

National
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RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT:

*A Vital Component
of the Behavioral
Healthcare
Continuum*

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Residential Treatment: A Vital Component of the Behavioral Healthcare Continuum

Children with Serious Behavioral Health Conditions Need the Full Continuum of Care

Behavioral health conditions are chronic conditions with symptom severity that vary among individuals and over time. Policymakers and government officials at the state and federal levels must take action to ensure that a full continuum with different levels of intensity of care is widely available for children and adolescents.

This continuum should include outpatient, intensive outpatient, residential treatment, and inpatient care. Regular outpatient services with a mental health professional can be sufficient when extensive case management or care coordination are not needed. Intensive outpatient and partial hospitalization or day treatment programs can provide more intensive levels of care with multiple types of therapy, more frequent sessions with mental health professionals, and clinically informed care coordination and case management.

For children and adolescents with more serious behavioral health conditions, residential treatment settings can provide a more comprehensive array of therapies and more contact with specialized providers. Inpatient care, the most intensive level of care, is generally reserved for those in a crisis state and provides monitoring and observation on a 24-hour basis, with medications and intensive therapies aimed at managing the crisis and decreasing risk of harm.ⁱ

Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities Play a Critical Role

Residential treatment provides a necessary level of care for children and adolescents with significant needs, such as those at risk of hurting themselves or others or who have been diagnosed with serious behavior problems. Children and adolescents requiring this level of care often have difficulty relating successfully to others at home and in school and are at risk of dropping out of school and/or becoming involved in the criminal justice system. Psychiatric residential treatment can provide the necessary expertise and resources that the child welfare, juvenile justice, and education systems frequently lack.

The admission criteria for residential treatment reflect the severity of the behavioral health conditions treated in these settings. For residential treatment to be considered medically necessary, and covered by insurers or healthcare coverage programs, a child or adolescent must be at risk of self-injury or danger to self, physical aggression, assault, or danger to others, or disruptive and destructive acts in the community.

Some of the children and adolescents who need this level of care have suffered hardships and abuse, including multiple failed community placements through child welfare programs. This experience can be traumatic and can cause increased emotional and behavioral problems.ⁱⁱ Children and adolescents in foster care are at heightened risk of dropping out of school, at a rate of 75%, according to one study.ⁱⁱⁱ They are also at greater risk of drug abuse.^{iv} Rates of delinquency^v and arrest^{vi} among these children and adolescents are also much higher.

For example, below is a client overview in one NABH member's residential treatment facility:

- 32% of patients had a recent history of serious suicidal ideation and/or attempt in the past month, and 54% had experienced this in their lifetime;
- 39% of patients had a history of self-harm requiring more than basic first aid;
- 31% of patients had a history of abuse and/or neglect resulting in formal investigation and/or removal from the home;
- 13% of patients are currently under family services supervision or custody; and
- 62% of patients had a history of physical violence or aggression toward others.

The goal of psychiatric residential treatment is to provide care to children and adolescents with significant social and emotional needs in a non-hospital, highly structured, and therapeutic environment. These settings provide a safe place where individuals can gain stability, support, and treatment for mental diagnoses, substance abuse, intellectual/developmental disabilities, sexual conduct disorders, and other disabilities that require stabilization.

Multidisciplinary teams of clinically licensed professionals (including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, special education teachers, and activity therapists) provide an array of services and supports, including diagnostic processes that address psychiatric, social, and educational needs and individualized assessment, treatment planning, and aftercare involving the child and family. Individual, group, and family therapies are designed to address delays in cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Services are focused on supporting problem-solving skills and self-management to help children and adolescents learn how to manage their conditions. Education and support services are tailored to a child's grade level, learning style, and individual capabilities. In addition, services are provided to support children and adolescents as they transition out of residential treatment.

