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**SPECIAL TOPICS**



**RELATIONSHIPS BEGET RELATIONSHIPS: WHY UNDERSTANDING ATTACHMENT THEORY IS CRUCIAL TO PROGRAM DESIGN FOR HOMELESS YOUTH**



by Toni Vaughn Heineman, DMH  
*with a forward by Ginny Puddefoot*

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### **About the Author**

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### **About the Project**

The California Homeless Youth Project (HYP) is a multi-year research and policy initiative of the California Research Bureau, in collaboration with the California Council on Youth Relations, a project of New America Media. The HYP highlights issues and solutions for youth ages twelve to twenty-four who are living “on the edge” of homelessness or are currently homeless in California. In particular, the HYP engages these youth directly in research and policy discussions, giving voice to their experiences and recommendations as well as those of researchers, practitioners and policy experts. The HYP is supported by funding from The California Wellness Foundation.

## *Forward*

It is with great excitement that I write this forward to Dr. Toni Vaughn Heineman's paper, *Relationships Beget Relationships: Why Understanding Attachment Theory is Crucial to Program Design for Homeless Youth*. Dr. Heineman has provided an invaluable resource for all of us concerned with the growing number of homeless youth in California (and across the country) and how best to assist them in finding and maintaining stable housing and the supports they need for a successful transition to adulthood.

At first glance, it may seem difficult to see how a psychological approach called "Attachment Theory" could possibly relate to providing effective supports for homeless youth. Certainly the notion that our earliest experiences with parents or other caregivers affect our ability to form healthy, positive relationships later in life is hard to dispute. But the idea that the attachment patterns a person develops in early childhood may affect their interpretation of, and response to, programs with the specific goal of helping them, is a bit more of a challenge to conventional thinking.

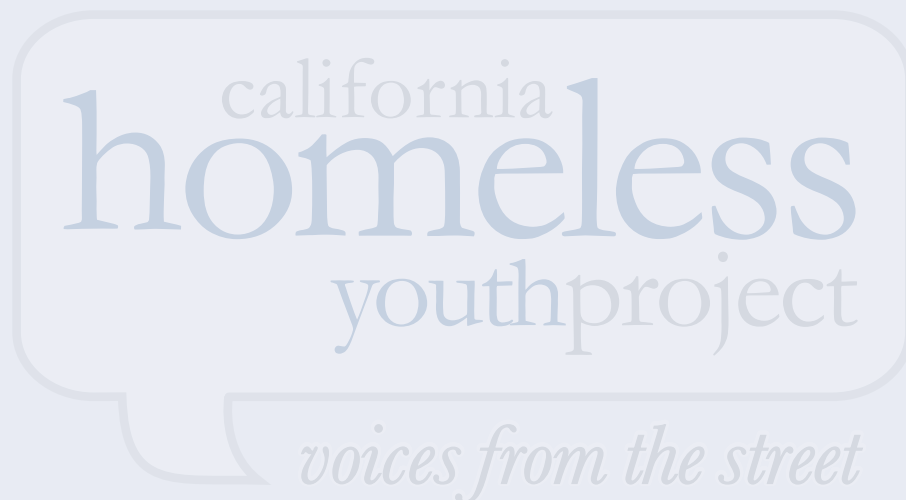
However, Dr. Heineman's analysis is borne out by, and in fact grounded in, the viewpoints of homeless youth themselves. In numerous peer-to-peer interviews conducted for the California Research Bureau report, *Voices from the Street: A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers*, and in subsequent policy seminars held in Sacramento, currently and formerly homeless youth consistently echoed the ideas that Dr. Heineman presents. If we truly want to address the needs of homeless youth, we must start from an understanding that our behavior, and programs we put in place, will be interpreted through the lens of whatever attachment patterns these young people developed long before we came in contact with them.

For me, the implications of Dr. Heineman's analysis are clear and compelling. *First*, we must start from a recognition that many of these youth have developed attachment patterns resulting from early trauma of one kind or another. Expecting them to respond to adults and programs through a secure attachment lens is not only inappropriate but may also re-traumatize these youth. *Second*, the healing power of unconditional support must often come first—before any expectations or requirements are placed on the youth we are working to assist. This nonjudgmental, consistent caring can be an important first step in counteracting

the insecure attachment patterns some of these youth formed in early childhood. *Finally*, there are times when we must step back from our familiar roles as “adults in charge”, and instead let the youth lead the way. This means responding in a respectful way to the individual young person we are working with. It means being actively and consistently involved and at the same time, respecting the pace and parameters set by each youth for her or himself.

