

Children's Feelings of Safety in Residential Care: The Supporting Role of Adult-Child Relationships

★ Deborah E. Sellers, Elliott G. Smith, Charles V. Izzo, Lisa A. McCabe & Michael A. Nunno (2020) Child Feelings of Safety in Residential Care: The Supporting Role of Adult-Child Relationships, Residential Treatment for Children & Youth, 37:2, 136-155, DOI: 10.1080/0886571X.2020.1712576



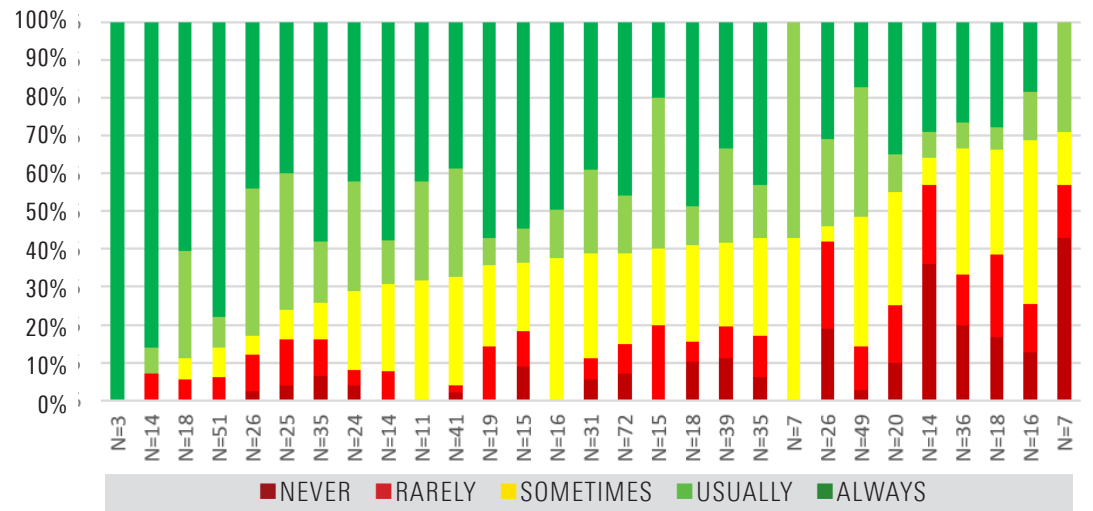
For children in residential care, healing, growth, and normative development require that the children feel safe. Safety refers not just to protection from physical harm and provision of food, shelter, and clothing, but to feeling emotionally and psychologically safe as well. Many, if not most, of the children who live in group care settings have experienced hardships such as parental neglect and/or abuse, removal from the home, and exposure to a range of adverse experiences associated with poverty. Also, many have experienced multiple out-of-home placements, and/or aggression, violence or bullying within residential care settings, further undermining feelings of safety.

Research from the RCCP helps us better understand both staff and children's perceptions of child safety. The study★ used data from routine surveys of staff and children in residential child care programs implementing the CARE model.

KEY FINDING: FIGURE 1. Child Responses to *I feel safe here* Across Agencies

Overall, one-third of children reported feeling safe only sometimes (21%), rarely (8%), or never (7%). (Red and yellow bars show reports of low safety.)

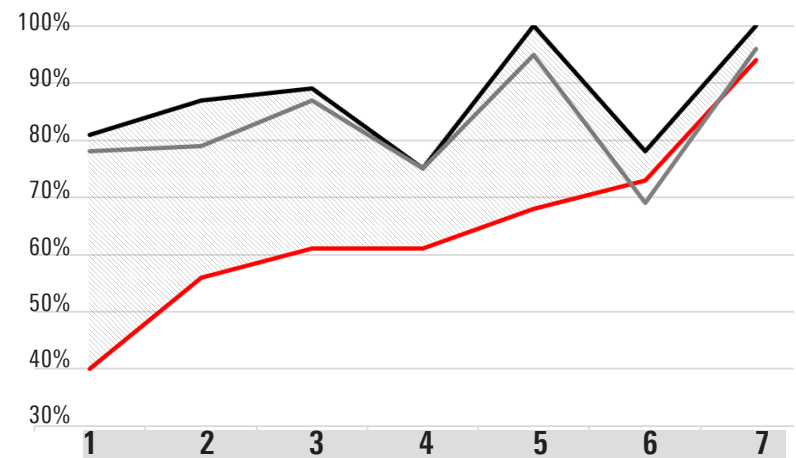
Children's perceptions of safety varied widely across agencies. Children who said they felt least safe (safe sometimes, rarely, or never) ranged from 0% to 71% across 29 agencies. (Each bar represents one agency's results.)



