

Promising Practices

how foster parents can
support the successful
transition of youth
from foster care to
self-sufficiency



Promising Practices:
***How Foster Parents Can Support the Successful
Transition of Youth from Foster Care to
Self-Sufficiency***

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Youth and young adults raised in foster care face unique challenges as they:

Work to complete high school and continue on to post-secondary education;

- Arrange for housing;
- Develop long-term employment and career goals;
- Secure reliable transportation, childcare, and other support services for themselves and their family; and as they
- Address health care needs.

Historically, services addressing the above challenges have been offered through independent living programs, which are often under-funded and unable to serve the entire caseload of eligible youth. In addition, there has been limited research to identify best practices to guide birth and foster families on their primary role in assisting young adults with their transition to independence. Therefore, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine, and the National Resource Center for Youth Services at the University of Oklahoma initiated a research project, *Promising Practices: How Foster Parents Can Support the Successful Transition of Youth from Foster Care to Self-Sufficiency*, to identify best practices for foster parents and agencies serving adolescents through independent living programs.

Scope

Aiming to uncover the approaches that work best for foster parents in helping youth transition out of care, the research team decided to focus on foster parents who had already had success with adolescents in their homes. These successful foster parents offered unique ideas, proven strategies, and real-life examples. Documenting the results of their experiences provides guidance to all foster parents on the most promising practices for working with adolescents today.

Findings

This research clarified factors contributing to the success of foster parents. It confirmed that successful foster parents possess attributes that enable them to define boundaries, advocate for the youth and seek needed

services. These foster parents recognize that rewards do not come immediately; they have an inner confidence and are guided by a belief system. They have a commitment to children and value the family experience and what this can bring to a young person's life. The successful foster parent knows what they know and are willing to seek help and training when needed.

The research team also clarified the various roles successful foster parents play each day -- coach, networker, advocate and facilitator of relationships. As coach, they listen, plan, provide real life experiences and help the youth reflect on those experiences. In their role as networker the successful foster parent helps cultivate resources and connections for the youth. These parents continually advocate for the youth and will "go the distance" for them. The successful foster parent facilitates the creation of lifelong family connections -- thus creating a sense of permanency.

Through this research, the 13 best practices and suggested practice criteria identified in 1999 as part of *Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System* have been applied to foster parents; an additional suggested practice -- Reflective Learning -- was identified. The experiences of the youth, agencies and foster parents who participated in this project have been synthesized and are reflected in the promising practices and related practice criteria. It is felt that this work will serve as a guide for people throughout the foster care system.



BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Youth and young adults raised in foster care face unique challenges as they:

Work to complete high school and continue on to post-secondary education;

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- Address health care needs.

Historically, services addressing the above challenges have been offered through independent living programs, which are often under-funded and unable to serve the entire caseload of eligible youth. In addition, there has been limited research to identify best practices to guide birth and foster families on their primary role in assisting young adults with their transition to independence.

In 2001, the Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine, Casey Family Services and the National Resource Center for Youth Services at the University of Oklahoma initiated a research project, *Promising Practices: Supporting the Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System*, to identify best practices for agencies serving adolescents through independent living programs. Upon completing the project, the team realized that the report lacked the voice of people who play an integral role in an adolescents' success -- foster parents. Therefore, the group has collaborated again to continue their research—with the goal of identifying promising practices and “tools”, and to create a source of information and assistance for foster parents as they work with youth in preparing to live independently. The result of this work is contained in this document -- *Promising Practices: How Foster Parents Can Support the Successful Transition of Youth from Foster Care to Self-Sufficiency*.



SCOPE OF RESEARCH

“If you want to know what makes a runner fast, you do not waste time studying the technique of slow runners.” Abraham Maslow

In *Success Stories as Hard Data: An Introduction to Results Mapping*, Barry M. Kibel writes, “For “fix it/cure it” programs, where all cases are supposed to be alike, the average case is a good place to start—since all cases ought to look like that case. However, for programs engaged in healing, transformation, and prevention, the average case offers little that the programs should want to emulate that is not also included in their better cases . . . By drawing attention to a program’s best work, it is our intention to prod that program to make the necessary adjustments so that the exceptional becomes the norm” (Kibel, 1999).

Kibel’s insights were applied to this project. Aiming to find out what approaches work best for foster parents in helping youth transition out of care, the team decided to focus their research on foster parents who had already had success with adolescents in their homes. These successful foster parents offered unique ideas, proven strategies, and real-life examples to share. Pulling this input together offers a guide to all foster parents on the most promising practices for working with adolescents today.

Research for *Promising Practices: How Foster Parents Can Support the Successful Transition of Youth from Foster Care to Self-Sufficiency* started with contacting state independent living coordinators and foster care managers nationwide. They were each asked to identify three to five public and private agencies that have a foster parenting component that do outstanding work providing independent living services for youth in care. In order to ensure adequate representation across the country, one state from each of the ten Department of Health and Human Services federal regions was selected. The final agency list included public agencies run at the county level, public agencies run at the state level, and private agencies. The agencies and some county-level Independent Living Coordinators were then asked to identify five of their most outstanding families who they feel are successful in helping youth transition to self-sufficiency. When considering success, the agencies and coordinators were asked to think about foster families that have repeated success with teens in their homes; specifically, teens that have an educational or career focus, have connections to the community and have stability. Teens they view as happy and independent, and who have hopes and dreams about school, jobs and family.



RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The goal of this project was to find out the most promising practices foster parents can use in working with youth transitioning to adulthood. To do this, the team decided to talk with foster parents who were **successful** with adolescents in their homes. Harvard psychologist David McClelland used a similar technique as part of a hiring process for employees (Goleman, 1981). His team interviewed “star” employees in order to identify qualities, or competencies, that would most predict success in future candidates (Goleman, 1981). He recalled, “[We] asked ourselves what competencies these stars had shown that the other people failed to show. We were able to distill a distinct set of competencies that set them apart” (Goleman, 1981). Talking to successful foster parents helped to compile a list of their practices; a list of promising practices from which all foster parents can draw.

Using this approach however, has its limitations because it is not a randomized study and it is subjective. We asked state Independent Living Coordinators for agencies they felt had successful independent living programs. We then asked those agency executives for names of foster parents who they felt were successful with helping youth transition from care.

Other limitations to our study are:

- The sample size of the population involved in the study was small.
- The survey response rate was low—results are based on 62 respondents.
- The majority of respondents were Maine residents, which altered the regional and racial percentage of the overall sample.
- We conducted interviews and site visits with only those foster parents who stated they would be willing to participate. Foster parents not responding to the survey were not considered for site visits.
- The foster homes visited were not randomly selected; instead, locations were selected based on clusters of foster homes from the same agency.

For these reasons, the results should only be considered a description of specific foster parent experiences that offers insights into recommended practices for foster parents. Despite these limitations, we are confident the results provide valuable information to foster parents helping prepare adolescents to live on their own and to agencies that want to ensure the success of their foster parenting program.



SURVEY PARTICIPATION

A fifty-question survey was developed to gain an understanding from foster parents how they live and work with youth in their home. The survey was mailed to 120 agency-identified foster families. Sixty-two surveys were returned for a return rate of 52 percent. Survey data were entered into a database and analyzed using data analysis software - Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) - to gain an understanding of the descriptive statistics. The table below highlights by state the number of surveys

mailed, the number of surveys returned, the percent of surveys returned and the response rate. Complete survey results can be found in Appendix E.

State	Surveys Mailed	Surveys Returned	Returned Surveys	Response Rate
Maine	36	19	31%	50%
Pennsylvania	11	8	13%	75%
Texas	17	7	11%	40%
New York	8	6	10%	75%
Colorado	12	6	10%	50%
California	7	4	7%	60%
Washington	10	4	7%	40%
Illinois	6	4	7%	67%
Ohio	5	2	3%	40%
Missouri	4	1	1%	25%
Florida	4	1	1%	25%
Totals	120	62	52%	52%



INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Survey respondents were asked if they would participate in further interviews during site visits in their homes. A list of the willing respondents was compiled, and the location of the homes and agencies examined to determine potential for site-visit locations. Based on “clusters” of homes located near one another and from the same agency, four locations were selected—Buffalo, New York, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, Ft. Worth, Texas, and Bangor, Maine. Agency executives were contacted to participate in site visits and coordinate interviews at the agencies and in the foster homes.

Each site visit included one focus group with agency staff, one focus group with foster parents, and site visits to two - three foster homes.

State	Youth Interviews	Foster Parent Interviews
Maine	1	1
Pennsylvania	3	2
New York	2	2
Texas	7	3
Total	13	8

Foster parent and youth interviews were conducted in two formats. Interviewers from the Muskie School of Public Service conducted Behavioral Event Interviews, based on the technique developed by David McClelland (McClelland, 1978). During these interviews (site visits to Pennsylvania, New York and Maine), the interviewer asked the respondent to think of a “high point” or a “low point” that occurred recently within the foster family. The respondent told a story and the interviewer followed up with clarifying questions. The goal of this type of interviewing is to isolate characteristics, or competencies, the respondent has that stand out from others. In this case, foster parents were talking about themselves and youth were talking about their foster parents. Structured interview questions were used in conjunction with the Behavioral Event Interviews (see Appendices C and D). Interviewers from the National Resource Center for Youth Services (site visits in Texas) used the structured interview instruments that are included in the Appendices.



PARTICIPANT STIPEND

All participants who returned surveys received a \$15 Walmart Card as a stipend. Youth who participated in site-visit interviews received a \$25 stipend. Foster parents who participated in the focus groups received a \$25 stipend. Foster parents who participated in the site-visit interviews received a gift basket for participating.



FOSTER PARENT CHARACTERISTICS

Below and on the following pages, you will find information about the characteristics of the foster parents who participated in this research project.

Children Seventy-five percent of respondents had biological children.

Relationship to Youth No respondent was related to the youth they considered for the survey.

Household Over 82% of the foster parent respondents lived with a spouse or a partner.

Gender Eighty-four percent of respondents were foster mothers; the remaining 16% were foster fathers. Over half the respondents were between the ages of 36 and 50 (53%). Twenty-nine percent were over 50 years of age. A small percentage (5%) were 30 or younger.

Age and Gender of Respondents

Age	Male		Female		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
26 – 30	0	0%	3	5%	3	5%
31 – 35	1	2%	7	11%	8	13%
36 – 40	2	3%	8	13%	10	16%
41 – 45	2	3%	10	16%	12	19%
46 – 50	0	0%	11	18%	11	18%
51 -- 55	1	2%	5	8%	6	10%
56 >	4	6%	8	13%	12	19%
Total	10	16%	52	84%	62	100%

Experience Forty-four percent of the respondents had more than 10 years fostering experience. Experience varied among the remaining respondents.

Years of Foster Parenting by Gender

Years	Male		Female		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
0 – 4	2	3%	13	21%	15	24%
5 – 10	3	5%	17	27%	20	32%
> 10	5	8%	22	36%	27	44%
Total	10	16%	52	84%	62	100%

Household Income More than half of respondents reported their annual household income to be over \$40,000. Three participants did not answer this question.

Household Income	Respondent		
	Annual Income	#	%
	\$10,000 or Less	1	2%
	\$10,001 – \$20,000	2	3%
	\$20,001 – \$30,000	9	15%
	\$30,001 – \$40,000	15	25%
	\$40,001 – \$50,000	14	24%
	\$50,001 – \$60,000	6	10%
	More than 60,000	12	20%
	TOTAL	59	100%

Licensure

Seventy-seven percent of respondents were foster parents licensed through private agencies; 16% were licensed through public agencies, 3% did not know, and 3% did not answer. Fifty-six percent of respondents held therapeutic or treatment licenses, 23% had general licenses, 15% have specialized licenses and 6% had “other” licenses, which include Family Teachers, Foster to Adopt, and Options for Recovery.

Licensure of Respondents	Licensure	#	%
	Private Agency	48	77%
	Public Agency	10	16%
	Don't Know	2	3%
	No Answer	2	3%

Type of License	#	%
Therapeutic/Treatment	35	56%
Specialized	9	15%
General	14	23%
Other	4	6%

Race

Over 80% of respondents and over 70% of the spouses were White/Caucasian. The remaining breakdown was 3% African American, 3% Hispanic/Latino and 5% Native American/Alaskan Native. Of spouses, 5% were African American, 2% Native American/Alaskan Native.

Race of Respondent and Spouse	Respondent		Spouse		
	Race	#	%	#	%
	Caucasian	54	87%	45	72%
	African American	2	3%	3	5%
	Hispanic/Latino	2	3%	0	0%
	Native American/Alaskan American	3	5%	1	2%
	No Answer/Not Applicable	1	2%	13	21%
	Total	62	100%	62	100%



YOUTH CHARACTERISTICS

Respondents were asked to focus on a youth currently living in their home, who is 12 years or older, with whom they had done some independent living preparation work and who was special to the respondent for some reason; a youth with whom the respondent had a connection.

The following describes characteristics of the youth selected by the respondents for this project.

Relationship to Youth No respondent was related to the youth they considered for the survey.

Race Seventy-seven percent of respondents reported that they were the same race as the youth.

Number of Placements Fifteen percent of youth had not been placed in foster care before living with the respondent. However, most youth had between one and six foster care placements prior to living with the respondent.

Age of Youth Forty-five percent of respondents focused on youth ages 16 or 17. Thirteen percent focused on 12 - 13 year olds; 26% 14 - 15 year olds and 16% focused on youth 18 or older.

Age of Youth Selected by Respondents	Youth		
	Age	#	%
	12 - 13	8	13%
	14 - 15	16	26%
	16 - 17	28	45%
	18 or Older	10	16%
	Total	62	100%

Years Together A third, or 39%, of respondents had lived with the youth for less than one year. The remaining 61% of respondents had lived with the youth from 1 - 4 years (45%) or longer (16%).

Years Youth and Respondent Together	Years Together		
	Years	#	%
	< 1	24	39%
	1 - 4	28	45%
	5 - 8	8	13%
	> 8	2	3%
	Total	62	100%

Age When Placed in Home

Over 70% of youth were between the ages of 11 and 16 when placed in the respondents' homes.

Age of Youth When Placed in Respondents Home

Age Bands	Youth	
	#	%
< 2	0	0%
2 - 4	2	3%
5 - 7	3	5%
8 - 10	3	5%
11 - 13	21	34%
14 - 16	25	40%
> 16	7	11%
No Answer	1	2%
Total	62	100%

Age When Removed from Home

The ages of youth when first removed from their biological homes varied among respondents from less than three years old to older than 14. A quarter of the youth were removed from their homes when they were between 11 and 13 years old.

Age of Youth When Removed from Home

Age Bands	Youth	
	#	%
< 2	4	6%
2 - 4	10	16%
5 - 7	8	13%
8 - 10	12	19%
11 - 13	16	26%
14 - 16	11	18%
> 16	0	0%
No Answer	1	2%
Total	62	100%

Siblings

Seventy-three percent of youth were part of a sibling group. However, only 31% of these youth lived with their sibling(s).

Youth and their Sibling(s) Together

	Youth	
	#	%
Live w/Sibling	14	31%
Not Living w/Sibling	31	69%
No Siblings	17	27%
Total	62	

Clinically Diagnosed Disabilities

Approximately half of respondents reported that the youth had clinically diagnosed disabilities; the largest percentages of which were emotionally based, ADHD, and "other" medically diagnosed conditions, such as ODD, autism, depression, and asthma.

**Diagnosed
Disabilities of Youth**

Diagnosis	Youth	
	#	%
Clinically Diagnosed Disabilities	29	47%
Mental Retardation	8	13%
Visual or Hearing Impaired	6	10%
Physically Disabled	1	1%
Emotionally Disturbed	34	55%
ADHD	24	39%
Other Medically Diagnosed Condition	24	39%

Support Needed

Using a Likeart scale of 1 to 5 to assess the level of support needed by the foster parents; 1 indicating lowest support and 5 indicating highest support, fewer than 25% reported their level of support at the highest level. Thirty-five percent rated their level as four. Eighty-two percent of foster parents indicated they needed moderate to high levels of support.

**Level of Supports
Needed by
Respondent**

Likeart Scale	Respondent	
	#	%
1 - Lowest	2	3%
2	9	15%
3	14	23%
4	22	35%
5 - Highest	15	24%
Total	62	100%

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Family foster care serves an important role along the continuum of child welfare services. Since the 1960s there have been studies to determine the effectiveness of family foster care (Altshuler and Gleeson, 1999). This research focused primarily on outcomes such as: educational attainment, status, living environment, and the emotional functioning of adults who had been in care (Pecora et al, 1998). Recently, most likely in response to the requirements of the Adoption and Safe Families Act and the national standards established for the Child and Family Service Reviews, attention and research efforts have shifted to the safety and permanency outcomes of foster care. If the objective in placing children in family foster care is to achieve positive outcomes in permanency, safety and preparedness for living independently, and the success of placement is defined in this way, then the capacity of foster parents to facilitate these outcomes is critical.

From the late 1980s to the late 1990s, there was a 74% increase in the number of children in out-of-home care (Barbell and Wright, 1999). As of March 31, 2000, 47% of the children in the foster care system were in non-relative care (Landsman, 1999). These licensed homes offer a temporary living arrangement; provide physical care and emotional support; and facilitate the connection to other services that protect children, promote healing, and enhance growth and development (DHHS, 2002). Even though Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) data for 1999 indicate that of the 110,000 children in care and awaiting adoption, 28% are between the ages of 11 and 18, few of the existing studies have investigated the profiles of foster parents who successfully foster adolescents (Landsman, 1999).

As the number of children needing care has risen steadily over the past decades, the number of foster families has fallen by one third since the 1980s (CWLA, 1992). In 1995, it was documented that 40% of families leave fostering during their first year of licensing, primarily because of confusing role expectations, lack of agency support and respite, the challenging behaviors of children, negative interactions with birth families and agency staff, and/or payment issues. Of the foster families remaining, 35% of them had no foster children in their homes (DHHS, 1993; CWLA, 1998). It appears that more experienced foster families with foster children already in their homes are most likely to accept harder to place children, including adolescents (DHHS, 1993), but there is not necessarily a correlation between experience and competency (Simms and Horwitz, 1996).

Studies have found that foster parent recruitment continues to be very general, while the need for specialized care remains unmet. Unfortunately, research to determine the qualities of successful foster parents is limited, the information gathered is often based on small samples with low response rates (Barth, 2001), there is often no control group, and a distinction between kin and non-kin care takers is rarely made (Orme, 2001).

Efforts to identify competencies for foster parents have resulted in the articulation of varied sets of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Dougherty, 2001). All of which points to the fact a foster parent's success, as a substitute parent, must be measured against objective criteria to determine successful parenting in general. The following organizations have worked to identify competencies and criteria for foster parents.

- **Child Welfare League of America:** Organizes its PRIDE (Parents' Resources, Information, Development, and Education) family pre-service training around five accreted competencies: protecting and nurturing children; working as a member of a professional team; supporting relationships between children and their families; meeting children's developmental needs and addressing developmental delays; and connecting children to safe, nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime (CWLA, 1994).
- **Muskie School of Public Service at University of Southern Maine:** Developed a 50-item list of discrete competencies, each with two to 11 sub-groups, that addresses a foster parent's family management skills, conceptual knowledge, interpersonal skills, self-management skills, and technical knowledge (Bernotavicz, 1995).
- **National Extension Model of Critical Parenting Practice:** Suggests good parents are able to care for themselves, understand, guide, nurture, and advocate (Smith et al, 1994).

While existing foster parent competency models are helpful in developing training curricula and evaluation criteria, a review of the literature suggests they are beginning to incorporate some key factors critical to a foster parent's success. These characteristics can be grouped into five categories or success factors:

- personal attributes,
- family orientation,
- motivation to foster,
- knowledge, skills and abilities, and
- agency support.

They are described in detail on the following pages.



SUCCESS FACTORS FOR FOSTER PARENTS

1. Personal Attributes

One of the most comprehensive lists of the personal attributes of successful foster and adoptive parents is presented in Spaulding for Children's pre-service training curriculum Parents As Tender Healers (PATH). These qualities include:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <i>Tolerance for ambivalent and negative feelings</i> | A parent's ability to expect some powerful and negative feelings in themselves in reaction to a child's behavior and to understand that those feelings are normal and transient (Gill, 1978). |
| <i>"Intrusive and controlling" behaviors</i> | Necessary to assume control of the parental/child relationship, not allowing the child to reject them, and to advocate strongly with systems and institutions so that a child's needs can be met (Jernberg, 1979). |
| <i>Flexible expectations</i> | Necessary to insure that the long-term parenting goal is not a perfect child and that each tiny, incremental improvement in a child's functioning is celebrated (Katz, 1986). |
| <i>Tolerance for rejection and the ability to delay parental gratification</i> | Demonstrated by a parent's ability to de-personalize a child's behavior and to realize that the rewards of fostering are rarely immediate (Kadushin, 1970). |
| <i>Sense of humor</i> | Helpful as a way to cope with stress and to diffuse strong emotions (Gill, 1978). |
| <i>Ability to read a situation and react accordingly</i> | Take on parenting tasks that are outside their usual role; for example, they are able to shift from nurturer to disciplinarian depending on the situation or the child (Cohen, 1981). |
| <i>Take care of themselves</i> | Necessary in order to maintain their perspective, relieve tension, and remain strong and healthy (Gill, 1978). |

Seek and accept

This is for themselves and for the children in their home (Smith and Sherwin, 1983).

Spirituality, or the belief in a higher power

Provides a constant resource for strength and wisdom, rounds out Spaulding’s list (Jackson and Wasserman, 1997).

Other sources suggest that additional personal attributes include optimism and a tendency to put more emphasis on giving respect than on demanding it (Marshall, 2001).

Our research identified that successful foster parents...

