



Promoting Youth Engagement in Residential Settings: Suggestions from Youth with Lived Experience

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The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views, opinions or policies of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration or the Department of Health and Human Services.

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Why Engage Youth?

Youth with lived experience in residential settings offer a crucial inside perspective regarding the aspects of residential that promote or hinder youth engagement. This document was developed for residential providers interested in moving toward a youth-guided approach. A *youth-guided* approach means that:

“...young people have the right to be empowered, educated, and given a decision-making role in the care of their own lives, as well as the policies and procedures governing care in their organizations and/or communities. This includes giving young people a sustainable voice.... and the focus should be towards creating a safe environment enabling a young person to gain self-sustainability in accordance to the cultures and beliefs they abide by. Further, through the eyes of a youth-guided approach, we are aware that there is a continuum of power that should be given to young people based on their understanding and maturity in this strength based change process. Youth-guided also means that this process should be fun and worthwhile.” <http://www.youthmovenational.org/youth-guided-definition>

Promoting *youth engagement*¹ is crucial for residential providers seeking to develop youth-guided practices. In this paper, youth offer their insights regarding how residential providers can more effectively engage them as they develop skills necessary for successful family and community reintegration.

Background

The strategies and ideas presented in this document were elicited from youth through focus group discussions. Focus groups were held with more than 50 youth between the ages of 15-22, all of whom are currently in residential settings. By drawing on their personal experiences, the focus group participants were asked to offer ideas regarding how residential providers can better engage youth. Additionally, the youth were asked to think about and react to scenarios and struggles that youth might face in residential settings. At the final stages of the development of this guide, a large focus group of youth currently in residential settings met to validate the themes developed from the previous discussions, and to provide specific suggestions and feedback for residential providers. The Building Bridges Initiative’s Youth Advisory Group, which consists of youth members, youth leaders,

¹ The importance of youth engagement is also supported by research. For a literature review regarding youth engagement in residential settings, please see the companion piece to this paper.

and youth advocates from across the country, provided feedback on the content of this paper at various stages of the writing process.

Throughout the process of developing this paper, it became clear that from a youth perspective, to best engage youth in residential settings, there is no “magic bullet”- no single recommendation or rule book for providers to follow. Residential providers and staff can best engage youth by conveying their humanity, which includes being genuine, honest, patient, compassionate, and consistent- and by connecting with youth, one individual to another. The youth repeatedly emphasized how they can tell when residential staff members genuinely care about them and when they don’t. And, it only takes one staff member abusing his or her power to fully undermine a youth’s trust and engagement across the board. Further, residential providers and staff can best engage youth by getting to know them as individuals, who in spite of their struggles, have unique and positive qualities and hope for a better future.

This paper is not meant to be critical of the efforts made by providers to work with youth with multiple challenges- rather, it is meant to be constructive, to provoke continued discussion, and to encourage reflection leading to positive changes and strategies for engagement. We encourage providers to conduct similar focus group discussions with the youth they serve to discuss the themes in this paper.

A companion document, *Promoting Youth Engagement: What Providers Should Know about Best Practices and Promising Strategies* provides a summary of key research findings as well as best and promising practices for promoting youth engagement in residential settings. These best and promising practices complement and contextualize the perspectives offered by the youth in this paper.

Six Key Themes for Engaging Youth

Six key themes emerged from the focus groups. According to the focus group participants, residential providers should: 1- facilitate helpful relationships; 2- understand the meaning of resistance, frustration, and acting out; 3- create opportunities for peer support; 4- encourage and motivate without using coercion; 5- provide opportunities for a good education; and 6- ensure fairness and safety. Each theme is described below, and the paper closes with conclusions and suggestions from the youth for implementation of the key ideas.

➤ **Theme 1: Facilitate Helpful Relationships for Youth**

The youth involved in the focus groups described how essential it is for youth in residential to develop supportive relationships. As they explained, youth can play a critical role in identifying staff members, mentors, or other supportive individuals who can help them, particularly during times of challenge or crisis. For instance, several youth described how treatment team meetings are often challenging, because youth “feel uncomfortable” or “are not seeing eye-to-eye with family members” or because “past histories of trauma makes

meetings difficult.” In this situation, as one youth explained, “It’s important to have someone in the room that the youth trusts. The youth can give this person a look or say something if they are uncomfortable or overwhelmed, or if they need to leave the room.”