As is often the case, these principles are simple but not necessarily easy to implement, especially with today’s policy emphasis on clearly measurable results. Changes in attachment patterns are extremely difficult to evaluate, yet they are often fundamental to a homeless youth’s ability to accept support, find and maintain stable housing, and ultimately, make a successful transition to adulthood. My hope is that Dr. Heineman’s paper, written in common-sense language with practical suggestions for effective program supports, will be actively used to inform both policy and program development for homeless youth in California from this point forward.

*Ginny Puddefoot, Project Director  
California Homeless Youth Project*



## Introduction

Much as we might like to idealize the lives of homeless youth<sup>1</sup>, imagining them, like the characters in *The Boxcar Children* (Chandler Warner, 1989), living happily and cooperatively – independent of parental demands or supervision –the real lives of homeless youth are not exciting, fun, or romantic. Without adults to help, support and protect them, these young people often live a grim, frightening, and dangerous existence. Why then, don't they, like the children in the *Boxcar* story, come to recognize that they need help from adults? Why do some seem unwilling to accept our offers of food and shelter? Why do some fail to take advantage of the programs we create to help them improve their health, education, and general well being? If it is because we have not understood or given them what they need, why don't they simply come forward and tell us what we can do to help them? Until we can answer questions such as these, homeless youth will continue to suffer, despite our genuine concerns and well-intended efforts to help them come in from the cold.

**Attachment theory**, with its descriptions of different relational styles, may offer useful insights into these questions and point us toward answers that will help us develop policies and programs to successfully address the needs of homeless youth. At its most basic, attachment theory simply describes the ways in which young children relate to their caregivers – demonstrating that they are either securely or insecurely attached (Slade, 1999). Many researchers, clinicians, and theorists have expanded on the tenets of attachment theory, as first proposed by John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1983). We are now able to draw on a rich body of work to understand the interplay between children's earliest relationships and later behavior (Fonagy 1998; Main & Hesse, 1990; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985; Sander, 1975). Because human beings have a protracted period of dependency, extending from infancy through childhood,

adolescence, and often into young adulthood, the quality of early relationships profoundly affects all aspects of later life. Initially, attachment theory focused our attention on the importance of young children's relationships with their caregivers; more recently it has helped us understand the impact of early attachments on later relationships.

Attachment theory has also deepened our understanding of the ways in which, for better or worse, we do not easily change the ways in which we view others and our expectations of relationships. For example, we have come to understand better why moving a child from an abusive home to one in which he or she is physically and emotionally safe does not

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immediately cause him or her to feel protected, secure, and safe from harm.

These points are crucial to our discussion of the mental health needs of homeless youth. Understanding the importance of early patterns

of attachment helps us comprehend the sometimes confusing behavior of homeless youth, and understanding the ways in which later relationships can alter that behavior helps us to create effective programs.

The purpose of this report is to define attachment theory, discuss its implications for homeless youth and programs intended to assist them, and illustrate these points with three programs that embrace an understanding of attachment theory in their approach to supporting these vulnerable young people.

<sup>1</sup> By "homeless youth", this report is speaking of youth who are without stable housing, between the ages of twelve and twenty-four, and are unaccompanied by a parent or caregiver.

## Attachment Theory Defined

### Secure Attachments

Infants enter the world with the capacity to form relationships. As utterly dependent creatures, they must rely on caregivers for physical and emotional survival. **Secure attachments** to caregivers provide the foundation for emotional well being, offering children a solid base from which to explore the world. A sense of security and confidence in relationships develops when parents, or other caregivers, reliably read and respond to their infants' cues. This does not mean that parents must – or even can – perfectly interpret or immediately react to every signal that a child sends by vocalization or movement. (For example, parents may not instantly identify the source of their crying baby's distress or immediately find a way to sooth him or her.) Secure relationships are built through "trial and error," with children becoming increasingly skilled at identifying and signaling their moods and needs and caregivers becoming increasingly skilled at reading and responding to those signals.

Securely-attached children are not overwhelmingly distressed when separated from their parents because they "know," both cognitively and emotionally, that their parents will return. Indeed, as they grow, children can tolerate longer periods of separation because they have internalized the comforting security of the parent. We learn to soothe ourselves by being soothed by another – a young child will seek out the parent in times of distress, while an older child can create a sense of security by thinking about the parent or turning to images or activities that evoke the security of that relationship. Young adults may carry family traditions forward into their lives as a way of easing the transition from their parents' home to their own. Familiar routines from a secure childhood offer solace well into adulthood because they evoke a sense of reassurance and safety. That is why "comfort food" sustains not just the body, but also the soul.