Foster parent:

“We told her when she got here that a lot of her freedoms and her privileges were going to depend on her grades in school and how well she did, because getting good grades and doing well in school is the most important thing to us.”

Define Boundaries

Foster parents do assume control of the parent/child relationship—through setting rules and instilling structure in their homes. Routine and rules are established for things such as chores, curfews and study habits.

Know What They Know

When respondents were asked what enabled them to be successful foster parents, the most common answer was training and/or education.

Foster parent:

“... my job as the protector, as the parent, as the teacher, is to deal with all of the other people and say look, let’s work through this. Let us help this child because this is something they need to be a successful adult.”

Advocate

Foster parents in the study advocated strongly for the adolescents in their homes. Foster parents were advocates for health care needs, job searches, schools, and for issues concerning visits with siblings.

Foster parent:

“... meeting with other foster parents helps me ... they understand the challenges and the rewards.”

Seek Services and Accept Support

Survey results showed that foster parents seek help for themselves and for children by routinely accessing services. The majority of respondents obtained individual counseling for youth (77%), and used respite care (66%). Services used less frequently included residential treatment for youth (8%),

institutional placements for youth (3.3%), and foster parents support groups (3.3%).

Foster parent:
“We’d be in the wrong business if we wanted to see success right now.”

Recognize Rewards Come Later

Our research showed foster parents had an ability to delay parental gratification. A consistent theme in foster parent interviews and focus groups was that the greatest reward of foster parenting sometimes does not come until the youth has left the home and returns again for a visit. Some foster parents described not knowing whether they had done a good job with youth until years after the youth moved out. Visits and phone calls from youth, and holidays spent together reassure foster parents that they had a positive influence on youths’ lives.

Have Confidence in Their Abilities

Survey respondents did appear to be optimistic. On the survey, more than half of respondents reported being self-confident, and feeling competent to handle the types of children, they have fostered. Many foster parents (19%) felt that patience is what enables them to be successful.

Foster parent:
“We have a responsibility to all children...”

Are Guided by Beliefs

When asked what guiding beliefs drive their work, 21% said spirituality or religion; more than half of survey respondents report being religious.

Foster parent:
“I try not to interfere with family ties. I try to promote that they continue any relationship that they can with their family.”

Value Connection to Birth Family

Successful foster parents understand the importance of the youth maintaining a connection to their birth family and are willing to encourage contact between them.

2. Family Orientation

Through a review of literature and previous research, family orientation emerged as a success factor stressing that foster care offer the informal, spontaneous, and unconditional atmosphere of family life (The Social Worker, 1991). The characteristics of the family providing the care are significant and include:

- Having sufficient economic resources and healthy family and marital functioning,
- Valuing and supporting education,
- Respecting what each member of the family thinks about fostering and the possibility of adoption (Michigan State, 1998),
- Offering a variety of experiences along with routines and structure,
- Developmental and emotional stimulation,
- Maintaining quality in the physical environment,
- Providing culturally competent care,
- Meeting their own needs for support and stimulation (Simms and Horwitz, 1996), and
- Recognizing the need to express and process grief.

In addition, the literature and research identified that successful foster parents provide:

- Permanency and safety,
- Positive parenting,
- A healthy example of family and marital functioning,
- A family experience that is informal, spontaneous, and unconditional, and
- Experience nurturing a child's development and emotional recovery.

Our research identified that successful foster parents...

Have Sufficient Economic Resources

Survey respondents appeared to have sufficient economic resources. Our survey results showed that more than half of respondents had a total income of \$40,000 or more.

Foster parent:
“To do the best job I can I know I need to continually learn”

Recognize the Importance of Life Long Learning

The education levels of survey respondents varied from high school to graduate school degrees. Seventy-four percent of respondents, and 68% of spouses, had a minimum of some college education. When respondents were asked what enables them to be successful foster parents, the most common answer was training and/or education.

Foster parent:
“I think the biggest thing that we do is say - these are the rules.” We leave a pretty big gray area ... so they can make mistakes ... and learn from them”

Provide Structure

A clear theme in the focus groups and foster parent interviews was that families provide structure and rules for youth. Families implement rules such as: rotating schedule for household chores; daily study hour; youth must save 75% of their paycheck; youth must pass in school; youth have to have a job once in high school. Failing to meet these criteria results in consequences.

Foster parent:
“My husband and I work together, we’re a team....”

Access Support Systems

Survey results showed that families did meet their needs for support. When respondents were asked about the types of supports they rely on, the most frequent answers were spouses/partners (85%), foster care agencies (84%), followed by family members (65%) and other foster parents (55%). The most common manner in which foster parents were supported was through receiving feedback or advice (45%). Supports also give respondents a break by spending time with the youth (38%).

Foster parent:
“... when I have a child it’s not all my responsibility. It’s the social worker, the youth worker, and the teacher - we’re a team. We all work together.”

Other supports were respite care providers (34%), mental health services (31%), community (17%), and Foster Parent Association (14%). Respondents also mentioned being supported by schools/teachers, foster parent support specialists, and therapists. One person mentioned receiving support from the youth’s emancipated foster brother.

Respondents were asked what their supports did to provide support. The most common response

(45%) was their supports give feedback or advice. The next most common answer (38%) was supports provide a break by

spending time with the youth. Other ways respondents feel supported are shown in the table above.

WAYS SUPPORTED	%
Emotional support	20%
Work with spouse/partner as a team	20%
Listen/sounding board	18%
Share Ideas	18%
Offer help	14%
Great agency staff	13%
Counseling	9%
I could talk openly/vent	9%
Encouragement	9%
Provide activities for youth	9%

Foster parent:

“When it comes to siblings (visitation) we have to be the primary town crier, advocate, we have to make it happen.”

Value the Birth Family

Results showed that in general, contact with a youth’s birth family was important to families. Youth visited most often with their siblings—more than half visited their siblings every month or more often. Approximately 35% of youth visited their birth parents every month or more. An additional 30% visited other blood relatives every month or more, while only 10% visited with former foster parents every month.

Agency:

“Foster parents play a vital role in linking and supporting youth maintaining connections with birth family, siblings and relatives.”

Support Visits with Birth Family

The majority of survey respondents helped to support these visits. Seventy percent provided transportation, 56% initiated contact, 33% planned activities, and 26% did “other” things such as encouraging the youth to stay in touch, hosting family members, helping to locate family members and helping the youth process through feelings after a visit.

3. Motivation to Foster

Over the years, research has documented a number of factors that motivate families to foster. The results of a British study in the mid-1980's suggested that the primary reason for providing long-term foster care was the desire to parent a child when a couple could not conceive a child of their own. A second reason was an identification of one or both parents with the deprived children as a result of their own unhappy childhood. Social concern and altruism were additional motivators (Dando and Minty, 1987). More recent studies recognize a love for children and a desire to contribute to a child's "solid beginning" as strong incentives to provide care. Many successful foster parents are members of a religious community and cite that connection as a motivator and sustaining factor in fostering (Edelstein et al, 2001; Marshall, 2001).

Our research identified that successful foster parents...

Committed to Fostering Children

Over 40% of survey respondents had 10 or more years fostering experience. It is likely that through this experience, this group of foster parents gained an understanding of the types of behavior to expect from foster children, and feelings they have in response to that behavior.

*Foster parent:
"What motivated me
is just love for
children."*

Love of Children

Survey results showed the most common reason for foster parenting was wanting to offer security to a child, or to nurture a child. Other reasons included knowing someone who was a foster parent, closeness to the child, being "called" by God, wanting to share life/offer skills to a child, and love for children

*Foster parent:
"I can understand ...
I've been there. I can
give some of my
insights, my
experience to these
kids."*

Identifies with Child's Experience

Foster parents' identification with deprived children was discussed in interviews and on surveys. Foster parents described relating to youth having unhappy childhoods. On the survey, 30% disagreed with the statement, "I had a happy childhood."

Foster parent:
“I believe all children need to feel loved and supported in order to believe in themselves.”

Values Children and Family

When respondents were asked what guiding values or beliefs drive their work with adolescents, the most common response (28%) was children need to be loved/children need to experience a family. Another common response (21%) was their religious belief or spirituality. *Other guiding values or beliefs* are outlined in the table on the right.

Other Guiding Values/Beliefs	%
Love for Children	16%
Want to Help Youth Develop Their Lives	16%
Youth Have Strengths/Can Change	14%
Believe We Should Help Those in Need	12%
Everyone Deserves A Chance	12%
Believe We Can Make a Difference	12%
My Upbringing/Morals	11%
Determination/Dedication/Work Ethic	9%

Foster parent:
“You can’t fence them in, you can’t make all their decisions for them... we talk about drug and alcohol abuse, we talk about premarital sex, we talk about curfews and the time that they’re going to be home, and where they’re supposed to be and picking their friends.”

Bring Life Experience

Prior experiences that respondents attribute to benefiting them in their work with adolescents included parenting their biological children (34%) and employment involving children, such as teaching, day care, coaching (29%), and social work (21%). Other experiences that helped foster parents are in the table to the right.

Experiences	%
Positive Upbringing/Morals	12%
Religious Work with Kids (Sunday school teacher, youth group leader)	9%
Foster Parent Experience	9%
Life Experience	9%
Negative Upbringing/Abuse	9%
Foster Children Succeeding/Keeping in Touch	7%
Remembering My Own Adolescence	7%

4. Knowledge, Skills and Abilities

Historically, the role of a foster parent was that of a nurturer and caregiver. Over time, this role has expanded to require knowledge and skills in the following areas:

- Helping children to cope with separation and loss, to make

- developmental gains and to build self-esteem;
- Giving positive guidance, promoting cultural identity and supporting social responsibility;
- Advocating in school issues, accessing services and developing job skills;
- Mentoring birth parents, ensuring a connection to siblings and promoting continuity of relationships;
- Functioning as a contributing member of the service delivery team;
- Knowing when to take a break; and
- Making an informed decision about adoption.

Therapeutic foster parents need the skills to function as trained counselors. Additionally, parents who successfully foster teens have the skills to:

- Play a dual role – shifting from parent, caregiver and disciplinarian to a role model, guide, companion, and mentor
- Teach, model, coach, and positively reinforce the acquisition of life skills
- Assist youth in connecting their past and present life experiences with future goals
- Develop a relationship with the youth that will exist beyond their stay in the home.

Even with the strongest motivation, families may find the fostering experience overwhelming. Not only must families provide safety and nurturing, but they must also have an array of skills to communicate, build on a child's strengths and needs, enhance self-esteem and promote cultural identity, support and model social responsibility, manage loss and grief, address problematic behaviors, work in partnerships, and facilitate connections (Dougherty, 2001). Successful foster parents build on this foundation by expecting and taking advantage of training to prepare them for and support them in their expanded roles as members of service delivery and permanency planning teams (Sanchirico et al, 1998), educational advocates (Schwartz, 1999), mentors to birth parents, and potential adoptive parents or permanent surrogate extended family members (Katz, 1999; CWLA, 1995). The best therapeutic foster parents must also be trained as counselors (Children's Voice, 1995). Similarly, foster parents who have been found to do well with adolescents have developed additional skills. They are able to shift from parenting, care taking, and disciplining to role modeling, guiding, teaching, and advising in order to develop and positively reinforce the learning of life skills. Foster parents in transitional models of care are able to make this shift to provide role modeling and mentoring as opposed to maintaining a more structured

and parental environment. The foster parents work to move from controlling the youth in their home to acting as a resource and mentor to encourage the youth in their independent skills building and decision making capabilities. Flexibility for the parents has been identified as a key factor of success for these families because it allows them to accept the adolescent and their individual needs for accomplishment and independence. By acting as a resource, the foster parents help the youth to process their experiences, both positive and negative, to help them learn from their actions and move forward. The ability to allow the youth to experience these things and then help them to learn from the process is a key to success in a less traditional foster home environment (Louis and Carol Colca, 1996).

Our research identified that successful foster parents...

Seek Training

High percentages of respondents reported receiving training in relation to preparing youth for adulthood. More than 80% of survey respondents reported receiving training on such topics as behavioral problems in adolescents, adolescent development, adolescent attachment/loss, and independent living/life skills.

*Foster parent:
“I ask what could you have done differently, and help him work through the issue, ideally learning from what has happened.”*

Value Communication

Interviews and focus groups showed that foster parents work with youth to help them reflect and learn from their mistakes—and process their experiences. This involves being flexible, trusting youth, communicating and being supportive.

Define Success

When foster parents were asked what enables them to be successful the most common answers were training and education (22%) and providing lots of love and support (21%).

Contributes to Foster Parents Success	%
Patience	19%
Support of Family/Spouse	17%
Commitment to Foster Parenting/	16%
Hard Work	14%
Agency Staff Support/Professionals	10%
Successful Parenting Experiences	10%
I Am A Good Listener	10%
Enjoy Teens/Children	10%
Prayer/Faith	10%

5. Agency Support

Good foster parents become better service providers when they are supported by placement agencies that appreciate the fact that individuals bring different skills and priorities to the challenge of fostering (Barth, 2001). It is essential that agencies encourage creativity, autonomy and the flexibility for foster parents to seek out services on their own (Schwartz, 1999). A Virginia study found that continuing education offered by an agency is also critical and suggests that foster parents be involved in determining the content of that training (Rodwell and Biggerstaff, 1993). Recognition by the agency is also important (Children's Voice, 1995).

A review of the literature suggests successful foster parents are supported by agencies that provide:

- **Clear expectations** regarding the foster parents' role and how they will interact with the agency staff, schools and other organizations that may impact the youth's life;
- **Initial training** that includes the legal issues affecting children in foster care, information about child safety and child development, and a discussion on working with birth parents and child welfare workers;
- **Ongoing training** that meets the needs of foster families, reflects the input of those families, and focuses on specific behaviors of children;
- **Freedom and flexibility** for foster parents to seek out services that afford convenient, quality, community-based care for the children in their homes;
- **Recognition, autonomy, and opportunities for creativity** in order to feel valued they are treated as professionals and encouraged to seek alternatives.

Our research identified that successful foster parents...

Seek Training

Survey results showed that respondents availed themselves of training that is offered by the agency—the majority have taken training on a number of subjects related to working with adolescents.

Youth:

“Anything that you are going to teach kids you need to make sure that you know what you are doing. You can’t just take them grocery shopping and say this is what we do.”

Foster parent:

“We call ourselves professional parents. We have an advisory committee and we meet monthly. In those sessions we share a lot and give a lot to each other.”

Foster parent:

“The best training you’ll get is talking to one another.”

Foster parent:

“The executive director surrounds herself with good people and she has a loving heart and is a caring person.”

Value Being Part of a Team

As mentioned earlier, survey results showed that one of the most frequently relied upon supports for respondents was the foster care agency. Ninety-six percent of respondents reported having contact with a caseworker once a month or more often. They are recognized by the agency as an integral part of the team.

Understands Role & Expectations

Respondents overall agreed (more than 90% agreed; more than 60% strongly agreed) that they are clear about agency expectations and are involved in decision-making for the youth. Foster parents stated that they look to the agency for the following:

- Peer support through mentoring, support groups, networking opportunities and training;
- Being viewed as a professional;
- Agency advisory committee to incorporate foster parents’ experiences and feedback;
- Being part of the treatment team;
- Recognition that positive messages/feedback received from youth (sometimes years later) are the motivator, not agency celebrations;
- Training that is relevant to the population being served;
- Training being offered on weekends and supporting foster parents becoming trainers for their peers;
- Practices and policies that support foster parents incorporating birth families/siblings into the foster home, family events, treatment team meeting and life skills preparation and transitional planning for youth; and
- Leadership that provides support, vision compassion and accessibility for foster parents and youth.



FOSTER PARENT ROLES

When asked about the role of a foster parent, one foster parent responded ...

“I don’t think any of us here can really answer your question about what roles we play because we take so many hats off and on all day long for whatever the situation calls for, but I think the one role that we play in all of this, in all parts of our life is parent.”

Survey results showed that the majority (51%) of respondents felt their role as a foster parent is “parent” or “caregiver.” Other common responses were to teach life skills (32%) and to nurture a child (21%). Other foster parent roles include advisor, advocate, providing security, providing a loving/family environment and to love unconditionally.

When one delves into the term parent, it actually contains many roles. Common themes start to arise, which can be grouped into four key roles that contribute to a youth’s successful transition to independence: coach, advocate, networker and facilitator of relationships.

Coach

In the role of coach, foster parents act as teacher, role model, guide, friend, and companion. They see themselves as a parent, and the youth sees them as “family”, and in many cases, they are the only “parental” figure in the young person’s life. Foster parents are always mindful of the youth’s needs and work with them to develop strategies to meet those needs. One youth put it this way --

“They encourage me a lot, they make me feel like I can do it...by telling me that I can.”

There are five functions the foster parent considers to assist the youth in their daily life, they – listen to the youth, plan with the youth, provide life experiences, practice skills, and help the youth reflect.

Youth:

“They didn’t say you gotta’ talk to us about it ... they just said hey, whenever you’re ready to come talk to us, you know, we’re here.”

Agency caseworker:

“He had wanted to go into the armed services and he scored really low on his ASVABs so she [foster mother] basically helped him get tutoring so he could bring up the scores, but she also talked to him about pursuing other options in case that that didn’t work out.”

Agency caseworker:

“... let’s take the bus to Fort Worth. This is where you’re going to be living over the next few months.... and here’s the bank and here’s the school, here’s the bookstore and here’s a couple of places you might want to look for a job and just hands on right there with them...So, you hold their hand the first time and then now most recently she’s going all by herself.”

Listen

Foster parents allow time to listen, understand and give the youth a “voice,” by providing a chance for the youth to be heard. They help the youth identify what they need and want. This is a key part of developing an in-depth relationship with the youth.

Plan

The foster parents assist the youth formally and informally assessing and planning with them to set their personal goals. They then guide the youth as they work toward their goals. The focus is on the youth’s wants and needs, more than on maintaining compliance.

Provide Experience: The foster parents recognize the importance of the youth experiencing “real life.” They work to support the youth’s learning by ensuring that day-to-day activities provide a context for learning. They may also use outdoor activities and outings as an approach to learning. They give special attention to providing the youth the space necessary to try something first hand, succeed, fail, and try again, with supportive adults to help when needed.

Practice: This is very similar to the above function, “Provide Experience.” However, in this instance the process is planned (e.g. applying for a job) and preparatory. Foster parents may help the youth prepare for a job interview, meetings with care providers, or writing a college essay. Like a coach preparing a team or individual for a sporting event, the foster parents prepare the youth for real world events.

Reflect: Foster parents help the youth reflect, review and decide whether the approach they have taken and decisions they have made have been in their best interest.

Networker

Foster parent:
*“You’ve got to tap every resource you’ve got.”
With one young man, we set up a plan with the community store, he would work there, we would pay part of his wages. He never knew this.”*

In this second role, foster parents act as a resource or options broker. They know where the resources (e.g. jobs, apartments, therapists, and scholarships) are and help broker connections for the youth. Typically, they have developed contacts through experience working in the field or through personal connections in the community. They are committed to getting the youth the resources they need to achieve self-sufficiency, while at the same time ensuring the process empowers and educates the youth on how to network and gain access to resources they may need in the future. This role is guiding and assisting the youth to become networkers for themselves.

Foster parent:
“I said I’ll do what we can, we’ll get character references, we’ll get whatever we need and I can talk to as many people as I can and you got so many people pulling for you ...”

Advocate

Youth:
“I know my foster parents will be there for me no matter what.”

In this role foster parents act as the youth’s advocate, both within the child welfare system and in the community at large. They act as the youth’s “life-line” by going the distance, showing up when no one else does and acting in a way that expresses unconditional acceptance and love for the youth. They help coordinate meetings on behalf of the youth, as well as work with caseworker to intervene for the youth regarding their needs/rights in areas such as education, placement, mental health or specialized service areas. In this role some friction between foster parents and “the systems” may occur. Because of the long standing relationship, and at times the “parental” role, foster parents develop with the youth, they will stand by the youth and advocate for them long after others have given up.

Facilitator of Relationships

Foster parent:
“Well the first thing we do is assure them that we’re always going to be here for them as long as we live.”

In this role, foster parents facilitate the creation of lifelong family connections for the youth. They offer the youth normalcy in the form of holiday traditions and day-to-day continuity of activities (e.g. study time, snack time, and chores). They support the youth by consistently “being there” in a non-judging, unconditional manner, regardless of the circumstances. Through these actions, they model how lasting, caring relationships are built and maintained. They provide the youth with a place to call “home,” a home to return to in the future. The foster parents play an integral part in helping the youth to overcome permanency barriers and identify permanency options such as adoption, legal guardianship, and other less formal alternatives. They also encourage the youth to stay connected with siblings, resolve differences with their birth family, and make peace with the past in planning for a positive future.

A key part of facilitating relationships is working with the youth to maintain contact with their birth families, if appropriate. The majority of foster parents

Youth:

“... they treat me like I’m their kid and the “foster” doesn’t matter.”

participating in this study supported these visits by providing transportation, initiating contact with birth families, and planning activities. Survey results showed that youth do maintain contact with their birth families. Youth visited most often with their siblings. More than half visited their siblings every month or more often. Approximately 35% of youth visited their birth parents every month or more. An additional 30% visited other blood relatives every month or more, while only 10% visited with former foster parents every month



EXAMINATION OF BEST PRACTICES

A comprehensive review of the literature on independent living for older adolescents was conducted as part of the research that went into creating *Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System*, which focused on agencies. This work also applies to foster parents, and others who work with youth in foster care. The following pages provide a review of the literature supporting four core principles and 14 suggested practice criteria identified for independent living/self sufficiency.

Core Principle: Youth Development Philosophy

Although the idea of youth development has been around for several years, we have just begun to see consistent movement of agencies and foster parents involving youth in the development, implementation, and evaluation of their programs. This involvement occurs through creating an environment and opportunities where young people feel supported and safe in practicing skills, learning about relationships and connecting with their communities.

