

Four Strategies to Promote Coordinated, Dignity-Centered Care in Youth Group Homes



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

Youth living in group homes rely on adults across multiple systems – including education, child welfare, health, and residential care – to create a sense of safety and predictability. Too often, these systems operate separately, without coordination, focused on supervision and rule compliance.

This Evidence Brief defines key terms and summarizes strategies to shift youth group home environments from rule-driven and compliance-focused to dignity-centered. Moving from surveillance to the promotion of **coordinated, dignity-centered care** will help to ensure that young people can heal, grow, and have their full humanity recognized.

Developed by Kenneth Ajila, Youth Worker, Education Assistant, and Research Assistant at YouthREX.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Youth Group Home: A staffed residential setting for youth who often live with developmental, behavioural, or complex needs and who require 24/7, structured support.

Dignity-Centered Care: A practice approach that prioritizes **safety, respect, emotional connection**, and a young person's **inherent worth** – not just their behaviours or compliance with rules and regulations.

Trauma-Informed Practice: An approach that recognizes trauma's impacts on behaviour, communication, and regulation, and aims to create **predictable, safe** environments.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: FOUR STRATEGIES

01. Make dignity and connection, not compliance, the foundation of practice.^{1,2,3}

Youth feel *dehumanized* when residential care relies heavily on surveillance instead of connection, and youth often feel managed, not supported.

Residential care environments frequently prioritize rule enforcement, risk prevention, and incident response over emotional development and relational connection. Rather than understood, youth describe feeling watched, controlled, and punished. Institutions focus heavily on managing 'problem' behaviours while overlooking identity, belonging, and healing. But youth thrive when they feel **respected** and **valued**.

Dignity-centered care strengthens trust and engagement, and requires:

- Speaking to youth with respect, even in crises.
- Avoiding punitive responses that escalate fear or shame.
- Co-creating expectations *with* youth rather than imposing rigid rules.

Relationships are the foundation of successful care, not rules. Young people in care repeatedly highlight the importance of adults who treat them with **warmth**, **patience**, and **respect**. Feeling **valued** and **believed** improves behaviour, trust, and stability. Conversely, young people shut down when they are spoken to harshly, viewed as ‘difficult,’ or treated as a ‘case file’ instead of as a person.

02. Create safe spaces with trauma-informed practice.^{4,5,6}

Trauma-informed practice can reduce behavioural incidents and recognize when emotional escalation may be how a young person communicates overwhelm, not defiance. Predictable routines, calm tones, sensory supports, and non-punitive responses can help to **lower anxiety**, **support emotional regulation**, and **prevent or deescalate crises**.

Trauma-informed group home practice includes:

- Clear routines and transitions.
- De-escalation strategies rooted in calm communication.
- Sensory tools and quiet spaces.

- Avoiding restraint or isolation, except for in legitimate safety emergencies.
- Staff consistency to build relational safety.
- Seeing behaviour as communication, not defiance, to build trust and reduce conflict.

03. Strengthen communication and coordination across systems.^{1,3,7}

System fragmentation and the lack of coordination between different systems and settings is a major issue for young people living in group homes. Youth experience different expectations, routines, and communication styles, depending on the adult (teacher, clinician/practitioner, caregiver) or setting (school, home). This inconsistency increases stress and dysregulation, forcing youth to ‘start over’ with each person or in each context.

Coordinated, predictable routines and **shared strategies** across environments can significantly improve outcomes for youth and prevent young people from having to repeatedly explain themselves or adjust to new expectations.

This coordination requires:

- Shared communication tools across group homes, schools, teachers, clinicians/practitioners, and caregivers.
- Routine check-ins between teachers and residential staff.
- Behaviour support strategies that ‘follow’ youth across environments.

04. Invest in youth workers' training, support, and wellbeing.^{1,5,7}

Stable, well-supported staff create stable, supportive group homes.

Youth workers need **time**, **training**, and **emotional support**, not just protocols and procedures. Frontline staff want to do more but are stretched thin. High turnover, limited training, and constant crisis response leave little room for relational work or meaningful support. When staff receive training, debriefing space, and shared care plans, both staff retention and youth outcomes improve.

Supporting group home staff requires:

- Regular debriefs and supervision.
- Trauma-informed training.
- Mental health supports for workers.
- Workload structures that allow meaningful relationship-building.

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "dignity-centered care youth", "Ontario residential care youth experiences", "trauma-informed group home practice", "youth worker relational care Ontario". The Evidence Brief also draws on the frontline practice experience of the author.

ENDNOTES

1. Residential Services Review Panel. (2016). [Because young people matter: Report of the Residential Services Review Panel](#). Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services.
2. Vitopoulos, N., Kielburger, M., Frederick, T., & Kidd, S. (2018). Developing a trauma-informed mental health group intervention for youth transitioning out of homelessness. In S. Kidd, N. Slesnick, T. Frederick, J. Karabanow, & S. Gaetz (Eds.), *Mental health & addiction interventions for youth experiencing homelessness: Practical strategies for front-line providers* (pp. 149-167). Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press. [YouthREX Research Summary](#)
3. Blum, S., & Dewar, M. (2017). [Voices from the child welfare system: Community engagement to address systemic barriers and improve outcomes for youth leaving care](#). WoodGreen Community Services.
4. Vitopoulos, N., Frederick, T., & Kidd, S. (2018). Trauma-informed group interventions for vulnerable youth. In Ungar, M. (Ed.), *Working with children and youth with complex needs*. Oxford University Press.
5. Parry, S. L., Williams, T., & Burbidge, C. (2021). [Restorative parenting: Delivering trauma-informed residential care for children in care](#). *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 50(6), 991-1012.
6. Sansone, G., Williams, C. C., Crowe, A., Kartusch, M., Vandermorris, A., Fallon, B., D'Angiulli, A. & Maxie, J. (2024). [Supports and systems to respond to complex needs among children and youth in Ontario](#) (Policy Brief). Policy Bench, Fraser Mustard Institute of Human Development, University of Toronto.
7. Ames, R. L., & Loebach, J. E. (2023). [Applying trauma-informed design principles to therapeutic residential care facilities](#). *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 16, 805-817.