



HOLLYWOOD HOMELESS YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

Trauma Informed Consequences (TICs) for Youth Experiencing Homelessness:

Putting Theory into Practice

Agencies serving youth that are experiencing homelessness work hard to maintain safe and supportive environments for young people. Young people seeking services frequently present with multiple problems, including relationship difficulties, a lack of sense of self, memory impairment, lack of emotional control, intellectual challenges, and low self esteem. Often these problems are a result of earlier traumatic experiences suffered as children at home or in institutional settings. In dealing with traumatized children, the best practice is to use an individualized approach. Consequences for challenging behavior must address the needs of the individual. Being flexible and using critical thinking is essential in working with traumatized individuals. Careful observation of youth's behavior is necessary in order to understand what is motivating the behavior. Putting the behavior in context and factoring in the young person's trauma history before judging and reacting to the youth and the behavior ensures that your response is trauma-informed.

Staff working with youth should ask themselves the following questions as they try to respond to challenging behaviors with trauma-informed consequences:

1. What is the purpose of enforcing the rules? Is it to discipline/teach the youth how to manage emotions, or to enforce the rules for the "rule's sake?"
2. Is this youth intentionally pushing my buttons? Why would he/she want this type of attention from me? Keep in mind that for many youth negative attention is preferable to no attention at all.
3. How much of my response is because I feel personally hurt, offended, disrespected, helpless and frightened, or need to prove that I am in control?



4. What assumptions am I making about this young person's behavior? Could there be another explanation?
5. What options do I have to respond to this behavior? How does the young person expect me to respond?
6. Which option most closely fits my intent to maintain safety while building the young person's capacity to manage intense emotions and learn more effective behavior? Which option is least disruptive to service delivery?

FAQs about TICs

Why does it seem like some youth are asking to be discharged from services by repeatedly breaking the rules even when they know the consequences?

Many youth come to us with multiple experiences of rejection and abandonment by family and other caregivers. Due to these past experiences, they come to us with the expectation that we will also reject them and, in turn, abandon them. In order to protect themselves, consciously or not, they act provocatively to speed up the rejection that they are convinced is coming anyway.

If we don't exit/punish youth when they break the rules, aren't we enabling them?

No. When we exit a youth that is highly impacted by past trauma, what are we really teaching them? Although we may believe that we are teaching them that they can't write on walls or they can't treat us with disrespect, mostly we are just confirming a young person's belief that they are unlovable and undeserving of our attention and support. We are not suggesting that agencies and staff ignore inappropriate behavior. Instead, we are asking staff to work with young people to identify the behavior that was problematic, put it in the context of trauma, and to help the young person find different ways to express their anger, frustration, or sadness. We want youth to know that we can see far beyond the problem behavior; and see the youth's capabilities and potential.



Punishment vs. Trauma-Informed Consequences

The examples below are representative of how to view an incident from both a punishment and a consequence/trauma-informed perspective, and are designed to assist staff and program managers recognize how staff interpretation of youth behavior strongly influences responses.

Punishment

- Punishment is used to enforce obedience to a specific authority and it uses words that escalate conflict.
- Punishment is usually used to assert power and control and often leaves a young person feeling helpless, powerless, and ashamed.
- Punishment is for the benefit of the punisher and not for the individual whose behavior needs to be corrected.

Trauma-Informed Consequences (TICs)

- TICs are intentionally designed to teach, change or shape behavior, and offer options within firm limits.
- TICs are logical consequences that are clearly connected to the behavior, given with empathy and in a respectful tone.
- TICs are reasonable, and use words that encourage thinking, and preserve connections between people.

Incident #1

Youth is verbally aggressive towards a staff member.

Punishment

Staff Interpretation: Youth is being disrespectful. Youth doesn't appreciate the services we are offering. I need to set a firm example that we don't allow this type of verbal abuse.

Reaction: Staff threatens to exit youth if behavior continues.

Consequences (TICs)

Staff Reflection and Interpretation: What is going on in the environment that is setting this youth off? I need to let this youth know it is inappropriate to verbally abuse staff and, at the same, time, help him develop more constructive self-regulation skills.

Response: Youth is asked to cool off in a safe place. Staff person processes the experience with the young person when it is deemed appropriate (it would not be wise to press the issue if the youth is still visibly agitated). Staff person shares with youth their observation regarding the interaction and asks for feedback. Staff explores with youth alternative/pro-social ways of communicating feelings.

Incident #2

Youth comes to agency but doesn't do anything, just sits on the couch and dozes.

Punishment

Staff Interpretation: This guy is lazy and is taking advantage of services. He should be working on his GED or looking for a job. We're here to help youth, not just let them sit around and do nothing.

Reaction: Staff members don't invest time in this young person.

Consequences (TICs)

Staff Reflection and Interpretation: This young man is very tired. I know we told him about the services that we have here. What could be interfering with his ability to focus? Lots of youth are worried about failing so they don't even want to try. How can we engage him?

Response: Staff member approaches the youth and asks if he needs anything. Staff member tries to engage youth in pro-social activity (game, group) to try to further engage him in services. Even if the youth is generally unresponsive, the staff member gently continues to try to engage him periodically and spends time sitting with him as much as the youth can tolerate.

