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# Promoting Interdependent Living Skills for Youth Aging Out of Care through Healthy Relationships: A Child Welfare Practice Framework

Becky Antle, Ph.D.; Lisa Johnson, MSW; Anita Barbee, Ph.D.; Dana Sullivan, Ph.D.

Approximately 20,000 youth age out of foster care in the U.S. each year. At the moment they leave care, these youth take on the mantle of adulthood, which is often associated with reduced or terminated assistance from their families, communities, and government. The provision of appropriate services for and outcomes of youth aging out of the foster care system have been an area of growing concern for the field of child welfare.

Many policies and research studies on youth transitioning out of the system are based upon the concept of independent living. Independent living postulates that youth who age out of the foster care system must possess certain skills or competencies in order to function autonomously once they are no longer in the care of the state. However, some scholars have suggested that *interdependent* living is a much more realistic and beneficial framework for preparing youth for adulthood (Propp, Ortega, & NewHart, 2003). Interdependent living occurs when an individual depends upon others in areas in which he/she lacks the capacity to function on his/her own. The goal is for young people to be able to reach out to and count on others for support to manage the experiences and tasks encountered in the world when they do not have sufficient skill, energy, confidence, and/or time to do it themselves (Propp et al., 2003).

Propp, Ortega, and NewHart (2003) argue that the relationship between the child welfare worker and youth should be one of interdependence, through which the youth is empowered to be a major contributor to the process. These authors offer a number of practice recommendations to move toward an interdependent living model for youth aging out of care. These recommendations include the following practices:

- involve youth at every stage of the casework process,
- foster collaboration between the different systems that serve youth,
- teach youth when and how to rely upon external resources, and
- encourage healthy relationships between youth in care.

The purpose of this article is to describe strategies to promote interdependent living through the strengthening of healthy relationships. These relationships will be organized by stage of the youth's transition out of care: (1) relationship in care such as case workers and foster families; (2) bridge relationships such as helping professionals, mentors, and extended family; and (3) future relationships such as birth parents and romantic relationships. Practice skills to address these relationships with multiple systems at different stages will also be described.

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## Interdependent Living Through Healthy Relationships

### Relationships in Care

#### **Child Welfare Caseworker**

*Parallel process.* The concept of *parallel process* suggests that the relationship between case workers and clients (youth) often mirror the relationships youth have in their personal lives. This parallel process provides workers with an opportunity to model and/or teach healthy relationship skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and boundary setting through their interactions with youth. Workers should be cognizant of these relationship dynamics and consider the following questions:

- How are the youth's current relationship needs reflected in their relationship with the case worker?
- How might the youth's underlying conditions or any contributing factors be affecting the quality of the worker-youth relationship?
- What strengths exist in the youth's relationship with the worker?
- What new expectations does the worker need to communicate to the youth?
- How might the youth be encouraged to be more ready to change?
- What developmental feedback could the worker give to the youth? What coaching is necessary to support this development? How do you anticipate the youth will respond?
- Given the worker's previous experience with the youth and the message to be delivered, what is the best way to engage the youth?
- How will the worker monitor the youth's progress in these relationship domains?

In the initial phase of mentoring relationship formation, it is important that workers be consistent and reliable; they must demonstrate they are willing to listen and be honest (Search Institute for Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota, 2007b). In the next phase of building trust, the worker should be patient and become more involved in the life of the youth, while setting limits if it appears the youth is becoming too dependent. Many youth and workers experience a phase of testing. At this point, it is important that workers not take the testing personally and reaffirm their commitment to the relationship. Finally, as workers notice changes in behavior and progress, they should identify and celebrate these with youth. They should also reinforce youth efforts to seek support from others. As workers navigate these phases of mentor relationship formation, they will be able to maximize the parallel process of professional and personal relationships for youth and demonstrate healthy relationship skills.

*Relationship after emancipation.* An important aspect of child welfare practice is explicitly defining when a client is no longer a client. This means that social workers must set boundaries and be explicit about expectations for termination with youth. These boundaries and expectations often depend on contextual factors such as agency policy and youth needs, as well as social worker caseload and desire to maintain the relationship.

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In cases of youth transitioning out of foster care, it is important to prepare them not only for independent living, but also for the end of case management services and possibly for the end of relationships with service providers. One method of doing this is for social workers to ask youth about their expectations before the formal relationship ends.

### ***Foster Family***

Youth in foster care report learning life skills mainly from their foster parents (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Therefore, it is critical that foster parents engage in training on caring for adolescent youth in foster care, and for social workers to formally collaborate with foster parents to prepare youth to successfully transition to adulthood (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005).

The limited research evidence suggests that the majority of youth aging out of care maintain at least some contact with their foster parents. One key practice consideration for child welfare workers in this area is to help youth clarify expectations of contact with foster families prior to emancipation. If the child welfare worker clarifies with the youth and foster family specific expectations regarding the type and frequency of contact (e.g. holidays only, all significant events, weekly or even daily contact), they may maximize the social support provided by this important resource and prevent the youth from engaging in these maladaptive relationship behaviors.

### **Bridge Relationships**

While the child welfare case worker and foster parents serve as key relationship supports for youth while they are in care, there are important others who serve as “bridge relationships” for youth as they exit care. These bridge relationships may include helping professionals, such as mental health, substance abuse, or educational providers, as well as mentors and extended relatives.

