

Tool 5: Connection and Community



Part of the “Come on In: Reimagining Shelter as a Healing Space for Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse” toolkit

When survivors of sexual violence and domestic violence enter shelters, they can become isolated from their friends, family, and support systems. Healing is as much about helping a survivor address the effects of their trauma as it is about encouraging their connections to joy and fun. Connection and community are foundational for healing. They’re not only important to a survivor’s healing in the moment, but for their future healing as well. In current shelter systems, there are many common practices causing continued isolation for shelter guests, including:

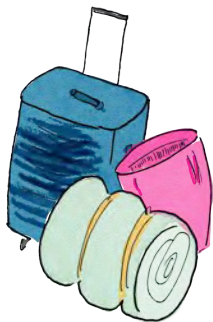
- ▶ requiring guests to keep the shelter’s location confidential.
- ▶ barring guests from bringing friends, family, and other service providers into the shelter.
- ▶ discouraging communication and/or relationships between shelter guests to try and maintain guest confidentiality.
- ▶ believing that advocates should focus solely on the trauma that brought someone to shelter and therefore discouraging joy and fun.

Sexual violence is an inherently isolating experience. Because of this, community and the act of building community offers an incredible opportunity for healing, especially for adult survivors of child sexual abuse. **Building and being part of a community allows survivors to feel connected and in sync with others, helps with emotional regulation, and creates a communal rhythm that benefits a survivor's nervous systems.** It's important to take the time to rethink what fostering community could look like between guests – and between guests and their outside-of-shelter relationships – to better support the survivors accessing your services.

Here are a few trauma-informed tips on how shelter guests can stay connected with family, friends, and other care providers, and how guests can build community with one another. These tips are just a starting point. We recommend taking time to brainstorm more ideas inspired by your community's unique needs – specifically keeping in mind the needs of adult survivors of child sexual abuse accessing your services.

Ways to Keep Shelter Guests Connected to Family, Friends, and Necessary Supports

- ▶ Allow family, friends, and other service providers to pick up and drop off survivors at the shelter instead of blocks away.
- ▶ Allow multi-generational households to stay at the shelter.
- ▶ Provide a place for shelter guests to meet in-person with their loved ones and other service providers. Preferably this would be at the shelter. However, if this isn't possible, create a comfortable living room type space at your outreach office for shelter guests to regularly use.



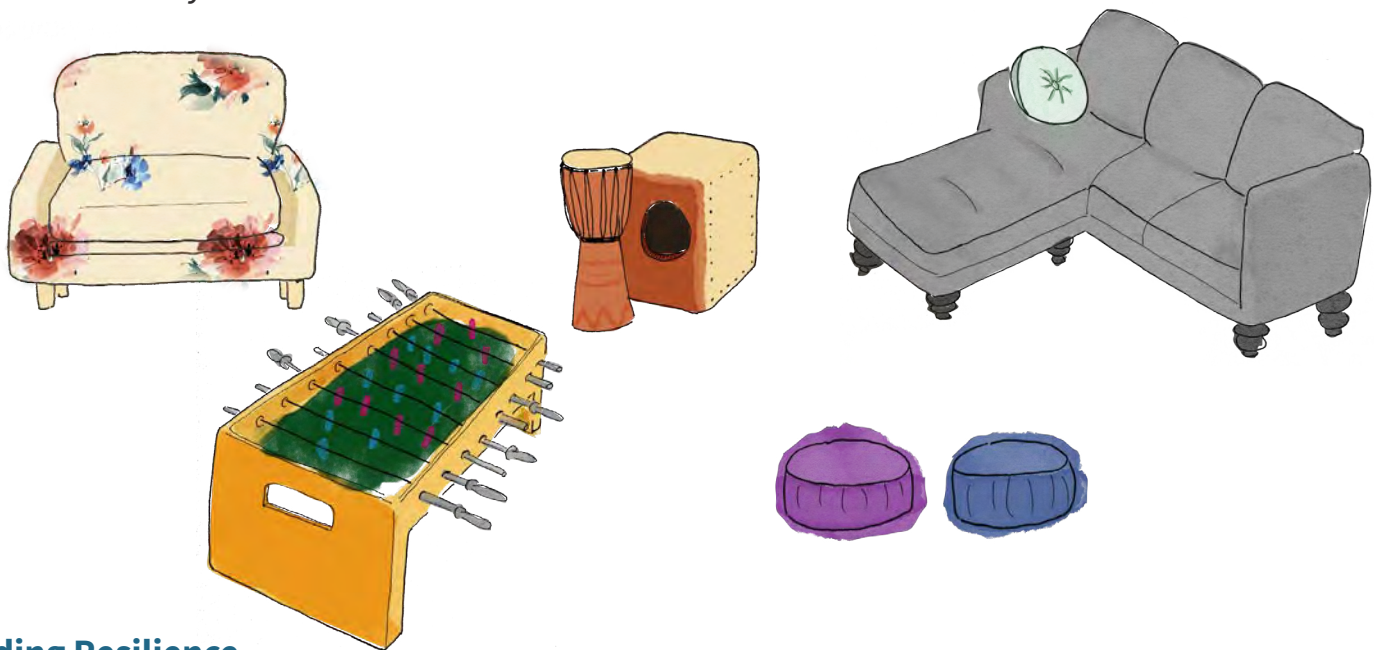
- ▶ Provide access to private phone calls, text messages, and/or social media apps.
- ▶ Create an environment where shelter guests are supported in spending time with friends and family – including having overnight visits away from the shelter.
- ▶ Provide the space and ingredients that encourages guests to prepare and cook the food that makes them feel connected to their family, friends, and cultural identities.



Ways Shelter Guests Can Care and Support One Another

- ▶ Offer guests opportunities for support groups, including those that are centered around joy and fun. To make this as trauma-informed and holistic as possible, check in with shelter guests about what they'd like to see brought into the space and try and facilitate these needs.
- ▶ Teach grounding skills and emotional regulation skills to all guests. This allows guests to know how to comfort each other when they see each other in distress.
- ▶ Provide fun opportunities where guests are encouraged to interact with one another should they desire. This could happen through regular potlucks, movie nights, book clubs, board games, musical performances, art classes, yoga classes, beauty sessions at local salons, dance classes, etc.

Fostering a sense of community will look and feel different for every guest so make the time to regularly check in and ask shelter guests how they would like to build community within the shelter.



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