

# Real Life Heroes (RLH); Resiliency-Focused Therapy for Complex Trauma: AT-A-GLANCE

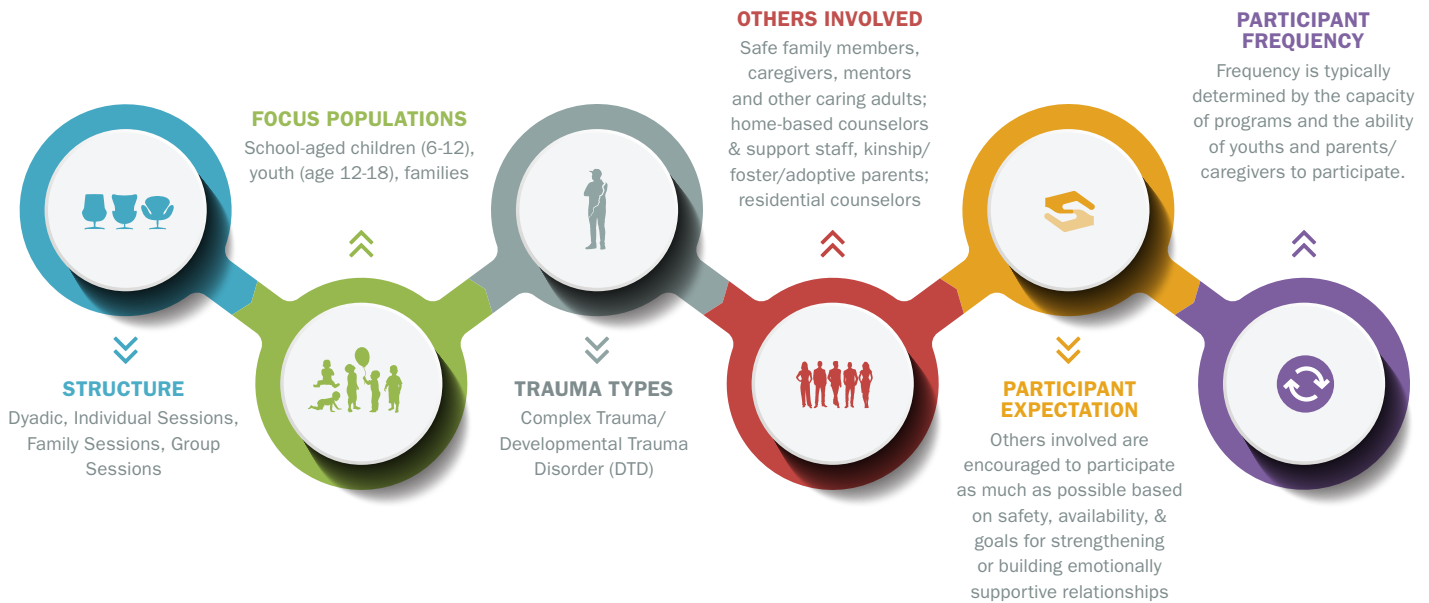
**What is RLH?**

Real Life Heroes® (RLH) provides therapists with easy-to-use tools including a life storybook, manual, 24 CE credit asynchronous training program, multi-dimensional assessment tools, multi-sensory creative arts activities & psycho education resources to promote engagement of children, adolescents and parents/caregivers in evidence-supported therapy for Complex Trauma/DTD. RLH is focused on ‘Relational Healing for Relational Traumas’ & was developed for use in hard-pressed treatment centers to expand & sustain engagement & inclusion of youths & families who have experienced multi-generational adversity, historical traumas (e.g. discrimination, racism), and on-going risks & stressors. Creative arts, mindfulness, movement activities, ‘improv’ & shared life story work provide a flexible means for youths & families to develop the safety, attunement, regulation & co-regulation needed for re-integration of traumas and development of strength-based identities linked to their cultural heritage.

**What are the goals of RLH?**

1. To expand and sustain engagement & inclusion of children, adolescents & families who have experienced complex traumatic stress in evidence-supported therapy including families who have experienced multi-generational adversity, historical traumas and on-going stressors.
2. To help therapists and programs rebuild (or build) emotionally supportive/attuned relationships for youths and parents/caregivers, increase self & co-regulation skills, develop & implement realistic safety plans and promote trauma re-integration as part of life story work.
3. To help therapists and programs increase youths’ pride in their abilities, family & cultural heritage.

