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 consequences.
- Disrupting service delivery (exiting youth from programs or restricting participation) as a consequence may lead to more negative outcomes than positive.
• 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 model, 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 Gyarfas, MA
The Community Trauma Treatment Center for Runaway and Homeless Youth
An Initiative of the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership