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# Adolescent Engagement in Home-Based Treatment: An Action Research Study

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# Adolescent Engagement in Home-Based Treatment

Krystal Finch, DSW

## Problem

The factors that impact adolescent engagement in treatment include treatment resistance, dysfunction within the home, substance use, criminal involvement, and unmet mental health issues (Liddle, 2014). Researchers have suggested approaches to improve the therapeutic alliance, reduce access to services, and implement evidence-based interventions to assist with treatment engagement (Kim et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2007).

## Purpose

The purpose of this action research study was to explore the clinical practice approaches, roles, and experiences to enhance engagement in home-based treatment with adolescents residing in a large city in the northeastern United States. Specifically, I explored the personal and professional experiences of social workers that may enhance clinical care, specifically, the concepts of competence, respect, empathy, and passion.

## Significance

The factors that impact adolescent engagement in treatment include treatment resistance, dysfunction within the home, substance use, criminal involvement, and unmet mental health issues (Liddle, 2014). The contributions of this study, which may advance knowledge in the field, included an exploration of social worker roles, skills, and experiences that prove beneficial for engaging adolescents when using home-based interventions. Throughout the social work field, there is a strong emphasis on enhancing clinicians' skills to enhance clinical care (Gladding & Newsome, 2003; Kim et al., 2007).

## Social Change Implications

An adolescent may need additional guidance and support to understand the benefits of engaging in treatment for improved functioning, and the clinical social worker is an ally for the adolescent. The need for additional training and support for clinical social workers providing home-based treatment to adolescents has a direct effect on improving their commitment to social work practice with a focus on improving the skills needed in home-based treatment programs.

## Theory or Framework

**Ecological systems theory** provided the foundation for this study. Through the lens of systems theory, Bronfenbrenner (1986) assessed the working theories between the micro, macro, and mezzo system levels (Neal & Neal, 2013). A significant component of systemic responses throughout the social work field provides social workers with an opportunity to assess the relationships between an individual's behaviors and the environment (Christens & Peterson, 2012).

## Relevant Scholarship

Throughout the social work field, there is a strong emphasis on enhancing clinicians' skills to enhance clinical care (Gladding & Newsome, 2003; Kim et al., 2007). Historically, home-based treatment provided access to services for families to assist with bridging the gaps between mental health and family service needs within the community (Liddle, 2010).

Guidelines in social work practice highlight the clinical roles and responsibilities in mental health treatment. Therefore, a shift in practice that focuses on the developmental learning and skills of the social work clinician is essential for initiating change within the treatment setting (Bilson, 2007). Current practice interventions continue to focus on the systemic counterparts within treatment.

## Research Questions

1. How do home-based clinicians view their role in the process of engaging adolescents in treatment?
2. How do home-based clinicians integrate the concepts of competency, respect, empathy, and passion in home-based treatment with adolescents?
3. How can home-based clinicians improve the engagement process for adolescents in home-based treatment?

## Participants

Five participants were licensed social workers and provided home-based therapy to adolescents in a large Northeastern community.

## Procedures

I used audio-taped focus groups to explore the concepts of competence, respect, empathy, and passion. The clinicians also had an opportunity to provide me with information on the social worker's role, clinical skills, and experiences that prove beneficial for engagement. The researcher held one focus group for 90 minutes in a conference room at Bayville. I used the research questions to guide the focus group discussions to increase insight into the clinical role, characteristics, and skills essential for improving adolescent engagement in mental health treatment.

## Analysis

I analyzed the audiotapes and then transcribed verbatim using Nvivo qualitative data software. I then identified patterns and common themes related to the participants' experiences beneficial for improving effective therapy with home-based interventions. The goal of this process was to highlight patterns for the enhancement of clinical practice. The reliability check concluded the data analysis process.

## Findings

Findings from this study suggest that effective social work practice techniques depend upon the clinician's ability to engage the adolescent throughout the entire treatment process. Clinicians identified four ways to overcome barriers by utilizing at least one clinical skill related to the concepts of empathy, respect, competence, and passion. An important area for the clinical role, techniques, and strategies identified in the focus group was the ability for clinicians to engage the adolescent throughout the various stages in treatment which may include the use of creativity, therapeutic relationships & validation of the adolescents feelings.

## Interpretation

The outcomes for this action research study included both challenging and rewarding opportunities for clinicians to increase understanding of characteristics, skills, values, and experiences in providing home-based treatment to adolescents within a large city in northeastern United States.

## Limitations

The study limitations included the participant criteria of licensed social workers, the availability of in-home clinicians, and my relationship with the participants.

## Recommendations

This study provides the essential components needed in home-based treatment is centered on the concepts of empathy, respect, competence, and passion.

Clinical social workers should also maintain consistency with the adolescent throughout treatment and model behaviors for the adolescent in treatment which may improve overall functioning and reduce barriers within the home.

The last recommendation is for the clinical social worker to validate the adolescent's feelings despite the problems identified in treatment. To set adolescents on the path of success clinicians should increase the urgency around the adolescent and family's needs to improve communication and assisting the adolescent with eliminating at-risk behaviors.

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