**What does RLH look like?**



## Real Life Heroes (RLH); Resiliency-Focused Therapy for Complex Trauma: AT-A-GLANCE

### ■ Additional Information

RLH provides therapists with practical tools that can be easily adapted for diverse youth, families, programs, and communities. Therapists can use RLH to reframe referrals based on pathologies and blame into a shared ‘journey’, a ‘pathway’ to strengthening (or building) emotionally supportive and enduring relationships and promoting development of self & co-regulation skills for youths, parents, extended family members and other caregivers. Creative arts, mindfulness, movement activities, and shared life story work promote connections of youths and parents/caregivers to strengths in their families and cultural heritage. RLH has been successfully utilized with children, adolescents and families involved in child welfare and behavioral health care including home-based, clinic-based, school-based, day treatment, kinship, foster, or adoptive family, hospital and residential treatment programs. RLH can also be easily adapted and implemented for special focus areas (e.g., for youths with developmental disabilities or youths in refugee programs).

### ■ What is the commitment?

RLH sessions can be adapted to match the resources and limitations of families and programs. A multi-dimensional assessment is utilized including types of chronicity over time, resiliency factors, relationships (attachments, intra-family, community, heritage), traumatic experiences within primary families and communities including historical traumas (discrimination, racism. . .), symptoms of PTSD, symptoms of complex trauma/DTD, and developmental age. Individual and conjoint activities include use of standardized trauma assessments and special tools to elicit child, family and cultural strengths as well as safety to share traumatic experiences.

#### **LOCATION:**

Anywhere you and your provider decide. In your home, in a provider’s office, virtually/via telehealth, in a school, in a community setting. Location can be adapted to match family and program resources along with importance of privacy and safety

### ■ How do we know it works?

RLH has practice-based and research evidence to support its benefits in hard-pressed child welfare and behavioral health treatment centers.

RLH was developed by individuals in partnership with teams and advisory groups including community members, youths, parents/caregivers, and professionals for children ages 5-12 and adolescents ages 6-18 who have experienced traumatic stress before age 12 and show symptoms of complex trauma/DTD (as well as their parents/caregivers). For more information, see page 3. Children/youth/families involved in the initial development of this practice identified primarily with European, African-American and Latino descent, lived in both rural and urban environments, and spoke English at home. Research and revisions of RLH involved youths and families from diverse backgrounds reflecting the population of communities served.

Additionally, there have been informal adaptations of the practice. There are translations of RLH materials for children, youth, and families available in Chinese. Learn more on page 3.

### ■ For more information explore the next several pages or check out:

[www.reallifeheroes.net](http://www.reallifeheroes.net)

## Real Life Heroes (RLH): THE EVIDENCE

### ■ What types of evidence are available for RLH?

- Best Practices
- Evidence-based Treatment
- Practice-Based Evidence
- Promising Practices
- Case Study
- Emergent Issues
- Pilot Study
- Unaddressed Community/Population Conditions Practice Based Evidence
- Other: RLH has demonstrated efficacy in pre-post research studies with children and families in 'real world' child welfare, behavioral health and school-based programs with an 'all practitioner' training model that can be easily replicated in programs that are not restricted by the selective inclusion and exclusion criteria for youths, parents/caregivers and practitioners often found in EBT research.

### ■ Where can I learn more about the evidence?

- Model website
- Kagan, R., Henry, J., Richardson, M., Trinkle, J., & LaFrenier, A. (2014). Evaluation of *Real Life Heroes* Treatment for Children with Complex PTSD. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 6 (5), 588-596. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0035879>
- Kagan, R., Douglas, A., Hornik, J., & Kratz, S. (2008). Real Life Heroes Pilot Study: Evaluation of a Treatment Model for Children with Traumatic Stress. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, 1:1, 5-22
- Kagan, R. & Spinazzola, J. (2013). Real Life Heroes in Residential Treatment; Implementation of Trauma and Attachment-Focused Treatment for Children and Adolescents with Complex PTSD. *Journal of Family Violence*. Volume 28 (7), 705-715.
- Ford, J., Blaustein, M., Habib, M., & Kagan, R. (2013). Developmental Trauma Therapy Models. In J. D. Ford & C. A. Courtois (Ed.) *Treating complex traumatic stress disorders in children and adolescents; Scientific foundations and therapeutic models*. New York: Guilford Press. ISBN 9781462524617
- Kagan, R., Pressley, J., Espinoza, R., Lanktree, C., Henry, J., Knoverek, A., Duffy, S., Labruna, V., Habib, M., Blaustein, M., & Spinazzola, J. (2023). Development of a Differential Assessment Guide to Improve Engagement with Youths & Families Living with Chronic Trauma. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*. 16:145-159.
- Kagan, R., Pressley, J., Espinoza, R., Lanktree, C., Henry, J., Knoverek, A., Duffy, S
- California Clearinghouse

