “How many points did he get today?”, “Let’s sit down and tote up our point sheets”. “Too bad he slipped back a level and can’t go swimming”. Even among administrators “pointese” is pervasive. “What level is he on” one agency representative will ask another about a youth of mutual concern. Among the values of point and level cultures are such beliefs that every behavior somebody else is unhappy with must receive a ‘consequence’, and that everything that is pleasant in life must be ‘earned’. Youth will be asked what they enjoy doing not so staff can offer to help them experience these activities, but rather so that they can be sure to take them away for ‘misbehavior. Continued experiences like this of having something taken away or ‘being on restriction’ often for a very minor offense can cause youth to lose hope and to give up.

Offending the Cultural Background of Youth

Just as pernicious is the fact that the point and level culture often offends the cultural beliefs and practices of the children and youth, and their families. Point and level systems are so prescriptive that they may disrespect culturally determined modes of communication by the way they are applied, and responding to the kinds of situations that may occur in group and residential care. For example, a youth’s culture may teach that he must respond back to aggression initiated by another youth. Or, moving on to a higher level may require a greater amount of self-disclosure than a youth’s culture encourages. Rather than work with these youths to first acknowledge and respect their culture, and then work with them sensitively to modify their behavior, arbitrary point and level systems discourage understanding of the meaning of culturally determined behavior by decontextualizing it. Such practices lead to misunderstanding, resentment, resistance and often an increase in the acting out behavior point and level systems were designed to ‘control’.

What is perhaps hardest for those enmeshed in point and level systems to recognize is that as point and level systems take over every aspect of daily living, how much is lost and how much everybody, staff as much as youth, are dehumanized. Real relationships, with both their gratifying and their aggravating aspects, are subverted in a subcultural process in which

relationships are simply adversarial – staff against youth and in which youth, rather than using staff as the positive role models they should be.

How to Replace a Point and Level System with a Positive Model

In the past several years, the pitfalls of point and level systems have gradually come to be recognized by personnel of group and residential care programs. With this has come, with increasing frequency, the question, “Well, then, what *can* we do? What is there instead?”

1. ***Make the decision.*** First a decision has to be made that the agency is going to eliminate the use of point and level systems. This sets everybody on the same path-of common understanding even if not everybody agrees with it. Administrators may consider making the decision difficult, but might remind themselves that it is their responsibility to ensure that their agency uses the most positive practices. It is important that the decision to get rid of point and level systems include the premise that “the rug will not be pulled out” from the staff all of a sudden, but rather that time will be given for all to plan together carefully to change their practices. The decision can also serve as the starting point for a cultural change. Once in place, everybody is called upon to examine their belief systems and resultant practices. Paradoxically, administrators may find in the long run that their relationships with line staff improve. A common goal to strive for has been established and the collaborative work that will take place will actually bring administrators in closer touch with the daily challenges that line workers experience, and give the administrators ideas of ways they can be more supportive.

2. ***Consider alternative practices.*** There are a number of alternative practices that can be installed to replace point and level systems that will lead to a more harmonious and healthy milieu.

* **Treatment-oriented phase program.** This treatment oriented phase program is based on a program developed at Janus Youth Services in Oregon. It is a goal and skill - oriented approach that enables youth to work on treatment issues in an organized and purposeful way. Each phase has an appropriate title, i.e. Observer, Participant, Self-Directed, Transition. The focus is on assessing where the youth is in treatment, making his or her active involvement in it a priority. When the tasks of a treatment phase have been accomplished, the youth moves on to the next phase. There are no points to be earned, and because activities are core to treatment, they do not have to be earned. The treatment tasks that are laid out in a series of specific assignments are clear, useful, engaging, and can necessarily involve the staff in helping the youth complete them. Thus staff

support and interact with youth around these treatment oriented activities, rather than arbitrarily award and remove points.

The phases are designed to help the *youth make progress in treatment and to identify attainment of their goals along the way*. Given the power of language in creating a culture, it can be noted that the language of this program is treatment oriented rather than ‘point and level’ oriented with its implications of deprivation and restriction. In fact, it is helpful to note the differences between the treatment oriented phase program and the traditional point and level system as shown in the following table:

COMPARISON OF TREATMENT PHASE PROGRAM AND POINT AND LEVEL SYSTEM

	<u>Treatment Phase Program</u>	<u>Point and Level System</u>
Language/culture	Treatment and goal oriented	Control and deprivation oriented
Staff relationships with youth	Staff interact and support youth in accomplishing goal oriented tasks	Staff evaluate and take away
Activities	Activities are treatment; all youth participate	Activities must be ‘earned’
Communication	Bi-directional. Youth participate in assessment process	Uni-directional. Points, levels assessed without youth input

It should be mentioned that *structure*, which is essential for any milieu program is not to be confused with the presence of a point and level system. A point and level system indeed offers structure, but a negative one. Conversely, the treatment oriented phase program has a specific structure, but with a different purpose.

* **Structured and enriched activity program.** Activity programs, with planned (as well as spontaneous) activities, with scheduled times for them, also impose a positive structure. In many agencies there are few organized and challenging activities, thus increasing the probability of acting out behavior and the maintenance of the ‘point and level systems’ that try to control it. Research on one program that replaced a point and level system with a more formal activity program based on an after-school club model showed that the number of incident reports was greatly reduced as the result of installing the activity program. (Schneider-Munoz). While an

activity program obviously can't completely prevent difficult behavior, it can modify it greatly. Inappropriate behavior can be handled *within* an activity rather than its presence in an essentially 'empty' milieu resulting in a denial of activity.

An enriched activity program offers activities in all of the traditional domains (e.g. sports, games, arts and crafts, writing and journaling, music, food preparation, community service, and out of doors activities such as camping. These encourage constructive relationships between youth and staff, as well as prosocial behaviors such as team work, persistence, and accepting feedback. Youth actually hunger for the opportunity to develop new skills and to master the challenges posed by meaningful activities. A strong activity program utilizing staff interests and expertise can completely transform staff attitudes towards the youth and their own work. Staff activity competencies can be assessed and configured into an activity program. Any staff member would probably agree that it would be more engaging for them, for example, to help youth bake a pizza, to gaze at the stars with a telescope, or to make holiday decorations for the unit, rather than to sit in an office and tote up the day's point sheets for the youth. For example, out of doors oriented youth workers will often report that a camping experience can completely transform relationships between youth and staff. They relate to each other in newer, more positive ways as they not only enjoy nature, but also work together to face the real challenges of the out-of doors - environment.

IX. READ MORE ABOUT ACTIVITIES and ACTIVITY PROGRAMMING and RELATIONSHIPS

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READ MORE ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Works by Thom Garfat, (e.g. “Relational Aspects of Controls from Within”. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, Winter 2009); James Anglin, Mark Krueger, Gerry Fewster, Lorraine Fox, Jack Phelan ... and others.

X. CONCLUSION

I hope this material will give you the rationale and tools you need to eliminate point and level systems and place greater emphasis on activities and relationships which are the essence of a child and youth work approach. You will not only be contributing to a more therapeutic and development promoting experience for the youngsters, but also you will find your own work richer and even less stressful as you use yourself, your relational and communication skills, and interests.