

Abagael Gerdes

Fraser

Mental Health Professional

My name is Abagael Gerdes and I am a mental health therapist at Fraser. I am primarily working with younger children (ages 3 to 5) diagnosed with trauma disorders, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and developmental delays. Throughout the last year, there have been many changes in the mental health world. In order to continue to meet the needs of the clients that I work with, Fraser remained open and seeing clients face to face. Although we had the ability to have safety precautions in place, this change greatly influenced the way we worked with our clients.

The clients that we work with require a significant amount of physical nurturing due to not receiving comfort from caregivers in their past. As clinicians, we work extremely close with our clients to ensure that they develop positive attachments, learn strategies to help calm their bodies, listen to instructions, and decrease impulsivity/aggression. We support with aggressive behaviors where clients will often times kick, spit, bite, punch, and throw items.

These behaviors were closely monitored during COVID-19 in order to protect against transmission and spreading; however, there was little we could do to avoid these situations. When wearing masks, our clients would often rip them off when frustrated or angry and it was impossible to grab a new one right away. This was particularly concerning when a client would spit, cough, sneeze, or wipe their runny nose. In addition, we were able to wear goggles; however, clients would often times break them or throw them at staff. Between activities and after session, staff three step cleaned (soap and water, water, bleach) every surface that was touched or played with. While these precautions added an extra layer of protection, they also added on more time to cleaning, supporting with aggression, and out of work stress.

Working face to face with clients who require intensive services, making sure that they are staying safe and healthy, making sure their families are staying safe and healthy, while also trying to take care of myself and those around me, made for an extremely trying year. There was a constant fear of COVID-19 being passed along to me from a client and then me spreading it to vulnerable populations (like children), other clients, my family, or those close to me. Although this position put me at great risks of contracting and spreading COVID-19, I would not have wanted it any other way.

Therapy is not meant to be over a screen or computer and, with the children that we work with, it would have been more harmful than helpful. We have been able to adapt and overcome all of the changes, struggles, and roadblocks that COVID-19 put in our way. We have been able to provide the best care and treatment that we could have possibly given to the clients that we work with, even with a global pandemic taking place. My motto is always clients first, and that is what I tried to uphold during this time. My clients definitely helped me get through this past year and all I want is to do the same for them. They are what keep me going.