Westat (1991) found that independent living services targeted toward specified youth needs and outcomes achieve the best results. Based upon results from a pilot study, Nollan, Downs, Wolf, and Lamont (1996) recommend that life skills assessment tools be designed for youth across an age continuum and structured to involve participation from both the youth and their caregiver. A follow-up study by Nollan (2000) again underscored the need for a systematic life skills assessment involving both the young person and caregivers, stating that “assessment information gathered in this manner helps independent living programs meet the requirement of the [Chafee Program] Act that youth directly participate in the design of their program activities.

In addition, two recommendations were made by Caliber (1999) relevant to further engaging youth in helping to shape independent living program activities.

First, states should be encouraged to embrace a youth development approach that moves beyond occasional youth involvement to ongoing engagement of youth in the planning, development, and delivery of independent living

services. Second, training and technical assistance (including peer-to-peer technical assistance) should be provided. This training and technical assistance should focus on integrating youth development approaches, emphasizing youth strengths rather than deficits, and keeping youth engaged (p. VI-12).

Successful transition to adulthood depends to a large degree on the youth's ability to make appropriate decisions regarding his or her case plan. Youth who have a sense of self-esteem and who feel empowered are often better equipped to deal with the barriers as well as the opportunities that arise during and after care. By encouraging youth and adults to become partners in making decisions, youth learn to take responsibility for themselves and thus feel empowered. This philosophy lies at the core of the youth development movement. Therefore, in order to provide effective services and achieve positive, outcomes for older foster youth, it is imperative that both public and private independent living/transitional living providers and foster parents embrace the youth development philosophy and incorporate youth not only in their own case assessment and planning, but also in overall independent living policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation.

Core Principle: Collaboration

Preparing a young person to take his/her place in the community as a young adult is the community's responsibility. Foster parents, as part of independent living/transitional living programs should be proactive in seeking community involvement/collaboration. When foster parents reach out to community organizations and individuals, they create linkages that will benefit youth while they are in the program and after they leave it. Community involvement can lead to additional financial resources, in-kind contributions, and support. Community members can be helpful to youth who are looking for housing, seeking employment, and finding ways to fill their free time. Collaborations with community organizations can lead to job shadowing experiences, mentoring opportunities and long-term personal connections.

Collaboration also involves working with other agencies to secure the myriad of services necessary to prepare youth for adulthood. For example: integrated service delivery is described as procedures and structures that help service agencies coordinate their efforts to address the wide range of needs in a holistic manner (Burt, Resnick and Matheson, 1992). The researchers offer the following recommendations for inter-agency

collaboration; long-term commitment, identification of needed services, common goals and objectives, flexible funding, minimization of administrative barriers, effectively designed and implemented evaluations, and institutionalizing change.

The need for integrated services for youth aging out of care is well documented. The Courtney et. al. (2001) study on Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood identifies several areas of need for former foster youth. Areas of need include education opportunities, mental health services, health services, and public assistance. For example, the study found that “although the receipt of mental health care services decreased dramatically over time [post discharge], there is no evidence that the young adults’ need for services decreased. In the area of health care, many youth identified lack of insurance or high cost, as a reason for not receiving necessary care.

The importance of integrated service delivery is also reinforced by the American Youth Policy Forum’s (1997) comprehensive evaluation of youth programs. They found that unsuccessful programs generally provide a single focus for intervention rather than addressing all the dimensions of a youth’s developmental needs. While some programs are able to provide the full range of services solely through their agency, most need to work collaboratively with other agencies in order to offer a complete continuum of youth services.

In examining literature specifically focused on foster youth, there is strong implied support for the concepts of both inter-agency collaboration and agency-to-school collaboration. (Westat, 1991; Barth, 1986; Mech, 1994; Kazis & Kopp, 1997; CWLA interim report, 1998) One component that Cook (1988) refers to as essential to the operation of integrated service delivery is the inclusion of inter-agency training. Training needs to incorporate all of the involved parties, including the administrators, caseworkers, foster parents, school personnel, and other outside service providers. This process facilitates the flow of information, builds both formal and informal relationships and creates a foundation of trust and cooperation between agencies.

Caliber Associates (1999) made three recommendations to promote increased collaboration for independent living agencies with other agencies and community services. They included:

- **Federal** -- Pursue inter-agency initiatives and joint program funding among Health and Human Services (including Children’s Bureau, Family Youth Services Bureau, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, and CMSH), Department of Education, Office of Juvenile Justice and

Delinquency Prevention, Housing and Urban Development, Department of Labor, and other relevant agencies for collaborative community programs that support youth exiting the child welfare system. Coordinate activities with ongoing foundation initiatives.

- **State and Local** -- Identify formalized mechanisms (e.g., inter-agency task forces, designated point person responsible for collaboration) to facilitate coordinated efforts.
- **Private Sector** -- Promote involvement of private sector businesses in independent living program activities (e.g., through job placement programs). (p. VI-12)

When young people move out on their own, they need to be well connected with community resources and individuals. Programs that promote community interactions and inter-agency collaboration are modeling for the youth the importance of networking and community support systems. Therefore, collaboration is offered as a core principle, which must be at the foundation of any effective independent/transitional living programs. Administrators and staff in these agencies should embrace the value of inter-agency and community collaboration and seek to make the necessary linkages that will help youth as they prepare to leave and after they leave care.

Core Principle: Cultural Competency

Public and private child welfare agencies across the country are increasing their attention to the issue of diversity and cultural competence. Culture is a constantly changing, learned pattern of customs, beliefs, values and behaviors, which is socially acquired and transmitted through symbols, rituals and events, which conveys widely shared meanings among its members. Culture includes gender, age, sexual orientation, urban, rural, ethnicity, values, personalities, marital status, and job position.

According to the statistics cited earlier, the following percentages were reported for children in care: 34 percent African-American, 13 percent Hispanic, 2% American Indian, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 5% Unknown/Unable to Determine. While there is a disproportionately large number of children of color in the child welfare system, professionals of color appear to be under-represented in the fields of social work and psychology. (Gilbelman & Schervish, 1993; Lennon, 1993). Changing demographics have contributed to the need to recruit and retain workers knowledgeable about providing services to individuals and families from different cultures.

This influx of children and youth of color into the child welfare system has

also contributed to the need to provide services that are more compatible with the cultural needs of the youth and families served. Many agencies have embraced this challenge by developing approaches to provide more acceptable and useful services to these populations. Courtney and Barth (1996) challenge agencies to give greater weight to “the fact that the adolescent foster care population is not singular. It consists of youth from different backgrounds who have considerably different experiences while in foster care.”

Green and Leigh (1989) define cultural competency as “the ability of the service provider to give assistance to clients in ways that are acceptable and useful to them.” Culturally competent agencies and staff are able to view a young person’s strengths and needs within the cultural context and integrate what they know in helping the youth develop a meaningful plan of action. Every agency should strive to meet this definition of competency. This is a skill learned by the individual and the organization. It does not occur merely out of good intentions. It is fostered out of the commitment to provide services that are culturally appropriate and that make a difference in the lives of individuals and families.

The concept of developing culturally competent agencies is similar to the teaching of youth to appreciate and value differences. If agencies and foster parents do not create an atmosphere that values and appreciates cultural differences, how can they expect to develop awareness in youth with whom they work? Staff who value diversity are more apt to move beyond the comfortable and familiar to seek out services, essential connections, and role models that are meaningful to these young people. As staff grow to appreciate the additional tasks faced by these adolescents, viewing the world from another’s perspective enriches their own lives. Cultural competence is the third core principle or value that underscores the work of child welfare agencies providing independent living/self-sufficiency services.

Core Principle: Relationship Permanency

Assisting youth to successfully sustain life-long emotional relationships with adults is essential to their successful transition to adulthood. Former youth in care have reported that they seek out relatives as well as other adults they met while in care for emotional connections after they have left the system (Barth, 1990; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney & Barth, 1996; Jones & Moses, 1984; Westat, 1991). These relationships have an enormous impact on the young person’s ability to succeed in making the difficult transitions from youth to adulthood. In fact, Courtney and Barth’s (1996) study reports that “it may be that long-term

residents of foster care who maintain ties to their families fare better as adults than those who no longer retain a connection to biological kin.”

Courtney et al. (2001) found that after discharge about one-third of their sample (31%) lived with relatives, and family members were the most common source of monetary assistance. In addition, 55% of the sample had visited their birthmothers at least once since discharge, and 35% had visited their birthfathers. Given the reality that many young people reconnect with their biological families after discharge, independent living skills should incorporate teaching on how to re-enter and maintain healthy relationships with family members.

Programs that focus on youth-defined family connections by working with the youth and those people whom the youth has relationships are more likely to successfully establish relationship permanency. Youth may be the best resource in identifying people in their life or from their past who can serve as their permanent family connection. The permanency planning process should also include relatives, foster parents, group home staff, school personnel and other professionals to assist caseworkers in establishing placement options, as well as defining what barriers may exist to establishing permanent, healthy relationships with adults.

Youth who learn life skills that address issues of self-esteem, self-determination, loyalty and loss, while at the same time learning how to build safe relationships with their relatives, will be better able to reconcile with the past and build healthy permanent relationships. Agencies and foster parents that assist youth to address independent living skills while assisting them with permanent family connections are more likely to help youth achieve self-sufficiency.



BEST PRACTICES FOR FOSTER PARENTS

The best practices outlined in this section were originally identified in *Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System*, which was developed in 1999. The 13 best practices and suggested practice criteria become universal and can be applied to all roles providing services in the foster care system. Through this project, *Promising Practices: How Foster Parents Can Support the Successful Transition of Youth from Foster Care to Self-Sufficiency*, an additional best practice was identified. You will find all 14 best practices and the associated practice criteria and related research outlined in this section.

Plan of Transition

SUMMARY

It is important for youth who are transitioning out of foster care to have opportunities to enhance their own capabilities and exert their own control. Many youth have not lived in stable, positive environments where these skills were modeled. However, engaging youth in direct planning and decision-making, while at the same time providing support, offers youth a sense of empowerment. Young adults benefit from a coherent planning process that outlines steps for them in a meaningful way. By becoming partners with youth in the planning process, foster parents and agency staff can enable youth to identify their own strengths and needs based on a comprehensive needs assessment. Youth can then set goals and develop plans and methods to achieve those goals. When an assessment is strengths-based, and the service plan is outcome-oriented, the youth recognizes his/her talents and can translate those talents into actions.

Goodman, Naomi, et. al, *It's My Life: a framework for you transitioning from foster care to successful adulthood*, Casey Family Programs, Seattle, WA, 2001.

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster Parents contribute to a youth's transition by ...

Assisting in the development and implementation of a transition plan for the youth by...

Foster parents conduct informal assessments of the youth's skills and abilities through informal discussions with the youth and by observing chores, conversations at dinner and other activities with the youth. Foster parents do not put kids on the spot, but instead use day-to-day interactions. Because of these interactions, foster parents are able to understand and

communicate the youth's strengths and needs to the team and work to ensure that the strengths are built upon and the needs met. A critical part of encouraging the implementation of the youth's transition plan is the coaching provided by foster parents as the youth works toward their goals.

Periodically discussing with the youth where they are relative to their plan ...

The youth's transition plan and the people helping to implement the plan are inextricably linked. The plan including the youth's goals stated clearly is flexible and adaptable enough to meet the changing needs of the youth. The foster parent works closely with the youth to assist them – celebrating successes and helping to address challenges.

Understanding that all youth learn differently and at their own pace...

Care providers must have a repertoire of options available for working with youth as they develop the skills that will ensure their success when they are on their own. Foster parents and team members must recognize that learning is not a one-size-fits-all proposition and must alter their approaches to meet the needs of the youth.

SURVEY FINDINGS:

- 70% of foster parents reported helping youth develop an educational and career plan.

SUMMARY

Nollan et al. (1999) document that the disruptions and traumas suffered by youth in out-of-home care can result in delays or interruptions in the development of life skills. The effects of these disruptions and traumas on the emotional well-being of youth must be addressed by independent living programs, foster parents, mentors, and other youth workers.

Dorothy Ansell (1988) describes a four-stage continuum that enables youth in independent living programs to move through a series of phases to acquire tangible and intangible skills. The four stages are Informal Learning, Formal Learning, Supervised Practice and Self-sufficiency. Delivering life skills training throughout the four-stage continuum gives youth the flexibility to move through the continuum based on their own developmental needs and individualized independent living goals.

Caliber Associates (1999) reported that between FY's 1987 and 1996, state independent living programs provided services that addressed both tangible and intangible skills. They defined educational, vocational, money management, home management and the use of community resources as tangible skills. Intangible skills included decision-making, problem solving, communication, time management, conflict resolution and social skills, following the typology established in the Westat (1991) evaluation.

The Westat (1991) national evaluation of outcomes for former foster youth identified five specific skill areas associated with improved outcomes for youth: money management, credit, consumer skills, education and employment. The authors also identified that a combination of skills training including the five identified skills was associated with better youth outcomes.

The General Accounting Office (1999) reported that opportunities to practice daily life skills and to develop self-esteem were limited in some of the locations they visited. GAO reports that program officials in two locations and youth in three locations reported that issues such as safety regulations for group homes inhibit or prevent activities such as cooking. Additionally, GAO officials found that:

...esteem-building activities are often limited to a small number of youth. For example, local officials in Texas reported that opportunities for foster care youths to

participate in post-secondary school conferences or extended outdoor activities were limited.(p. 10)

In addition to agencies providing skill building for youth, Casey Family Programs has been advocating that the field recognize foster parents as primary trainers of life skills. In fact, in a study asking foster parents to identify their primary responsibilities, respondents identified the teaching of life skills as 95% their responsibility (Nollan, 1994). Foster parents agreed that they have responsibility for transmitting these skills to the youth.

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster Parents contribute to a youth's life skills development by ...

Providing life skills instruction ...

Foster parents use informal discussions and opportunities that arise each day such as: meal preparation, laundry, grocery shopping, paying the bills and formal step-by-step instruction such as how to drive a car to teach life skills. They work to model the behaviors and actions expected of the youth and continuously review and reinforce the youth's learning through weekly discussions about day-to-day life activities. It is key for the youth that the foster parents teach to the youth's needs and skill level.

Collaborating with agency staff as needed to support a youth's life skills development ...

Agencies count on foster parents to provide life experiences that will aid in the development of life skills for the youth. Agency staff is available to support the foster parents as they determine the youth's current skills and needs. The successful agency provides assessment tools to help assess a youth's skill level relative to money, health, personal hygiene, and other life skill areas. In addition, they provide training materials to assist foster parents in teaching money management and employment skills, such as filling out job applications and interviewing.

Engaging the youth in activities that build self esteem ...

Foster parents work with the youth to identify outdoor activities, such as canoe trips, camping or other activities where the youth will stretch

themselves to learn new skills and ideally experience success.

Supporting youth involvement in other activities ...

Foster parents' encourage youth to participate in activities outside of the home and school. They demonstrate their value for these activities by providing transportation and at times participating with the youth.

SURVEY FINDINGS

- 100% of respondents reported discussing budgeting money with youth, more than half indicated doing so about once a week.
- 98% of respondents reported discussing beliefs about money with youth.
- 92% of respondents reported instructing youth age 16 years or older on how to pay his/her own bills.
- 90% of respondents reported discussing personal hygiene with youth; 50% indicated doing so about once a week.
- 58% of respondents reported teaching youth age 16 years or older how to drive.

SUMMARY

Coordinating educational services for foster youth is one of the most important practices for an independent living program. Coordinating educational services helps youth to prepare for independent living in the short-term and for improved overall life outcomes in the long-term (Mech, 1994; Westat, 1991). Multiple studies, even those controlling for the youth's abilities, have found discrepant educational outcomes for youth in foster care (Blome, 1997). Youth in foster care are more likely to have dropped out of school, less likely to have received a high school diploma or a GED and less likely to participate in post-secondary education. A recent follow-up study out of Wisconsin (Courtney et. al., 1998) found that 12 to 18 months after discharge from the foster care system, 37% of youth had not yet completed their high school education.

In addition, while in school older youth may need more attention from educators. A study by Carey et. al. (1990) indicated that more foster youth require an Individualized Educational Plan because they were often identified as having emotional disabilities, cognitive and or/ learning disabilities, and behavior difficulties. Plus, placement changes may impact a youth's learning. In Illinois, the Children and Family Research Center (2002) found while that 18% of their sample of older youth never changed schools as a result of placement, 22% changed schools one or two times, and 16% of youth changed schools 5 to 10 times as a result of placement changes.

Services that may contribute to the youth's positive educational outcomes include (Ayasse, 1995; Horn & Chen; 1998; Kochanek, 1998; Mech, 1994):

- educational liaisons (consistent contact person for managing educational information)
- educational tutors/coaches,
- college preparatory activities,
- school-to-work programs,
- and the training of school personnel regarding foster care issues.

Programs that promote educational stability and approach education in a comprehensive, integrated manner are most likely to promote the completion of high school and encourage enrollment in post-secondary education (Ayasse, 1995; Mech, 1994). Despite the continued advocacy

of researchers urging programs to approach education in a comprehensive and integrated manner, the Workforce Strategy Center (WSC, 2000) found that among the programs they reviewed:

...virtually without exception, programs educational preparation focused on achievement of the GED as the educational outcome for foster care youth. (p. 10)

Supporting the WSC findings, the GAO (1999) reported that:

Forty-one states reported assisting youth with preparing for, or completing education or vocational training. Of these 41 states, 26 offered assistance such as tutoring or remedial training to help youth graduate from high school or receive a GED; 28 states helped youth prepare for vocational school... and 33 states helped youth pursue post-secondary education, such as through educational planning or assessments, assistance in applying for financial aid or college admission, or campus tours. Further, 21 states awarded some tuition aid or scholarships for college or vocational schools, and 20 helped to pay for other educational expenses such as books, training materials, uniforms, college entrance exam fees, or college application fees. (p. 7)

The GAO findings offer evidence of a more comprehensive approach to education of older foster youth on the part of some states. However, the most compelling fact in the above quotation is that only 33 of the 50 states (66%) report providing any form of support for post-secondary education for IL program youth.

In light of their finding and similar findings from other sources the Workforce Strategy Center (2000) recommends that:

Programs for foster care youth should incorporate a clearly defined college preparation component that would ensure youth meet prevailing skills standards for success in postsecondary education and training. This component could be delivered through enhanced or enriched GED programs, or maybe preferably, as a separate educational initiative developed with local community colleges or other educational institutions. (p. 10)

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster Parents support the youth educationally by...

Helping the youth develop an education and career plan ...

Successful foster parents work with youth to develop educational and career goals and work with them to achieve the goals. In addition, they have clear expectations about education/goal planning and constantly guide the youth as they work to make choices. Foster parents also encourage youth to seek volunteer activities or other work experience in order to explore aspects of their educational/career goals.

Working with the youth to improve their study skills ...

Foster parents understand the importance of consistency and structure and work with youth to structure study time. In addition, they are available to assist youth with homework and provide, or arrange for, tutoring as needed. Foster parents create excitement around books and learning by taking the time to read to youth.

Accessing the necessary educational resources needed by the youth ...

Foster parents are strong advocates for youth at school. They firmly understand the challenges youth in care face and work diligently to overcome barriers to success. They do this by working with the schools to ensure needed services are provided and working effectively. Foster parents are present at the school and actively participate in Individualized Educational Plan meetings and parent/teacher conferences; making sure youth voices are heard and their needs met.

Encouraging the youth to explore post-secondary education/vocational programs ...

Foster parents understand the challenges youth face as they leave home to continue their education. They seek out educational mentors and others to assist youth and to help ensure success as they pursue their educational goals. They support youth in the process of deciding on a direction; guiding them to make the “right” choices. Foster parents actively network and advocate for youth education and employment needs.

Assisting the youth with financial aid/scholarships/college applications...

Foster parents understand the financial challenges associated with post secondary education and assist youth in identifying the financial resources to continue their education. Some foster parents go as far as to provide financial support to youth to continue their education beyond high school. Others encourage youth to use resources available through state-funded tuition waiver programs. The foster parents' goal is for youth to focus on their educational goals without letting the financial challenges encumber them.

SURVEY FINDINGS

- 100% of respondents reported discussing study skills with youth; slightly more than half indicated doing so about once a week.
- 98% of respondents reported tutoring/doing homework with youth; 40% indicated doing so about once a week.
- 93% of respondents reported helping youth access necessary educational resources; three fourths indicated doing so about once a month or more.
- 87% of respondents reported helping youth age 16 years or older explore/pursue post-secondary education/vocational program(s).
- 81% of respondents reported advocating for youth in school; 63% indicated doing so about once a month or more.
- 71% of respondents reported helping youth find vocational training.
- 70% of respondents reported helping youth age 16 years or older develop an educational and career plan.
- 46% of respondents reported assisting youth age 16 years or older in applying for financial aid/scholarships/college applications.
- 45% of respondents reported attending an IEP meeting.
- 42% of respondents reported helping procure a tutor for youth.

Employment

SUMMARY

Research on the employment status of older youth living in out-of-home care has demonstrated mixed results. Some studies have revealed positive findings, while others have reported low levels of employment among older youth. In Wisconsin, Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith (1999) found that 80% of a sample of 141 older youth had an employment history of having held a job at some time, and 57% were currently holding a job. And, in New York City Mallon's (1998) research found that 72% of young people leaving a privately-run independent living program had full-time employment at the time of departure.

However, other studies have reported a lack of opportunities for older youth leaving care. A recent study by researchers at Chapin Hall Center for Children (2002) made the following conclusions:

- Youth aging out of care are underemployed.
- Patterns of unemployment vary by state.
- Youth who do work begin to do so early.
- Youth aging out of foster care have mean earnings below the poverty level.
- Youth aging out of foster care progress more slowly in the labor market than other youth.

