



HOLLYWOOD HOMELESS YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

Trauma Informed Consequences for Homeless Youth

Prepared by the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership

Homeless youth-serving agencies including drop-in centers, emergency shelters, transitional living, and supportive housing programs work hard to maintain safe and supportive environments for young people. While safety is always a primary concern, rules and consequences must take into account the following factors: normal adolescent development, the impact of trauma on development and behavior; the realities of homelessness, and the unique histories of each young person we encounter. In our efforts to make agency rules and consequences more trauma-informed, we have found it useful to clearly understand the differences between punishment and consequences and acknowledge the tension between maintaining consistency and providing individualized, trauma-informed responses.



What is the difference between punishment and consequences?

Punishment

- Punishment is used to enforce obedience to a specific authority.
- Punishment is usually used to assert power and control and often leaves a young person feeling helpless, powerless, and shamed.

Consequences

- Consequences are intentionally designed to teach, change, or shape behavior.
- Logical consequences are clearly connected to the behavior; given with empathy and in a respectful tone, and are reasonable based on the behavior.

What is the tension between consistency and individualized responses?

Consistency

- We want to create rules and consequences that apply to everyone, understanding that predictability and consistency can help a youth feel safe.

Individualized Response

- We recognize that some youth are more highly impacted by past traumatic experiences and there may be compelling reasons to tailor consequences for the individual. We must make sure that our consequences are consistent with the needs and level of functioning of youth, while also holding them accountable for their actions.

What do we know about adolescent development and homeless youth that supports trauma-informed consequences?

- The adolescent brain is acutely sensitive to positive reward and relatively insensitive to negative consequences¹.
- Disrupting service delivery (exiting youth from programs or restricting participation) as a consequence may lead to more negative outcomes than positive.

continued



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- If concerns about safety requires us to ask a youth to leave our agency or restrict their access to specific services, maintaining contact with that individual can “open the door” to important learning opportunities and engagement.
- Some youth will repeatedly test limits and challenge staff with their behaviors until they feel more connected and trusting of staff.

Characteristics of Trauma Informed Consequences

- Trauma informed consequences (TICs) slowly shape youths' behavior by helping them recognize the impact of their behaviors on themselves and their community.
- TICs build youth's capacity to manage strong emotions, and increase their confidence in what they are able to do or accomplish.
- TICs minimize disruptions to attachment (i.e. connections to caring adults).
- TICs attempt to retain youth in services, in spite of problematic behavior.
- TICs support youths' access to basic services, such as housing and food.
- TICs take into account the severity of the infraction and respond with thoughtful and appropriate actions that help the youth with their specific needs.
- TICs consider the function of the problematic behavior and help youth develop more effective strategies for getting their needs met.
- TICs take into account trauma triggers and past traumatic experiences.
- TICs take the long view and understand that change is slow and incremental.
- TICs invest great energy, creativity, and resources upfront in order to support long term success in helping youth.

What are the challenges of implementing trauma-informed consequences?

- TICs may require a paradigm shift in the way staff understand and respond to challenging, negative, and disruptive behavior.
- TICs require more planning, patience, and creativity by service providers.
- TICs are best implemented in a calm and thoughtful manner, and so require time for discussion and processing with youth and staff members.
- Changing agency policy and practice to incorporate TICs is challenging for staff and supervisors.
- Providers must balance what is best for the individual young person with the needs of other youth and the agency as a whole.
- Agencies must provide adequate supervision and support to staff learning and implementing TICs.

In summary, following the ARC model², when imposing a consequence we can ask ourselves how this consequence *and the way in which it is discussed with the youth* enhance the following:

- a) The youth's attachment or relationship with me, the team, and the entire program;
- b) The youth's ability to self-regulate, i.e. practice self-control, self-restraint, or self-discipline in the future; and
- c) The youth's internal competencies such as judgment, decision-making, insight, reality testing and problem solving.

**For more information,
contact Arlene Schneir MPH
at aschneir@chla.usc.edu or 323-361-3901**

Written by: Arlene Schneir, MPH, Daniel Ballin, LCSW, Heather Carmichael, LCSW, Nikolaos Stefanidis, PhD, Lisa Phillips, MFT, Coreena Hendrickson, LCSW, & Lisa de Gyafas, MA

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¹ Casey, BJ, Jones, RM, & Hare, TA. (2008). The Adolescent Brain; Ann. N.Y. Acad. Sci. 1124: 111–126.

² Kinniburgh, K., Blaustein, M., Spinazzola, J., & van der Kolk, B. (2005). Attachment, Self-Regulation, and Competency: A comprehensive intervention framework for children with complex trauma. Psychiatric Annals, 35(5), 424 - 430.