Youth value and need the support and guidance of a trusted peer with personal experience in residential, a staff member who takes a special interest in them, and a caring, consistent mentor.

The youth went on to describe how helpful it is to have the support of people who have had personal experience in residential settings. As one youth explained, “It’s important to have staff or youth who have had similar experiences. They can help because they have been there and might understand how we feel.” Several youth emphasized how difficult residential placement can be, particularly for those youth who have not had the benefit of supportive relationships with friends or family. One youth shared, “It is very frustrating when you don’t have love and affection.” Several youth agreed that having mentors with personal experience in residential settings (Peer Youth Advocates) on staff would be particularly helpful.² In addition to Peer Youth Advocates, the youth emphasized that staff can indeed build positive relationships with youth by trying to understand their perspectives, even if they have not had similar life experiences.

➤ **Theme 2: Understand the Meaning of Resistance, Frustration, and Acting Out**

The focus group participants described how youth behaviors are often poorly understood in residential settings. According to one youth, “Staff should try to understand how we feel and should try to understand *why* we are acting out and where we might be coming from.” Another emphasized that past traumatic experiences often make it difficult for youth in residential to trust providers, and that “acting out” is an expression of this.

Youth may feel scared, alone, isolated, and confused in placement. As a result, some youth feel hopeless and concerned that they will be away from home and their communities indefinitely. One youth explained, “Some youth get frustrated because they feel like they can never leave placement. Fighting and acting out happens because this is so frustrating.” According to another youth, “You have to understand that it is frustrating to be in placement. It is a very difficult experience.”

² Peer Youth Advocates are young people (generally between the ages of 16-25) who work in residential programs. These Advocates have “lived experience”, as they have received services in residential placement firsthand. See the BBI Peer Youth Advocate Guide: *Peer Youth Advocates in Residential Programs Handbook*. <http://www.buildingbridges4youth.org>.

As a result, some youth “don’t want to be bothered when they’re in placement”. Because youth become disengaged and deeply frustrated when they perceive that their time in residential placement is indefinite, it is especially important to include youth in treatment planning. This allows youth to contribute to plans for discharge and transition, and also makes the process more transparent.

Being in residential can be a difficult, frustrating, and scary experience. It helps when staff members try to understand the situation through the eyes of youth. Support youth and give them time to reflect and adjust.

To promote engagement when youth are difficult to reach, staff should convey support and allow youth the time they need to gather their thoughts and to express themselves. One of the participants said, “Give youth time to reflect and process what is happening, and why they are acting that way.” The youth reiterated the importance of connecting youth with people in their lives who are supportive and understanding, particularly during times of frustration or crisis. Further, the youth described how crucial it is for residential settings to be “a nice space” and “a respectful place”, “where we feel comfortable and where we can take time to get ourselves together.”

The youth emphasized that restraint and seclusion should not occur, as it makes youth feel unsafe, as well as disengaged. As one youth said, “No restraint and seclusion....seclusion makes us feel locked up.”

➤ **Theme 3: Create Opportunities for Peer Support**

Several youth emphasized that in addition to staff members in residential, peers can play a key role in the recovery process. According to the youth interviewed for this paper, peers can understand and empathize with one another, as they often have similar lived experiences and understand the emotions associated with placement firsthand.

One youth advised, “Don’t just rely on staff to encourage youth, allow other youth to be supportive and encouraging.” Peer support is helpful, as other youth “understand where we’re coming from”. As a result, staff should “allow other youth to encourage us and to help us”.

There is no substitute for the encouragement and hope that comes from talking with a peer who can say “I know where you are coming from.”

In addition to promoting the voice of each individual youth, Youth Advisory Councils with real decision-making capabilities can be a powerful way to initiate and grow peer support opportunities.

Many programs have hired peer youth advocates or partnered with youth-led programs in the community to ensure that every young person has the opportunity to get support and encouragement from someone who can truly say “I understand what you are going through.”

➤ **Theme 4: Encourage and Motivate - Don't Coerce**

An engaging residential setting is “a place where we have control over our day to day decisions and where we can make choices” as opposed to feeling forced to participate. The youth discussed how any behavior on the part of staff that youth find coercive or “pushy” makes them less likely to engage.