Additionally, a review of randomly selected case records of youth age 17 and older who were discharged from the Missouri Division of Family Service found that only 38% held a job at the time of discharge, and 29% had no employment experience (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). A Westat (1990) study found that only 39% of older youth had a history of employment before leaving out-of-home care.

Some research points to scant employment opportunities and experience, in addition to low wages and disparity in wages for older youth aging out of care. Courtney et. al. (2001) found that:

The average weekly wage for those with jobs ranged from \$54 to \$613. There were no statistically significant race/ethnic differences in the rate of employment, but employed Caucasian youth on average were earning \$202 per week, whereas African American youth earned \$182. There were no

gender differences in the likelihood of being employed at follow-up but employed males earned on average \$220 per week while females earned \$178.

Some research on youth employment opportunities illustrates a system that has progressed over time in terms of connecting older foster care youth to employment opportunities. However, existing research continues to point to a series of current shortfalls and also makes a number of recommendations designed to strengthen the ability of programs to enhance the creation of employment opportunities for youth.

The Workforce Strategy Center (2000) describes today's economy as resembling a dumbbell or hourglass with jobs falling into two categories. The categories are:

- **High-wage positions with a continuing career pathway.** These jobs, in areas such as manufacturing or technology, typically require some form of advanced training and skills and offer continuing career opportunities to successful individuals.
- **Low-wage entry-level jobs.** These positions, found in areas such as the fast growing service sector, typically require minimum training, pay low wages, and offer little prospect for career advancement. Recent early data from the welfare to work demonstration shows that, contrary to the belief held by some, entry into these low-level jobs does not provide a career ladder into economic self-sufficiency. (p.1)

This description of the economy paints a bleak picture for youth entering the job market with low educational attainment and poor job-readiness skills. WSC identifies five successful elements of a pathway that will support the successful transition of foster care youth to the world of work. These five elements are:

- **Introduction to career and educational options.** Effective workforce development strategies should acquaint students with regional high-wage, high-demand career opportunities as well as needed training and education.
- **Preparation for college entry standards.** An effective strategy must prepare youth for the skill levels needed to succeed in these programs.
- **Career related work experience.**
- **Transition to post-secondary education and career employment.** Effective programs provide youth access to people and businesses that allow them to experience different jobs. In addition, programs should help youth to connect to needed pre-career skills training

offered at community colleges and other industry intermediaries (organizations with close ties to industry that provide industry approved training and connections to employers).

- **Needed social supports.** Youth counseling, contact with supportive adults and other needed support services are an integral part of program operations. (pp. 2-3) The Work Strategy Center presents an approach to preparing young adults for the workforce that recognizes success in acquiring jobs that earn a family-supporting wage will require earning at least a high school diploma or GED. Earning these credentials should be considered an essential outcome for all young people, but getting and keeping high-wage, high-skill jobs will likely require additional skills and knowledge. In contrast, Caliber Associates (1999) report that from FY 1989 through FY 1996, states gradually increased the depth and scope of employment support services provided to youth in IL programs. The following table, excerpted from their report, displays the increase in support in three specific areas of employment support services between FY 1989 and FY 1996.

Percentage of States Reporting Services* -- FY1989 and 1996

Career Planning and Employment Services	FY 1989 (%)	FY 1996 (%)
Career Planning and Employment Services	92	98
Job Search and Preparation	73	89
Job Maintenance	45	70
Purchase of Career Resources	8	37

*These data represent the proportion of states that reported providing these services to at least one youth in their state. More states may have provided such services but it was not clearly evident in the review process.

Caliber Associates report that state independent living programs have increasingly implemented collaborations with outside organizations such as Job Training Partnership Act, Job Corps, and Offices of Employment Training. Among the examples they cite are summer employment and training programs in Maryland, Virginia, New York State, and Michigan. These examples all consisted of collaborations between the state ILPs and other public sector initiatives. They also provide examples of collaborations with private employers, community agencies, nonprofits and social service agencies. IL programs in Virginia, California, Washington, DC and New Jersey were cited in reference to these types of collaborative initiatives. Interestingly, these collaborations focus on more traditional employment development paths, with more stress on job readiness and preparation than education. Ansell et al. list the following activities as necessary elements of an effective IL Program employment component:

- Job search training;
- Job skills training;
- Job development;
- Job placement;
- Job coaching; and,
- Career exploration.

While the focus of this list is primarily in the area of job attainment, the inclusion of career exploration points to the authors' emphasis on a comprehensive approach to employment. This approach includes both job acquisition skills and a focus on future goals through career exploration. DeJesus (1997) interviewed a sample of youth employment program graduates who had been continually employed for at least one year. His research identified a change in mentality, attitude or outlook on life as a critical element in the successes of sample youth. He listed several activities that youth cited as contributing to these changes:

- Activities that engage and expose young adults with successful role models;
- Activities that build self-confidence and self-esteem;
- Activities that teach interpersonal and communication skills;
- Activities in which young adults feel support and genuine concern;
- Activities that help young adults realize their educational objectives; and,
- Activities that allow young adults to be of service in the larger community.

DeJesus' (1997) findings again emphasize the relationship of educational attainment and successful employment outcomes.

The GAO (1999) reported that 40 of the 50 states (80%) responding to their survey stated that they provide employment services to youth. States reported providing job readiness (28 states), job search (24 states) and job placement activities (18 states). However, in relation to the site visits they performed during their study, GAO reported:

Although all four areas we visited provided assistance with education and employment, we found that ILPs did not provide services that fully matched youth to appropriate employment pathways. (p. 7)

Among the problems programs reported to GAO were a lack of vocational and apprenticeship opportunities, and a lack of sufficient ILP funds to pay for available vocational programs. GAO reported that of the four sites they visited (programs were located in Maryland, Massachusetts, Texas and California) only Texas offers statewide tuition waivers to IL youth for all state-supported vocational, technical and postsecondary schools.

The GAO's findings illustrate that while the states are making progress toward better employment support programs there is room for improvement. Echoing the GAO finding, Workforce Strategy Center (2000) reported that:

Relatively few of the programs interviewed have formal employment training programs. Most of the employment training is focused on immediate employment open to students with relatively little skills training as opposed to longer-term and more intensive career training... (p. 6)

The Workforce Strategy Center (2000) speaks directly to the need to link career and educational options. They assert:

Programs should incorporate a clearly defined educational and career counseling element, developed either internally or in partnership with an educational institution such as a local community college that offers basic labor market and educational information tied to the regional economy. Programs should also seek to work with youth to develop an individual educational and career plan to ensure participants understand the range of opportunities available and are moving forward to achieve them. (p. 10)

Research confirmed that many programs have difficulty providing a comprehensive employment component. Programs described a number of factors that impeded the establishment of a comprehensive employment component. Among these factors programs listed:

- Rural locations, which result in limited employment opportunities and also impose difficulties with transportation;
- Difficulties in finding stable jobs for youth; and,

- A programmatic focus on establishing employment skills and job stability.

Programs report that they compensate for these difficulties by focusing on job readiness and job skills acquisition. Programs reason that if youth gain basic employment skills, these skills can be built upon when the youth moves to locations with better employment opportunities. All of the programs we interviewed require youth to be employed part-time while enrolled in the program.

The findings and recommendations outlined above, lend weight to the assertion that programs need to include a comprehensive employment component that includes all aspects of employment preparation.

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster parents make it possible for youth to gain and maintain employment by...

Assisting youth in the job search process ...	Foster parents actively network with employers and business to create meaningful job experiences for youth. They informally assess job readiness and career interests in order to help identify an employment experience that will be successful the youth. They continually work with youth to develop good work habits and explore career interests and opportunities. Foster parents provide pre-employment practice opportunities such as approaching a prospective employer, application/resume writing and interviewing. They also provide post employment support through job coaching.
Using personal connections to broker employment opportunities...	Foster parents maintain personal connections that can assist them in helping youth find meaningful employment. They work with youth connecting them to resources where they will gain job skills and develop work habits.
Assisting with transportation to and from work...	Foster parents ensure that transportation is not a barrier to the youth securing employment. They will provide transportation, if needed, or arrange transportation with other sources. In some instances, Foster parents will work with

youth to purchase a car or provide one for them.

Working with agencies and schools to involve youth in ...

Career exploration through career counseling, job shadowing and involvement in volunteer activities. In addition, youth are engaged in programs where they can learn job skills, have access to employment opportunities and are coached on the job so they are able to maintain employment.

Working with youth to maintain employment...

Foster parents coach youth and model work ethic through their own actions relative to their employment. They talk with youth as to why work is important and the rewards that can be attained through employment.

SURVEY FINDINGS

- 100% of respondents reported assisting youth age 16 years or older in getting to work (transportation); 71% indicated doing so about once a week.
- 86% of respondents reported helping youth age 16 years or older explore career(s).
- 83% of respondents reported assisting youth age 16 years or older in a job search.

Community Linkages

SUMMARY

Community linkages refer to the ability of youth to be aware of and gain access to community resources. These resources include health and mental health care, job and career opportunities, community leadership opportunities, and opportunities to establish connections to adult mentors. While each of these community resources is important in its own right, the literature increasingly points toward the importance of a significant adult relationship in supporting youth during the transition to adulthood.

Community connections are helpful in replacing youth's reliance on the agency and foster parents for help. Nollan (1999) highlights that "community connections and relationships with individuals in the community can help youth address and resolve feelings of grief, loss, and rejection." This supports research that found it important that youth resolve these issues prior to living on their own (Mech, 1994). Mentoring and other positive relationships can help accomplish this. Ansell et al. (1999) focus on the findings of the resiliency research (Mech, Pryde, & Rycraft, 1995; Rhodes, Contreras, & Mangelsdorf, that focuses on adolescents who are moving from foster care. This research examines the ability of young people exiting foster care to develop a support network and the influence of informal role models and mentors as members of this support network. Mech, in a survey of three different groups of adolescents in foster care, found that mentoring is increasingly being used as a support service to assist older foster youth to make the transition to adulthood. Noble (1997) found that one of the key factors of why some foster children succeed when others do not is the presence of a significant adult in the lives of youth who succeed.

Caliber Associates (1999) note that over two-thirds of the reporting states indicated that they attempt to help youth form mentoring relationships. The states listed the following sources for youth mentors:

- Work place mentors;
- Student mentors;
- Cultural empowerment mentors;
- Former foster care youth mentors;
- Peer mentors; and,
- Community volunteers.

However, despite the states' recognition of the importance of mentoring,

many states also reported difficulties in finding enough mentors to serve their eligible populations.

The six sources of mentors cited in the Caliber Associates report suggest the wide variety of sources states utilize to attempt to connect youth with adults. This reflects earlier research (Jones et al.1998), which reported a shortage of available mentors. In the study, *Improving Economic Opportunities for Young People Served by Foster Care System*, only 18% of youth indicated they talked to a mentor about what they wanted to be when they grew up. Our current survey of programs also reflects the difficulty of finding a sufficient number of community volunteers to enable programs to help youth establish mentoring relationships. Programs overwhelmingly indicated their desire to access mentoring resources, however, the programs interviewed repeatedly mentioned the difficulty of attracting sufficient numbers of suitable adult volunteers.

Community linkages for youth must focus on a larger target than the establishment of mentoring relationships. Caliber Associates (1999) list the following community resources that state IL programs reported referring youth to:

- Job training programs;
- Private industry councils;
- Local businesses;
- Chambers of Commerce;
- Local service agencies;
- Housing agencies;
- School districts;
- Legal services;
- Health and medical organizations;
- Mental health agencies;
- Organizations serving special needs populations;
- Child care agencies;
- Food banks; and,
- Faith-based organizations.

The inclusion of faith-based organizations reflects current findings of the importance this link can play for youth. The agency staff interviewed mentioned that faith-based organizations emphasized several valuable aspects of these resources, including the opportunity to develop peer and adult relationships and the opportunity to participate in community service work.

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster parents support the youth in developing community linkages by...

Connecting the youth with community resources...

It is important for youth to have a sense of belonging to a community. Foster parents are a vital link or lifeline to the community for youth as they prepare for transition. They often act as a liaison for youth to access employment, volunteer experience or housing, and will advocate for youth with education systems and law enforcement. Agency staff train and support foster parents in their roles of community liaison/networker. Community resources such as the faith-based community, employers, and schools make the youth feel special as though they aren't a "foster kid."

Introducing the youth to potential adult mentors...

Foster parents understand the importance of adult role models in a youth's life, and work within the community to ensure that connections are made. Youth experience a sense of support and commitment from the family that enables them to problem solve, achieve goals and feel special or valued. Youth may choose their own mentors and very often may select foster parents, or another member of their foster family, as their mentor. Agencies play a more formal role in networking and linking youth to other systems and resources. Agencies, when appropriate, support a youth's relationship with birth family, siblings, extended family and previous foster care placements.

Involving youth in community activities ...

Foster parents try to identify ways for the youth to become involved in the community. Through these activities, the youth gains a sense of community and belonging.

SURVEY FINDINGS

- 92% of respondents reported connecting youth to community resources.
- 69% of respondents reported connecting youth to adult mentor(s).

Supervising Independent Living (Housing)

SUMMARY

A supervised independent living experience provides youth with an opportunity to live independently while still being able to maintain contact with the supports the child welfare system provides. In addition it allows youth to make a gradual progression toward full independence. Referring again to Ansell's continuum to independent living, (cited in Cook, 1988) supervised independent living identifies experiences as occurring when youth have progressed to the third level of the continuum. The continuum of skills acquisition includes:

- Informal learning
- Formal learning
- Supervised practice
- Self-sufficiency

The importance of a supervised independent living experience is demonstrated by comparing the outcomes of foster youth without supervised independent living experiences to those of youth who participated in a supervised independent living situation. Courtney et al. (1998) reported on the post-care living arrangements of a group of former foster youth 12 to 18 months after they left care. Twelve percent of the youth reported being homeless at least once since discharge. While 37% of the youth reported living in the same place since discharge, 22% of the youth reported living in four or more places since discharge. In contrast, Mech et al. (1994) found that supplementing basic placement settings with apartment experiences helps to increase a youth's life skills.

Kroner (1999) identifies several different housing options that qualify as supervised housing and can meet the need of the youth:

- Scattered-site apartments
- Supervised apartments
- Shared homes
- Live-in adult/peer roommate apartments
- Specialized foster homes
- Host homes
- Boarding homes
- Transitional group homes

- Shelters
- Subsidized housing

Kroner (1999) contends that the independent living options listed above can address some of the shortcomings associated with more traditional options, such as: foster care, group homes and residential treatment centers. Traditional approaches often:

- Promote dependency
- Are often more expensive
- Do not always resemble the place where a youth would return or live after care
- Prevent the development of self-sufficiency skills
- Are not always in the neighborhoods to which a youth returns
- Focus on group control with many problems coming from the grouping of several or many high-risk youth
- Focus on deficits and behaviors related to adjustment to the setting in which a youth often lives
- Often end at age 18 and require a move to a new living arrangement upon discharge
- Do not always give firsthand experience in managing space, time, food preparation, laundry, money, etc. (pg. 7-8)

The GAO (1999) reports that more than 80 percent of states provided transitional practice living arrangements to *some* youth while they are still in foster care to allow them an opportunity to experience independent living for a period of time. However, the GAO also found:

Officials in the four areas we visited confirmed that the number of supervised transitional housing sites is very limited and that they could not provide adequate housing for both youths in care and those who have left the system. One transitional housing provider in Texas indicated that the program has space for only six youths, while an additional 80 to 100 youths with no place to live upon exiting the foster care system could benefit from this type of housing. (p. 12)

Caliber Associates (1999) mentions that states increasingly reported supervised living activities supported by both state and federal dollars. States reported that they were severely constrained in these activities by the ILP restrictions prohibiting the use of federal ILP funds for room and

board. The report makes the following recommendations to promote “Experiential Learning in Supervised Environments.”

- Allow states to allocate some of their federal funding, matched by state funds, for room and board to enable expanded supervised living programs.
- Develop guidelines on eligibility criteria (e.g. enrollment in school, employment) for youth participating in supervised living programs.
- Conduct evaluation studies to assess the outcomes of different supervised living models.
- Expand the use of tuition waivers that encourage youth to attend college or vocational programs and continue to build valuable educational and independent living skills in a structured environment. (p. VI - 10)

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 explicitly addresses the first of the Caliber Associates recommendations. One of the major changes of the Chafee Program is a provision that reads:

States may use up to 30 percent of their allocation of Federal funds to provide room and board for youth up to age 21 who aged out of foster care. (p. 2)

This change will enable states to expand supervised independent living services without increasing state spending.

Ansell et al. (1999) emphasize that when youth complete “the program,” they should be established in a safe and affordable living arrangement that they can continue to occupy if they choose.

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster Parents help youth learn how to find and maintain housing by...

Providing instruction on how to look for an apartment...

Foster parents assist youth in identifying the best type of living arrangement for them at that time, and help consider what is needed when searching for housing. They help youth assess location, determine a budget and develop questions to ask landlords. They are available as needed to assist the youth in their transition to living independently.

Working with agencies and communities to provide non-traditional housing options to youth...

Foster parents can work together with agencies and communities to ensure that housing options are available to older youth.

Providing practice living opportunities within the foster environment..

Foster parents can seek ways to provide living arrangements where youth can practice life skills, such as: “in-law apartments”, campers on property, and other non-traditional settings.

SURVEY FINDINGS

- 69% of respondents reported instructing youth age 16 years or older on how to look for an apartment.

SUMMARY

Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System identified two major health services issues that youth need to be able to understand and manage prior to making the transition out of the foster care system. First, youth must be prepared to understand and manage their own physical, dental and mental health needs. Second, prior to leaving care, programs must help youth to connect with appropriate health care resources in their own community. This is especially important given that studies have identified foster youth as having more health and mental health care needs than non-foster youth. In fact, Rosenfeld (1997) estimated that foster youth have three to seven times as many health, developmental and emotional problems as non-foster youth from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, Festinger (1983) found:

- The younger children are when they enter care, the less likely they are to have physical health problems.
- Adolescents in out-of-home care who had received health care at a younger age were less likely to show health problems.
- Youth in group homes or facilities were likely to have poorer health than those placed in family foster homes.
- Adolescents who receive a high school degree before leaving care and those who maintained contact with their foster family after discharge were less likely to have health problems.

The sum of this research shows that older youth, particularly those living in group homes, are at higher risk for increased health concerns. Older youth are also at risk for greater emotional, or mental health problems. Courtney et al. (1998) found that only 21% of sample youth reported receiving mental health services after leaving care, compared to 47% of sample youth who were receiving mental health services while in care. The youth reported that access to care was difficult due to lack of insurance and the inability to pay for care out of pocket. Additionally, Halfon (1995) reported that while children in out-of-home care make up only 4% of the Medicaid eligible population in California, they consumed 41% of the Medicaid mental health services delivered during the study period. In Missouri, McMillen and Tucker (1999) found that 44% of youth 17 years or older [discharged from Missouri DFS] experienced inpatient psychiatric care.

Youth in independent living programs receive health insurance through their state Medicaid programs. While youth are in foster care, the arrangements for their health care are handled through the programs the youth are involved with. This creates a two-part dilemma. First, unless youth are specifically taught to understand their health care needs and how to make and keep appointments they will be unable to manage their own health care needs after leaving care. Second, as a result of established relationships, agencies and programs are able to find physical/mental and dental health providers who are willing to work with Medicaid enrollees. Youth are insulated from understanding how difficult it can be to gain access to the healthcare system as a Medicaid insurance beneficiary.

Ansell et al. (1999) assert that the literature on health related outcomes for former foster youth indicate that programs are not adequately preparing youth to access physical, mental and dental health services on their own. The authors emphasize that it is imperative that youth be connected to physical, mental and dental health services in the community where the youth will be living after leaving care, regardless of where that community is located.

The authors also place specific emphasis on the need to help youth address substance abuse issues, both while in care and after making the transition from care. The authors cite a General Accounting Office Study (1994) of foster care placements in three major cities that found that 78% of the children in foster care in these cities had at least one drug or alcohol abusing parent. The Westat (1991) study reported illegal drug taking in 50% of the foster youth population. Ansell et al. (1999) point out that although this rate of substance abuse parallels that of the general population for this age group, the additional risk factors foster youth are exposed to make substance abuse a potentially more acute issue for youth in care. In addition, Altshuler and Poertner (2002) found that while youth in kinship care and non-related foster care showed similar levels of risk as the general population, adolescents in group homes exhibit the highest level of risk behavior. In McMillen and Tucker's (1999) study, 13% of the older foster youth (in the sample) had substance abuse problems, and the youth were more likely to engage in behaviors that are known to heighten the likelihood of substance abuse.

Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System considered both the physical, dental and mental health needs of youth in foster care. Physical and mental health needs must be met for youth to succeed in other realms. Not only are foster youth more likely to have health and mental health problems than the general population

(Courtney et al., 1995; Chernoff et al., 1994; Fanshel, Finch, & Grundy, 1990; Iglehart, 1994; Mech, Lucy-Dobson, & Hulseman, 1994) but problems also exist in youth trying to access appropriate medical care (Dubowitz et al., 1990; Moffat & Peddie et al, 1985; Risley-Curtiss, 1996). Youth are generally eligible for Medicaid while they are in care, however extension of Medicaid benefits after youth leave care is at the discretion of the individual states.

Depending on their state of residence, youth may or may not have health insurance after leaving care. In the absence of Medicaid coverage, youth have limited access to health care. This problem is exacerbated by employment that typically does not provide medical, dental or mental health benefits. Given these possibilities, it is extremely important that youth be connected to physical, mental and dental health care in the community they will live in after leaving care. The existence of established relationships with health care providers can be extremely important to youth being able to maintain health care relationships in the face of their potentially changing insurance status.