Many children and adolescents have been prescribed multiple psychoactive medications when they are admitted to residential treatment facilities. These settings offer a safe, structured environment and sufficient time to reassess medication regimens and initiate tapering. These facilities also administer interventions to teach children and adolescents with serious behavioral health conditions self-regulatory skills that can serve as alternatives to medication.

Residential treatment facilities provide a nurturing, safe environment, improve socialization skills, prevent out-of-home placements, improve academic achievement, increase self-esteem, and prevent juvenile justice involvement. These settings help children and adolescents learn and practice pro-social behaviors, including preparing for the transition to adulthood. These settings also provide care and coordinate services for their patients as they transition back to their homes and communities.^{vii}

Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities are Subject to Strict Oversight Requirements

Psychiatric residential treatment facilities provide 24-hour therapeutically planned behavioral health interventions in a highly supervised and structured group living and active learning environment. These healthcare settings are subject to external monitoring on validated standards and independent auditing of potential safety issues. State agencies license and regulate these treatment settings, and nationally recognized entities such as the Joint Commission and the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities, or CARF, accredit them. There are mechanisms in these settings to prevent self-harm and harm to others as well as opportunities for adolescents and staff to report problems.

Education Services and Supports are Key Components of Residential Treatment Settings for Children and Adolescents

Ensuring children and adolescents with behavioral health conditions can maintain their education is also critically important. Behavioral healthcare services in schools can improve access to treatment while

providing necessary support for those with less serious mental health and substance use disorders. Moreover, some behavioral healthcare providers have developed specialized therapeutic schools for children and adolescents who need more intensive, education-focused supports.

Residential treatment settings provide education services tailored to address the needs of children and adolescents with more serious behavioral health conditions. Most of these children and adolescents have struggled in regular school settings and would not be able to succeed without the support these centers provide.

For most children and adolescents with serious behavioral health conditions, distance learning does not work without high degrees of support. Residential treatment settings have staff who are professionally trained to provide this support and to tailor education to meet the needs of children and adolescents with serious behavioral health conditions.

Data Show Improved Outcomes for Children and Adolescents Who Receive Services for Serious Behavioral Health Conditions

Children and adolescents who receive care in psychiatric residential treatment programs tend to have more severe symptoms.^{viii} Research studies indicate that adolescents who received care in high-quality residential treatment settings had significantly fewer problems and negative behaviors over time, and adolescents with more serious problems showed greater improvement.^{ix} Residential treatment has been shown to be effective at improving outcomes for children and adolescents with severe mental health conditions, such as anxiety,^x obsessive-compulsive disorder,^{xi} and trauma.^{xii} In a large study of adolescents in residential care in Illinois, adolescents who were diagnosed with conduct disorder made statistically significant improvement in problem behaviors during an episode of residential care.^{xiii}

Furthermore, 2019 outcome data from an NABH member with a number of residential treatment facilities show that more than 75% of adolescents experienced statistically meaningful improvement due to the care they received in a residential treatment program.^{xiv} These data also show that 86% of 3,103 adolescents improved between admission to discharge from residential treatment.^{xv} Parents and guardians express high levels of satisfaction with special education services provided in these settings and 87% of 1,266 parents and guardians surveyed were pleased with residential treatment program education services in 2019.^{xvi}

Adolescents who receive care in residential treatment programs are much more likely to graduate from high school (90% compared with 50% in foster care).^{xvii} One psychiatric healthcare system awarded 211 general education development (GED) high school equivalent diplomas in 2019 and 203 GEDs in 2020. These GED results offer a critical piece of information, as the children and adolescents who receive treatment in these settings generally struggle in school and would not be able to succeed without the intensive special education services and supports these settings provide.

Conclusion

Residential treatment settings offer effective treatment for children and adolescents with more serious behavioral health conditions. It is critical to improve access to this level of care. For more information, please contact [John Snook](#), director of government relations and strategic initiatives at NABH.

ⁱ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Child and Adolescent Service Intensity Instrument, information about this tool is available at https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Member_Resources/Practice_Information/CASII.aspx.

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