



Exploration of the Youth-Adult Relationship in Residential Care

RCCP researchers asked 738 young people to describe qualities they liked about their favorite staff. * The qualities they described fell into 7 broad categories, and varied according to age, gender, and length of time in agency. Findings indicated several factors that contribute to positive connections between young people and staff.

Small Glimpses from a Large Sample of Youth

Why ask about favorite staff?

Relationships between young people and adults are the “active ingredient” in therapeutic care. Young people can offer valuable insights about what factors help them feel more connected to staff.

What we did

Surveyed 738 young people in 16 agencies asking:

“Are there 1 or 2 adults that are your favorite?” (yes/no)

“What makes them your favorite?” (open response)

About the respondents

597 (80%) answered “yes” and provided a response. Confidentiality was promised.

53.6% male

68% Caucasian

Mean age=14.3 (range 8-21)

Median days in care=159

Categorizing youth comments

Multiple raters sorted responses into 18 types of staff qualities, which were grouped into 7 broad categories (shown here).

Types of reasons young people wrote for why these staff members were their favorite:

Youth in their own words:



*Izzo, C. V., et al. (2014). Exploration of the youth-adult relationship in residential care: Small glimpses from a large sample of youth. *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare*, 15(1/2), 10–23.

Practice Implications: Study findings have implications for how agency caregivers, supervisors, and leaders help to meet the best interests of the young people they serve.

Similar Studies in Group Care Have Found...

- Young people are more receptive to adults who...
 - ... help them solve problems.
 - ... are consistently good role models for self-discipline and maturity.
 - ... give them personalized attention and show that they care.
- Staff can provide this by trying to understand what matters to each young person and adjusting their approach accordingly.
- Young people think of their relationships with staff not only as professional, but as personal.
- Unconditional support and acceptance help build young people's resilience.
- Building a relationship with young people forms the foundation for lasting change.

Sources: Manso et al. 2008. Youth expectations about therapeutic alliance in a residential setting. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth*, 25(1); Soenen et al. 2013. The voice of troubled youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(9).

QuickTRIPs are translations of RCCP research for practitioners.

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For Caregivers

Build relationships by:

- Spending time together; Sharing positive interactions
- Showing active engagement and genuine concern
- Adjusting expectations depending on young people's unique circumstances
- Keeping order and peace in the home with clear expectations and boundaries
- Showing respect, validation, and fairness
- Finding common interests that may spark a positive exchange and make young people more receptive to staff



For Supervisors

Support staff efforts by:

- Keeping these priorities and concerns on staff's radar during supervisory discussions
- Helping staff see how to align with young people's interests and needs
- Acknowledging when staff succeed at this
- On-site coaching to observe, model, and reflect on positive interactions with young people
- Noticing when staff need help connecting with a young person
- Building staff's confidence about what they have to offer young people



For Leaders

Prioritize relationships by:

- Hiring staff with diverse interests and qualities who can connect with the diverse needs of young people
- Messaging with staff about what helps young people feel connected with adults
- Providing time and resources to support the formation of developmental relationships
- Establishing expectations and a culture that sets the tone for positive relational experiences between staff and young people
- Modeling positive relational approaches in their interactions with staff

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