The Chafee Act authorizes states to establish a new Medicaid eligibility group for children who are in foster care under the responsibility of the state on their 18th birthday. A letter from the Health Care Financing Administration to state Medicaid Directors explains the Medicaid options states may choose to enact:

- Providing eligibility for children until they reach age 21 or only until age 19 or 20;
- Not applying an income or resource test for these children. If the state does apply an income or resource test, then the standards and methodologies used cannot be more restrictive than those used for the State's low income families with children under Section 1931 of the act; and,
- Only making those children eligible who were furnished foster care maintenance payments or independent living services under a program funded under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. (p. 1)

These options will enable states to recoup the Federal Medicaid contribution while they provide Medicaid coverage for independent living program graduates.

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster parents support youth in learning about healthy lifestyles and health services by...

Discussing the importance of nutrition and its impact on physical and emotional health...

Foster parents help the youth evaluate their diet for nutritional content and work with them to make changes as needed. They set an example through meal planning, grocery shopping and meal preparation that selecting and preparing healthy meals can be fun as well as beneficial.

Discussing the medical, social, emotional and legal risks associated with drugs, alcohol, and tobacco...

Through regular conversations with youth, foster parents help youth understand all the risks associated with substance use and abuse. Use of substances not only affects an individual's physical health but also has implications for the youth's successful transition to adulthood.

Discussing sexuality and how to protect oneself from STDs and AIDS, pregnancy, and unwanted sexual relationships...

Open and honest discussions about sexuality and sexual relationships help the youth be better prepared against unintended pregnancies and unwanted sexual experiences. Regular dialogue between foster parents and their youth about how to deal with these issues empower youth to make more thoughtful and confident decisions regarding their sexuality.

Connecting the youth with health care resources in the community...

Youth need to learn how to find the health care resources best suited to meet their on-going health needs. Foster parents assist youth not only in the locating and collecting information about low cost health care services and/or the medical providers covered under the youth's medical insurance plan but also in finding medical resources that the youth can continue to use when they are on their own.

Preparing the youth to manage their own medical/dental/mental health needs...

Foster parents work with older youth in setting up their own medical/dental/and mental health appointments, helping youth develop a plan for managing their own medications and deciding when and how to access medical/dental/and mental health services.

Working with youth to resolve any substance abuse issues...

Foster parents support youth in seeking appropriate interventions for substance abuse issues and provide the necessary supervision and encouragement for youth as they work through recommended treatment.

SURVEY FINDINGS

- 100% of respondents reported discussing nutrition with youth; just over 50% indicated doing so about once a week.
- 97% of respondents reported discussing drugs, alcohol, tobacco with youth; 85% indicated doing so about once a month or more.
- 90% of respondents reported discussing sexuality with youth; 68% indicated doing so about once a month or more.
- 84% of respondents reported connecting youth age 16 years or older to health care resources in the community.
- 79% of respondents reported preparing youth age 16 years or older to manage his/her own medical/dental/mental health needs.
- 30% of respondents reported helping youth age 16 years or older resolve substance abuse issues.

SUMMARY

Family support and social relationships are important components of ensuring a successful transition to adulthood. Unfortunately, adults who have a history of out-of-home care are more likely to report a lower level of received social support (Cook, 1992; Russell, 1984; Quinton, Tutter, & Liddle, 1986), and this risk is intensified for males, and youth who enter care relatively late (Festinger, 1983), whose social and behavioral problems are severe (Jones & Moses, 1984), and whose placement type is group care (Children and Family Research Center, 2001; Festinger, 1983).

As youth age out of care, they face a number of difficult issues during the process of transition to independence. Some of these issues include developing personal support systems to replace the supports provided by the child welfare system, working through the emotional stages of the transition process, returning to their home communities and preparing to reunite with family members. Formal and informal supports must be developed prior to youth leaving care that will allow them a safety net while living independently.

Ansell et al. (1999) place special emphasis on helping youth reunite with family members. The authors cite a number of studies that found a positive relationship between youth in care who have contact with their birth parents and positive post-care outcomes (Fanshell, Finch, & Grundy, 1990; Courtney & Barth, 1996; Iglehart, 1994). Fanshel et al. (1990) reported that over 20 percent of the foster children discharged from a program designed for children in "permanent foster care" returned to their biological or adoptive families after discharge from care. Ansell et al. (1999) quotes Landsman et al. (1999):

...the process of reconnecting with a family or significant other represents an important step toward emancipation and healthy functioning in the community, solidifying the adolescent's identity, affirming family connections, clarifying personal history, and re-integrating past trauma. (p. 2)

Focusing on a different set of transition needs, Caliber Associates (1999) emphasize the importance of helping youth develop/expand personal support systems and the need for programs to help youth promote cultural identity development.

Caliber Associates makes the following recommendations in these areas:

- Conduct assessments within States to identify the specific needs of various sub-populations of youth (e.g., youth with disabilities, minorities, parents, youth with substance abuse issues) and tailor ILP programs to meet those needs.
- Increase outreach to mentors from the same racial/ethnic backgrounds as youth in care.
- Provide training to ILP staff in cultural competency and integrate more formal cultural awareness activities into ILP services. (VI - 11)

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster parents support the youth's emotional well-being and cultural identity by...

Helping the youth come to terms with their foster care experience, e.g., “make peace with the past” ...

Many youth require counseling services to understand issues related to their entry into foster care and the relationship they have had with their family members since placement. Foster parents provide support for youth as they go through highly emotional counseling sessions, visits with family and trips to the home community. Foster parents work with counselors to encourage youth to complete such therapeutic activities as journaling, life book development and life mapping.

Promoting cultural awareness and cultural identity...

Foster parents encourage youth to engage in cultural activities available in the community and to explore the culture of their own racial/ethnic group. When necessary foster parents find resources in the community to assist youth in learning about their cultural heritage and in developing their own cultural identity. Foster parents also become involved in the youth's culture so they are better able to understand the youth's world and perspective.

Facilitating reunification with family members or adoption when appropriate ...

Agencies when appropriate should support a youth's relationship with birth family, siblings, extended family and prior foster care placements. Youth experience a sense of support and commitment from the family that

enables them to problem solve, achieve goals and makes them feel special or valued.

SURVEY FINDINGS

- 98% of respondents reported discussing social development with youth; three fifths of respondents indicated doing so about once a week.
- 95% of respondents reported helping youth make peace with the past.
- 70% of respondents reported promoting cultural awareness or development of cultural identity with youth.

Permanent Connections

SUMMARY

Adolescents have specific needs that are different from younger age groups. As a result, child welfare staff and care providers must rethink how services are provided in order to achieve safety while protecting familial relationships and achieving permanency for the adolescent population. There is no one permanency answer for the variety of adolescents in transition. Several studies found that youth in foster care who have contact with their birth parents while in care have better outcomes than those youth who did not maintain these contacts (Fanshel, 1990; Barth, 1996; Inglehart, 1994.) The importance of these relationships remains even after youth leave the foster care system. These young people, many of whom have spent years in foster care, return to the very homes from which they were removed years before. (Cook, 1991; Barth, 1986; Courtney et al., 1998) Youth seek out relatives, and remain connected to foster parents or others they meet while in the foster care system. These emotional connections and relationships will have the greatest impact on the young person's ability to navigate the challenging transition into adulthood.

Adolescents need positive, healthy relationships in order to successfully transition into adulthood regardless of the ultimate placement option for that youth. Older youth not only need caring relationships with adults, but also with their peers. At this age the peer group takes on greater importance for all adolescents.

For adolescents to achieve permanency the child welfare system must focus on youth-defined family connections, rather than developing a family image that does not match that of the adolescent. By starting with the youth, workers and care providers have the opportunity to work with the adolescent and those with whom the adolescent has a relationship. The goal is to create connections for the young person to provide safety and security over time.

In 1999 only 16% of the 36,000 children that were adopted from the child welfare system were between the ages of 11 and 18 (Child Trends, 1999). Even though this age group accounts for a small percentage of the youth being adopted, adoption needs to be seen as a viable and positive option for adolescents. The adoption of older children is considered an unusual and difficult endeavor in many areas of social services. The adoption process for an adolescent must be broadly conceived; there may remain connections to biological family members or community members.

Findings from this research project showed that youth visited most often with their siblings. More than half visited their siblings every month or more often. Approximately 35% of youth visited their birth parents every month or more. An additional 30% visited other blood relatives every month or more often, while only 10% visited with former foster parents every month.

The majority of respondents helped to support these visits. The table to the right identifies the actions taken (percents equal more than 100% due to respondents checking all that apply). “Other” includes encouraging the youth to stay in touch, hosting family members, helping to locate family members and helping the youth process through feelings after a visit.

Foster Parent Support of Birth Family Visits

How Support Visits	%
Provide transportation	70
Initiate contact	56
Plan activities	33
Other	26

Some respondents who did not help support visits commented that parental rights had been terminated, visits were not recommended, the parent was a negative influence, or that the agency arranged the visits.

Respondents were asked if they consider themselves to be a permanent caretaker for this child, or a temporary placement. The majority (64%) answered permanent caretaker. Respondents were asked to explain their answer. The most common reasons provided for those who consider themselves permanent caretakers were:

- Youth will always be family
- Permanent until emancipation
- Long-term foster care is appropriate for this youth
- Family can't take/doesn't want youth
- We plan to adopt youth

The most common reasons respondents considered themselves temporary placements were:

- The goal is to return home
- Youth is in process of emancipation
- Youth is being referred elsewhere
- Youth looking forward to living on own at 18

Only 20% of respondents had considered adopting the youth. The respondents (80%) who had not considered adopting the youth provided the reasons outlined in the table to the right.

Reason Child Not Adopted	Percent
Adoption is not an option for youth	39.6%
I am not interested in adoption	22.6%
Other reason	6.91%
Child is not interested in adoption	9.4%
Financial reasons make adoption a poor choice for me	9.4%

Other reasons given for not considering adoption included:

- Youth’s age makes adoption a moot point
- Youth’s needs state support
- Youth didn’t want to abandon siblings
- Respondent didn’t want to close his/her doors to other foster children
- Youth wanted to keep his own parents.

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster parents strengthen the youth’s permanent connections by...

Explaining what the family’s long-term relationship with the youth will be...

Foster parents work to with the youth to create an understanding of what their relationship will be after the youth leaves foster care. The goal is to have a conversation with the youth and to help the youth understand how they will “fit” with the family after care, based on what the youth feels they want and need.

Helping the youth develop /expand personal support systems ...

The foster parent works with the youth to look at their natural or pre-existing supports and at every relationship and how it can fit with the youth’s needs after they leave care. The foster parent plays a significant role in helping the youth evaluate their “circle of support”.

Preparing the youth to return to his/her home community ...

It is important for the youth to make peace with the past and the foster parent will play a key role in helping this happen. This is not an event, but a process that occurs everyday that the youth is with the foster parent.

Supporting the youth in reuniting with family members...

The foster parent works with the youth to decide how and when to engage the youth’s

family of origin. This may occur on an ongoing basis while the youth is with the foster parent (e.g. special events, family cookouts, etc) or prior to the youth leaving care. What occurs and when is based on what the youth wants and what the agency can allow at that time.

Considering and preparing for adoption and other permanent connections

Many youth will return to their families regardless of whether the plan is to return home or not. Without preparation, reuniting with family can be disappointing and even dangerous. Foster parents should define with agency staff the role foster parents have in assisting youth to reunite with family (e.g. Facilitating family visits, phone contact, sibling visits).

Supporting the ongoing connection to siblings...

Foster parents take seriously their role in maintaining a connection between the youth and their sibling(s). They view their role as helping to create permanent connections that will carry through the youth's life.

SURVEY FINDINGS

- 92% of respondents reported helping youth develop/expand personal support systems.
- 83% of respondents reported helping youth reunite with family members.
- 54% of respondents reported preparing youth age 16 years or older to return to his/her own home community.
- 37% of respondents reported helping youth consider/prepare for adoption.

SUMMARY

At its most basic level, a youth development philosophy implies that youth are involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of their programs. Ansell, Charles and Copeland (1999) consider youth development philosophy as a core principal for programs serving older youth in foster care. Ansell et al. (1999) go on to assert, “This is done by creating an environment where young people feel supported and safe in practicing skills, learning about relationships and connecting with their communities.” (p. 31) Nixon (1997), commenting on youth development, refers to “...programs that promote development by building on strengths, creating opportunities to learn and practice real life skills and facilitating mutually beneficial participation in programs and communities.” (pp. 571-572)

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 specifically calls for youth involvement at both a personal and public level. Workers and state systems are required to engage youth in decisions around their own case plan, as well as provide opportunities for youth to have input into policy. Many states are giving voice to youth by establishing Youth Advocacy Boards. These boards not only provide a platform for youth to share their views, but also provide youth necessary leadership skills and training to succeed in education and the work force.

Caliber Associates (1999), in a review of 10 years of independent living programs, makes the following recommendations for involving youth in helping to shape program activities:

First, states should be encouraged to embrace a youth development approach that moves beyond occasional youth involvement to ongoing engagement of youth in planning, development, and delivery of ILP services. Second, training and technical assistance (including peer-to-peer TA) should be provided. This training and technical assistance should focus on integrating youth development approaches, emphasizing youth strengths rather than deficits, and keeping youth engaged. (p. VI - 12)

Focusing on the state level, Caliber Associates found:

Over the decade, ILP staff steadily increased their efforts to involve and engage youth in multiple ways.... this trend coincided with the increased focus on youth development in the youth services field, and with child welfare reform which has underscored the need to involve service recipients in the service delivery process. (p. IV - 20)

Caliber Associates examined the following youth involvement activities and traced the changes that have occurred in these areas between fiscal years 1989 and 1996. The authors developed the following table to display these changes (p. IV-21).

Percentage of States Reporting Services* FY 1989 and 1996

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES	FY 1989 (%)	FY 1996 (%)
Youth Involvement	84	96
Youth Conferences	59	81
Youth Advisory Boards	12	49
Youth Newsletters	18	53
Cultural Awareness Programs	16	36
Mentoring Programs	47	70
Recreational Activities	67	83
General Youth Development and Empowerment Activities	63	77

*These data represent the proportion of states that reported providing these services to at least one youth in their state. More states may have provided such services but it was not evident in the review process.

The increases in youth development activities illustrated in this table are generally reflective of Promising Practices research. The process of incorporating youth development philosophy and activities into programs has been confusing due to the lack of a generally accepted definition of youth development.

Newman (2001) describes service learning as an effective way to foster learning and development in youth through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences. Service learning requires:

- Youth involvement
- Providing value to the community
- A connection to goals and objectives
- Involves reflection

When engaging in service learning activities, Newman emphasizes that “youth facilitation is desired to the greatest degree possible.” This allows young people a place to practice their skills, and test their knowledge and beliefs about the world.

Youth development and involvement can, and should, happen on a variety of levels. Individually, young people should have input and decision-making capabilities related to their case plan. On a local, state, and national level, youth who have grown-up in foster care, and youth who have aged out of care should be recognized as “experts” on the system. Agencies should assist in giving youth a voice by establishing Youth Advisory Boards, youth newsletters, teen conferences, or youth advocacy groups. Policy-makers should consider the insight and experience of these youth as they seek to define policies that better serve young people aging out of care.

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster parents provide youth development opportunities by...

Finding ways for the youth to contribute to his/her community...

Foster parents engage youth by discussing volunteer interests/possibilities and seeking out volunteer opportunities. They help network through schools, community members, friends, and family to discuss opportunities where youth can practice their skills while serving others. Most youth want to contribute to the communities of which they are a part.

Creating leadership opportunities...

Foster parents work with agency personnel to connect youth to Youth Advisory Boards, youth advocacy groups, or to teams working on youth newsletters or organizing teen conferences.

Establishing community linkages...

Foster parents work with youth to find mentors in the community, with whom youth can explore careers, job-shadow, participate in internships, or assist in the orchestration of community service programs. Foster parents encourage youth to participate in volunteer work.

SURVEY FINDINGS

- 76% of respondents reported assisting youth in finding ways to contribute to the community; more than 50% indicated doing so about once a month or more.
- 71% of respondents reported creating youth leadership opportunities.

SUMMARY

Youth in foster care consistently identify the period after discharge from placement as a critical point in their lives (Mech, 2001). Irvine (1988) defines aftercare services as “a system of services for youth (age 16-21) in the post-placement phase who are living in an independent arrangement.” Important aftercare components include assistance in providing basic needs such as housing, financial assistance, and employment services and supports. Other important aftercare components are community connections, social service support systems, a continuum of housing options, and an open-door policy. In addition, Mech (2001) has asserted “successful aftercare depends on replacing agency services with a “natural system” – that is, non-agency resources. Families, relatives, significant others, friends, church groups, employers, and mentors can be critical in forming a community support network.”

Emancipated youth are expected to be self-sufficient at age 18, and this is not often achieved. Mech and Fung (1998) completed a multi-state study that found that “at age 18, fewer than 1 in 10 youth are able to attain economic self-sufficiency, and by age 21, fewer than 20% are able to live without aid from means-tested programs or help from family, relatives or friends. However, other after care studies (Wetzstein, 1999; Burrell & Perez-Ferreiro, 1995; Wedeven et al., 1994) have demonstrated that adolescents who receive follow up services were statistically better than comparison groups in terms of lower educational drop out rates and higher employment stability. Burrell and Perez-Feirrerro (1995) recommend that aftercare programs offer services to youth on an “as-needed” basis. Often, after an initial period of being on their own, many youth want to take advantage of aftercare services. Several authors (Child Welfare League of America, 1998; Irvine, 1988) recommend that aftercare programs maintain an “open-door” policy so youth can feel comfortable requesting these services after they have formally left care.

The GAO (1999) reported that the 30 states responding to their survey reported providing formal services for a period of time after foster care, serving a total of 7,830 youth during FY 1998. The majority of the responding states indicated that they provide a full range of services including education and employment assistance, training in daily living skills and individual or group counseling. Additionally, GAO noted that 21 states mentioned providing additional services such as mentoring, transportation assistance, medical coverage and clothing.

Caliber Associates (1999) note that, “Aftercare services typically refer to those resources provided to youth under 21 who have been discharged from a foster care setting.” (p IV-28) The authors also noted that, “In many cases, aftercare was provided on an informal, individualized basis, but increasingly, states were moving toward more formalized, broader-based aftercare programs. Among the examples of state aftercare programs Caliber Associates cite are:

Connecticut

Formal aftercare activities include alumni newsletters and surveys, mentor networks, support groups, workshops and special events to keep the ILP connected to their program graduates.

Ohio

Five providers were contracted to provide the following array of services:

- Employment training programs;
- Life skills and college bound services;
- Case management, day care and Head Start services, transportation allowances, legal assistance for youth enrolled in job readiness or educational enhancement programs;
- A network of support for youth lacking in necessary environmental and personal systems to overcome the barriers to completing education or gaining and maintaining employment.

Nevada

The ILP developed an aftercare medical program, which provided primary healthcare services to youth for up to one-year post discharge.

Despite these examples, Caliber Associates observed that states continue to advocate for more extensive and formalized aftercare program for youth who have been emancipated from care.

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster parents provide continuous support for youth even after discharge from foster care (aftercare) by...

Providing temporary financial assistance...

Foster parents work with youth to identify financial resources needed to assist them as they transition to independence. In some instances the foster parent may loan the youth money or seek other sources that are provided by state or federal programs.

Helping to establish and maintaining own living arrangements...

Foster parents work with youth to identify housing options and then to assess them. They help the youth move into and maintain their new home.

Advocating for the needs of youth post foster care...

Foster parents work with their peers and agencies to promote the availability of housing for youth transitioning out of care.

Providing ongoing support to youth as they transition to independence...

Foster parents seek ways to provide “real” life living situations within the foster environment.

Supporting youth during transition out of state care...

Young adults need emotional support as they transition out on their own or back to their families. Personal connections that serve as a “lifeline” are critical during this period as the youth makes new friends and potentially re-establishes connections.

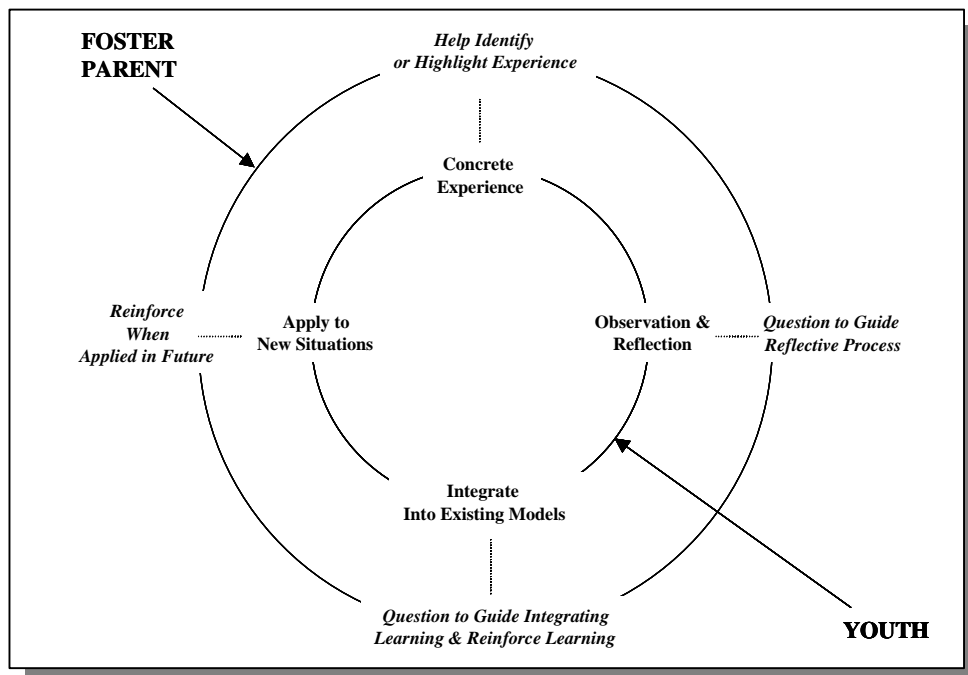
Reflective Learning

The following summary is taken from *A Competency Model for Adolescent Caseworkers: Partnering with Youth as They Transition to Independence* developed by the Muskie School of Public Service, Institute for Public Sector Innovation, at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, Maine. The research in this document focused on the adolescent caseworker, yet we found through the foster parent research that a great deal of the knowledge, skills and abilities are consistent.