Incident #3

Youth has a crush on his/her case manager and follows this staff member around.

Punishment

Staff Interpretation: This is very awkward. I don't want to hurt this young person's feeling but I don't want to give them the wrong idea. It is probably better if he works with someone else.

Reaction: Youth is given a new case manager.

Consequences (TICs)

Staff Reflection and Interpretation: This young person is trying to connect with me. I might be one of few people in his life who sincerely tried to help him. This is very awkward but with some supervision and support, I think I can help this young person.

Response: Case manager gets supervision and support in talking to the youth about the crush and working to reinforce appropriate boundaries and expectations.

Incident #4

Youth acts out in group and storms out.

Punishment

Staff Interpretation: This young person is disrespecting the group and disrespecting me. I can't create a cohesive group when she feels free to leave whenever she feels like it. It's not fair to the other group members.

Reaction: Youth receives a warning that he will be discharged from the group if she does that ever again.

Consequences (TICs)

Staff Reflection and Interpretation: Did something in the group trigger this young woman or bring up uncomfortable feelings or memories? What else I could do to help her feel safe in group?

Response: If two staff members are leading the group, one of the staff members leaves the group to check in with the young person and see if it is possible for her to rejoin the group. If this is not possible, the group leader talks to the youth after the group to find out what happened. He lets the youth know that she can leave the group if she is feeling upset or anxious but she is always welcome to rejoin the group. The staff member asks the youth if she wants to talk to someone about any feelings she might be experiencing in the group.

Incident #5

Youth caught writing racist graffiti on the bathroom wall.

Punishment

Staff Interpretation: Youth is defacing our property. If we don't come down hard on this youth, other youth will think that it is OK to use racist language and to destroy agency property.

Reaction: Youth is immediately exited.

Consequences (TICs)

Staff Reflection and Interpretation: I need to explore why this young person was writing racist graffiti on the walls. Was he reacting to something? What kind of attention is he seeking?

Response: A staff member talks to the young person about the incident, explaining the rules about graffiti and "hate" language and explores why the youth wrote on the wall. The young person is assigned to clean or repaint the wall. Staff helps him/her explore alternative ways to express his feelings.

Incident #6

Youth enters agency clearly drunk or high.

Punishment

Staff Interpretation: This young person knows that she is not allowed to come to the agency under the influence. This is totally disruptive to youth and staff. She needs to learn that this is just not allowed.

Reaction: Youth is exited from program and referred to detox.

Consequences (TICs)

Staff Reflection and Interpretation: This is disruptive to other youth and staff. However, if I send her back outside, she is really vulnerable to being victimized. We need to find a safe place for this young person to sober up. She needs further assessment regarding her substance use.

Response: Youth is asked to move to safe place within the agency where she can sober up and be safe. When she is more coherent, a staff person talks to her about the circumstances of her using. The youth is reminded that we are concerned about keeping her safe and the agency's policies about being drunk or high. The youth is encouraged to speak to a substance abuse counselor who can talk to her about substance use.

Incident #7

A room search at the shelter leads to the discovery of a knife under a youth's mattress.

Punishment

Staff Interpretation: This youth is dangerous. She knows weapons are not allowed. This isn't safe for the other youth at the shelter.

Reaction: Youth is exited immediately.

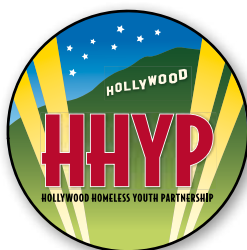
Consequences (TICs)

Staff Reflection and Interpretation: It isn't safe to have knives at the shelter. Why does she feel that she needs a knife even though she knows she could get exited from the program? Do we have enough staff at night to make sure that she feels safe here?

Response: A staff person pulls the young woman aside and tells her that they found the knife under her mattress. They ask her if anything has happened that has made her feel unsafe in the shelter, at school, or in the neighborhood. They let her know that she can't have a knife at the shelter and that they have confiscated it but they want to help her feel safe. They help her identify ways that they could help her feel more safe.

SUMMARY

Working from a trauma informed perspective and implementing TICs demands much thought, patience and perseverance on our part. The youth entrusted in our care deserve this best practice care. We have the responsibility to create environments that afford these youth both opportunities and options to heal from past traumas and learn more effective and pro-social coping styles in order to become successful and productive members of our society.



Written by: Nikolaos Stefanidis, PhD, Arlene Schneir, MPH, Daniel Ballin, LCSW, Heather Carmichael, LCSW, Paul Gore, PhD, Lisa de Gyarfas, MA, Coreena Hendrickson, LCSW, Erin Hubbard, PsyD, Jim McGaffey, PsyD, Lisa Phillips, MFT, Moises Rodriguez, PhD, and Jennifer Schwartz, PsyD

The Community Trauma Treatment Center for Runaway and Homeless Youth SAMHSA Grant #SM57247
©Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership, 2010

4650 Sunset Boulevard, MS #2, Los Angeles, CA 90027 323-361-2112 www.hhyp.org