KEY FINDING: FIGURE 2. Child Responses to *I feel safe here* Versus Staff Responses to *Children feel safe here* Across Agencies

In 7 agencies, the staff and child surveys were conducted at the same time. In 5 of those agencies there was a significant difference between staff reports of children feeling safe and actual reports from the children. (Shaded area highlights difference between staff-child reporting.)

- % Children who reported usually or always feeling safe here (N of 17 to 93)
- % Staff who agreed or strongly agreed that children feel physically safe here (N of 17 to 247)
- % Staff who agreed or strongly agreed that children feel emotionally safe here (N of 17 to 247)



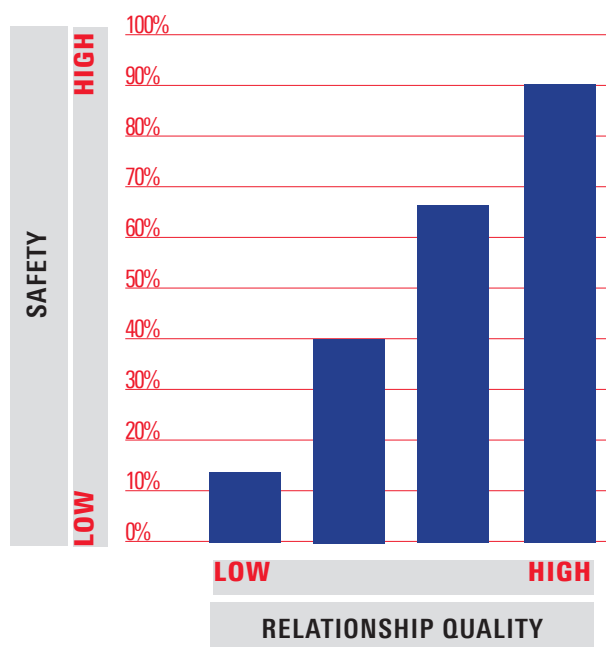
KEY FINDING: FIGURE 3. Staff-Child Relationships Are Key to Children's Sense of Safety

The study also found that strong, trusting, high-quality relationships between staff and children emerged as the most powerful factor related to children's sense of safety. This association was above and beyond factors such as the child's age, gender, previous placements, and socio-emotional functioning.

In the diagram below:

Percentages show % of children who reported usually or always feeling safe.

Low to High show children's perception of the quality of their relationships with staff.



Practice Implications

For Staff

- Be emotionally and physically present
- Build positive, trusting relationships
- Respond to children's needs
- Include children in decision making and developing strategies to reduce risk of harm
- Spend time relaxing with children and having fun
- Help children build positive relationships with each other
- Protect children from harm
- Engage children in fun activities
- Listen and respond to children's concerns and feelings of safety

For Organizations

- Provide for adequate, competent staffing and minimize turnover
- Maintain consistent staff teams working with children
- Enforce rules that ensure safety and protect children – not reinforce staff's power
- Have high expectations for children's behaviors
- Avoid moving children – stability in placement and staff are essential
- Maintain a calm and peaceful environment
- Match children appropriately when placing with others
- Provide home-like, inviting residences with consistent routines and engaging activities
- Monitor safety and respond quickly to risks of emotional and physical harm

QuickTRIPs are translations of RCCP research for practitioners.

QuickTRIP Authors

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