SUMMARY

Foster parent:
"I ask, what do you think or how do you feel you could have done something different? – Encourage them to process it themselves. Not to sit there and tell them what they could have done."

Assisting youth as they gain experience in life is a key aspect of the foster parents' role; therefore, they must possess the competencies necessary to assist youth in their learning process. There is a partnership formed between the foster parent and the youth; in this partnership the foster parents' role is focused on providing a nurturing and safe home environment, modeling behaviors, providing feedback and encouragement, demonstrating value for the youth, and assisting them in setting goals.



Foster parents support and encourage youth in their growth process and in the identification of goals/desires. In addition, they support youth as they develop plans to attain their goals, and provide ongoing encouragement as they work toward their goals. To accomplish this the foster parents must help identify and reinforce learning opportunities on an ad hoc as well as on a planned basis; Reflective Learning is integral to this process.

Reflective Learning occurs in a cycle that includes: *Concrete Experience, Observation and Reflection, Integration into Existing Models, and Application to New Situations* (Kolb, 1984) (see diagram on previous page). Integral to this process is that the “learning moment” must be identified, reflected upon, integrated, reinforced and applied in the future

An example of Reflective Learning might be a person who rides a bike for the first time and falls off (*Concrete Experience*). Lying on the sidewalk, the person looks at the bike and thinks about what might have gone wrong (*Observation & Reflection*). A number of possibilities go through the person’s head regarding the reasons for the fall (“I wobbled too much... crouched over... got scared,” etc.) (*Integration into Existing Models*). The person decides to try again and remembers to sit up straight, and hold tightly to the handlebars (*Application to New Situations*).

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Foster parents provide a living environment that incorporates reflective learning, by...

Discussing and practicing decision-making on a regular basis...

Foster parents continually seek ways to engage the youth in the decision making process. They do not make decisions for the youth, but guide them through the process of assessing the pros, cons and impacts of their decision. They then support them in their choice.

Allowing the youth to experience natural consequences for personal choices...

Foster parents make sure that youth understand the consequences of their actions. They make sure the youth is aware of boundaries and allows them to work within the framework. The foster parents provide encouragement to the youth and when needed will work with the youth to understand the ramifications of their actions and behaviors.

Providing real-life learning opportunities for youth...

Foster parents seek opportunities for the youth to engage in activities that will provide life experiences. This can range from volunteer activities in the community, canoe trips or camping to seeking employment, managing their finances, cooking and other daily chores.

SURVEY FINDINGS

- 100% of respondents reported allowing the child to experience natural consequences as a result of his/her own personal choices; 75% indicated doing so about once a week.
- 100% of respondents reported discussing decision-making with youth; 74% indicated doing so about once a week.
- 98% of respondents reported providing real-life learning opportunities for youth; 82% indicated doing so about once a week.

SUMMARY

Inter-agency training is an essential element of the operation of integrated service delivery (Cook, 1988). Cook asserts that training needs to encompass all involved parties including administrators, caseworkers, foster parents, and outside service providers. In addition to the broad scope of necessary training, more recent developments include creative ideas in training. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau funded 12 independent living training grantees. The projects were to develop a curriculum that could be used to train child welfare practitioners to work effectively with youth transitioning out of care. Together, the training grantees identified solutions to concerns surrounding curriculum implementation (YD Update, 2002). The four primary solutions were:

- Institutionalized training
- Engaging administrators
- Using youth as trainers
- Facilitating networking and sharing between grantees

Of note is the idea of using youth as trainers. An important component of the John H. Chafee Program is the emphasis on youth involvement; youth involvement at a personal level in their case plans, and youth involvement at a more global level by having insight and influence on policy. One obstacle is that many professionals are not prepared to view young people as the experts in their own lives and experiences. Yet doing so may provide workers with an increased ability to connect with and be helpful to the youth they serve.

Many of the programs that responded to the *Promising Practices: Supporting Transition of Youth Served by the Foster Care System* survey utilize integrated service delivery models, that is, the program provides some services directly, while referring youth to other services outside of the program. Caliber Associates (1999) found that in FY 1996, 45 states reported providing some training to independent living program staff and also to foster parents. States encouraged foster parents to attend formalized foster parent trainings, youth conferences, and independent living program youth service sessions. The authors also report that 38 states provided some training to non-state service providers/contractors, and 15 states provided training to youth

mentors. Some states also reported training child welfare and other public agency staff, juvenile corrections/probation staff, school counselors and community volunteers. Among the training topics reported were examples such as:

- Youth Assessments –practice and procedures
- Skills for Success
- Separation, Attachment and Bonding
- Handling Grief and Loss issues.

Ansell et al. (1999) specifies the following requirements for a comprehensive independent living program staff training component.

...Organizations must develop an ongoing training plan for new and experienced staff at all levels of the organization. In particular, training should cover but not be limited to independent living/life skills, youth development, cultural diversity, permanency and special needs of adolescents. (pp. 35-36)

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Agencies ensure that foster parents acquire the skills and knowledge to be successful by ...

Providing initial and ongoing training that properly prepares foster parents on how to best prepare youth in care for their transition to self-sufficiency...

In order for foster parents to carry out the tasks associated with preparing youth in care for their transition to self-sufficiency, they need to understand:

- The developmental stages and tasks of adolescents, including the impact that trauma.
- The impact loss and attachment disruption has had on youth.
- The importance of implementing a youth development approach to help youth develop the competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) to successfully transition to young adulthood and self-sufficiency.

Keeping foster parents apprised of proven as well as new approaches to working with youth ...

All foster parents need periodic refreshers to learn about new approaches in working with youth. Because the work is very demanding, continuing education can also serve as an energizer and source of support for all care providers. It's vital that foster parents caring for teens be aware of the latest suggested/promising practices in the areas such as life skills education, career development, education beyond high school, assessment, housing, health care, and financial literacy.

Providing foster parents with ongoing opportunities to reflect, support and train one other...

Foster parents need regular opportunities to reflect with others through formal and informal networks, groups and one-to-one meetings with other foster parents. Support-groups, training teams and mentoring programs are all forums that provide foster parents with the opportunity to reflect on their work, identify struggles and new strategies that they can incorporate into their homes and practice.

SURVEY FINDINGS

High percentages of respondents reported receiving training related to preparing youth for adulthood. Topics respondents reported receiving training include: Behavioral problems in adolescents (98%), adolescent development (94%), adolescent attachment/loss (94%), independent living life skills (81%), positive youth development (80%), assisting youth with education planning (77%), permanency planning (74%), career readiness, i.e. placements and resources (69%), how to be an educational advocate (68%), connecting youth to community (66%).

In addition to the training topics listed above, 44% of respondents have had training on assisting youth with housing, and 39% received training on helping youth prepare to manage medical needs.

SUMMARY

Lindsey and Ahmed (1999) reported several shortcomings with prior evaluation studies of independent living program outcomes. The authors focused on three studies; the Westat evaluation (1991), an evaluation of the Pennsylvania Independent Living Program (1993), and an evaluation of the Nebraska Independent Living Program (1994). The authors cited problems with the structure of the three studies that made comparison of the outcomes difficult. The problems include:

- Different sampling techniques and methodology; and,
- Two of the three studies did not include comparison groups.

However, current legislation such as the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program offers an excellent opportunity for quality outcomes studies to emerge. Mech (2001) looks to the future optimistically:

“...many talented research investigators are emerging with an avowed interest in the positive development of foster young people. Likewise, numerous practitioner-scholars are working at the service delivery level, many of whom are eager to join the task of building independent living programs that are truly evidence-based.” (p. 33)

Ansell et al. (1999) suggest that ongoing program evaluation measures should include:

- Immediate program outcomes (results at the end of the program);
- Short-term outcomes for youth (6-12 months after program completion); and,
- Long term outcomes for youth, (over a year after program completion).

Examining youth outcomes at various periods after program completion will give a more accurate picture of youth outcomes.

Reflecting on their review of state independent living programs, Caliber Associates (1999) lists the following data limitations in connection to independent living programs research and reporting:

- Non-standardized reporting formats, resulting in reports that vary widely in content, breadth and methodology.
- Inconsistent definition of terms, including “served,” “eligible,” “completed services,” “needs assessment,” “counseling,” and “aftercare.”
- Inconsistencies in data sources across states and within states.
- Differences in the timeframes used for collecting and presenting data.
- Lack of information regarding the scope, intensity and duration of services.
- Difficulties tracking youth to collect post-discharge outcome data. (p. VI-1)

Caliber Associates make the following recommendations to improve program effectiveness and youth outcomes reporting:

- Build state capacity in collecting and analyzing outcome data through training and technical assistance. Help states identify ways to track youth over time.
- Develop guidelines for annual collection of a select and well-defined group of outcomes that reflect mastery of skills, education, employment, housing attainment and other indicators of self-sufficiency.
- Encourage states to track and report the progress of youth in meeting goals specified in their individual needs assessments and case plans related to independent living.
- Support longitudinal studies by external evaluators to provide needed insight into the effectiveness of various ILP services and their long-term impact on youth self-sufficiency.
- Conduct additional research to assess ILP staffing issues, understand causes and consequences of ILP Coordinator turnover, and develop a list of appropriate ILP staff competencies. (p. VI-3)

Although the Caliber Associates recommendations are targeted toward state level as opposed to individual program level reporting, it is clear that in order for states to be able to report clear and consistent data, individual programs will also be required to fulfill these reporting requirements.

SUGGESTED PROMISING PRACTICES CRITERIA

Agencies conduct program evaluation by...

Surveying foster parents/youth annually...	Agencies can measure how well their staff helps foster parents/youth, and examine which areas need improvement. Surveys can ask foster parents/youth directly to make suggestions for change.
Gathering outcome data...	Agencies can survey foster parents/youth while in the program, at the point of discharge, three - six months after discharge, and more than one year after discharge. This allows foster parents/youth to give input with a full perspective of their needs, and a clear idea of what could be improved.
Surveying foster parents regularly on their training needs...	Agencies can better prepare foster parents for working with youth in their homes by finding out from foster parents what it is that they would like to learn. Keeping training topic areas in line with foster parents' suggestions helps to ensure better attendance and participation in training.
Using sound evaluation techniques...	Agencies should make efforts to formalize evaluation through routine schedules for surveys, accurate data entry, and employing databases to track information. Foster parents and youth should be ensured of confidentiality and agencies should report information consistently and responsibly.
Collaborating with state evaluation systems...	Agencies can help build state capacity in evaluation by cooperating with state evaluation projects and fulfilling reporting requirements. Complete data allows states to more accurately assess programs and populations.

FINDINGS

Results from agency interviews and focus groups show that agencies conduct very little formal evaluation. However, agency personnel agreed that the evaluation of programs is important. Some agencies conducted foster parent satisfaction surveys, or surveys regarding training needs, but no agency had formally analyzed the resulting data.



OBSERVATIONS ABOUT ...

Successful Foster Parents

1. Successful foster parents are able to establish boundaries with youth in their home.
2. Successful foster parents are strong advocates for youth.
3. Successful foster parents recognize that rewards do not come immediately, and are able to delay gratification.
4. Successful foster parents know how to access necessary services for youth and themselves.
5. Successful foster parents are open to learning, and have confidence in their abilities.
6. Successful foster parents value the youth's connection to their birth parent(s).
7. Successful foster parents have a strong support network and access to resources.
8. Successful foster parents are those who value youth, know themselves, identify with the challenges faced by the youth, value family and bring life experience.
9. Successful foster parents are those who seek training, help youth reflect and learn from experiences, are patient, have a support system, understand that their work can be hard, and are committed to foster parenting.
10. Successful foster parents play a number of roles – coach, networker, advocate and facilitator of relationships as they work with youth to develop life skills, gain access to education, connect with their community and prepare to live on their own.
11. Successful foster parents value peer support on an ongoing basis to help them recognize their successes and to cope with the challenges of foster parenting.
12. Successful foster parents outwardly demonstrate to the youth that they care and that they are there for the youth no matter what.
13. Successful foster parents value education and as a result strongly advocate for youth in schools, and work with youth on educational goals.
14. Successful foster parents know there is an unmet need to provide services to youth age 18 – 21 who have left care and they seek to fill this gap.

Agencies that contribute to the success of foster parents

15. Agencies are supportive of and available to foster parents.
16. Agencies have an ongoing assessment and performance appraisal process for foster parents that incorporates input from youth.
17. Agencies treat foster parents as professionals and involve them as an integral part of the treatment team.
18. Agencies provide ongoing training to continually advance foster parents' knowledge, skills and abilities.
19. Agencies work with foster parents to identify their training needs and ensure that training is pertinent.
20. Agencies involve foster parents in ongoing evaluation of the program.
21. Agencies encourage foster parents to attend conferences, interact with peers and become involved in foster parent organizations.
22. Agencies recruit and select foster parents based on a profile for success.
23. Agencies recognize the importance of peer support for foster parents.
24. Agencies know there is an unmet need to provide services to youth age 18 – 21 who have left care and they work to find ways to fill this gap.

Youth/Adult Partnership

25. Youth are able to articulate the qualities and characteristics that make a successful foster parent.
26. Youth are able to define the relationship they want with birth parents and what permanency means to them.
27. Foster parents and agencies value youth voices as a resource in their own planning, or in planning for the program.
28. Youth are actively involved in defining what success is for them – recognize that adults are there to assist, not to tell, the youth what to do.
29. There is an unmet need to provide services to youth age 18 – 21 who have left care.

On the following pages the numbers in brackets cross reference the *recommendations* for foster parents, agencies and youth with the *observations* identified on pages 95 and 96 of this document.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOSTER PARENTS

- State parameters for behavior for youth so expectations and consequences are known. [1]
- Be willing to call school administration and/or teachers if necessary; be willing to talk on behalf of the youth to caseworkers, court personnel, and other service professionals (mental health workers, health care). [2,4,10,12,13]
- Recognize that rewards may be years down the road, and that initial care-giving may be difficult and challenging. [3,9]
- Gain an understanding of services available in the community; and be willing to admit your own need for support and perhaps even respite care. [4,7,10]
- Be open to continuous learning from youth, agency and other sources. Assess your skills often; and feel good about what you do right, and seek training in areas where you need improvement or assistance. [5,7,9]
- Ask youth to define the relationship they want with birth parents and be there to support the relationship approved by the youth's legal guardian. Foster parents should help facilitate if it is difficult for the youth to communicate what they want. [6,10,12]
- Gain an understanding of the needs of the youth and determine what is available in their community/area. Work with the agency, caseworker, schools and others to access needed resources. Also, seek support from peers (other foster parents) to assess the best resources for youth. [7,10,13,14]
- Be involved in training offered to foster parents by the agency and other organizations. Continually assess skills and know developmental needs. Create a system of support through partners, other foster parents. Continually develop communication skills – listening, reflective learning, etc. When possible, become involved in curriculum development and delivery for other foster parents, agency staff and caseworkers. [5,9,11]
- Learn a variety of approaches to use in working with youth as they prepare for independence. Create opportunities for real life experiences to hone life skills, make mistakes, and experience natural

consequences. [5,8,10]

- Demonstrate through example how to leverage a network, help the youth connect to the community, use reflective learning approaches to process experiences and add them to the youth's repertoire of skills and knowledge. [5,8,10]
- Actively participate in foster parenting support groups and forums. If these mechanisms do not exist work with other foster parents and the agency to create them. [11]
- Recognize it is okay to say, "I love you", "I care about you" and "I want you to be part of my family." When appropriate, pursue a relationship with youth beyond the time the youth is living in your home. [8,12,14]
- Find out about educational services and policies at the federal, state and local level; know what the youth is entitled to. Encourage and support youth to pursue education beyond high school. [2,10,13]
- Ensure that youth are involved in decisions that affect their present living situation and their future goals. [8]
- Allow the youth the opportunity to define what permanency means to them. Help youth make peace with the past. Put greater emphasis on contact with siblings. [8,10,12]
- Stay connected with youth after they have left care. Initiate a discussion with them prior to discharge regarding the role and support you will provide to them. Make yourself available on the youth's terms. [8,12,14]



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AGENCIES

- Develop screening tools that identify competencies and characteristics in foster parent candidates that align with those of successful foster parents. [22]
- Design programs that help foster parents acquire knowledge and develop skills in setting and enforcing boundaries. [18,19,21]
- Establish peer support groups to discuss successes and frustrations of foster parenting. [23]
- Educate foster parents around identifying and accessing services; educate foster parents about respite care. [18,21]
- Provide opportunities for on-going training and supervision for foster parents. [18,19]
- Assist foster parents in working with youth's relationship with birth parents. [17]
- Work with foster parents to identify needs and access needed resources. Develop an inventory of resources available in the community and surrounding areas. Also, seek support from peer agencies as needed to gain access to resources. [15,21]
- Engage the foster parent in ongoing self-assessment and provide ongoing support. [15,18,24]
- Train foster parents on the knowledge and skills they will need to coach youth, advocate for them, create networks, and develop and maintain relationships. [18,16,23]
- Ensure that agency policy stresses the importance of peer support for foster parents and that the agency provides a forum for foster parents to gather regularly to discuss the successes, challenges and reforms needed relative to foster care. [23,15]
- Involve youth in the ongoing recruitment and training of foster parents. [25,26]
- Ensure that agency policy states that youth will be involved in program planning, training and recruitment of foster parents and agency staff, and most importantly, in decisions that affect their care and future. [21,25,26]
- Identify funding sources that will support aftercare and transition programs for older youth. Involve foster parents and youth in defining these services. [27,29,24]
- Identify a person at the agency that the foster parent can always go to for assistance and support. Ensure that all agency staff demonstrates

value for the work that foster parents are doing with the agency for the youth. Leadership within the agency sets an example by being available and accessible to foster parents. [20,21]

- Work with foster parents and youth to develop an appraisal process that incorporates the youth's voice. If a foster parent appraisal process already exists in your agency, determine how it can be refined to include the youth. [26,27,21,17]
- Outline policies that create a collaborative relationship between the foster parent and agency. Recognize the role that foster parents play and require their involvement in the team charged with care of the youth. [17]



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH

- Work with foster parent(s) to state needs and identify resources that will work. Ask for opportunities to learn and practice the skills you will need to know; if you have ideas share them. [28]
- Seek to become involved in the recruitment and training of foster parents. [26]
- Articulate the relationships you want with foster parents, birth parents and siblings. Accept support from foster parents and the agency to meet your needs. State your needs and desires regarding permanency. [25]
- Seek out sources that will help you have a voice in your care and decisions that affect your life. [28,29]
- Connect with adults and peers that value education. Let adults know what your career and educational goals are – pursue those goals! [28]
- Become involved in “youth voice” activities, leadership training, speaking and other opportunities. When possible become involved in community service, “give back” so others can benefit from your actions. [27,28]
- Become involved in organizations and activities to change federal and state policies relative to foster care, adoption, independent living program and transitional services. [14, 29]

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Notes:

APPENDICES

FOSTER PARENTS SURVEY

APPENDIX A

In order to identify promising practices for foster parents working with adolescents, we are looking to successful foster parents for information. This survey is voluntary. It will help us learn more about how you live and work with youths in your home. Your individual answers will be confidential, known only to the research staff. The survey will take less than 30 minutes to complete. We appreciate your taking the time to answer the following questions and to help us in this important project.

1. Who is completing this form?
 - a. Foster mother
 - b. Foster father
 - c. Other: Specify _____

In answering this survey, **please focus on one youth who is currently in your home** and:

- 1) is 12 years old or older
- 2) with whom you have done some independent living preparation work
- 3) is special to you for some reason (i.e. your most challenging child, the youth who has made the most progress, a youth with whom you have a connection).

