Creating Safe Environments During COVID-19 for Youth Who Have Endured Hardships

Health Equity

Date Posted:

Apr 17, 2020

This deeply unsettling time will leave a generational mark on young people. We can hope that the transformative influence it leaves is one that helps them understand the power and primacy of protective relationships. This lesson will be reinforced if they are made to feel safe within their homes even as the outside world feels frightening. It will be driven home when they are again able to embrace the elders in their lives, and thereby see the deep meaning in things previously taken for granted.

All young people will remember whether they felt safe during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. But for those youth who have endured hardships, this moment offers an opportunity for healing. They may not associate safety with their homes, and may not have come to expect that adults will nurture them. They may have learned to suppress their emotions as they've been told to move on. They may have been expected to grow up too soon, with childhood's normal developmental allowances taken away from them, learning instead that they dare not stumble. They may have been forced to understand they were largely on their own.

Those of us who serve youth in foster care or congregate settings, such as shelters, should *always* approach them with the absolute respect and unconditional loving-kindness that confers safety. We should *always* honor their emotions and give them the same opportunity to develop—to fail and recover—as youth receive in healthy homes. They deserve nothing less. However, the frightening time we are collectively sharing offers a powerful opportunity to reshape young people's expectations of adults and of the protective nature of relationships.

Patterns Created Through Hardship

Too many youth have endured immeasurable hardships. Those painful experiences have wired their brain to expect uncertainty, perhaps even danger. These patterned expectations lead to behaviors. Young people who have lived with uncertainty for their entire lives—who have never known whether they are going to be protected, accepted, embraced, rejected or hurt—have learned to be hypervigilant to danger cues and reactive to potential threats.

The patterns are set. Their brains become wired for hypervigilance and they act out in an effort to protect themselves. Then, as they exhibit disruptive or dysregulated behaviors during moments of uncertainty, the adults in their lives take punitive measures, or withdraw from them. As they try to express their emotions, they are not always heard and they learn that they need to contain those well-earned feelings. They push the feelings rooted in trauma deeper inside. When exposed to a new trigger this just allows more unprocessed emotions to be expressed in the form of rage. Rinse. Repeat. Reinforce the pattern.

They are told that they have "anger problems" and receive undermining labels like Oppositional Defiant Disorder. These labels change the way they view themselves, the expectations adults have for them, and the

way in which society interacts with them. Rinse. Repeat. Exacerbate the pattern.

Adult Behavior Can Create Transformational Change for Youth

How can we begin to heal youth? *We break the pattern*. A youth experiences uncertainty or perceived danger and naturally draws from his or her patterned responses. Perhaps they withdraw or act out. They then expect adult rejection or punishment. Perhaps they choose to express their fears, expecting to have their emotions denied. But if we break the pattern, what they expect doesn't happen. Their reactive behaviors that appear aggressive, are understood to be rooted in defensiveness. They are embraced rather than rejected. Their fears are heard and validated. They are met with radical calmness, respect and unconditional lovingkindness. *Again . . . what they have grown to expect . . . doesn't happen.*

If we can create safe, secure, and sustained environments, we may deliver a large enough "dose" of positive human interactions that we can change young people's expectations of others, and ultimately contribute to their belief in their own potential.

We can help them experience that people can be worthy of trust. More critically, it can help them see themselves as being worthy of being cared for and about. Important enough to be protected. These basic understandings so essential to human flourishing, can be transformative in a young person's life whose previous experiences have not allowed them to see adults as trustworthy, protective or unconditionally loving.

Concrete Steps to Create Safe Environments

- *We need to reject the biases systems sometimes perpetuate about youth.* Much of my work at Covenant House Pennsylvania is with young people who come to us with a litany of diagnoses. We help them see themselves instead as they deserve to be seen, as they really are, as having "Protectors' Brains." Brains that see dangers others would miss. Brains that pick up on cues that others would pass by. Dispositions to do what it takes to keep themselves and those they care about safe. When they experience genuine safety, these young people who have experienced some of the worst that life can offer proudly display their compassionate selves.
- *We need to connect young people to the people they care about.* To remain grounded amid uncertainty, humans seek those relationships that reassure us. This makes it imperative that we first do everything in our power to connect them to those healthy existing relationships in their lives. Even youth who have endured instability or worse in their homes of origin care about the safety and well-being of their families. Typical systemic barriers may make it difficult to reach their families, now is a time to lower those barriers *if* that can be done safely.
- *We who are in service to young people must be the kind of adults they deserve in their lives right now.* Whether we are inviting them into our homes as resource families or protecting them in our shelters, we must create the kind of environments where youth can be heard, process their emotions and, ultimately, made to feel safe. We can acknowledge that having emotions is good, talking about them is necessary and being honest with them is healing. We can't talk away uncertainty, but we can join together. We can create safe settings, a haven that says the world is complicated, but that in this space, we care about each other. In this space we protect each other. In this space, we've got you.

An Opportunity To Heal

With supportive systems and caring adults at their side, young people who have been through more than many of us could imagine will not only get through today's challenge, but their expectations can change for tomorrow. This uncertain time offers the chance to demonstrate to youth that systems can be protective, and people can be worthy of trust.

This may install a different reality in their rapidly developing adolescent brains—one in which they grow to see how protective healthy relationships can be. We can help them experience that individuals may be fragile, but

when we join together, we become stronger than the sum of each of our individual strengths.

Dr. Ken Ginsburg is an adolescent medicine specialist, and serves as the health services director of Covenant House Pennsylvania and founding director of the Center for Parent and Teen Communication at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. He is the author of several books, including "Building Resilience in Children and Teens" and the interdisciplinary toolkit "Reaching Teens: Strength-based, Trauma-sensitive, Resilience-building Communication Strategies Rooted in Positive Youth Development."

Jennifer Rodriguez of The Quality Parenting Initiative and Dr. Ginsburg recorded a webinar that offers a deeper dive into the pivotal role of protective relationships. "The Power of Connection: How Resource Families Can Support Adolescents Through COVID-19 Crisis," can be heard here. If you only have a few moments listen to the segment between 11:00 and 16:00.