Secure attachments are relatively straightforward – they are relationships that offer children a solid foundation for later relationships. Not surprisingly, secure attachments, which can be thought of simply as the capacity to love and to work, are associated with positive mental health (commonly attributed to Sigmund Freud; exact source unknown). In contrast, insecure attachments interfere substantially with the capacity for both love and work, often making life exceedingly difficult and unfulfilling.

### Insecure Attachments

Classification of psychological difficulties is very complex. The most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) relies on thirteen categories to classify patterns of mood and behavior that arise from serious emotional distress. The causes of mental health and mental illness extend beyond the

*The causes of mental health and mental illness extend beyond the attachment patterns laid down in early childhood. However, these patterns are crucial in determining subsequent emotional, social and cognitive development.*

attachment patterns laid down in early childhood. However, these patterns are crucial in determining subsequent emotional, social and cognitive development; insecure attachments do not provide a solid developmental foundation (Fonagy, 1998; Fraiberg, Adelson, and Shapiro,

1975; Cicchetti and Cummings, 1993). Unlike secure attachments, which are captured in a single category, insecure or anxious attachments are typically categorized as "avoidant," "ambivalent," or "disorganized."

Children with **avoidant attachment** patterns often appear to pay little attention to caregivers. They behave as if they really don't expect much from adults, so they don't bother to ask for help or soothing when distressed. This type of behavior tends to arise when caregivers are relatively unresponsive to the child's signals of distress or bids for positive attention. As these

children move into daycare or school they may pay little attention to the adults charged with their care; they often play by themselves and appear to be oblivious to routines or instructions. Adults may then feel dismissed or irrelevant, as if they have nothing to offer the child. While other children are vying for and obviously pleased by an adult's attention, children who avoid contact are easily ignored or overlooked. Clearly, this pattern easily perpetuates itself – the child asks for little from adults and gets little, which simply reinforces the idea that adults really have very little to offer and that there is little point in asking. Adults may stop offering help, attention, or support when their efforts appear to have little effect on the child's mood, behavior, learning, or sense of wellbeing.

Children who characteristically pull people close and then push them away demonstrate an **ambivalent attachment** pattern. This pattern tends to arise when the caregiver's response to the child is inconsistent – at times responsive and loving and at others dismissive or inattentive. These children need constant reassurance from caregivers. However, even seemingly constant attention does little to calm the child's anxiety or offer comfort. At daycare or in the classroom, children who have ambivalent attachments to caregivers often seem extremely needy and may repeatedly seek the approval or attention of the adult in charge and then discount the attention they get. In addition to being exhausted by the incessant demands for reassurance, adults can easily become frustrated or angry when what they offer does not seem to have any positive effect. (Unlike the avoidant child, who isn't particularly interested in what the adult offers, the ambivalent child often aggressively rejects the offered attention.) Again, it is easy to understand how the pattern becomes self-perpetuating as children demand attention or help and then consistently reject it. Adults often respond in similar ways – sometimes becoming

very solicitous of the child's needs and at other times ignoring them or responding angrily.

*Many young people who live on the street or in unstable living situations have not had the good fortune to have grown up in homes where they had the opportunity to form stable attachments early on. That is why we can learn so much by looking at the words and actions of homeless youth – as well as our own responses in designing and providing services and interventions – through the lens of attachment theory.*

Children with **disorganized attachment** patterns have no reliable, characteristic means of managing emotional distress. They may appear both avoidant and ambivalent in their relationships with caregivers. These children may simply sit – somehow both stiffly immobilized and limp – or they might walk backward toward a caregiver, rather than reaching out for comfort. This type of attachment appears to stem from relationships in which the caregiver is a source

of both comfort and fear, leaving the young child confused about whether to seek comfort or “run for cover.” In this situation, the child may demonstrate periods of appearing to be emotionally “frozen” or “dazed.” In the history of children with disorganized attachments, we often find caregivers whose moods and behavior change rapidly because of mental illness or substance abuse. If we understand attachment theory as a means of categorizing children's typical means of relating to caregivers, it is easy to see how children whose parents are sometimes loving and other times abusive would be so confused that they might either become immobilized or careen wildly through different strategies to cope with distress. Not surprisingly, adults working with these children often feel almost overwhelmed with confusion and helplessness. They may feel at their wits' end or turn away out of a sense of despair.