SECTION A: PRACTICES

2. Place an X in the box that best describes how often you have done the following with the youth:

Topic	A great deal (about once a week)	A good amount (about once a month)	Somewhat (about once every other month)	Very Little (once a year or less)	Never	Not Applicable
a. discussed nutrition						
b. discussed beliefs about money						
c. discussed budgeting money						
d. discussed personal hygiene						
e. discussed drugs, alcohol, tobacco						
f. discussed sexuality						
g. discussed social development (communication/						

Topic	A great deal (about once a week)	A good amount (about once a month)	Somewhat (about once every other month)	Very Little (once a year or less)	Never	Not Applicable
relationships)						
h. discussed study skills						
i. discussed decision making						
j. provided “real life” learning opportunities (e.g. doing laundry, cooking meals)						
k. allowed child to experience natural consequences as a result of his/her own personal choices						
l. tutored/done homework						
m. helped procure a tutor for this youth						
n. advocated for this youth in school						
o. attended an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) meeting						
p. helped youth access necessary educational resources						
q. helped youth find vocational training						
r. connected youth to community resources						
s. created youth leadership opportunities						
t. connected						

Topic	A great deal (about once a week)	A good amount (about once a month)	Somewhat (about once every other month)	Very Little (once a year or less)	Never	Not Applicable
youth to adult mentor(s)						
u. helped youth “make peace with the past”/trauma counseling						
v. helped youth reunite with family members						
w. helped youth develop/expand personal support systems						
x. promoted cultural awareness or development of cultural identity						
y. helped youth consider/prepare for adoption						
z. assisted youth in finding ways to contribute to the community (volunteering)						

3. If this youth is *younger than 16*, please skip to question 4. If this youth is *16 years old or older*, please place an X in the box that best describes how often you have:

Topic	A great deal (about once a week)	A good amount (about once a month)	Somewhat (about once every other month)	Very Little (once a year or less)	Never	Not Applicable
a. helped youth explore/pursue post-secondary education/vocational program						
b. assisted youth in applying for financial aid/scholarships /college applications						
c. helped youth						

Topic	A great deal (about once a week)	A good amount (about once a month)	Somewhat (about once every other month)	Very Little (once a year or less)	Never	Not Applicable
explore career(s)						
d. helped youth develop an educational and career plan						
e. assisted youth in a job search						
f. assisted youth in getting to work (transportation)						
g. taught youth how to drive						
h. instructed youth on how to look for an apartment						
i. instructed youth on how to pay his/her own bills						
j. prepared youth to manage his/her own medical/dental/mental needs						
k. connected youth to health care resources in the community						
l. prepared youth to return to his/her own home community						
m. helped youth resolve substance abuse issues						

SECTION B: ABOUT THIS FOSTER CHILD

4. How old is this youth? _____ years
5. How long has this youth been living with you? (Please **circle** the most accurate answer.)
 - a. less than 1 year
 - b. 1-2 years
 - c. 3-4 years
 - d. 5-6 years
 - e. 7-8 years
 - f. 9-10 years
 - g. more than 10 years
6. How old was this youth when he/she was first placed in your home? _____ years
7. How old was this youth when he/she was first removed from his/her birth home? _____ years
8. How many foster care placements did this youth have before being placed with you? (Please **circle** the most accurate answer.)
 - a. none
 - b. 1-3
 - c. 4-6
 - d. 7-10
 - e. 11-15
 - f. 16-20
 - g. more than 20
 - h. Don't know
9. Which, if any, of the following diagnoses does this youth have? (**Place an X in the Yes or No box** to indicate if the youth has the following diagnoses.)

Diagnosis	Yes	No
a. clinically diagnosed disabilities		
b. mental retardation		
c. visual or hearing impairment		
d. physically disabled		
e. emotionally disturbed		
f. ADHD		
g. Other medically diagnosed condition: _____		

10. Are you related to this youth?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
11. On a scale from 1 to 5, how would you rate the level of support you need to meet this youth's needs? Please **circle** your answer.

Lowest 1 2 3 4 5 Highest

12. Are you and this youth of the same race?

- a. Yes
- b. No

13. Is this youth part of a sibling group?

- a. Yes
- b. No (**skip to 15**)

14. Does the sibling (s) live with you?

- a. Yes
- b. No

15. **Place an X in the box** that best describes how often this youth has contact with his/her:

	Very Often (every week or more)	Often (about every month)	Sometimes (a few times a year)	Rarely (less than once a year)	Never (no contact)	Not Applicable
a. Birth parents						
b. Siblings						
c. Other blood relatives						
d. Former foster parents						

16. Which of the following do you do to support or encourage the visits mentioned above?

(Circle all that apply):

- a. Initiate contact
- b. Provide transportation
- c. Plan activities
- d. Other _____

17. Does this youth have an adolescent worker/life skills worker?

- a. Yes
- b. No (**skip to 19**)
- c. Don't know (**skip to 19**)

18. How often do you and this youth have contact with the adolescent/life skills worker?
(Place an X in the box appropriate for you and an X in the box appropriate for the youth)

	You	Youth
Every week or more		
About once every month		
A few times a year		
Once a year or every few years		
No contact		

19. Is there a worker with whom you have contact or with whom you have more contact than the adolescent/life skills worker?

- a. Yes If yes, please specify type of worker:

- b. No

SECTION C. SUPPORTS/SERVICES

20. Please place an X in the box that best describes the extent to which the following are supports for you.

	Not a Support	Very little support	Occasional support	Good amount of support	Great deal of support
a. spouse/partner					
b. family					
c. friends					
d. other foster parents/support group					
e. foster care agency					
f. religious institution					
g. foster parent association					
h. community					
i. mental health services					
j. respite care providers					
k. other					

21. If you answered “good amount of support” or “great deal of support” for any 20a-20k, please indicate what it is that the above sources do to support you:

22. Which of 20a-20k is the most significant source of support for you?

23. Place an X in the Yes or No box to indicate if you have used the following services (for yourself or the youth) in the past 6 months:

	Yes	No
a. respite care		
b. individual counseling (self/spouse)		
c. individual counseling (youth)		
d. family therapy		
e. marriage counseling		
f. adoption support group		
g. residential treatment (youth)		
h. institutional placement (youth)		
i. other professional service		

24. Place an X in the Yes or No box to indicate if you have received training on the following:

	Yes	No
a. adolescent development		
b. adolescent attachment/loss		
c. behavioral problems in adolescents		
d. independent Living life skills		
e. positive youth development		
f. permanency planning		
g. assisting youth with education planning/educational resources		
h. how to be an educational advocate for foster children		
i. career readiness—assisting youth with employment placements, resources and career development		
i. connecting youth to the community/accessing resources		
j. assisting youth with housing arrangements		
k. preparing youth to manage medical/health needs		

SECTION D: MOTIVATION FOR FOSTERING

25. We would like to know more about why people decide to become foster parents. **Place an X in the box** that best describes how much each of the following was a factor in your decision to become a foster parent.

Factor	Big Factor	Small Factor	Not a Factor
a. obligation to relative/friend			
b. closeness to the child			
c. inability to have children			
d. biological children are grown			
e. wanted a companion for children			
f. biological/other foster children were very attached to the child			
g. agency pressure to foster the child			
h. increase household income			
i. wanted to offer security to a child			
j. wanted to nurture a child			
k. wanted to feel needed			
l. knew someone who was a foster parent			
m. knew someone who was once a foster child			
n. you were a foster child			
o. identify with children in need as a result of your own unhappy childhood experiences			
p. you work in the child welfare system			
q. other: _____			

SECTION E: YOUR FOSTER PARENTING SUCCESS

26. What enables you to be a successful foster parent?

27. What guiding values and beliefs drive your work with adolescents?

28. What prior experiences have benefited you in your work with adolescents?

SECTION F: ABOUT YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

29. How many people currently live in your home? (Please **write in a number for each** of the following:)

- a. _____ Spouse/partner
- b. _____ Number of foster children
- c. _____ Number of birth children
- d. _____ Number of other adults

30. What is your age? _____ years

31. Do you have biological children?

- a. Yes If yes, how many? _____
- b. No **(skip to 33)**

32. How old were you when your first child was born? _____ years

33. How old were you when you first became a foster parent? _____ years

34. For how many years have you been a foster parent? (Please **circle** the most accurate answer.)

- a. less than one
- b. 1-2
- c. 3-4
- d. 5-6
- e. 7-8
- f. 9-10
- g. more than 10

35. What is your role as a foster parent?

36. **Place an X in the Yes or No box** to indicate which, if any, of the following you typically do with former foster children:

	Yes	No
a. Keep in phone contact		
b. Visit regularly		
c. Have to your house for dinner		
d. Celebrate holidays		
e. Send care packages		

37. What is your relationship status? (Please **circle** your answer.)
- Single, never married
 - Married
 - Separated
 - Divorced
 - Widowed

38. **Place an X in the box that best describes your race** (and if applicable, **place an X in the box that best describes the race of your spouse/partner**):

	You	Spouse/ Partner
a. Asian/Pacific Islander		
b. African American		
c. Hispanic/Latino		
d. Native American/Alaskan Native		
e. White/Caucasian		

39. Are you (and if applicable, spouse/partner) employed outside of your home? (Please **circle one** answer.)
- Neither parent employed
 - Foster mother employed
 - Foster father employed
 - Both parents employed

40. **Place an X in the box to indicate the highest level of education you completed** (and if applicable, **place an X in the box that indicates the highest level of education your spouse/partner completed.**)

	You	Spouse/Partner
a. less than high school diploma		
b. high school diploma		
c. some college education		
d. associate's degree		
e. bachelor's degree		
f. graduate degree		

41. Does the youth use a computer in your home? (Please **circle** the most accurate answer.)
- Yes, very often
 - Yes, occasionally
 - No, youth doesn't use our computer
 - No, we don't have a computer

42. Which of the following best describes your total household income before taxes? (Please **circle** the most accurate answer.)
- 10,000 or less
 - Between 10,001 and 20,000
 - Between 20,001 and 30,000
 - Between 30,001 and 40,000
 - Between 40,001 and 50,000
 - Between 50,001 and 60,000
 - More than 60,001

43. Place an X in the box that best describes how much you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
a. I am a religious person.					
b. I am self-confident.					
c. I had a happy childhood.					
d. I feel satisfied with the case management support I get.					
e. The agency training I have received meets my needs as a foster parent.					
f. I am well-matched with this youth.					
g. I have felt competent to handle the types of children placed in my home.					
h. I am involved in the decision-making for this youth.					
i. I am well informed by the agency of planning for this youth.					
j. I am clear about what my agency expects of me as a foster parent.					
k. I receive an adequate stipend to provide for this youth.					
l. I consider this youth to be my own child.					
m. Visits between foster children and their biological family are important.					

44. Overall, how has fostering this youth affected your family? Please **circle** your answer.

- a. Very positively
- b. Positively
- c. Mixed; positives and negatives—about equal
- d. Negatively
- e. Very negatively

45. Do you see yourself as a permanent caretaker for the child or a temporary placement for this youth?

- a. permanent caretaker
- b. temporary placement

Explain:

46. Have you considered adopting this youth?

- a. Yes (**skip to 48**)
- b. No

47. Why have you not considered adopting this youth? (**Circle all that apply.**)

- a. I am not interested in adoption
- b. Child is not interested in adoption
- c. I am unlikely to be allowed to adopt a child
- d. Financial reasons make adoption a poor choice for me
- e. Adoption is not an option for this youth
- f. Other:

48. Are you a foster parent through a private or public agency? (Please **circle** your answer.)

- a. Private
- b. Public
- c. Don't know

49. Agency Name:

County/district/regional office _____
State _____

50. What type of foster parent license/certification do you have? (Please **circle** your answer).

- a. general
- b. specialized
- c. therapeutic/treatment
- d. emergency care
- e. respite only
- f. other _____

Thank you for your input!

We would like to offer a small gift to thank you for taking the time to answer our questions. If you would like to receive a **\$15 Wal-Mart gift card**, please **write in your address below**. This is **optional**, however, we cannot send you the gift card without your address.

Send gift card to:

Street: _____

City: _____
Zip: _____

In an attempt to gather more in-depth information about foster parents' promising practices with youth, we are interested in doing site visits and telephone interviews with foster families. If you would like to take part in this

important research, please enter your address above and list the additional contact information below. If you are *not* interested, *you may leave this information blank*.

Name:

Telephone: (Home)_____ (Work) _____

E-mail (if applicable):

Please return this survey in the enclosed envelope to:

University of Southern Maine
Muskie School of Public Service
c/o Sherri Stockwell
One Post Office Square
PO Box 15010
Portland, ME 04112-5010

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the survey, please contact:

Sherri Stockwell
207-780-5836
sstockwe@usm.maine.edu

FOSTER PARENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS **APPENDIX B**

1. We'd like to talk about your work in preparing youth to transition to adulthood. Before we do that, can you describe what you think *success* means, in terms of a youth making a successful transition to adulthood?
2. What does it mean to you to help a youth successfully transition to adulthood? (We'd like to hear some examples of high points that you have had with helping a youth make a successful transition...)
3. What role do you think you play in helping to prepare a youth for adulthood? (More specifically, what are the formal and informal roles you play in preparing the youth in areas such as):
 - Education
 - Employment
 - Career opportunities
 - Health/mental health
 - Housing
 - Community connections
4. What motivates you to foster parent teens?
5. When a young person enters your foster home, how do you assess what life skills he/she needs to learn? What life skills assessment tool or curriculum do you use in your home?
6. How are staff and foster parents working as a team with youth? (Who has the primary responsibility for helping youth develop life skills competencies?)
7. How do you support or encourage the youth to practice the skills they'll need when they're on their own?
8. What kind of pre-service and in-service training have you received that has assisted you in working with teens?
9. Where do you get support that helps you in your work with teens? (it may help to think of a time when things were not going well in your home. What did you do—who did you turn to?)
How specifically do your supports help you? What kinds of things do you still need?
10. Do you talk with youth about life after leaving your home? How do you help youth maintain permanent relationships?
11. Do you feel that adoption is a realistic option for teens in care? Have you discussed adoption with youth in your home? (if not, what is this youth's plan for permanency?)

12a. What do the words *family* and *love* mean to you?

12b. What do you think the words *family* and *love* mean to the youth in your home?

13. What do you consider to be the most important thing you or any other person could do for a youth to prepare them for adulthood?

FOSTER PARENT SITE VISIT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

APPENDIX C

1. How would you define *success* for a youth, in terms of a youth successfully transitioning out of care?
2. Describe for us what a day in your home looks like. What typically do you do?
3. In our foster parent focus group, we discussed the role foster parents play in helping to prepare a youth for adulthood. Describe how you discuss the following topics and/or provide learning opportunities for youth on: (if you don't cover these topics with the youth, who does?)
 - Education
 - Employment
 - Career opportunities
 - Health/mental health
 - Housing
 - Community connections

We'd like to talk to you more in-depth about some of the questions we asked on the mailed survey you completed.

4. In answering what the significant sources of support are for you (ques. 20), you said: _____.
What do these sources do to support you?

5. In answering questions concerning the training you have received (ques. 24), you mentioned: _____.
Can you tell us what these trainings were like and how they helped or did not help you in preparing youth for adulthood? What additional training would you like to have?

6. When we asked about what enables you to be a successful foster parent (ques. 26), you said: _____.
Can you tell us a little more about that?

7. When we asked about what guiding principles and beliefs drive your work with adolescents (ques 27), you said: _____.
Can you tell us a little more about that?

8. When we asked about prior experiences that have benefited you in your work with adolescents (ques. 28), you said: _____.
Can you tell us a little more about that?

9. When we asked whether you consider yourself a permanent caretaker or a temporary placement for the child (ques 47), you said: _____.
What does this mean? (What will your relationship be after the youth leaves your home?)

10. When we asked about the contact the youth has with his/her birth parents, siblings, etc, (ques. 15 you said: _____).
Can you talk some more about that? What is your role in these visits?

11. How does the agency support you in your work in preparing youth for transitioning to adulthood? (What else do you need?)

12. In our focus group with foster parents we asked what is most important thing you can do as a foster parent for a youth? Some answers were: _____. What do you think?

YOUTH SITE VISIT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS **APPENDIX D**

1. Has anyone ever talked to you about what you want to be when you grow up? Tell us about some of your hopes and dreams.
2. What are you doing now to try and make those dreams happen? Who is helping you?
3. Who is working with you to develop the skills you need to be on your own? Describe any opportunities you get to practice these skills and who helps you practice them.
4. Who is your greatest support person right now? Describe what they do when you need help?
5. Describe what its like when you make a mistake. How do mistakes affect your opportunities to practice life skills?
6. What kind of choices do you have in your life? Can you give me an example?
7. What's working right now for you with:
 - School
 - Employment
 - Life Skills
 - Your placement here
 - Extracurricular stuff
8. Describe what the words *family* and *love* mean to you? What do you think they mean to your foster family?
9. In the foster homes and placements you've had, what were some of the best things the foster families did?
10. Are you in contact with your birth family? If so, who helps you with that? If not, how could your foster family or caseworker help with that?
11. Where do you see yourself spending holidays five years from now?
12. If you could change one thing about how youth are prepared for adulthood, what would it be?

Promising Practices II Foster Parent Survey Results

The intent of this research was to gather information from foster parents who have been successful working with adolescents transitioning from foster care to independent living. These successful foster parents were asked the types of activities they practice with youth in their home, their guiding principles, what motivates them to foster, and to what they attribute their success. Obtaining a sample of successful foster parents was a two-tiered process.

- First, state and/or county Independent Living Coordinators were contacted and asked to recommend foster care agencies that have successful independent living programs. In order to gather a sample of agencies that would represent states across the country, one state was chosen from each of the 11 U.S. federal regions.
- Second, the recommended foster care agencies in those states were asked to provide names of foster families who had been “successful” working with youth transitioning out of care. From this final list, 120 surveys were mailed. Sixty-two surveys were returned; a return rate of 52%.

The following table displays the states from which surveys were received.

State	Surveys Mailed	Surveys Returned	Returned Surveys	Response Rate
Maine	36	19	31%	50%
Pennsylvania	11	8	13%	75%
Texas	17	7	11%	40%
New York	8	6	10%	75%
Colorado	12	6	10%	50%
California	7	4	7%	60%
Washington	10	4	7%	40%
Illinois	6	4	7%	67%
Ohio	5	2	3%	40%
Missouri	4	1	1%	25%
Florida	4	1	1%	25%
Totals	120	62	52%	52%

Demographics of Respondents:

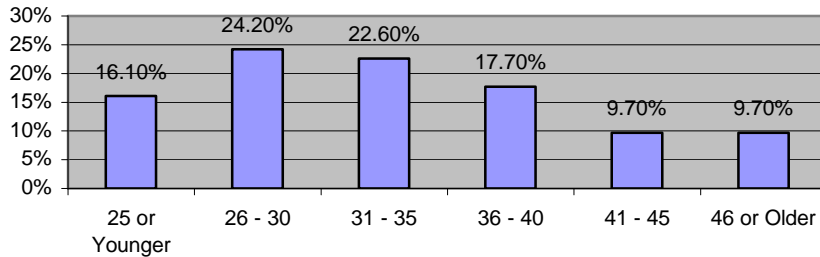
Eighty-two percent of respondents were foster mothers; the remaining 18% were foster fathers.

AGE OF FOSTER PARENTS

The majority of respondents were between the ages of 31 and 50 (66%). Twenty-nine percent were 50 or older. A small percentage (5%) were 30 or younger.

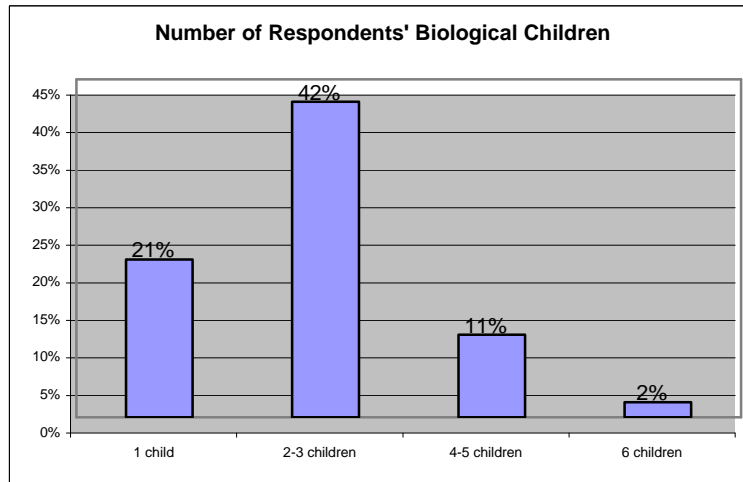
Close to half of respondents (47%) were between the ages of 26 and 35 when they first became foster parents. However, ages varied among respondents. The chart below displays the percentage of respondents in each age category.

Respondents' Age When First Became Foster Parent



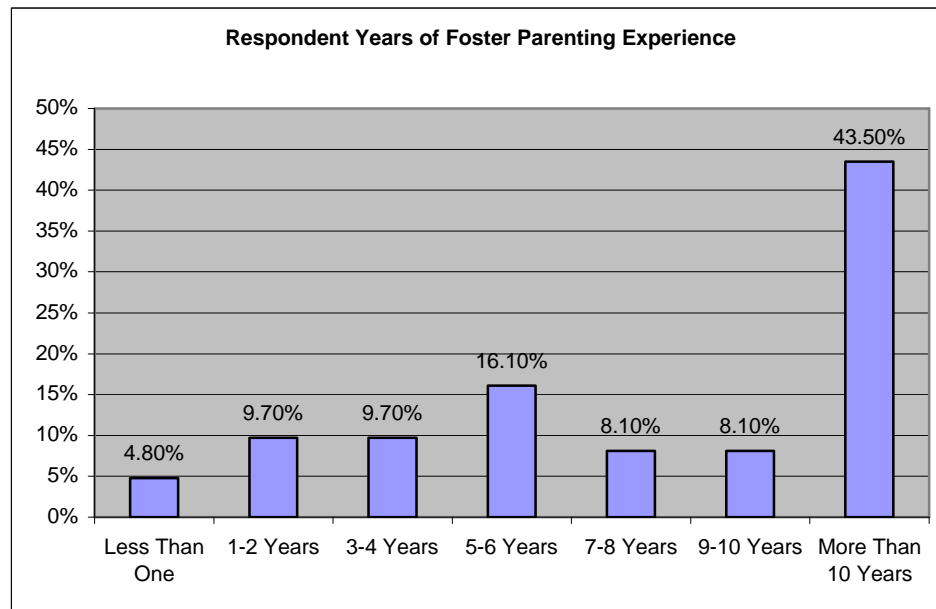
Foster Parents' Biological Children

Seventy seven percent of respondents had biological children. The majority of respondents (52%) were between the age of 17 and 25 when their first child was born. The chart below displays the number of children respondents reported having.



Foster Parent Experience

A large percentage (44%) of respondents had 10 or more years fostering experience. Experience varied among other respondents. The chart below displays respondents' years of fostering experience.



FOSTER PARENT LICENSING

Seventy-seven percent of respondents were foster parents licensed through private agencies; 16% were licensed through public agencies, and 3% did not know. Fifty-six percent of respondents held therapeutic or treatment licenses, 23% had general licenses, 15% had specialized licenses and 6% had “other” licenses, which include Family Teachers, Foster to Adopt, and Options for Recovery.