Instead, youth shared by being supportive and taking time to explain to youth why it is in their interest to engage and participate, staff can encourage and motivate youth in a manner that fosters engagement and trust. The youth emphasized that it is imperative for staff to be patient with youth, who often have complicated and traumatic experiences leading up to placement in residential. One youth remarked, “Try to understand us. Sit with us, talk to us. Tell us why this isn't a bad place and how it might help us.” Another youth said, “Encourage us to participate, and don't give up. Keep trying!”

However, the youth also noted that at times, the best way to engage them is to provide them with the space and time that they need. They stressed that it is important for staff to maintain boundaries when communicating with youth. One youth explained, “Staff should try to be aware of our emotions. Certain topics might be sensitive for us, so back off when we tell you to” and “have boundaries...don't get on us and give us space when we need it.” According to another youth, “A lot of staff haven't had personal experience in residential. They shouldn't push us and should give us some space and come back later.”

Engaging youth requires patience, persistence and deep respect. Youth find coercion, including point and level systems, demeaning and not motivating.

In addition to these suggestions, youth often perceive point and level systems, which are commonly used in residential settings, as coercive and disengaging. Inherently, programs that use point or level systems position youth as passive recipients of services and consequences, thus failing to engage them as full participants in their treatment plans. Youth often find point and level systems contradictory to the other messages conveyed in residential: “If everyone is equal, why are we on different levels? It doesn't make us feel good about ourselves.” In addition to alienating youth, point and level systems fail to motivate youth toward pursuing goals that can facilitate positive transitions to home and community contexts. As several youth explained, “In the real world, there is no level system.”

➤ **Theme 5: Provide Opportunities for a Good Education**

The youth described feeling very frustrated by receiving educational services in residential that they found ineffective and below their standards. Many participants described schoolwork in residential that is below their grade level, and explained that this makes them feel disengaged in school.

To address this problem, one youth suggested, “Give us placement tests...that way the work will be at the right level.” The youth also noted that if it all possible, they would prefer for providers to “send us to school in our own communities”.

Create rich, individualized educational opportunities based on the expectation that each young person can be successful.

Youth also recommended that residential providers offer SAT preparation courses and provide opportunities for educationally enriching activities. Some youth described how they asked their teachers for more challenging work. When their teachers provided more challenging assignments, this helped the participants to find school more engaging.

➤ **Theme 6: Ensure Fairness and Safety**

The youth perceived favoritism in residential as a significant problem. Specifically, they discussed how staff offered privileges to a select group of youth, and routinely denied privileges to other youth. To promote engagement, the participants stressed how important it is for staff to avoid “playing favorites”. According to a youth, “One staff member should not be able to decide about who gets privileges and who doesn’t. More people should be involved in these decisions.” Another youth said, “Youth should be treated equally and there should be no favoritism. If some youth get privileges, all youth should get privileges.” The youth also noted that when they perceive that staff members are treating them unfairly, it leads them to feel a general lack of trust. It is essential to include and engage youth in all forms of decision-making, as opposed to relying on staff-only decision-making.

Provide clear channels for youth to report any situations that make them feel unsafe. Take all complaints seriously and follow through appropriately.

Many youth experienced difficulties when reporting problematic staff behavior. Several youth noted that when they believed they were being treated unfairly and followed the channels for reporting the incidents, their concerns were not addressed or taken seriously. They shared that when their concerns are dismissed, they feel disengaged, unsafe, and vulnerable in residential. For this reason, they recommend that residential providers develop clear channels for reporting. They also emphasized that administrators should take all complaints seriously and follow through appropriately.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Implementation

The insights and perspectives offered by the youth who were interviewed for this guide can inform strategies for residential providers committed to moving toward a youth-guided system. This section summarizes key ideas and outlines specific strategies offered by the youth.

1. Facilitate Helpful Relationships for Youth

Within the walls of residential settings and beyond, supportive and healthy relationships are essential for youth. Youth can play a key role in identifying individuals in residential settings whom they can trust and count on to advocate for them, such as staff members, Peer Youth Advocates, and supportive peers. It is essential for youth to have opportunities to strengthen and reestablish relationships with their families or guardians. It is also critical for residential providers to foster family communication and to facilitate opportunities for youth to spend as much time as possible with their families within their own communities, so youth can continue to build the skills necessary to be successful. Staying connected with family and friends in the community can also ease the difficult transition that youth experience upon discharge.