Fortunately, most children begin life with a secure attachment to their caregivers. This does not mean that they are all equally happy, well-adjusted, or well-prepared for life. It does mean that most parents, even given enormous variations in beliefs and child-rearing practices, successfully transmit to their children a sense

that relationships can, and do, offer at least some stability and continuity. This allows children to move beyond the family with a sense that other people will be relatively welcoming, will respond reasonably to their needs and desires, and will be interested in what they have to offer.

However, many young people who live on the street or in unstable living situations have not had the good fortune to have grown up in homes where they had the opportunity to form stable attachments early on. That is why we can learn so much by looking at the words and actions of homeless youth – as well as our own responses in designing and providing services and interventions – through the lens of attachment theory.

## Viewing Homeless Youth Through the Lens of Attachment

Again, lest we be tempted to view homeless youth through a romanticized lens influenced by pervasive cultural representations of “runaways” – as free spirits eschewing conventionality or teenagers expressing their adolescent rebellion through temporary experimentation with life on the street – we would be wise to listen to



what those youth have to say about their lives. A sampling of the interviews from *Voices from the Street: A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers* (Bernstein and Foster, 2008)<sup>2</sup> are used to

illustrate some of the issues that are important to youth; they can also be used to inform programs that help youth out of homelessness.

In the course of these interviews youth were asked to explain how they came to be homeless. Their responses give a view of the families they left, or were forced out of, for life on the street.

*I was being bad at home so I wasn't wanted there no more. (p.17)*

*Because my mom kicked me out and chose a guy over my family. (p.17)*

*I had a fight with my mother over my gender identity and sexual orientation, and she put me out, and she instructed all family and friends not to help me out financially, so I hitchhiked to San Francisco. (p. 18)*

*Because we have a three-bedroom home and my mom takes care of foster kids so there was no room for me and she gave me a week to find somewhere to live. (p. 17)*

*I grew up in foster care and I was abused in group homes. I've moved around so much. I've been in over ten mental institutes, over 32 group homes and foster houses. I became homeless five years ago. (p. 20)*

*I was getting in so many fights with my mom and I didn't want to be that kind of person. I didn't want to be a burden on my family. (p. 17)*

These are not the words of young people who are living on the street on a lark or who can easily return to the comforts of a loving home. They did not leave home by choice; they left because they felt they had run out of choices.

Nothing in these comments even hints at a home and family in which children are loved, respected and offered a sense of security. We must keep in mind that families that do build

<sup>2</sup>The California Research Bureau report, *Voices from the Streets: A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers*, is available at <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/08/08-004.pdf>.



secure attachments for their children are not perfectly happy and calm either, nor without tension and even upheaval at times. Caregivers and children get angry; they sometimes lose their tempers, are preoccupied, impatient, inattentive, overwhelmed, and exhausted. But all of this happens in the context of certainty that caring relationships persist in spite of difficulties, that they can be repaired and restored even when they appear on shaky ground. It is this sense of the robustness of relationships that lays the foundation for mental health – the capacity to manage the inevitable ups and downs of life. (It is also important to note that youth homelessness is not always related to parental detachment, neglect, etc., and the resultant attachment problems that children may experience. There are instances in which parents of homeless youth are searching their hearts and souls, wondering why despite their many efforts they were unable to save their children from life on the street.)

We must also remember that an “insecure attachment,” in and of itself, does not constitute a mental illness or psychiatric disorder.<sup>3</sup> It simply describes a characteristic way of relating to others, particularly caregivers. However, these relational patterns, which were an adaptive response to the very early relationship with caregivers, can become maladaptive when navigating relationships with others in the world beyond the family. This point is particularly important when considering the attitudes of some homeless teens and young adults toward those who want to help them. While service providers and other adults offering assistance may see themselves as positive “caregivers,” homeless youth may not be so sure of their reliability, trustworthiness, or usefulness due to their earlier experiences. They may not eagerly accept offers of help, the options for food

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and shelter or opportunities that we consider important for improving their health, education, employment, or general sense of wellbeing. Some may appear **avoidant**, keeping a wary distance and, perhaps, assuming that what is offered may not be real or worth the trouble.

Others may be **ambivalent**, seeming desperately to want help one day and angrily rejecting it the next. Some homeless youth leave service providers and other adults massively confused – not knowing whether they want anything and, if so, what and on what terms – as they struggle to understand the **disorganization** that seems to pervade their interactions with these youth. While the adults wanting to help may have confidence in the value of what they are offering, some homeless youth may be less certain about whether potential helpers really mean what they say, fearing that their offers are meaningless or may disappear without warning if they move to accept them. Therefore, it is crucial that those working with homeless youth bear constantly in mind the ways in which young people’s attachment patterns may affect their reactions to offers of support or assistance.