### How is RLH measured in real time?

RLH is a multi-dimensional assessment-driven practice that includes use of standardized testing in collaborative treatment planning along with three fidelity measures and treatment planning review conferences every 30-90 days. In addition, each session utilizes a simple measure of youth and parent/caregiver stress, self-control and four feelings: mad, sad, glad & safety. Training programs include participant feedback & post-training quizzes.

### ■ What changes for the better as a result of RLH?

1. Expanded engagement & inclusion in evidence-supported treatment for Complex Trauma/DTD.
2. Significant reductions in evaluations for symptoms of traumatic stress & behavioral problems.
3. High rates of implementation after initial training & high rates of sustained use promoted by the RLH Toolkit and Life Storybook.

### ■ What do the numbers tell us (i.e., quantitative data)?

The HEROES Project, a SAMHSA-funded community practice site of the NCTSN, evaluated use of Real Life Heroes in seven child and family service and behavioral health programs & found significant reductions in traumatic stress and behavioral problems. Similar reductions were found in a previous pilot study.

### ■ What do the stories tell us (i.e., qualitative data)?

High rates of engagement, increased resiliency & decreased behavior problems. Inclusion of youths/families who did not meet admission criteria for other evidence-supported treatments. Sustained use by therapists in hard-pressed treatment centers and high ratings for value of training by therapists and program directors.

## Real Life Heroes (RLH): ADAPTABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

### ■ What is the history of RLH?

RLH was developed to provide practical tools that could help therapists working in hard-pressed treatment centers to engage, and sustain engagement, with children & families who had not been previously been successfully involved in evidence-supported trauma therapy utilizing other EBT's. Children & families in two SAMHSA-funded studies identified with a wide range of ethnic, racial, religious, regional & incomes/resources that was representative of the population of the region served. The 2014 study had 60 boys and 59 girls. 45% identified as Caucasian, 34% as African-American, and 15% as multi-race.

From its inception, RLH benefited from insights and experience of therapists and directors as well as feedback from children and parents/caregivers served. Research studies included advisory groups including clients of programs (youths and parents), program leaders and community representatives.

### ■ How did Real Life Heroes developers proactively seek, incorporate, and learn from the perspectives of individuals and communities to ensure the model reflects the experiences of those most affected by trauma and system challenges?

RLH was informed by feedback from youth, caregivers, and therapists with experience addressing complex trauma and adversity, including multigenerational trauma and persistent traumatic stress. Assessments incorporate relevant personal, family, and cultural history and heritage. Treatment planning emphasizes individual, family, and community strengths. The model focuses on "relational healing for relational traumas," including skill development, reinforcing family strengths, and identifying pathways to growth.

### ■ What is the role of RLH providers in tailoring the model for individuals, families, and communities?

Programs and therapists working in a wide range of programs can adapt the model to match the strengths, resources & needs of diverse youths & families within the context of their communities while maintaining a focus on RLH and NCTSN-recommended core components of treatment for Complex Trauma.

### ■ How are lessons learned from individuals, families, communities and providers used to keep improving RLH?

RLH books, tools & training programs have been modified on an on-going basis based on feedback from youths, parents/caregivers, therapists & program leaders involved in training programs & pilot studies since the model's initial development over 20 years ago.

### ■ Resources and materials are available:

- In more than one language – Chinese. Agencies in Hong Kong and Taiwan arranged professional translations for use by their staff.
- In more than one format:
  - Written, Video, PowerPoint handouts, asynchronous web-based training with handouts of tools, published books and journal articles.
  - Workbook drawings and written entries, musical activities, art activities, movement-based activities, Improv activities, step by step instructions and suggested messages.
  - Case studies feature youths from European and Latino backgrounds, early and late adolescence, and a range of developmental abilities including youths with delays in social-emotional and cognitive abilities.
- For more information on adaptation and access, please see [www.reallifeheroes.net](http://www.reallifeheroes.net), the Real Life Heroes Toolkit for Treating Traumatic Stress in Children.

