

## YOUTH WITH COMPLEX MENTAL HEALTH 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.”

## Effective Strategies for Working With Youth With Complex Mental Health Needs

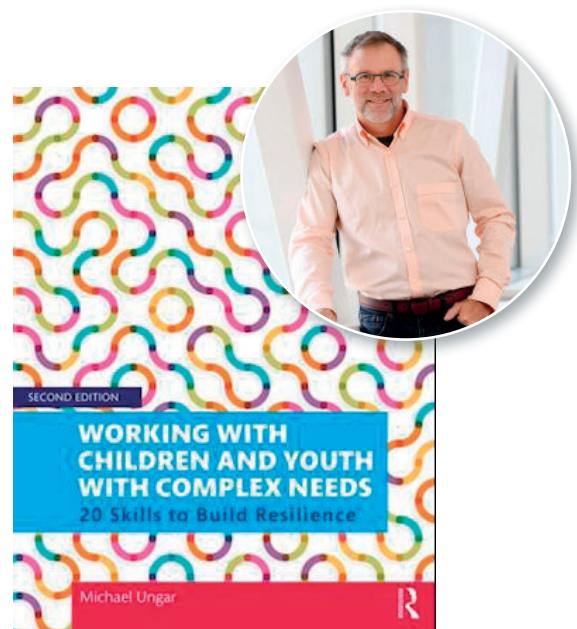
- ▶ **1. Build Resilience:** Focus on developing skills that enhance resilience in young people. This includes fostering social connections, teaching problem-solving skills, and promoting positive self-identity.
- ▶ **2. Engage Extended Family:** Involving extended family can provide additional support and resources for the youth. It is important to engage them in the therapeutic process and consider their role in the youth's life.
- ▶ **3. Understand Maladaptive Coping Strategies:** Recognize that some maladaptive coping strategies may be necessary for the youth's survival in challenging environments. Help parents and teachers understand this as part of supporting the youth.
- ▶ **4. Systemic Practices:** Implement systemic practices that go beyond individual therapy. This includes working with schools, community organizations, and other stakeholders to create a supportive network around the youth.
- ▶ **5. Customized Care:** Provide high-quality, customized care that addresses the specific emotional and behavioral health needs of the youth. This may include short-term stays in residential treatment facilities when necessary.
- ▶ **6. Reduce Congregate Care:** Safely reduce the use of congregate care by shifting towards less restrictive, more family-like settings. This aligns with current trends and research advocating for the well-being of youth in care.

Dr. Michael Unger provides extensive insights into working with children and youth with complex needs in *Working with children and youth with complex needs: 20 skills to build resilience*.

These strategies, among others, are part of a detailed framework developed by Dr. Unger. It is essential to tailor these strategies to the individual needs of youth, ensuring that they receive the support and care necessary to thrive.

While addressing unmet needs, we can also reduce their prevalence by improving systems of care that emphasize early intervention, prevention, and responsiveness to individual needs. The National Center can collaborate with States, Tribal Nations, and Territories to achieve these goals.

1. **Early Intervention and Prevention**
2. **Building Responsive Care Systems**
3. **Strengthening Community-Based Supports**
4. **Policy and Systemic Changes**
5. **Creating a Culture of Mental Well-being**



- ▶ *Dr. Michael Unger - Working With Children and Youth With Complex Needs: 20 Skills To Build Resilience.*



## ▶ 1. Early Intervention and Prevention

**Focus on Early Childhood:** Investing in mental health support during early childhood can reduce the likelihood of more severe issues developing later. Programs like early childhood mental health consultations, parent training, and school-based interventions can identify and address emerging issues before they escalate.

**Universal Screening:** Regular mental health screenings in schools and community settings can help detect issues early. This allows for timely intervention, reducing the risk of these issues becoming more severe over time.

**Promoting Mental Health Literacy:** Educating parents, teachers, and the community regarding mental health can help in recognizing early warning signs and in reducing stigma, which encourages help-seeking behavior.

## ▶ 2. Building Responsive Care Systems

**Integrated Care Models:** A coordinated approach that combines physical and mental health care can ensure that individuals receive comprehensive support. This can include models where primary care providers work alongside mental health professionals to provide holistic care.