Suggestions from Youth:

- Ask youth to identify helpful and trusted supports in residential, and allow these supports to “speak with youth one-on-one” during difficult times.
- Hire staff “who have been in residential”.
- Get to know youth as individuals- if youth enjoy writing or the arts, ask them about their interests and what these interests mean to them; allow them to continue to participate in activities that match their interests in the community, in normalized settings.
- Staff should “humanize themselves” by sharing something about who they are beyond their professional roles with the youth.
- Try to consider the perspectives of the youth when giving them direction; staff should avoid “offering advice that they wouldn’t take themselves”.
- Beyond saying that they care, staff should demonstrate their concern for youth by “going the extra mile” and doing whatever it takes to work with a youth, even during difficult times.
- Invite youth to play a role in hiring staff and be very selective in the hiring process, as staff who are employed in residential settings for the wrong reasons “can ruin it for everyone” by undermining the youths’ trust.
- Staff should “constantly demonstrate respect”, even when youth are challenging; this includes “not throwing the past [including past mistakes youth have made] in our faces”.
- Staff should “follow through on what they say they’re going to do”, as actions speak louder than words.

- Provide regular opportunities for youth to spend time with their extended families/guardians and friends within their own communities, and don't take away time with family as a form of punishment.

2. Understand the Meaning of Resistance, Frustration, and Acting Out

While youth in residential may display problematic behavior, it is important to understand and explore with youth the feelings and perceptions underlying such behaviors. Many youth in residential settings have histories of acute trauma, which have a disruptive effect on their relationships. Understandably, these youth may struggle to trust adults. By providing youth with constructive outlets for discussing their concerns and frustrations, providers can begin to develop trusting relationships with youth. Further, residential settings should provide trauma-informed care and educate staff about the impact of trauma on child and youth development. As the youth suggested, residential providers must strike a delicate balance of providing support and encouragement, while also giving youth space and maintaining boundaries. In providing trauma-informed care, it is essential that residential providers avoid using restraint, seclusion, and other aversive approaches that re-traumatize youth. Residential providers can implement proactive strategies for addressing youth in crisis. By including youth and families in planning these proactive strategies, youth can continue to develop coping strategies that will serve them well in their adult lives.

Suggestions from Youth:

- Provide excellent training to staff on an ongoing basis, particularly on trauma, to better understand “the difference between trauma and acting out”.
- Ask youth for ongoing feedback about trauma-informed interventions in residential.
- Involve youth in treatment planning to better understand what they perceive as helpful and harmful, particularly during times of crisis.
- Do not use restraint, seclusion, and other aversive approaches.
- Work with youth to determine what helps to keep them calm to avoid a crisis, and discuss what helps to calm them down following a crisis.

3. Recognize the Importance of Peer Support

Peer Youth Advocates play a key role in facilitating youth voice and participation, and Youth Advisory Councils provide opportunities for youth to be involved in all levels of decision-making. As the youth emphasized, the support that peers and Peer Youth Advocates can offer is particularly valuable, as those with lived experience share an understanding that can promote recovery.

Suggestions from Youth:

- Hire Peer Youth Advocates, as many youth in residential “don’t have access to peer support”.
- Develop Youth Advisory Councils with real voice and real opportunity to make change in the program and to promote peer support.
- Allow youth to help each other and learn from each other.

4. Encourage and Motivate- Don’t Coerce

Disengagement often results when youth are discouraged from making choices and decisions about the issues that matter to them. Youth become increasingly frustrated when they perceive that residential providers dismiss their concerns and limit their opportunities to make choices. Thus, providers should create opportunities for youth feedback, participation, and leadership, and value the ideas that youth contribute, even if these ideas suggest that widespread changes need to be made. Administrators should be in frequent contact with youth to encourage feedback about residential practices. Encouraging and valuing youth voice leads to a fundamental shift in power relationships within residential settings, which often requires dramatic changes in organizational culture.

A key goal for youth in residential settings is to build the skills necessary to be successful in the community. While level and point systems promote compliance with rules, they do not foster the skills that youth need to succeed in family and community life, and they are often perceived by youth as coercive. Residential settings can better serve youth by fostering intrinsic motivation and accountability, as opposed to coercing youth to conform to institutional expectations. By encouraging youth to play an active role in developing goals and articulating the skills they would like to develop, residential settings can better engage youth and prepare them for success in their families and communities.

