TIPS FOR ENGAGING WITH HOMELESS YOUTH

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- It is impossible to discuss youth homelessness without discussing the impact of trauma and chronic stress on the developing brain in early childhood development. See below on BRAIN PLASTICITY.

- Homelessness among younger people is not a simple housing issue. Being "on the streets" refers to a complex psychological state or worldview connected to a perceived lack of options that is intrinsically linked to a youth's identity and sense of self-worth.

- Until we address the underlying conceptual/developmental needs, “the streets” will always be an appealing option for young people. This leads to a common misconception that most youth are “choosing” homelessness.

- Cultural Competency: Working effectively with street-affected youth is cross-cultural work. Youth on the streets have adapted to a sub-culture of survival with very different expectations, values, identities, hierarchies, language, etc. and it will take time for them to adjust to change.

- Though the sub-cultures that exist on the streets are often unhealthy and unlawful, it is important to remember that this “subculture of the streets” is meeting critical emotional needs for young people that haven't been adequately met elsewhere. It is unfair and unrealistic to expect youth to immediately drop the values that have helped them survive outdoors when they enter our programs. The “get a job” and “go home” theory simply does not work or apply for the vast majority of people under 25 living outdoors in Multnomah County.

- We should always strive to engage with youth surviving outdoors as worthy ambassadors of the adult world from which these youth have been marginalized (or worse), displaying the same gestures of courtesy and respect we might model as strangers in a foreign country.

- HEARTS & MINDS: "The ultimate victory will depend on the hearts and minds of the people who actually live out there." - President Lyndon B. Johnson

- BRAIN PLASTICITY: The neurological wiring of our brains is hugely impacted by early childhood experiences – evidence increasingly suggests that this wiring begins in utero and continues through most of our life.

- Due to the trauma and chronic stress that results in homelessness, the brains of homeless youth are wired entirely DIFFERENTLY than the brains of young people who have not experienced chronic stress and trauma.
• We are all “hardwired” to survive (fight or flight)...but homeless youth have “downloaded” the “failure app” due to compounded risk factors that outweighed protective factors.

• Homeless youth have good reason to be distrustful of adults. The adults in their world have often failed them miserably and mistrust has become a survival mechanism. Youth experience the corruption of the adult world in dysfunctional homes, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect, abandonment, and the commercial sexual exploitation of children such as prostitution or “survival sex.”

• This distrust extends to "adult" institutions such as schools, hospitals, social services, law enforcement and even employment. Even those of us who are "here to help" are viewed as potential exploiters and predators until proven otherwise.

• Most common stereotypical “profiles” that homeless youth use to quickly assess adults: 1) Users 2) Authoritarians 3) Rescuers.

• “The Drift”- The longer a young person survives outdoors away from caring adults, the more likely they are to become deeply alienated from broader society and resources that may exist to aid them in setting/achieving life goals. This can result in chronic instability and the perception that youth are “choosing” homelessness.

• Respect: The basic tenant for all our interactions with youth is respect. We model respect in the little things we do when communicating with each other. Don’t forget the non-verbal ways we communicate. When possible, make eye-level eye contact with the person you are addressing. If they are sitting, we suggest crouching to their eye-level when speaking to minimize the power differential.

• The “Iceberg of Communication”: 55% Body Language, 38% Tone of Voice, 7% Actual Words Spoken. Keep in mind that most of what we communicate to youth (intentional or not) is conveyed non-verbally.

• Consent: Always try to ask for permission before interacting with youth. Consent models respect in a subtle but profound way for youth who are extremely sensitive to power dynamics and issues of control. Remember that young people experiencing homelessness often have very sensible reasons for distrusting adults based on very real experiences of neglect, abuse and exploitation. Even if you are in a position to continue without consent, it always helps to ask for consent first.

• Consistency: People tend to feel safer and behave less hostile when they know what they can expect from you and your team/organization. When interacting with homeless youth, try to convey the same message in the same manner each and every time. It is great when we can get all staff/outreach workers/law enforcement to get on the same page so we avoid the “good cop/bad cop” stereotype (“Dennis always gives me 2 pairs of socks. You just hate me...”).

• Introductions: Introductions are a simple etiquette that we employ in nearly all of our interactions. Unfortunately, we often forget this common courtesy when we are dealing with a “problem” or a situation that might cause us anxiety or
discomfort (and we often don’t realize that a situation is causing us anxiety or discomfort at the time). We all like to know who it is we are speaking to and this is no different for youth experiencing homelessness. In fact, it is arguably more important for a person experiencing homelessness and/or possible mental health issues to know exactly who is communicating to them and why. When greeting youth always try introducing yourself politely. For example: “Hello, we’re Yellow Brick Road. My name is ______.” A simple “Hello” can do wonders and set a more positive tone to the following conversation.

- Try asking an open ended question such as “How’s it going tonight?” before attempting any further dialogue. This can be an excellent opportunity to quickly assess a young person’s mood, affect, language skills and approachability- all of which can help you steer the interaction more successfully.

