

“Self-Disclosure Narratives in Trauma-Focused Foster Care”

A Film Analysis of Self-Disclosure in *Short Term 12*

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The film *Short Term 12* depicts the relational obstacles within a fictional residential facility for troubled teenagers. Jayden, a recalcitrant teenage girl, is newly admitted to the home due to her aggressive behaviors which her recently widowed father cannot manage. Grace, the facility's manager, protects those in her care while struggling to cope with her abuse-ridden past. Despite Jayden's attempts to isolate herself, she eventually bonds with Grace and reveals her father's physically abusive nature. While Jayden's storyline mirrors those of many foster children, Grace's character illustrates the invaluable influence trauma-informed caretakers have on foster children. Grace and Jayden's relationship in *Short Term 12* illustrates trauma survivors' need to feel understood in their isolating hardships. This narrative raises awareness for educating foster parents and social workers to elicit self-disclosure¹ to facilitate connections with traumatized children. *Short Term 12* illustrates the disconfirming² nature of trauma and the value of both open sensitivity³ and interpersonal communication⁴ in connecting with foster kids.

Jayden disconfirms her peers and caretakers, attempting to defend herself from risks of self-disclosure (e.g., losing control of how others perceive her, feeling rejected, etc.). During her first day at the facility, Jayden closes herself off to the others. Upon introducing herself, she says "Please don't be offended if I'm not very friendly, but [...] I don't really like wasting time on short-term relationships [...]" (Astrachan, Goldstein, Najor, Olson, & Cretton, 2013, 00:22:23). Jayden disconfirms the significance of her peers because her past trauma (i.e., growing up with a physically abusive father) taught her interpersonal relationships are tied to suffering. In refusing to self-disclose, she rejects the possibility of future, relational pain. Moreover, when Jayden's dad fails to pick her up from the facility on her birthday, she is thrown into a fit of rage. As

¹ Self-disclosure- Revealing personal information, thoughts, and feelings to a communication partner

² Disconfirmation- Behaviors that diminish a person's existence or significance

³ Open sensitivity- Sharing and perceiving personal information with a communication partner

⁴ Interpersonal Communication- communication wherein people share and connect over personal information

Grace and the other staffers physically restrain her and attempt to calm her down, she yells a series of expletives and tells Grace “I hate you” (46:31). In feeling disconfirmed by her father’s absence, Jayden guards her insecurities through her rage, pushing her caregivers away, both physically and emotionally. This protects her from further rejection by assumed caretakers. These narratives illustrate how traumatized children internalize disconfirmation and project it on to others. This defense mechanism inhibits self-disclosure, protecting against being taken advantage of while vulnerable. Open sensitivity can aid in understanding trauma responses (e.g., self-harm) because it builds trust between foster children and their caretakers.

Jayden and Grace disclose their histories of self-harm and abuse to one another, employing open sensitivity to build a relational foundation of trust. After Jayden calms down from her rage, she sits with Grace and digs her nails into her skin, trying to cut herself. Upon seeing this, Grace says, “You wanna see mine?” (47:56) and shows Jayden her cutting scars. When Jayden asks her why she cut, she explains when her mom died, she had to live with her dad and “[...] it’s impossible to worry about anything else when there’s blood coming out of you” (48:35). Grace perceived Jayden’s trauma-based behaviors and proceeded to share her experiences with self-harm, letting Jayden know she is not alone. Later, in response to Grace’s disclosure, Jayden shares a fictional story with Grace, symbolically revealing her father’s physically abusive nature. Jayden’s self-disclosure elevates her relationship with Grace from one of professional care (e.g., Grace calming her rage, saying “You don’t have to like me right now. Just let it pass” (46:36)) to one of interpersonal connection (e.g., Grace empathizing with her emotional trauma upon disclosing her past self-harm). Thus, illustrating the importance of caregivers who employ open sensitivity, as it builds the interpersonal trust and emotional

security of which many children have been deprived. Such self-disclosure teaches foster children fundamental elements of interpersonal communication (e.g., addressable and unmeasurable).

In building a trusting relationship with Grace, Jayden is able to meaningfully internalize elements of interpersonal communication and employ these elements in communicating with others. During Jayden's birthday, the other foster kids make her cards upon seeing her distress. These cards nonverbally signify Jayden's addressability,⁵ as it communicates that while her father did not value her presence enough to pick her up, the others not only address her presence but celebrate it. After Jayden's disclosure of her abuse, she hangs her cards on her wall, signifying her willingness to accept new interpersonal relationships. Moreover, newly pregnant Grace divulges her history of abuse and fears about motherhood to Jayden. Perceiving Grace's insecurities and vulnerability, Jayden tells her "You're gonna be a really good mom" (1:24:56). Jayden utilizes unmeasurable⁶ interpersonal communication to reassure Grace, just as Grace has done for her (e.g., complimenting her artistic abilities and witty sense of humor). Jayden's response reflects the unquantifiable feelings of security and trust Grace contributes to their relationship. Their mutual self-disclosure showed Jayden how interpersonal connection provides emotional support, rather than increased suffering, to those who feel alone and vulnerable. Her reassurance towards Grace exemplifies how Jayden is not only open to interpersonal relationships, but takes steps to facilitate them. This narrative illustrates how care-givers' use of self-disclosure can empower trauma survivors to elicit interpersonal relationships.

Short Term 12 illustrates how self-disclosure facilitates interpersonal connections with trauma survivors. In educating caregivers on appropriate uses of self-disclosure, the foster-care system can better fulfill children's need for relationships based on trust and emotional security.

⁵ Addressable- Communicating with someone so as to make them feel they are an equal partner in an exchange

⁶ Unmeasurable- Recognizing and communicating the value of qualities that cannot be quantified, like emotionality

References

Astrachan, J. (Producer), Goldstein, A. (Producer), Najor, R. (Producer), Olson, M. (Producer),
& Cretton, D. D. (Director). (2013). *Short Term 12* [Motion picture]. United States:
Cinedigm.