

Created by: The Youth Partnership Board and NCSBY



Working with Adolescents with Problematic or Illegal Sexual Behavior

Advice from Youth

ABOUT US

The Youth Partnership Board (YPB) is made up of youth who were once in a group treatment program for problematic or illegal sexual behavior.

We write this to share that the first few moments, visits, and interactions you have with a youth are critical to establishing a therapeutic relationship with them. Be aware of and closely examine the verbal and non-verbal messages that are conveyed by you, your colleagues, and even the facility in which services are provided. All these things express how you perceive the youth and what the family can expect from you and the agency.

The following are a list of principles and suggestions you can use to examine the verbal and nonverbal messages that are being communicated to the family.



“Being called a sex offender or other harmful terms tears at your self-esteem and it makes me think, what’s the point in even trying because kids believe what adults say about them. Coming here and hearing other people say problematic sexual behavior immediately let me know this place was safe and I could be honest.”

BE AWARE OF RECENT AND PAST EXPERIENCES OF THE YOUTH

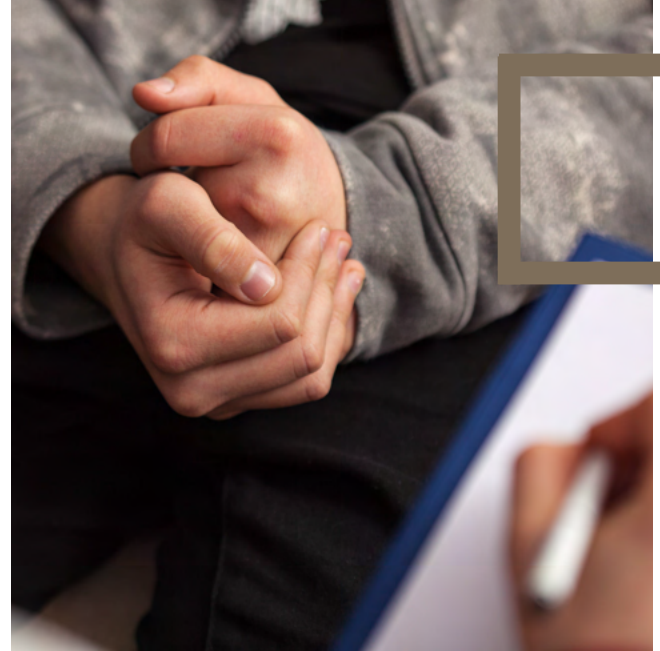
When youth come to the intake and group for the first time, it is important to keep in mind their mental state and what they have been through recently. Please remember to be as empathetic as possible.



“I was in a fog. I felt scared, alone, like no one is there to help me. I just went through court proceedings, entered a jail system, had my mugshot taken, I brought shame to my family and disappointed my parents and now I am in your office.”

IS IT "DENIAL" OR LACK OF TRUST

When youth are seen as “resistant”, therapists may mistake this as “denial” when the real problem is a lack of trust. Youth typically know why they are there. Often, they are feeling shame, guilt, and isolation. These feelings can manifest into resistance to open up. This will subside as trust is built. It is critical to prioritize building a positive relationship, especially in the first few meetings.



TRUST IS BUILT

Trust is vital to this relationship and begins during the first interaction. Youth must be comfortable before they will trust you. This rarely comes right away, as it is often built over time. Understand one must earn the level of trust needed for effective therapy. You don't have an automatic right to it.



“I don't know how to explain it or how it even works but kids can tell if you really do care about them. If you don't care or if you are not being genuine, they can tell and will not be honest with you.”

BE GENUINE

Being genuine is the first step towards effective therapy. You can tell if someone is actually interested in doing the work versus those who don't care as deeply about being there. A lack of genuineness produces more tension and is more “sterile.” A genuine authentic connection is a vehicle to the healing of the youth.

“Receiving realistic expectations from the therapist gets you into the room; confirmation of those expectations keeps you going.”

PREPARE THEM

Therapy may be new to the youth. Preparing them to have accurate expectations can be a powerful tool for engagement in services. Typically, when adolescents know what to expect from the healing process before they attend, they are more likely to become engaged and actively participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND DISCLOSURE

From the onset, be clear about the rules and limits regarding confidentiality. Because they are often feeling shame, guilt, and isolation, safety is key before youth can disclose and share personal feelings and experiences. Do not expect a youth to disclose if they believe that their safety, a loved one's safety, or family members are at risk if they disclose. Further, be aware that youth may have had painful consequences from previously disclosing that has taught them not to be open.

"Disclosing to a therapist is way different than disclosing in any other setting. For example, the court process was the toughest thing I have ever experienced. My guard was up after that, the safety of therapy allowed me to bring my guard down."

CONSISTENCY NOT RIGIDITY

Predictability and consistency provides important foundation to build trust and reduce anxiety. Being consistent is good but don't become rigid; remember to be flexible with how you interact with the youth.

BE CURIOUS AND DIRECT, NOT JUDGMENTAL OR DEMANDING

Sensitive topics must be directly addressed for progress to be made. Trust and tone distinguish direct from being judgmental. As trust is built you can become more direct. During initial interactions, you can start with "yes" or "no" questions and then as rapport is built you can become more direct. The therapist will need to be the one to bring up the past problematic sexual behavior in a matter-of-fact but gentle way. Open that door, don't expect them to do so on their own.



"As we were participating in the program, we were developing relationships. Known expectations for treatment, consistent therapists, and a strong group structure helped foster productivity and engagement. That consistency established higher expectations of ourselves and others in the program."



BUILD A CULTURE OF LEARNING

Too often poor decisions, past failings, and the impact of those decisions are difficult to share without feeling shame. By building a culture where past decisions are seen as learning experiences and not defining characteristics of the youth, you encourage them to focus less on shame and more on the context. This process then leads to a better understanding of the situation and the ability to change future behavior.

RESPECT, LISTEN, AND SUPPORT

To make important changes in their lives, youth and their parents/caregivers need to be treated with respect, to be heard, and to be provided support. The family as whole needs to be provided quality services. For healing to begin, listen carefully, treat all family members with respect, and support them to receive quality evidence-based care.

"If you demand respect, you're not going to get it."

"Shame doesn't work."



"I never liked the word change because if I had to change who I was to get better, that meant I am not good enough or worthy of that change. I like the word grow."

We share from our experiences and hope you find this information helpful as you provide services to youth and their family members.

Sincerely,

Youth Partnership Board

Additional information about youth with problematic sexual behavior can be provided from the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth www.NCSBY.org

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