- Don’t forget “Please” and “Thank you” when conversing with folks on the sidewalk. It may seem petty, but youth surviving outdoors are accustomed to being treated with less respect and common courtesy and little gestures of respect go a long way in developing rapport and cooperation.

- Speak literally and avoid making promises (especially promises you can’t keep). Youth on the streets tend to be even more literal/concrete/black & white thinkers than their housed adolescent peers.

- Outreach workers (and by extension any adult service provider) always hold the power in interactions and relationships with young people. Youth are acutely aware of this power differential. As outreach workers we do our best to minimize this power dynamic but we should always recognize that it exists simply because we can go home when our shift is over (and we control who gets what and when).

- The chaos of the streets is best countered with a calm personality, respectful approach and clear consistent boundaries or expectations.

- **Street Families:** At their core, street families are simply support networks that facilitate survival within a rough outdoor subculture. They generally operate more loosely than traditional street gangs. While some street families may engage in illegal activity, the vast majority of street families never engage in violent behavior and do not have the strict initiations, hierarchies and rituals associated with more organized criminal operations. Unfortunately, the rare exceptions that do become violent/criminal are the ones most reported in the media (Sic Boys, NGP, PSK, etc).

- Street Families- while not biological- are as real and important to street-dependent youth as birth or adoptive families are to others. street families are often described in nuclear terms such as “brother”, “sister”, “mom”, “dad”, etc. This is not an attempt to lie or manipulate but indicates the emotional need being served by those that assume the familial role.

- Youth are often as unwilling to separate from their street family as we might be to separate from our own biological kin. This frequently becomes a barrier to services including shelter. Sometimes this dynamic also plays into the popular perception that youth are "choosing" to remain homeless by refusing services.
• **Street Names**: Most street-dependent youth choose (or are given) a street name or alias that serves to help them shed their “victim identity” and survive on the streets. A street name is crucial to a youth's identity and is as real as a legal name for the purpose of maintaining a survival identity. We should respect what a youth wishes to be called. Often given by an older or more experienced homeless youth. Sometimes youth have the luxury of choosing their own name.

• **Pets**: Homeless youth generally have pets for the same three reasons others tend to have pets: Companionship, Protection, Therapeutic/Service. Loyalty to one's pet is an important value for many homeless youth (especially those that travel frequently) and pets are often closely associated with a youth's identity and concept of self-worth. Youth are often unwilling to abandon their pets to access services such as shelter. This if often misconstrued as “choosing homelessness.”

• Most aggressive or "cocky" behavior (i.e. "aggressive panhandling") is a symptom of fear and a protective defense mechanism in a hostile environment. It can often be countered with courtesy and respect. Contrary to popular media, most street youth will avoid confrontation and will only resort to violence when they are unable to perceive any other options.

**More to Explore:**

• [http://yellowbrickroadoutreach.blogspot.com](http://yellowbrickroadoutreach.blogspot.com)

• *Brain Rules* by John Medina

• *The Developing Mind* by Daniel J. Siegel

• *Streetworks: best practices and standards in outreach methodology to homeless youth* (available through StreetWorks Collaborative at StreetWorks@FreeportWest.org)


• *Street Culture: an epistemology of street-dependent youth* by JT Fest

• *Street Wise*: 80’s documentary about Seattle-area street youth that is dated in some ways but still very valuable. Available in segments on Youtube.

• *Children Underground*: Documentary about street youth in Bucharest- despite the location, this is very applicable to the work we do here in PDX. This is an upsetting film, so view with caution.
**Outside In: Tips for Conducting Outreach to Homeless Youth**
 presented by Heather Brown, Youth Development Director

- Use welcoming strategies
- Employ passive advertising
- Meet real, participant-identified needs

**Safety & Crisis Response**
Ensure physical and emotional safety for participants and staff
Health and safety policies and procedures
De-escalation training and critical incidents policies and procedures
Team response & debriefing
Individual crisis plans
Centralized tracking of incident reports and exclusions
Use of re-entry meetings and behavioral agreements

- **Offer a variety of opportunities to engage/participate**
  Program design and development forums
  Participant involvement in staff hiring
  Participant agreements & informed consent
  Develop engaging, skill-based activities and groups
  Utilizing peer mentors
  Satisfaction surveys
  Grievance process
  Board participation

- **Build trust**
  Be transparent and articulate about expectations and eligibility criteria
  Be flexible where possible (e.g., offer options and let people make choices)
  Be trauma-informed

- **Preventing and responding to staff trauma**
  Supervisors should have an ‘open door’ policy
  Ensure there is adequate team support
  Self-care
• **Provide trauma-specific services for clients**

  Trauma-specific services are designed to treat the actual consequences of trauma.

  One specialty program to consider is Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT).

  Incorporate trauma-specific interventions that respond to: the need for respect, information, connection, and hope for the future; the importance of recognizing the adaptive function of ‘symptoms;’ and the need to work collaboratively in a person-directed and empowering way. Trauma-specific interventions might include teaching coping skills to manage trauma responses/symptoms such as emotional modulation and self-soothing.