The interviews in *Voices from the Street* make evident how infrequently some homeless youth think of turning to adults for help. Considering the comments these young people made about their parents, presumably their earliest caregivers, in light of attachment theory helps us understand why only 13% of these youth said they would turn to service providers for help. Even when homeless youth said they could rely on parents, they frequently indicated they wouldn’t really expect much in the way of contact, let alone help.

<sup>3</sup> Reactive Attachment Disorder, an extremely rare condition, is included in DSM IV, but is not part of this discussion.

*I don't have contact [with my parents]. They told me never to contact them again. That was when I was twelve. (p. 91)*

*My parents are dead... because they were both crack heads and by the time I was born all of my sisters had been runaways and had children. (p. 91)*

*I visit my dad maybe once a year and call my mom every time I get my hands on a free long-distance phone. (p. 91)*

*Probably since me and my mom are a little bit better, I guess if something is really wrong or bad I could call her for help. (p. 88)*

*I can call my father. He gives me money, that's number one. Then pretty much after that, it's myself and that's it! (p. 88)*



At the age of 18, the young man quoted directly above believes he must rely largely on himself – a sentiment that was echoed by fully one-third of the youth participating in this survey. Their comments about self-reliance have a particularly poignant quality when we understand that this attitude is probably born of necessity and may convey a sense of resignation rather than pride.

*I rely on myself, really. That's the only one who's going to get you through it. You're by yourself, really. (p. 89)*

*I usually rely on myself. I've realized that's who I have to rely on. No one else is going to change my situation, no one going to change my life but myself. (p. 89)*

*Far from having a network of caring adults who offer advice and support, these youth perceive that many of the adults they encounter hold them responsible for their homelessness and therefore find them unworthy of assistance.*

Unfortunately, this kind of premature self-reliance often stems from the fact that, even as very young children, these young people had to care for themselves. Without adequate parental care, supervision, advice, and help, these youth learned too early to fend for themselves, rather than how to find the help they need. Sadly, we know their sense of self-reliance is often illusory; these youth may not be able to make it out of homelessness on their own.

### **From Compromised Attachments to the Absence of Networks**

Adolescents and young adults very often depend heavily on the networks their parents and caregivers have built up over years or even generations. Adults in these networks offer not only their personal wisdom but links to other adults who can offer advice, connections to jobs, health care, and educational opportunities – in short, those who can open doors into, and guidance through, the world of adulthood. In contrast, the homeless youth interviewed most frequently cited friends as the group they would lean on: 44% would turn to friends rather than parents, caregivers, service providers, or other adults.<sup>4</sup> Friendships provide important companionship, support, and opportunities for shared experiences. However, friendships are different from networks: friendships keep people

<sup>4</sup>Thirty-three percent of the homeless youth surveyed said they rely primarily on themselves.

close while networks connect people to those beyond the circle of their immediate friends and help people reach out into new communities.

This may be one of the most important barriers to homeless youth finding their way off the streets and into the larger community. They don't expect help from adults and if they do want it, they may not know who to ask or how to mobilize networks that could assist them. Homeless youth likely rely on friends because of proximity and ease of access. Friends also offer a sense of shared experience, belonging, and acceptance they don't easily find in the larger community. Indeed, when asked how they thought people perceived them, the homeless youth surveyed made their sense of being outcasts abundantly clear.

*A lot of people ignore me or yell at me. (p. 43)*

*Lower than dirt. People look at you with contempt and disgust. (p. 43)*

*As the scum of the earth, the lowest of the low. (p. 43)*

*People are just mean. It's life. (p. 43)*

While these statements certainly reflect the actual experiences of homeless youth, they may also reflect the way in which these youth view themselves. Research, clinical practice, and day-to-day experience shows that the world often acts as a mirror for our moods and self-assessment. On our cheerful days we enjoy easy, pleasant interactions with others, while our gloomy moods somehow find their match in the dour expressions of those around us.

Once again, we can look to attachment theory to understand why this would be so. Children learn who they are from their earliest caregivers. Children who hear loving words, experience comforting touch, and see smiling faces in response to their bids for attention come to know themselves as people who are worthy of attention and have the capacity to make others happy – just by being alive. Conversely, children whose bids for attention are met with harsh

words, painful touch, and angry, depressed, or simply uninterested faces may eventually come to see themselves as unworthy or useless—a perspective often reinforced for homeless youth by their interactions with adults. Far from having a network of caring adults who offer advice and support, these youth perceive that many of the adults they encounter hold them responsible for their homelessness and therefore find them unworthy of assistance.

