



WELL-BEING

SUPPORTING YOUNG ADULTS: INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS



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WHY IT MATTERS

Each year, approximately 20,000 youth, ages 18 and older, transition, or “age out”, of foster care and find themselves on their own. Without adequate support networks, independent living skills, resources, or safety nets, too many of these young people struggle with their early independence. Studies have found that by age 26, only three to four percent of youth who aged out of foster care will have a college degree. One in five will become homeless before turning 18. Only 50% will obtain employment by age 24. Many females from foster care will become pregnant by 21 (approximately 70%) and one in four young adults from foster care will experience trauma presenting as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹

There are some considerations that must be addressed when supporting adolescents and young adults in foster care. First, the commitment to helping youth

find legal permanency should remain a priority. Second, practitioners need to understand how trauma impacts adolescent development and the best ways to help youth understand their experiences and develop effective strategies for healing.

Finally, as advocates, we need to recognize that being in foster care carries a level of stigma that can affect successful “adult” outcomes. Educating others about the foster care experience, the impact on youth and how they can be supported, is important to youth’s success.

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Specific areas that should be addressed during youth's adolescence include:

- Building community connections and supportive relationships. Finding these connections has been shown to be the best chance of ensuring the well-being of older youth in, and from, foster care.
- Completing their education, beginning with high school completion.² Help youth determine what is best for them post-high school, educating them on the various benefits of continuing education and/or employment skill-building.³
- Learning employment skills including interview skills, completing job applications and understanding workplace values.⁴
- Understanding finances and money matters through education and practice. This is an often-overlooked piece of education that eludes many youth in, and from, foster care.
- Identifying and connecting with local housing providers to ensure adequate and safe housing once they leave care. Even if a young person is headed to college and will be using college housing, make sure that they have access to housing when school is on summer break or holidays.
- Developing a personal sense of identity that helps the youth validate that they matter. This may include guiding them in adopting a personal value system so that they can be clear on what matters to them moving forward.⁵
- Learning life skills that may typically be taught by parents are often neglected for youth in, and from, foster care⁶, and for many youth, these skills are needed earlier than their peers who are not in foster care, as they will likely achieve independence sooner.
- Finding mental, physical and other health care providers before leaving care. Mental and physical health is also often neglected once youth leave care as they struggle to take care of other things in their lives. While in foster care, youth should be connected with mental and health care services that they can continue to access after they leave care. Teaching them how to understand their health care benefits and rights is critical.⁷
- Youth with disabilities will have additional challenges that need to be addressed throughout their lives. For youth completing high school and going on to post-secondary educational opportunities, ensure that they are aware of their support options, legal rights and financial aids. Ensure also that if they lack the capability to make decisions for themselves, there is an appointed advocate who can guide them and act on their behalf.⁸



ADVOCATES IN ACTION

Researchers indicated that older youth who receive financial management education, post-secondary education and employment as part of their experience in independent living programs had significantly better outcomes than those who did not receive any training in these areas.⁹

In addition to the areas that should be addressed during youth's adolescence described above, below are some strategies for CASAs to consider when supporting adolescents and young adults in, and from, foster care.

ACTIONS

- **Never give up on helping youth find legal permanence.** This may require helping to create an intentional, deliberate culture of recognizing and advocating against outdated attitudes and assumptions about older youth in foster care. For some strategies and suggestions see, "Reducing long-term foster care," "Family find strategies" and "Permanency review roundtables," issue briefs.¹⁰
- **Promote experiences that will help older youth explore a range of career pathways.** These can be student leadership opportunities, community service, job shadowing, internships and paid work experience.
- **Help youth build connections with guidance counselors** and other faculty in their school that can help them identify the steps needed to complete high school and continue their education. For additional suggestions see, "High school completion and post-secondary preparation" and "Post-secondary supports" issue briefs.¹¹
- **Remember that for youth of color, their race and ethnicity may result in bias** impacting safe and adequate housing supports, employment, and educational success. Recognize when this is happening and raise your concerns.
- **Learn if youth in foster care are able to stay past age 18.** An increasing number of states now allow youth to voluntarily stay in foster care until age 20 or 21 (often with some education requirements).¹² Find out if this would be beneficial for the youth you advocate on behalf of.
- **Parenting youth will need additional supports** to help them continue to pursue their own educational and career goals while providing their children with safe and quality child care. They will also need support in understanding how to nurture and care for their children and enhance their development.

