

The Essential Role of Early Childhood Educational Services in Residential Family Substance Abuse Treatment

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Parents battling substance and alcohol use disorders often face significant challenges and obstacles to accessing treatment. These include the stigma of substance use disorders, fear of loss of child custody, and limited treatment options for women who are pregnant. These obstacles often result in community isolation, continued engagement in risky and potentially traumatic behaviors and increased contact with the child welfare system. Parents diagnosed with substance use disorders oftentimes end up with a tough choice: voluntarily separating from their children or risking the loss of their children and families temporarily, and in many cases permanently, due to child welfare intervention.

At Odyssey House, mothers and fathers do not have to choose between treatment and caring for their children. Since 1973, the Family Center of Excellence has allowed parents and their young children to access residential treatment together as a family. Because pregnant women and parents with children can stay together, Odyssey House is able to build stronger and more stable families. We assist parents in creating nurturing relationships with their children and provide an opportunity for parents to address a wide array of issues including managing emotional stress, addressing co-occurring medical and mental health issues, ameliorating childhood developmental delays and identifying safe and secure housing.

While parents engage in a host of clinical services, our Early Educational Center focuses on assisting children in reaching their full developmental potential. Our Early Educational Center is licensed by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and in partnership with Northside Center for Childhood Development, offers Early Head Start programming. Odyssey House operates five on-site, licensed daycare and preschool classrooms serving children from two months to six years of age. Classrooms operate from 8:30 am to 3:30 pm Monday through Friday. Evening childcare services are provided from 5:00 pm to 6:30 pm Monday through Friday to allow for parent participation in therapeutic group activities.

Parents and Children Learning Together

Working with children of substance abusing parents who are engaged in intensive residential treatment is both complicated and challenging. The majority of parents who enter treatment are mothers (sometimes fathers) with one or two young children. They may have been referred to treatment from a homeless shelter, by the child welfare system, by family members, or reached out themselves for help. However, they might arrive at Odyssey House, several things are clear: the mother and/or father love their children; they share a desire to become better parents; and they want to maintain custody of their children while they begin their recovery process.

The Early Educational Center strives to create a nurturing environment where vulnerable parents feel welcomed and supported

as they make efforts to engage in and understand their role in a child's development. When children arrive in treatment our role as early childhood educators is to make each child feel safe in a world that has often seemed overwhelming and quite unsafe, and to reassure parents that they have made the right decision for themselves and their children. We focus on building a positive, therapeutic relationship between the teacher, the child, and the parent. This relationship underpins everything we do. It is based on mutual respect, trust, and empathy for the young child and the parent who are both adjusting to the demands of a treatment environment and a life based on the principles of recovery.

The developmental and environmental issues involving children exposed to substances in utero have a direct effect on the field of early education. The children oftentimes come from chaotic environments where they may have been isolated, neglected and/or had limited exposure to positive adult role models. Many of the children present with learning impairments, cognitive and physical deficits, and developmental delays. Early Educational Center staff, as members of an interdisciplinary team, are tasked with rapidly engaging parents and children in services, assessing critical needs and deficits, developing educational plans and, where indicated, referring children for special educational testing.

Our early educational approach is intentionally designed to support a young child's developmental and emotional abilities. The evidence-based Creative Curriculum, used in each of our five classrooms, balances both

teacher-directed and child-initiated learning, with an emphasis on responding to children's learning styles and building on their strengths and interests. The curriculum defines the teacher's vital role in connecting content, teaching, and learning for infants, toddlers, and preschool children.

At the Family Center, the teachers are advocates for the children. They act as role models, acknowledge appropriate social behaviors, make daily routines as predictable as possible, limit interruptions, and focus on creating an engaging environment where the children come first.

Early Intervention Pays Off "One Family at a Time"

As the length of residential treatment stays has shortened, we typically have only a few months to make an impact on a young child's development, but the need for early educational services is critical to the family's long-term success.

Our goal for every child is to assist them in making gains in hitting developmental milestones. For the non-verbal child it is age appropriate speech; for the physically delayed child it is walking and running with his/her fellow classmates; and for our older children, it is the reintegration into mainstream schooling. Likewise, our goal for every parent is to provide them with the skills to nurture their child and assist them in understanding their continued role in their child's education and development.

Through the Family Center of Excellence, Odyssey House strives to break the cycle of addiction one family at a time.