None of this is to suggest that those desiring to help are doomed to fail if they don't always respond immediately or perfectly. That is no

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more possible than it is for parents to be perfectly attuned and responsive to their young children. It is, however, a reminder that if we want to succeed in helping homeless youth, we must be willing to try and

try again until we finally get it "right". With homeless youth who have experienced early insecure relationships that undermined their self-knowledge and confidence in relationships, it may take a very long time.

It may also be difficult for homeless youth to send clear messages about what they need and want. If their cues were consistently misread, ignored, or punished as children they may feel uncertain about whether they really know what they need, confused about whether they didn't clearly convey those needs, or convinced that what they think they need is bad or burdensome to the adults they encounter.

With this in mind, we can understand why youth who have started life from an insecure

relationship with their caregivers may be wary of relationships with other adults and hesitant to reach out. These young people very often do not tell us how our behavior affects them because they have had very little experience with adults who listen and adjust their own behavior or attitudes, rather than expecting the youth to adapt. Typically, these young people simply turn away without explanation, or at times, they may respond with anger and belligerence.

*Perhaps most insidiously, some programs require homeless youth to leave during the day...indeed, it is hard to understand how putting a young person on the street for the day could be seen as an antidote to homelessness.*



It is absolutely crucial we understand that, almost without exception, their anger masks profound hurt and self-blame. When parents do not respond appropriately to small children, when they turn a depressed face or deaf ear to a child's gleeful greeting, when they respond to cries with verbal or physical attacks, the children blame themselves. They do not have the luxury of blaming the people on whom they are totally dependent for care; only children in secure relationships have that luxury, because they know – in the very depth of their being – that the relationship will withstand their anger. Most homeless youth, by definition, do not have those

secure relationships—at least not with the adults and networks most young people can rely on.

## Viewing Programs for Homeless Youth through the Lens of Attachment

Not surprisingly, most of the youth surveyed for *Voices from the Street* did not have the kinds of relationships that allowed them to express feelings without fear of retaliation or the loss of the relationship. We can hear echoes of these fears in their comments about some of their more problematic experiences with programs and services for homeless youth.

*...I had a terrible experience. Because I needed them and it was embarrassing that no one wanted to help and they made it such an ugly experience. (p. 105)*

*...I'm afraid of getting laughed at. (p. 104)*

*They didn't do nothing. They expected too much, and they didn't see that I went into that program with nothing. (p. 104)*

*...sometimes staff have their own little issues and they try to take it out on clients... I had some staff say to me, 'If you want we can take this outside.' (p. 102)*

*Any shelter is like prison... but I guess it's better than being on the streets. You got food and a place to sleep. (p. 99)*

*The worst experience I've had was when the staff expects you to totally change who you were five minutes ago and act like your life is perfect, and punish you; they take away your food, they take away your shelter if you don't do what you're told. (p. 98)*

Clearly these young people feel that shelters and other services can exact a very high emotional price and that the responsibility for adaptation falls to them, rather than to service providers. While we can appreciate the attractiveness to service providers of consistent policies and procedures, rules are often perceived by homeless youth as rigid requirements that they must meet in order to

have even their most basic needs met. Youth often experience these programs as identical to unresponsive parents who could not or would not adapt to their children or provide for their needs, but instead demanded that their children accommodate their own needs. In other words, as children they had to take care of their caretakers and it often feels to them as if they are once again required to prove themselves worthy before receiving the care they so desperately need. In the context of attachment theory, we can understand why these issues emerged from the survey as particularly problematic for homeless youth.

*It is essential that those working with homeless youth have, at the very least, a basic understanding of the impact of trauma, particularly the ways in which traumatized young people are vulnerable to overwhelming memories and unmanageable feelings.*

Curfews, which are often imposed on youth in shelters, appear to have meaning beyond themselves. More than an expected time of arrival, curfews also represent the possibility of being locked out. (Ironically, for teenagers living with their parents, the consequence of breaking curfew is often being “grounded,” i.e. not being allowed to leave home.) In addition to standing as a reminder for many youth of the experience of being kicked out of their own homes, curfews can also provoke anxiety because of prior experience being locked in for the night – perhaps in juvenile hall or jail, or perhaps trapped in a house with a physically- or sexually-abusive family.