BRIGHT SPOT

FOSTERING FUTURES AND EMANCIPATION YOUTH PROJECT CASA OF PUEBLO, PUEBLO, COLORADO

As many CASA programs can identify, outcomes for youth in foster care, particularly for older youth, are often dismal and alarming. The staff and volunteers of CASA of Pueblo, Colorado were finding that within months of a youth leaving care, many were either homeless, pregnant or caught up in human trafficking rings. They also found that many youth were running away prior to their 18th birthday. Recognizing that while it is important for youth to have advocates, they also need basic instruction on how to live adequately as adults. This finding was confirmed by the youth's Chaffee program workers who did their best, but agreed that efforts to help youth successfully achieve independence were not working.

To better understand what was happening, focus groups were organized with emancipating teens, the district's Chief Judge, DSS administrators and CASA of Pueblo's Executive Director. Listening closely to what the youth had to say about their experiences and what they were missing out on, a *Foster Care Bill of Rights* was produced and placed in every foster home in Pueblo County. Using National CASA's *Fostering Futures* program as a starting point, staff at Pueblo expanded the program by providing 12 to 16 session support groups for teens emancipating out of care. Support was leveraged from stakeholders including the county's judge, Guardian Ad Litem (GALs), Division of Social Services (DSS) caseworkers and child agencies.

In 2012 the program was started with additional funding coming from a 2013 expansion grant that funded a Case Supervisor. Now in its sixth year, the first challenge in

INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS COVERED:

- Finances / money management
- Job / Career
- Life skills
- Identity
- Education
- Permanence
- Self-care / Health
- Housing
- Transportation
- Community culture / Social life

OTHER SUPPORTS:

- Tutoring sessions held weekly at the CASA offices
- Employment and volunteer experience

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launching the program was how to get youth to the CASA offices after school and entice them to be part of the group. The solution was to offer them \$1,000 for participating in the program and completing various, required activities. Funding is provided by the generous donations of a couple of private foundations as well as what is earmarked from special events for the program. The funding has been consistent and steady since the inception of the program.

With the help of materials from FosterClub America¹³, a toolkit was created that contained important information for emancipation. Community professionals come to sessions and present on topics such as banking, credit, housing, personal care, transportation, etc. Each session covers different material so that youth can begin a session at any point with a calendar that runs from October through May. A 6-week cooking course was added in the summer. Dinner is provided at every session with most meals being donated by local restaurants. The minimum and maximum ages for participation are 15 to 22.

Youth earn points through participating in activities and these points are used to access the financial incentive. Points are awarded in a variety of ways including

attendance at sessions, getting copies of their birth certificates and social security cards, volunteering or working while in the program, graduating from high school or achieving a GED equivalent. Completing

their education and working is needed to get to the full \$1,000 award, although youth can receive lesser amounts by completing some of the activities described above. Youth are not able to take their monetary award (e.g., “cash out”) until they leave care and the program holds their money for them as long as they want.

To date the program has had 46 referrals over the last 6 years. During that time, 22 youth have cashed out. Not every youth who completes the program cashes out right away, so the program is holding funds for a handful that have completed, but who have chosen to wait to receive their funds. 16 of the 22 participants have cashed out at the \$1,000 level.

Youth who participate in the program complete a pre- and post-assessment with results showing that youth increase their independent living skills by 67%.

