Holistic Strategies for Addressing Complex Needs

Adoption Competent Mental Health · https://bridges4mentalhealth.org/hub/adoption-competence/youth-with-complex-mental-health-needs/

This brief emphasizes the importance of language when discussing the mental health needs of children and youth in child welfare systems. It highlights how terms like "complex mental health needs" can inadvertently stigmatize or misrepresent the challenges these young individuals face. Instead, reframing discussions to focus on "unmet needs" shifts the attention to systemic gaps rather than blaming the child. This approach encourages compassionate, solution-oriented conversations and drives improvements in care systems to better support these youth. It also underscores the significance of adopting a holistic approach that considers both individual and environmental factors in providing effective care and support.

Holistic Strategies to Address Complex Needs

HOLISTIC STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING COMPLEX NEEDS

Before addressing the unique mental health needs of children and youth with child welfare experience, it is essential for child welfare professionals and parents/caregivers to reflect on the language used to describe these needs. Language matters; terms like "complex mental health needs" may unintentionally imply that a child's needs are overly complicated or that there is something inherently "wrong" with them.

Jaxx, a young adult with lived experience in foster care, shares this perspective: "For me, it was really hard to hear at first. I have always been told I am difficult to deal with, I'm a burden. It took a long time for me to separate myself from my diagnosis."

Reframing how we discuss youth with mental health needs is critical. For example, shifting from terms like "high acuity" to "unmet needs" redirects attention to systemic gaps rather than the child *(Note: we use the term complex needs in this resource because it is widely used in the literature).* This reframing highlights that the challenge lies in the system's inability to meet all a child's needs, rather than placing blame on the child. Systems should assess their own capacities and engage in transparent conversations with partners about what they can realistically provide. This approach fosters more compassionate, solution-focused discussions and drives systemic improvements. Defining youth from a data-informed perspective—understanding who they are, what services they need, and identifying gaps—can guide more targeted interventions. By focusing on progress, such as moving from a baseline to an improved baseline, systems can better track outcomes and adjust services accordingly.



Sepherina, a young adult with lived experience, reflects on complex needs in a blog post: "Youth in foster care face a unique set of challenges, including navigating the intersection of multiple diagnoses, emotional stressors, and the lingering impact of their environment. For them, addressing these needs requires more than just medication or therapy — it calls for understanding, compassion, and a system that supports their holistic well-being."

Supporting youth with unmet needs requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both individual and environmental factors. An adoption competent approach recognizes the impact of the foster care experience and centers on healing and understanding. As Sepherina wrote, "These young people have lived through experiences that deeply affect their mental health, and they need services that reflect the depth of their struggles."