



Co-creating insights into professionals' empathy toward youth in residential youth care

How youth co-researchers are reshaping how we study empathy in residential care

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Why study empathy in residential youth care?

The empathy paradox
Youth who may need empathic care most may receive the least sensitive caregiving from youth care professionals (Moses, 2000).

A dynamic view of empathy
Empathy is not a fixed professional trait.

Empathy emerges within interactions and is shaped by youth-, professional-, and organizational factors.



Our study

Youth

Professionals

Managers

9 focusgroups
3 per stakeholder group
6-8 participants per group
+ embedded Participatory Action Research

What do we want to understand?
Empathy is widely considered central to helping relationships, yet we know little about what enables professionals to remain empathic in residential youth care.

1 **CONDITIONS**
Which youth-, professional-, and organizational conditions enable or hinder professionals' empathy?

2 **CO-CREATION**
What can we learn from studying empathy *with* youth rather than only about youth?

We combine experiential, professional and scientific knowledge.

Youth broadened our lens on empathy

Traditional lens (literature)
Understand Feel Respond

↓

Youth added
Feeling seen & understood Safety, trust & connection Curiosity & attunement
Breakdowns & repair The professional as a person Context & change over time

CO-CREATING THE RESEARCH WITH THE EMPaThYOUTH TEAM

We started with...

Research concepts
A literature-based understanding of empathy

Core dimensions
Understanding (cognitive empathy)
Feeling (affective empathy)
Responding (behavioral empathy)

Draft topic guide
Mainly verbal discussion

Researcher-informed starting point

Youth co-researchers changed

QUESTIONS – Abstract → Concrete situations

LANGUAGE – Academic → Accessible

PARTICIPATION – Talk, draw, write, map, interactive

FOCUS – Not only what staff do, but how contact feels for youth

Co-created focus group design

WHAT MAY SHAPE EMPATHIC CONTACT?
Three levels guide our analysis of enabling and hindering conditions:

YOUTH – for example:

- Trust
- Previous experiences
- Ways of connecting

PROFESSIONAL – for example:

- Curiosity
- Authenticity
- Self-reflection

ORGANIZATION – for example:

- Time
- Team stability
- Space for reflection

WHAT ARE WE HEARING SO FAR?

A key tension

Is more closeness always more empathic?
What feels supportive to one youth may feel intrusive to another.
Professionals also described moments in which brief distance can protect rather than damage the relationship – if it is conscious and transparent.

Empathy is relational and context-dependent – not a checklist of 'empathic behaviours'.

Emerging insights
(Focus group data collection and analysis are ongoing)

Connection before content
Start with contact rather than tasks, rules or immediate problem-solving.

Trust is built in small moments
Predictability, reliability and repairing ruptures matter.

The professional is also a person
Authenticity and self-awareness matter – but disclosure should serve the youth.

Empathy needs organizational conditions
Stable teams, reflection and support appear to enable empathy; workload, turnover and task pressure may undermine it.

What this suggests
Empathy may be less about 'understanding correctly' and more about staying curious, staying human, repairing connection – and creating conditions in which professionals can keep doing so.

"You don't have to tell me you understand. Show me that you want to understand."
Paraphrased from EMPaThYouth co-design



NEXT STEPS
Focus groups continue through September-October 2026. Findings will be jointly interpreted with the EMPaThYouth Team.



EMPaThY - Empathy as Mechanism to empower Personalized Treatment for Youth



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