### ***Helping Professionals***

In general, youth need to be taught to continue to access their own services. There are a number of areas to consider in preparing youth to work independently with helping professionals:

- Purpose of using resources
- Identification of current resources being used by the youth that relate to his/her health, mental health, or educational concerns
- Identification of new/additional resources to resolve these concerns
- Role of the resource in helping the youth achieve desired outcomes
- Advantages to the youth
- Possible barriers to using the resource and ways of overcoming them
- Involving the youth in choosing the resource to use
- How using the collateral resource will contribute to identified outcomes

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- Resource's expectations for the youth
- Youth's feelings and needs related to using the resource
- Process/procedure for addressing any conflicts between the youth and helping professional
- Confidentiality safeguards
- Resource contact information and scheduling

Another method of preparing youth to proactively seek helping services after foster care is found in the Solution-Based Casework model for child welfare practice (Christensen, Todahl, & Barrett, 1997). This model describes prevention skills that may assist youth in identifying needs and working collaboratively with helping professionals. These skills include the following: 1) Identify high risk situations that lead to difficulties; 2) Identify early warning signals of difficulties; 3) Develop a plan to avoid the high risk situations; 4) Develop a plan to interrupt the pattern early if not avoided; 5) Have a back-up or "escape" plan if all else fails. For example, youth with substance abuse issues may identify their high risk situations as times of intense family conflict or stress at school. Their early warning signals may include spending time with friends who drink or use drugs, missing class, and arguing with important members of their support network. They would then develop a plan to avoid high risk situations (e.g. work to resolve family conflicts before they escalate, get a tutor for school struggles); interrupt the pattern (call a friend if miss more than three classes or go out partying more than one or two times); or escape the situation (get professional help). These skills may help youth maximize the resource of bridge relationships such as helping professionals in their move to interdependence.

### ***Mentors***

Another resource for youth aging out of care is formal mentoring. There are a number of recommendations for youth to maximize their relationships with mentors. Youth should be encouraged to give their mentor a chance; show appreciation; be open to new experiences, and share what they know (Search Institute for Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota, 2007a). Conversely, mentors should be advised that "not talking is OK but not listening is not OK; welcome disagreement but end in compromise; be open to learning from each other; make decisions with young people-not for them; remember that no one knows all the answers" (Search Institute for Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota, 2007b, para. 8).

### ***Extended Relatives***

A final relationship resource for youth in the stage of bridge relationships is extended kin. These may include relatives who have not been able to take the youth into their care but who are a healthy and safe contact for youth from their families of origin. These extended relatives are often happy to re-establish or maintain contact with the youth.

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### Future Relationships

#### ***Reconnecting to Birth Parents***

Studies have shown that former foster youth are likely to initiate or increase contact with their birth families after leaving care. Caseworkers' efforts to maintain foster youth's connections to their birth families become especially critical during the youth's transition process because this may serve to encourage and strengthen informal support systems.

There are a number of practice considerations for youth who want to reconnect with birth families. These connections may pose little or no risk for youth or they may pose a significant risk of emotional or even physical harm. Youth should be protected from disappointment or harm to the extent possible through adequate preparation for this endeavor. Workers must identify if these relationships pose a risk of harm, how great is the harm, and what can be done to mitigate that harm.

One way to evaluate this risk of harm is to discuss with the youth where various family members fall on a risk continuum, with specific documentation as to why. Youth need to consider both their physical and emotional safety. Although physical risks are generally much lower due to their age, there may remain significant emotional risks of harm. The following questions may be used to assess physical safety in reconnecting (adapted from *Within My Reach*, Pearson, Stanley, & Kline, 2005): 1) Are arguments scary or do they become physical? 2) Do family members control or threaten you? 3) Do family members ever seem out of control when they are angry?

Similarly, these questions may be used to assess emotional safety in reconnecting: 1) Do you feel supported in your goals for life by these family members? 2) Do you feel comfortable sharing opinions? Do you feel respected by family members? 3) Do family members seem to love you unconditionally (for who you really are)? 4) Do you and family members contribute equally to the relationship? 5) Is everyone willing to work to make the relationship better?

When youth reconnect to their families of origin, they may have to consider what they are willing to accept and what must change in order to maintain contact. Youth must decide what is acceptable now with these family members, and what new patterns of interaction and relationship they want to establish. By considering these patterns, they are also making decisions about future relationships, such as those they will have with their own children some day. Youth should be encouraged to consider the following:

- What were things like when they were younger and living with these family members?
- What do they want things to be like now? What is minimally acceptable and safe for them?
- What do they want their own families to be like when they have children of their own?

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### ***Dating Relationships***

Although the evidence concerning the intergenerational transmission of abuse/neglect is mixed, recent research suggests that there is at least a greater likelihood of victimization as an adult for those who experienced abuse/neglect as a child (Renner & Slack, 2006). Hence, there is a need to teach youth healthy skills for dating or romantic relationships before they navigate these relationships independently. The child welfare worker may engage the youth in conversations about their dating relationships, which often provides opportunities for one-on-one coaching/mentoring of dating skills.

Another excellent alternative for teaching healthy relationship skills that promote positive dating relationships (as well as positive relationships in numerous other domains) is the group educational intervention. Healthy relationship education is of critical importance for youth, for whom there are needs related to adequate role models of healthy relationships and dating violence. An example of a group psychoeducational intervention appropriate for foster youth is the *Love U2: Communication Smarts* curriculum which addresses these complexities, risks, and potential benefits of dating (Pearson, 2004). Relationship programs such as *Love U2* may provide youth transitioning out of foster care with essential skills to form healthy romantic relationships, friendships, family and professional relationships.

### **Conclusion**

If youth develop, experience, and practice supportive adult relationships while they are in transition, it logically follows that they will be able to continue utilizing such relationship skills after emancipation and throughout their lives. Developing a practice framework that promotes both a significant adult relationship and the idea of interdependent living for youth transitioning out of care will result in better outcomes for youth once they have left care.

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