The requirement they comply with curfews is but one instance of what many homeless youth perceive as a pervasive tendency of program policies to infantilize them. For better or for worse, many of these youth have tended to their emotional and physical needs for many years before their living situation became unstable. We

can safely assume that very few of these young people routinely experienced leaving for school with a belly warm from a lovingly prepared breakfast or regularly settled into a comfortable sleep after bedtime stories or a late-night talk with parents. Then, homeless youth find in programs intended to meet their needs that they are required to surrender the independence and self-sufficiency on which they have come to rely in the absence of the care adults have consistently failed to provide -- simply in order to have a meal and a place to sleep.

*At times you stay even when you know it's probably better for your psyche to leave. Not better for you physically, but better for your psyche to leave. You are basically harming yourself. You're putting up and making a shell, coating yourself. Shelling yourself. And you are (becoming) more defensive... They have certain criteria that you have to follow... You have to give up some of your personality in order to be housed. (p. 100)*

Finally, and perhaps most insidiously, some programs require homeless youth to leave during the day, thereby continuing their homeless status as well as replicating the trauma of being kicked out of their families. For most people, leaving home for school or work doesn't mean they are not allowed to return until a



specified time; home is always available as a safe haven: the door can be opened when the time is right, not because the clock strikes the magic moment.

*We're homeless. It doesn't make any sense. What, you're going to kick us out? We're going to be right there in the front yard, basically. It doesn't make any sense. (p. 98)*



Indeed, it is hard to understand how putting a young person on the street for the day could be seen as an antidote to homelessness.

### Meeting the Attachment Needs of Homeless Youth

In securely attached families, parents and children work together throughout childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood to secure a mutually satisfying relationship – one that can meet the needs of its members through developmental changes and the vagaries imposed by the external world. As we learned from the youth surveyed for *Voices from the Street*, most homeless youth do not come from such families, and many were turned onto the streets by their families when they had barely left childhood.

To repeat, any attempts to address the needs of homeless youth must take their histories into account. As with all of us, their earliest patterns of attachment continue to influence their moods, behavior, attitudes and relationships. When homeless youth approach (or are approached by) service providers, the encounter is often fraught with the expectation that these relationships will repeat their earlier, unsatisfactory or traumatic relationships with caregivers.

We cannot undo those relationships; we cannot create happy childhoods, but we can generate programs that recognize that relationships cannot be rushed, and that preparation for life as a satisfied, self-sufficient adult occurs in the context of relationships that are built over a long period of time.

Homeless youth may not need many years of services to begin to heal from the trauma of their early years, but they will certainly require many months of compassionate attention from adults who are willing to listen and to try their best to develop relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. It is essential that those working with homeless youth have, at the very least, a basic understanding of the impact of trauma, particularly the ways in

*When traumatized youth "misbehave", they need to be held close...They need programs that can keep them safe until they can do that for themselves.*

which traumatized young people are vulnerable to overwhelming memories and unmanageable feelings. Experiences that evoke earlier experiences of abuse, neglect, or abandonment are not only disturbing in and of themselves, but are also re-traumatizing for these young people.

### My Friend's Place: Recognizing that Past Trauma Affects Current Behavior

Programs that recognize that homeless youth bring their traumatic histories with them routinely consider their policies in the light of relationships and the impact of trauma. Erin Casey, a social worker, eloquently describes the way in which an understanding of traumatized relationships informs the work at My Friend's Place, a drop-in center in Los Angeles.

*Drop-in centers and shelters need to ask: Is cutting a young person off from safe shelter and basic necessities the most appropriate,*

*compassionate, and trauma-informed consequence for disruptive or otherwise negative behavior? Does it build trust? Does it create space for real change? (p. 101)*

Clearly, the program at My Friend's Place recognizes that change occurs in the context of relationships. Young children learn to follow the rules of the family in order to please their parents; later they behave well to maintain good and positive relationships with teachers, coaches, ministers, and other important people in their communities. Indeed, these adults not only teach them the rules, but help them to follow them, recognizing that it takes time and practice to learn the rules of any game.

Successful programs such as My Friend's Place recognize that insecure attachments and trauma often coexist. Trauma severely interferes with the neuropsychological capacity to regulate feelings and behavior. The capacity for self-regulation, along with the capacity for self-soothing, is developed in the context of a relationship with a regulating and soothing other.



When traumatized youth misbehave, they need to be held close – like the teenager who is kept

safely at home as a consequence of breaking curfew. They need programs that can keep them safe until they can do that for themselves.

### **At the Crossroads: Providing Unconditional Support and Acceptance**

Most homeless youth have had little experience with unconditional love and acceptance. We learned from their interviews in *Voices from the Street* that they have had much more experience with being mistreated and unfairly judged. Programs that recognize this aspect of their histories and the impact it has on their attitudes and behavior are much more likely to devise nonjudgmental approaches to supporting homeless youth. Rob Gitin, director of At the Crossroads, a Bay Area street-counseling collaborative, describes such an approach.