Suggestions from Youth:

- Provide ongoing opportunities for youth “to have a choice” about their participation.
- Allow youth to be fully involved in and lead their own treatment plans, as youth view treatment as “*my life and my plan*”; youth “don’t just want to sit in a meeting, we want to be part of it.”
- Treatment team meetings should focus not only on services/treatment, but also on “planning goals for our *lives*”; this can be accomplished by asking youth “where we want to go and what we want to do.”
- Hire “strong youth advocates” who can teach youth about their rights while displaying “professionalism.”
- Avoid point and level systems, as youth are not motivated by this system and perceive it as unfair and ineffective.

- Instead of point and level systems, treatment should be “goal-oriented” by “focusing on strengths and achievements”, rather than applying punishment.

5. Provide Opportunities for a Good Education

The youth repeatedly suggested that the education they are receiving through residential is developmentally inappropriate, and as a result, discouraging and uninteresting. It is imperative that youth in residential settings receive excellent educational opportunities in line with the opportunities they would have in the community. By ensuring that educational services are of the highest caliber, youth will be better prepared to re-enter schools in their communities and to pursue training and educational opportunities beyond high school, including college.

Suggestions from Youth:

- If at all possible, allow youth to continue going to school in their communities so they won't fall behind.
- Provide placement testing/assessments to ensure that schoolwork is “age appropriate” and up to a youth's grade level.
- Hire “better teachers who keep us engaged and paying attention”.
- Provide tutoring services to youth who are struggling in school.
- “Individualize” each youth's educational plan to best meet their needs.
- Help students to “stay on track” when they leave residential and return to school in the community by providing continued support.
- Provide youth with “opportunities to meet frequently with a guidance counselor” to discuss school progress and goals for the future.
- Offer SAT prep courses and vocational training opportunities to interested youth.
- Provide one-on-one assistance with college and job applications and resume writing.

6. Ensure Fairness and Safety

During placement in residential settings, youth should receive services that offer them opportunities to become more resilient and to work on problems that contributed to placement. To promote youth engagement, residential staff should avoid behavior and decisions leading to perceptions of bias and favoritism. Including youth in decision-making is essential for promoting fairness and accountability. Most importantly, residential settings should be safe and therapeutic environments. Youth should be fully informed of their rights, and they should be connected with advocates in the event that they feel unsafe or perceive that their rights have been violated. Administrators should provide clear and appropriate channels for youth to report problematic incidents, and all incidents should be fully and transparently investigated.

Suggestions from Youth:

- Make youth aware of their rights when in residential placement, especially by connecting them with Peer Youth Advocates.
- Be selective when hiring staff; ensure that staff members go through background checks prior to employment, and allow youth to provide input into hiring decisions.
- Train staff upon hire and on an ongoing basis, especially about how to work safely and effectively with youth.
- Provide clear channels for youth to report incidents of problematic or abusive behavior in residential.
- Connect youth with legal advocates.
- Follow through with full and complete investigations of all youth complaints, and make the findings of these investigations transparent to youth, families, and staff.

The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI)

Building Bridges is a national initiative focused on supporting positive outcomes for youth and families served in residential programs and their community counterparts. Founded on core principles, an emerging evidence base, and acknowledged best practices, the BBI emphasizes strong collaboration and coordination between providers, families, youth, advocates, and policymakers to achieve its goals. More than 130 organizations have endorsed the Joint Resolution, which articulates the values and principles of BBI.

To find out more about the national Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), please visit:

<http://www.buildingbridges4youth.org>

Resources to Support Youth-Guided Practice

With the assistance of many partners, the Building Bridges Initiative has compiled a list of articles, websites and other resources to support the practice of youth-guided care.

<http://www.buildingbridges4youth.org/resources/presentations>.

Also, available on the BBI website is *Promoting Youth Engagement: What Providers Should Know about Best Practices and Promising Strategies*. This paper provides a summary of key research findings as well as best and promising practices for promoting youth engagement in residential settings. These best and promising practices complement and contextualize the perspectives offered by the youth in this paper. www.BuildingBridges4youth.org.