**Adoption Competent Care:** Many young people with unmet mental health needs have experienced separation, loss, and/or trauma. Adopting a competent approach ensures that care providers recognize and respond to the impact from these issues, fostering environments that promote safety and trust.

**Cultural Competency:** Care systems need to be responsive to the cultural, social, and economic contexts of those they serve.

## ▶ 3. Strengthening Community-Based Supports

**Community Mental Health Programs:** Investing in community-based mental health services makes it easier for individuals to access help in their own neighborhoods. This can include drop-in centers, peer support groups, and mobile crisis units.

**Collaboration with Schools and Community Organizations:** Schools and local organizations can be vital partners in providing mental health support, offering counseling services, social-emotional learning programs, and safe spaces for youth.

**Family-Centered Approaches:** Engaging families in the care process ensures that they have the knowledge and skills to support their children at home, creating a stable and nurturing environment that promotes mental well-being.

## ▶ 4. Policy and Systemic Changes

**Funding and Resource Allocation:** Increasing funding for mental health services, particularly for preventive programs, can ensure that more individuals receive the care they need before reaching a crisis point.

**Reducing Barriers to Access:** Simplifying access to care by reducing paperwork, providing transportation support, or offering telehealth options can make services more accessible. This is particularly important for rural or low-income communities.

**Data and Outcome Tracking:** Using data to track outcomes helps to refine and improve care systems. By identifying what works and where gaps exist, providers can adapt their approaches to be more effective over time.



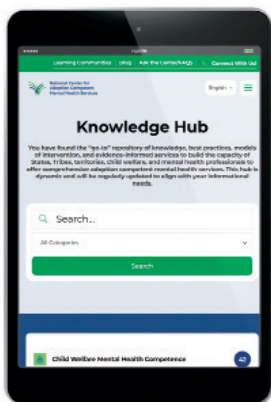
## ► 5. Creating a Culture of Mental Well-being

**Public Awareness Campaigns:** Addressing stigma through public awareness campaigns can normalize conversations about mental health, making it easier for people to seek help without fear of judgment.

**Promoting Resilience and Coping Skills:** Teaching skills like emotional regulation, stress management, and healthy coping strategies in schools and community programs can empower individuals to manage their mental health more effectively.

These strategies work best when they are implemented as part of a coordinated effort that includes policymakers, healthcare providers, schools, families, and community leaders. By focusing on prevention, building responsive care systems, and ensuring that support is accessible, we can reduce the prevalence of unmet mental health needs and create a more resilient and healthy society.

Supporting mental health in foster care goes beyond addressing symptoms; it requires a deep understanding of the lasting effects of trauma and the multifaceted challenges faced by youth in care. Foster youth themselves emphasize the need for a holistic, personalized approach to mental health—one that prioritizes their lived experiences, addresses their unique needs, and equips them with the resources to flourish. Sepherina said it best “systems of care [need] to be compassionate, supportive, and adaptable to the complex realities youth face. Their mental health is not just another checklist item, but a vital part of their journey toward healing and stability.”



For more resources on unmet mental health needs of children in child welfare, check out our Knowledge Hub.

► [Visit the Knowledge Hub](#)

## State Examples/Best Practices

**Indiana Mental Health Integration:** In Indiana, the Governor’s Commission on High-Acuity Youth unites leaders from various sectors to tackle the challenges faced by youth with unmet needs. This collaborative effort highlights the critical need to integrate mental health into child welfare practices. Children with unmet needs often require specialized care due to the complexity of their diagnoses and life circumstances. This initiative focuses on providing the necessary support to promote their overall well-being.

**Vermont Mental Health Payment Reform:** Vermont has built a collaboration between child welfare, mental health, education, and juvenile justice systems to allow for braided funding to serve children holistically. These collaborations help systems work together more efficiently and provide children with the comprehensive services they need.

**Virginia Safe and Sound Task Force:** Virginia created the Task Force to address the placement needs of youth with unmet needs. The Task Force brings together State, local, and private partners for a multi-system approach because a coordinated, aligned response is necessary. The Task Force's three phases aim to secure safe placements for displaced youth, expand kinship placements, and implement policy changes to address root causes of gaps and needs in the child welfare system that affect all youth and families. 🌱