

# Putting Research to Work for Families



**Focus:**  
Civilian

## Rules or No Rules? Three Strategies for Engagement with Young People in Mandated Services

Ungar, M., & Ikeda, J. (2017). Rules or no rules? Three strategies for engagement with young people in mandated services. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 34(3), 259-267. doi:10.1007/s10560-016-0456-2

**SUMMARY:** Relationships between at-risk youth and their mandated service professionals can be supportive, challenging, or both. This study examined youth's experiences with their mandated service professionals to explore what behaviors of professionals led to youth's experience of support and engagement. Results indicate that there is a spectrum of behaviors and roles which professionals can take that lead to successful relationships.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Three different roles were discovered that professionals typically embodied: informal supporter, administrator, and caregiver; each role served a function.
- Informal supporters were more friend-like and often did not enforce rules, and youth spoke most positively about these professionals.
- Administrators typically enforced rules and did little relationship-building, and youth consistently spoke poorly of the way these rules were enforced, even when it was clearly for their safety (e.g., lockdown of a correctional unit when a knife was missing from the kitchen).
- Caregivers enforced rules in flexible ways that allowed some manner of negotiation, and youth reported appreciating the flexibility, though often still resisted the rules.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS:

- Develop flexible rules, whenever possible, in order to facilitate relationship-building with youth
- Collaborate with other professionals to determine appropriate application of rules that mirrors the experience of non-service-receiving youth as closely as possible

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM LEADERS:

- Partner with youth to develop rules with their input whenever possible
- Engage youth in workshops that aim to improve communication skills with their professional service providers

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS:

- Promote the development of structures within youth services that allow flexibility of rules when appropriate
- Recommend partnerships between various youth service agencies to facilitate consistent enforcement of rules when multiple service agencies work with the same youth

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## METHODS

- Youth were selected to participate from a larger study examining risk and resilience in youth receiving services such as child welfare, mental health, juvenile corrections, alternative education, and community-based programs for youth at risk.
- Youth with the most extreme scores on risk and resilience measures (i.e., both high risk/high resilience and high risk/low resilience youth) were invited to participate in interviews for this study. At least two males and two females were invited to participate from each site that referred participants.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted by trained research assistants and the interview guide changed over time as the interviews progressed and themes were gathered.
- Interviews were coded by research assistants individually and discussed as a group.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 61 youth (27 female, 34 male).
- Youth were 12-19 years old (M=16 years, SD = 1.75 years). No additional demographic information was provided.
- Youth qualified to participate if they were currently receiving one service and had received at least one additional service in the past six months.

## LIMITATIONS

- Selected participants (i.e., those at the extremes of risk and resilience) may differ from youth moderate on risk and resilience in their experiences or responses, which may influence findings.
- No race/ethnicity or socioeconomic data were provided, and depending on sample demographics the results may differ from other populations; therefore, generalizability is unknown.
- Potential participants who declined to participate may have differed from those who did participate, limiting validity.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Examine whether professionals fall into one category consistently or switch roles over time or depending on circumstances
- Discover how professionals whose behavior places them in certain categories experience their relationships with the youth they serve
- Explore whether youth report of relationship strength with their professionals results in more positive outcomes for those youth

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

**Design**



**Appropriate**  
Research Plan  
and Sample

**Methods**



**Appropriate**  
Measurement  
and Analysis

**Limitations**



**Several**

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:  
<https://reachfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>