**Real Life Heroes (RLH): PROVIDING, SUPERVISING, TRAINING, AND SUSTAINING**

**TO PROVIDE RLH**

**Provider prerequisites:**

- Experience: RLH Fundamentals & 10-session consultation group
- Education: Master’s degree or working on M.A.
- Licensure: Licensed or working under supervision of licensed

**Trained providers can:**

- Earn ASWB approved CE credits

**Access for Provider Training:**

- Through live in-person training
- Through live virtual training
- Through pre-recorded training
- Through consultation
- Through a training manual
- Contact in advance for trainer availability

**TO SUPERVISE RLH**

**Supervisor prerequisites:**

- Meet Provider Prerequisites
- Use with 4 families+10-session consultation group
- 5 supervisor consultation sessions over 10 months
- Master’s degree or higher
- Licensure as a therapist

**Trained supervisors can:**

- Supervise others in RLH
- Provide consultation to others about RLH

**Access for Supervisor Training:**

- Through live training
- Through consultation
- Contact in advance for trainer availability

**TO TRAIN RLH**

**Trainer prerequisites:**

- Complete established trainer process (details on page 6)

**Approved trainers can:**

- Train within their own organization
- Train providers
- Train supervisors

**Access for Trainer Training:**

- Under development with planned pilot testing

**TO SUSTAIN RLH**

**Organization prerequisites:**

- Discussions on readiness and fit
- Commit to regular meetings dedicated to sustaining the practice
- Consider costs and commit 10 months for consultation

**Organizations can:**

- Prove training in evidence-supported trauma therapy for billing and insurance and to meet state mandates
- Market providers, supervisors, and trainers who completed RLH fundamentals
- Utilize RLH books and RLH Fundamentals asynchronous training program

**Access for Organizational Readiness Supports:**

- Virtual/Hybrid/In-person continuing education at cost or with grant-funding
- Assessment resources/supports included in books and asynchronous training
- Training new staff through use of [RLH On Demand](#)

## Real Life Heroes (RLH): MORE ON PROVIDING, SUPERVISING, TRAINING, AND SUSTAINING

### PROVIDE RLH

- **Training cost:** Please see <https://reallifeheroes.net/training-programs> for a description of this practice-focused program including typical costs and applications for grant-funding.
- **Time Commitment:** RLH Fundamentals (live or RLH On Demand) was approved for 24 CE credits. 10 hours of participation in consultation groups and program-centered consultation are highly recommended. Individual consultation is available.
- **Additional Details:** RLH On Demand and RLH books were developed to expand access to training and resources by organizations or therapists. Completion of RLH Fundamentals Training can be cited in grant and funding applications.

### SUPERVISE RLH

- **Training cost:** Program supervisors and directors are encouraged to take part in RLH training and are provided with consultation sessions to develop practical strategies & adapt the model for each program. Please see <https://reallifeheroes.net/training-programs>
- **Time Commitment:** Time commitment for supervisors includes participation in all training and consultation groups for therapists over 10 months as well as monthly consultation sessions for supervisors and directors.
- **Additional Details:** Master's degree and licensure required for supervisors. A formal supervisor's training program has not yet been implemented.

### TRAIN RLH

- **Training cost:** An outline for training to become an in-house trainer was developed but this has not been marketed to date.
- **Time Commitment:** Completion of provider training in the first year followed by training to be a trainer in the 2nd year. Time commitment is estimated at 100 hours.
- **Additional Details:** Master's degree and licensure required. A train-the-trainer program has been outlined but has not yet been implemented.

### SUSTAIN RLH

- **Training cost:** Development of *RLH On Demand* has made training feasible for treatment centers with limited resources, difficulties freeing up staff and high turn-over.
- **Time Commitment:** 24 hours for RLH Fundamentals Training (live or asynchronous) including readings, participation in 10 one-hour consultation group sessions and regular supervision by the therapist's supervisor.
- **Additional Details:** Sustainability is promoted by use of the RLH Toolkit, the RLH Life Storybook, access to asynchronous training (RLH On Demand) for new staff and training of supervisors and directors.

To learn more about providing, supervising, training, or sustaining, please see [www.reallifeheroes.net](http://www.reallifeheroes.net) or email: [richardkagan7@gmail.com](mailto:richardkagan7@gmail.com)

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