Other supports available to youth include access to local storage units that contain donated household items that can be used for setting up new homes. The program is well-loved by all who help support it and participate in it.



SELECTED RESOURCES

Name	Description
<p><u>American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), Healthy Foster Care America</u>¹⁴</p>	<p>Healthy Foster Care America (HFCA) is an initiative of the AAP and its partners to improve the health and well-being outcomes of children and teens in foster care. Partners have included representatives from child welfare, family practice, social work, nursing, and government, the legislative and judicial fields, child psychiatry and psychology, education, advocacy organizations, alumni, and families.</p>
<p><u>Annie E. Casey Foundation, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative</u>¹⁵</p>	<p>The <i>Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative</i> supports youth in and from foster care by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsoring <i>Success Beyond 18</i>, a campaign that advances policies and practices to help young adults who are transitioning out of foster care get on track for successful adulthoods; • Building young people’s personal and financial assets by engaging them in self-advocacy and leadership opportunities using the <i>Opportunity Passport’s</i> matched savings and financial education tools; • Developing practice, policy and evaluation tools to improve young people’s opportunities and assets; and, • Advancing the child welfare field’s understanding of neuroscience and brain research to encourage implementation of more effective programs and policies.
<p>Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration on Children, Youth and Families and the Office of Community Services, <u>The Financial Empowerment Toolkit for Youth and Young Adults in Foster Care</u>¹⁶</p>	<p>This toolkit provides caseworkers, independent-living skills providers, foster parents and other supportive adults with strategies and resources to critically evaluate and improve their ability to promote the financial capabilities of youth in foster care. The toolkit is a compilation of lessons learned, best practices and practical tools, which can be used together or separately.</p>

Name	Description
<i>FosterClub America</i> ¹⁷	<p><i>FosterClub</i> has over 44,000 members. Its young leaders have made hundreds of visits to policymakers in Washington, D.C., and in the States, playing a lead role in the raising awareness about the need for changes to foster care policies and practices. <i>FosterClub's All-Stars</i> were critical in asking for changes to the system, which resulted in the <i>Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008</i> (public law 110-351), which has significantly improved foster care services for children and youth across the country.</p>

ENDNOTES

- 1 Statistics available at <http://www.childrensrights.org/newsroom/fact-sheets/aging-out>
- 2 See Issue Brief, *High School Completion and Post-Secondary Entry*
- 3 See Issue Brief, *Post-Secondary Education Supports*
- 4 <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/coordinated-systems-key-to-employment-for-youth-formerly-in-state-care/>
- 5 http://www.aecf.org/m/resourceimg/Road_to_Adulthood_7-7-17.pdf
- 6 <http://www.sharedjustice.org/most-recent/2017/3/30/aging-out-of-foster-care-18-and-on-your-own>
- 7 Issue Brief, *Substance Abuse and Mental Health*; https://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/Docs/Literatures/NREPP%20Learning%20Center%20Literature%20%20Review_Transition-age%20Youth.pdf
- 8 <https://jlc.org/improving-transition-adulthood-youth-disabilities-foster-care>
- 9 Honomichl, R., et al. (2009). *Issues and Challenges in Aftercare Services: A Literature Review*. Davis, CA: Northern Training Academy Supporting Children and Family Services.
- 10 See Issue Briefs, *Family Find Strategies and Permanency Reviews: Helping Older Youth Achieve Permanency*
- 11 See Issue Briefs, *High School Graduation Completion and Post-Secondary Entry* and *Post-Secondary Supports*
- 12 See <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/extending-foster-care-to-18.aspx> to learn if youth are eligible in your state to stay past age 21
- 13 <https://www.fosterclub.com/about-us>
- 14 <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/healthy-foster-care-america/Pages/default.aspx>
- 15 <http://www.aecf.org/work/child-welfare/jim-casey-youth-opportunities-initiative/>
- 16 <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/financial-empowerment-toolkit>
- 17 <https://www.fosterclub.com/about-us>