

Runaway Youth _

A. Knowledge

Virtually all children are from families with abnormal family dynamics: 20% from intact families

Etiology of teen homelessness

- Parental alcoholism and substance abuse in 25%
- Lack of economic independence of teens implies they become homeless due to family stress
- Family stresses
- History of child abuse (up to 65% with physical abuse)
- Sexual abuse
- Substance abuse and runaways

Street survival

- Prostitution: hetero/bi/homosexual; exchanging sex for food, shelter, or drugs
- Living in abandoned buildings
- Shoplifting
- Drug dealing (especially younger children running drugs/money for older "friends")
- Effects of older street youth on teens (exploitation, developing their own sense of family)

Epidemiology: numbers of homeless/runaway teens

Psychological issues:

- Denial
- Lack of self esteem
- Depression
- Isolation
- External locus of control: feel that they are unable to control both their environments and lives
- Learned helplessness

Poor school and social adjustment; truancy, inconsistent attendance

History of failed interventions on their behalf in past

Mistrust of service providers

HIV infection/other STD's: prevalence/incidence

Suicidal behavioral/ideation

B. Skills

Interviewing technique - open ended questions

Ability to operate/converse at teen's level without being judgmental or condescending

C Attitudes

Empathy for the situation of runaway youth
Acknowledgment that most youths have legitimate fears about returning home
Respect for their opinions
Acceptance of alternative sexual orientation (many adolescents are confused about their sexuality)
Use of gender neutral questions

D. Barriers

Homophobia
Lack of awareness of the problem by providers
Youths are often distrustful of providers
Lack of comfort with issues of sexuality

E. Advocacy

Supporting guidelines which incorporate "family mental health" assessment as part of routine primary care for children
Advocacy for provision of adequate shelters, counseling, therapy
Street outreach to prevent exploitation, provide education

References

- Council Report, Health Care Needs of Homeless and Runaway Youths, JAMA Vol. 262 n. 10, Sept. 1989, p. 1358.
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Deisher RW, Farrow JA. Recognizing and dealing with alienated youth in clinical practice . Pediatric Annals. 1986: 15:759-764.