



Strengthening relationships and connections for young people in therapeutic residential care

This ARC funded project was conducted with colleagues from Southern Cross and Charles Darwin Universities and Trinity College Dublin (2025).

Background

Residential care in Australia has faced intense scrutiny, with inquiries and young people highlighting both the promise and pitfalls of care environments. While services often emphasise safety, behaviour management and independence, young people tell us that what matters most is feeling valued, cared for and seen.

Drawing on Honneth's Recognition Theory, this study explores how therapeutic residential care can strengthen young people's sense of belonging, dignity and hope — moving beyond supervision to healing, growth and relationship-based practice.

Method

- ARC-funded mixed-methods study
- Interviews and workshops with young people, workers and leaders
- Thematic analysis guided by Recognition and Social Capital Theory

Key findings

1. Trust through recognition

Young people described trusting staff who:

- Invested genuine time and interest in their wellbeing.
- Showed care, consistency, and respect.
- Made them feel valued and capable.

These interactions fostered **recognition** — the experience of being seen, respected, and cared for — which supported identity, belonging, and safety.

2. Misrecognition as harm: Where staff were inconsistent, distant, or dismissive, young people experienced **misrecognition** — feeling devalued, unheard, or treated as “bad kids.”

This led to disconnection, anger, and withdrawal, and was often exacerbated by systemic factors such as high staff turnover, rigid rules, and bureaucratic decision-making.

3. The Importance of everyday practices

Simple relational acts (sharing meals, humour, honest conversations) were powerful in building connection. Therapeutic intent was felt most when embedded in daily, relational interactions rather than formal interventions.

4. Organisational and systemic conditions matter

Institutional “architectures” — including staffing structures, policies, and communication systems — either supported or undermined relational practice. Young people identified turnover, limited cultural safety, and risk-averse practice as major barriers to forming trust.

5. Recognition as a practice framework

Researchers propose a **new dimension of relational practice** in TRC: one that explicitly centres *recognition* — being valued, respected, and cared for — as essential to healing, wellbeing, and participation.

“

“You’re supposed to care about us, not just watch us.”

“They’re too scared to care, but we still need them.”

“When workers actually listen, it feels like family.”

Practice implications

Our study demonstrates the need to:

- Re-centre relationships, warmth and everyday caring
- Embed youth voice and agency in daily life and planning
- Support staff with reflective practice and supervision
- Prioritise connection to family, culture and community
- Strengthen post-placement relationships and transitions

The image above, Heart Space by Digital Creator Talah Laurie, “represents togetherness, the courage it takes to journey forward and strength from the people who make our journey a little bit easier”
@gumbaynggirr_graphics