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*...we wanted to create a program that reaches people regardless of the decisions they're making, regardless of what kind of structure they want or don't want in their lives – that just tries to support them and help them identify and achieve their goals. We don't have a pre-existing agenda with our clients, where we say 'you need to do this,' or 'you need to do that.' We just try to get them and say 'How can we be of support?' (p. 102)*

This approach resembles what many parents find effective in raising adolescents. We know that adolescence is a time of experimentation – a phase in one's life that allows for trying on different roles and trying out different behavior. Even though it can be hair-raising at times, many parents of adolescents recognize that the "school of hard knocks" is often more effective than parental advice, but that parental support is essential to help young people navigate this important and often confusing period. This is not to suggest that parents should ignore or

give tacit approval to dangerous or self-injurious behavior, or that adults working with homeless youth should behave indifferently when youth act in ways that could cause harm to themselves or others. Indifference is quite distinct from a position of nonjudgmental support. These young people need to know that adult support is not contingent on pre-conceived ideas about how they should behave.

*Indifference is quite distinct from a position of nonjudgmental support. These young people need to know that adult support is not contingent on pre-conceived ideas about how they should behave.*

**A Home Within: Trusting, Consistent Relationships on Youths' Terms**

Careful observations of behavior offer a means of understanding emotional

make-up, current relationships and past ways of relating. A Home Within is a San Francisco-based program that offers long-term, pro-bono mental health services to current and former foster youth, many of whom who have had periods of homelessness and all of whom who have experienced difficulties in their earliest relationships. Therapists who participate in A Home Within know how important it is for these young people to have a consistent relationship that doesn't disappear when they do. Unlike publicly-funded therapists who must often close cases when their young clients miss too many sessions, the therapists who volunteer their time through A Home Within can keep an opening for as long as they want. Adults need to be available as long as they're needed – "for as long as it takes." It simply makes no sense for relationships to end because a child reaches a certain age or moves from one category of housing to another.

A Home Within also knows how important it is for youth who have been abandoned to have the opportunity to leave someone else behind – without fear of reprisal or retaliation. The young

people who come out of foster care after three, six, or ten different placements often need to miss several sessions or come to sessions erratically before they can be absolutely certain that the therapist will really be there at the agreed-upon time. The experience of keeping someone waiting differs dramatically from knowing that no one is waiting for you – just as the experience of latch-key kids choosing not to go home after school differs sharply from that of children who choose not to go home knowing that a parent is there waiting. Adults working with homeless youth need to remain available even when youth tell them they're not needed. They need to show up when they say they will – even when the youth don't.

**Conclusion**

Each of the three programs highlighted above recognizes that homeless youth are not all alike and that one size does not fit all. Successful programs recognize the importance of meeting the individual needs of homeless youth. The needs of the 14 year-old who has recently run away from home to escape being sexually abused by her mother's new boyfriend are very different from those of the 21 year-old who has been living on the streets for five years and prostituting himself as the only means he believes he has to survive.

When designing programs to serve homeless youth effectively, we need to remember – above all – that relationships beget relationships. By their behavior, homeless youth tell us a great deal about how they have been treated. Initially, many will expect us to treat them in the same ways they were treated in their earliest relationships. Only over time can they learn, from our interactions with them, that they merit care, compassion, and respect. We might follow the sage advice of Jeree Pawl, a leader in the treatment of very young children: "treat others as you would have others treat others" (Pawl, 1995). When we do follow that advice, we will develop and support programs and policies that promote healthy relationships for and with young people. Without those, nothing else really matters.



## Using Attachment Theory to Provide Effective Programs for Homeless Youth

- ❖ **Effective programs promote stable, caring, respectful relationships.**
  - *They recognize that building relationships comes before acquiring skills.*
  - *They provide sufficient financial and emotional support to hire and retain staff.*
  - *Without support, staff experience secondary trauma and youth are re-traumatized by high levels of staff turnover.*
  
- ❖ **Effective programs are nonjudgmental and nonpunitive.**
  - *They recognize that praise is much more effective than punishment in changing behavior.*
  - *They create a safe haven from the negative experiences these young people have endured before and during their lives on the street.*
  
- ❖ **Effective programs provide individualized services based on careful assessment of the particular needs of each young person.**
  - *They recognize that comprehensive assessments are done over time.*
  - *They provide opportunities for youth to develop the trust necessary to open up to adults and for adults to earn the respect necessary to offer guidance.*



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