

Supporting Children in Congregate Care

The Challenges of Congregate Care and Trauma-Exposed Children and Youth

Foster care is meant to be a temporary solution for families with children and youths in crisis. Yet too often, children and youth end up moving from placement to placement for years, including into more restrictive settings such as congregate care.

When children and youth enter congregate care settings, such as a shelter, group home or residential treatment center, many experience extensive traumatic exposure and stress through abuse, neglect or witnessing domestic violence. This trauma can result in more severe behavioral and emotional health issues than less restrictive settings, such as therapeutic foster placements, can address (Zelechowski et al. 2013). Children and youth may also be placed in congregate care because there are no foster care placements available. In comparison to the home setting, the rules and systems of a facility have increased restrictions. It is important to be aware of how congregate care can also cause trauma.

How Trauma Can Affect Residents and Staff

[Trauma-informed congregate careⁱ](#) recognizes that complex trauma histories affect staff as well as residents. If staff are not aware of their own traumas, their histories can unknowingly interact or activate a resident, which can cause re-traumatization. Conversely as a result of past trauma, resident symptoms can manifest as certain reactions and behaviors that are perceived as negative; acknowledging this fact empowers staff to better diagnose, treat and support children and youth in foster care. Because of the group nature of congregate care, a trauma-informed perspective can help youth reduce traumatic stress and be more open to treatment.

Milieu Therapy and How It Helps in a Congregate Care Setting

Typically, in a congregate care environment, clinicians use a [therapeutic milieu approachⁱⁱ](#). Milieu therapy creates a structured and controlled environment to help increase the effectiveness of other forms of therapy. Every relationship a child engages in will provide a role in the healing process.

By using a team approach with open communication, respect and compassion, milieu therapy can help promote stronger self-esteem, greater socialization skills and a sense of ownership of one's actions and environment.

What You Can Do

The National Council's ["Seven Domains of Trauma – Informed Careⁱⁱⁱ"](#) provides a framework through which to improve service utilization, patient outcomes, staff satisfaction and work environments. These guidelines can inform milieu therapy.

One domain involves helping everyone feel safe, secure and form a sense of trust. Here are some action steps that you can take for children and youth in congregate care:

- Conduct an environmental assessment.
- Assess child/youth/member safety.
- Establish trauma-informed rooming policies.
- Foster trust through trauma-informed child/youth/member interactions.
- Provide universal education materials.
- Ensure staff safety.

Another domain involves building compassion resilience for staff. The behavioral and emotional challenges that children and youth face can cause secondary traumatic stress for staff. This can result in staff burnout and compassion fatigue. If staff members burn out, they can't serve children and youth effectively. This can also cause a ripple effect of stress into staff members' personal lives and families.

Some action steps for building staff resiliency:

- Educate and train staff on symptoms of common workforce concerns.
- Create a culture of compassion resilience.
- Implement policies and procedures to build staff resilience.
- Provide time and resources for staff to process difficult situations.
- Encourage staff assessment of wellness practices.
- Encourage staff to develop and implement self-care plans.

Resources

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