Youth Characteristics

Respondents were asked to focus on a youth currently living in their home, who is 12 years or older, with whom they had done some independent living preparation work and who was special to the respondent for some reason; a youth with whom the respondent had a connection.

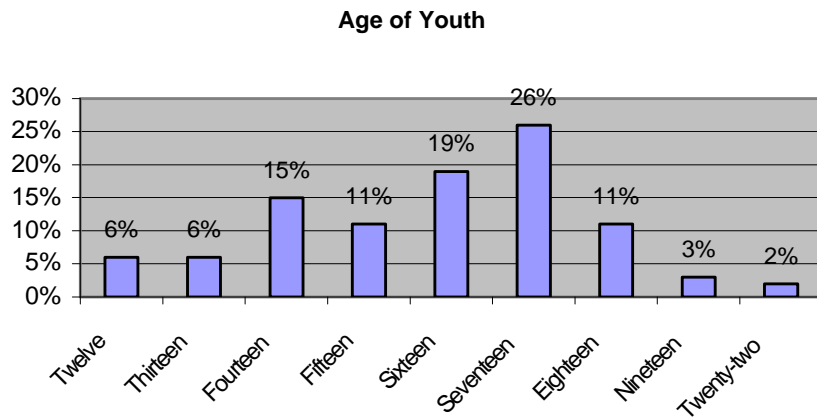
The following describes characteristics of the youth selected by the respondents for this project.

Relationship to Youth -- No respondent was related to the youth they considered for the survey.

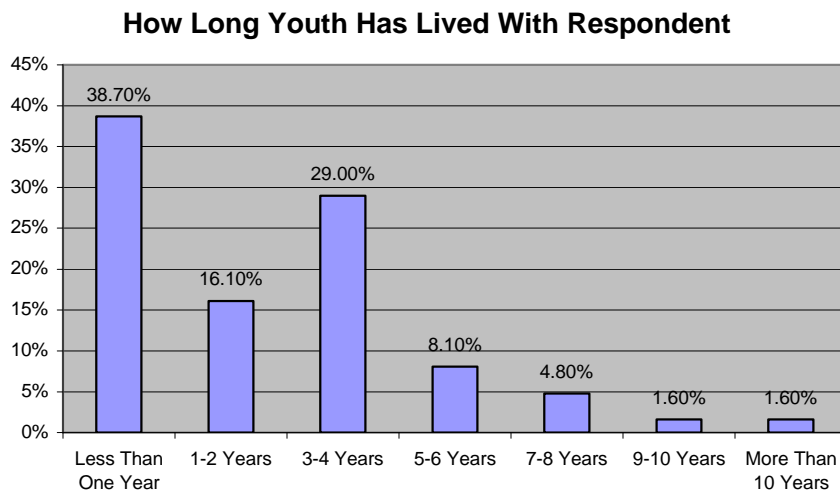
Race -- Seventy-seven percent of respondents reported that they were the same race as the youth.

Number of Placements -- Fifteen percent of youth had not been placed in foster care before living with the respondent. However, most youth had between one and six foster care placements prior to living with the respondent.

Age of Youth -- Forty-five percent of respondents focused on youth ages 16 or 17. Thirteen percent focused on 12 - 13 year olds; 26% 14 – 15 year olds and 16% focused on youth 18 or older.



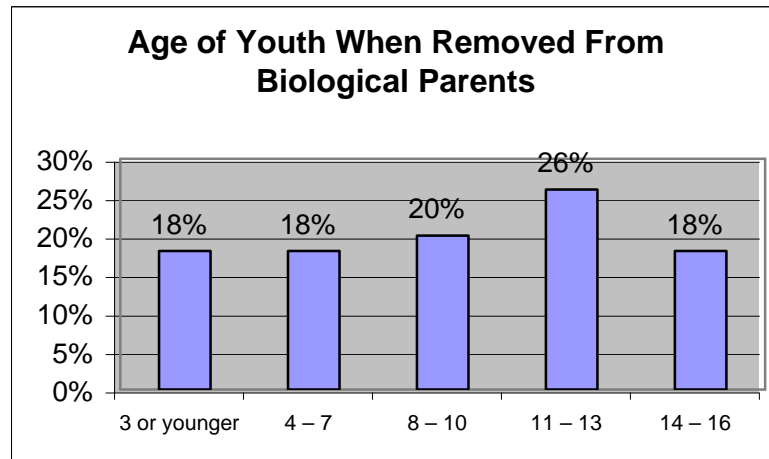
A third of respondents lived with the youth for less than one year (38%); 16% lived with the youth five years or more. The chart below displays the amount of time respondents lived with the youth.



The majority of youth (75%) were between the ages of 11 and 16 when placed in the respondents' homes.

Age of Youth When Placed in Your Home	Percentage of Respondents
7 or Younger	8.2%
8-10	4.9%
11-13	34.4%
14-16	41.0%
17-19	11.5%

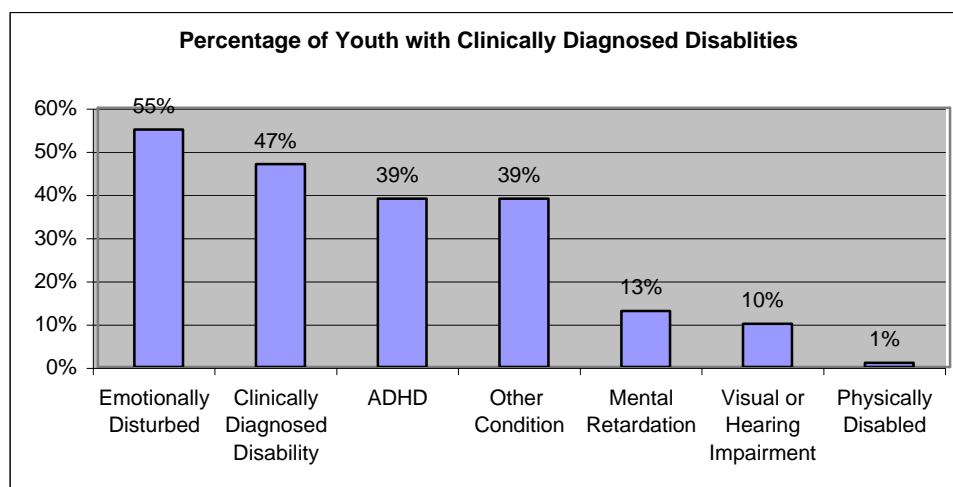
The ages of youth when first removed from their biological homes varied. Ages were as follows:



Fifteen percent of youth had not been placed in foster care before living with the respondent. However, most youth had between one and six foster care placements prior to living with the respondent.

Number of Youth’s Foster Care Placements	Percentage of Youth
None	14.8%
1-3	39.3%
4-6	34.4%
7-10	6.6%
11-15	3.3%
More than 20	1.6%

Approximately half of respondents reported that the youth had clinically diagnosed disabilities; the largest percentages of which were emotionally based disabilities, ADHD, and “other” medically diagnosed conditions, such as ODD, autism, depression, and asthma.



Respondents were asked the level of support needed to care for the selected youth, and the majority reported high needs for support. Using a scale from 1 to 5 (with one indicating lowest support and five indicating highest support), 59% of respondents reported their level of support needed as 4 or 5. Percentages were as follows:

Level of Support Needed to Care For Youth	Percentage of Respondents
5	24% <i>High Need</i>
4	35%
3	23%
2	15%
1	3% <i>Low Need</i>

Seventy-seven percent of respondents reported they were the same race as the youth. The majority of respondents (89%) and spouses (81%) were White/Caucasian. Of all respondents, 3% were African American, 3% were Hispanic/Latino and 5% were Native American/Alaskan Native. Of spouses, 5% were African American, 2% were Native American/Alaskan Native.

Seventy-three percent of youth were part of a sibling group. However, only 31% lived with their sibling(s).

Respondent’s Current Living Situation

Respondents were asked to describe who lived in their home. Most respondents (82%) lived with a spouse or a partner. The table below displays the percentage of respondents with biological and foster children in their home:

Children in the Home

One foster child	19%	One birth child	37%
2-3 foster children	58%	2-3 birth children	16%
Four or more foster children	21%	Four or more birth children	2%

Less than 15% of respondents lived with other adults in their home.

In 42% of families, only the foster father was employed. Both parents worked in 27% percent of families. In thirteen percent of families, only the foster mother was employed and in 18% neither parent was employed (which included retirees).

When asked about total household income, more than half of respondents reported their income to be more than \$40,000. Answers were as follows:

Total Household Income	Percent
\$10,000 or less	2%
Between \$10,001 and \$20,000	3%
Between \$20,001 and \$30,000	15%
Between \$30,001 and \$40,000	25%
Between \$40,001 and \$50,000	24%
Between \$50,001 and \$60,000	10%
More than \$60,001	20%

The education levels of respondents varied from high school to graduate school degrees. Respondents' and spouses/partners' education levels were as follows:

Education Level	Respondent	Spouse/Partner*
a. less than high school diploma		2%
b. high school diploma	26%	30%
c. some college education	27%	27%
d. associate's degree	23%	12%
e. bachelor's degree	18%	10%
f. graduate degree	6%	7%

*The remaining 12% are due to respondents not having a spouse/partner.

Most youth used computers regularly—86% used a computer often or occasionally. Of those who did not use a computer, 10% had one but did not use it regularly, and 4% did not have a computer at home.

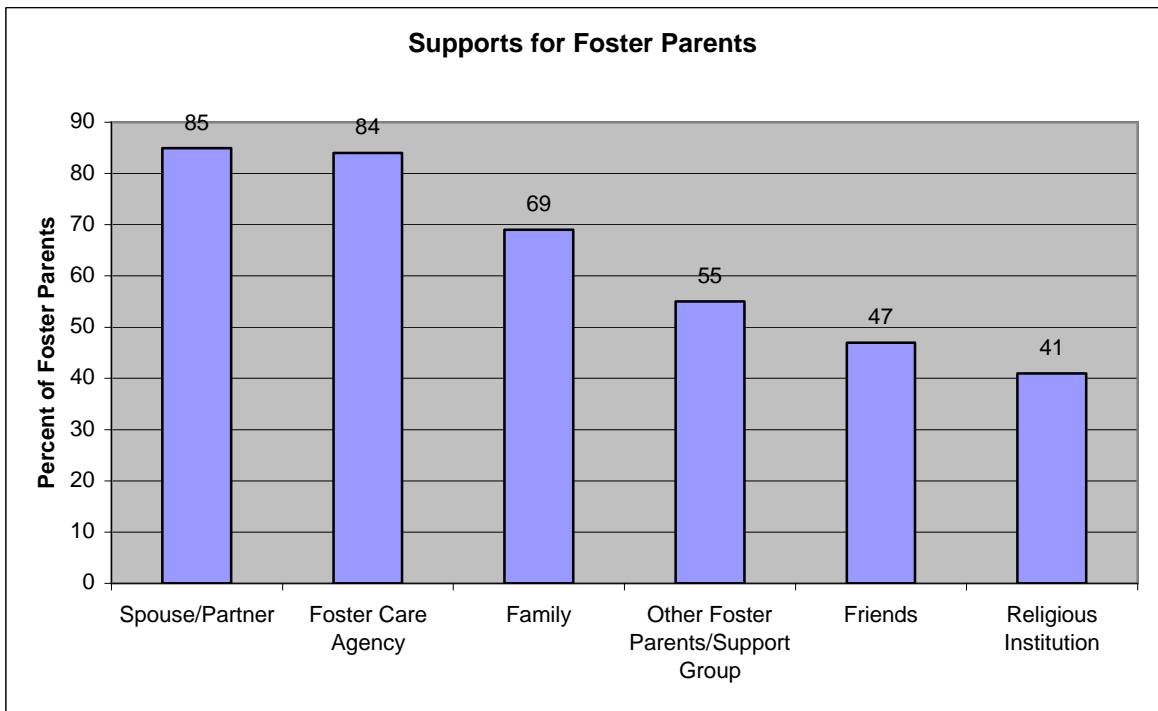
SUPPORT SERVICES

Fifty-two percent of respondents reported that the youth had an adolescent worker/life skills worker. Five percent said they don't know. The majority of respondents said they

had contact with this worker every week or more (50%) or about once a month (46%). The majority of youth also had contact with their worker every week or more (62%) or about once a month (27%). Only a few respondents (4%) and youth (11%) reported seeing the worker a few times a year. No one reported having no contact with the worker.

Other types of workers that respondents/youth had contact with included caseworkers, Family Advocates (FACT), IL counselors, attorneys, and vocational rehab workers.

Respondents were asked about the types of supports they relied on. The most frequently relied upon supports were spouses/partners, foster care agencies, family members and other foster parents. Shown below are percentages for supports that were either a good amount of support or great deal of support for respondents. (percentages equal more than 100% because categories for “good amount” and “great deal of support” were combined).

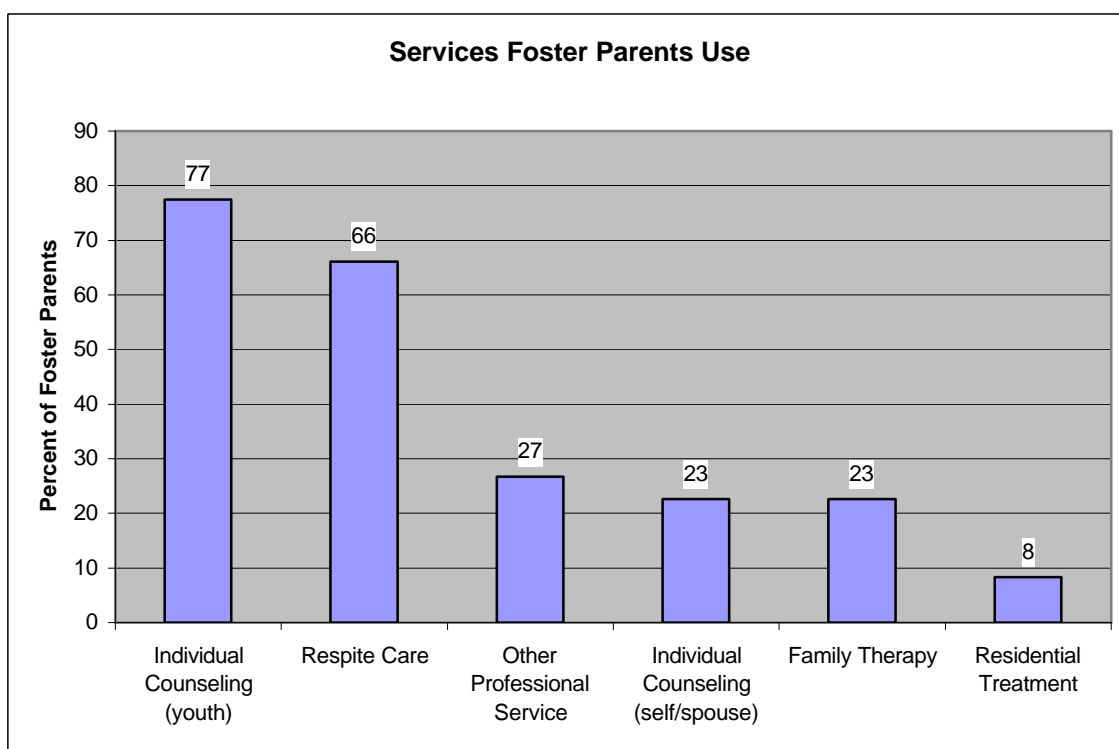


Other supports were respite care providers (34%), mental health services (31%), community (17%), and Foster Parent Association (14%). Respondents also mentioned being supported by schools/teachers, foster parent support specialists, and therapists. One person mentioned receiving support from the youth’s emancipated foster brother.

Respondents were asked what kind of things their supports did in supporting them. There was great variety in the answers. The most common response (45%) was that supports give feedback or advice. The next most common answer (38%) was supports give respondents a break by spending time with the youth. Other ways respondents were supported are:

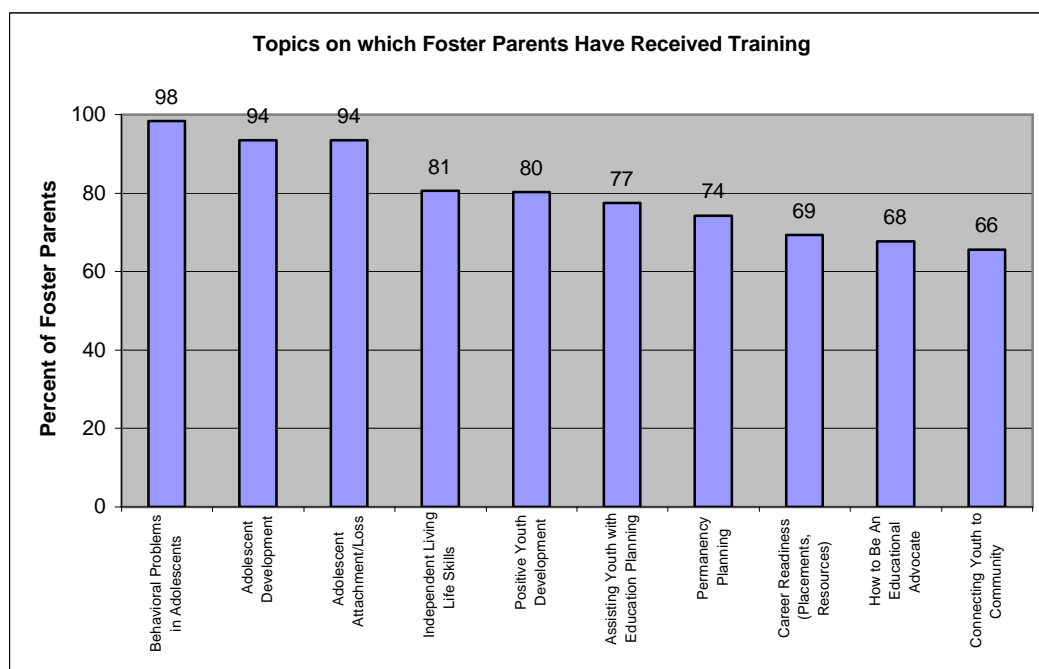
TYPE OF SUPPORT	%
Emotional support	20%
Work with spouse/partner as a team	20%
Listen/sounding board	18%
Share Ideas	18%
Offer help	14%
Great agency staff	13%
Counseling	9%
I could talk openly/vent	9%
Encouragement	9%
Provide activities for youth	9%

Respondents were asked the types of services they used. The chart below displays the types of services most often used by respondents in the past six months.



The majority of respondents had obtained individual counseling for youth, and had used respite care. Services used less frequently included residential treatment for youth (8%), institutional placements for youth (3.3%), and foster parent support groups (3.3%).

High percentages of respondents reported receiving training in relation to preparing youth for adulthood. The following chart displays the topics on which respondents received training:



In addition to the training topics listed in the chart above, 44% of respondents had training on assisting youth with housing, and 39% received training on helping youth prepare to manage medical needs.

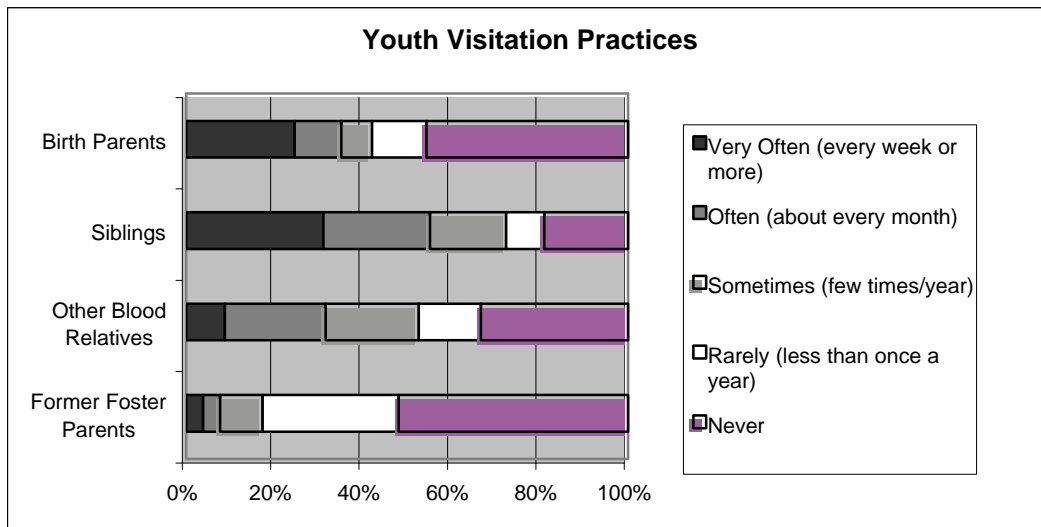
Practices with Youth

When asked what his/her role is as a foster parent, the majority (51%) said “parent” or “caregiver.” Two other common responses were to teach life skills (32%) and to nurture a child (21%). Other foster parent roles were:

OTHER ROLES	%
To Set Guidelines/Structure	19%
Advisor/Give Guidance	19%
To Provide Security/Safe Environment	17%
Advocate/Mediator	17%
To Provide Loving Environment/Treat as Family	15%
To Love Unconditionally	15%
Confidante/Sounding Board	14%
Role Model/Mentor	12%
To Provide Transportation	10%
To Teach How to Be Successful/Responsible	8%
To Participate in Appointments	8%

VISITATION PRACTICES

Respondents were asked how often the youth visit members of their birth family. Responses were as follows:



Results show that youth visited most often with their siblings. More than half visited their siblings every month or more often. Approximately 35% of youth visited their birth parents every month or more. An additional 30% visited other blood relatives every month or more, while only 10% visited with former foster parents every month.

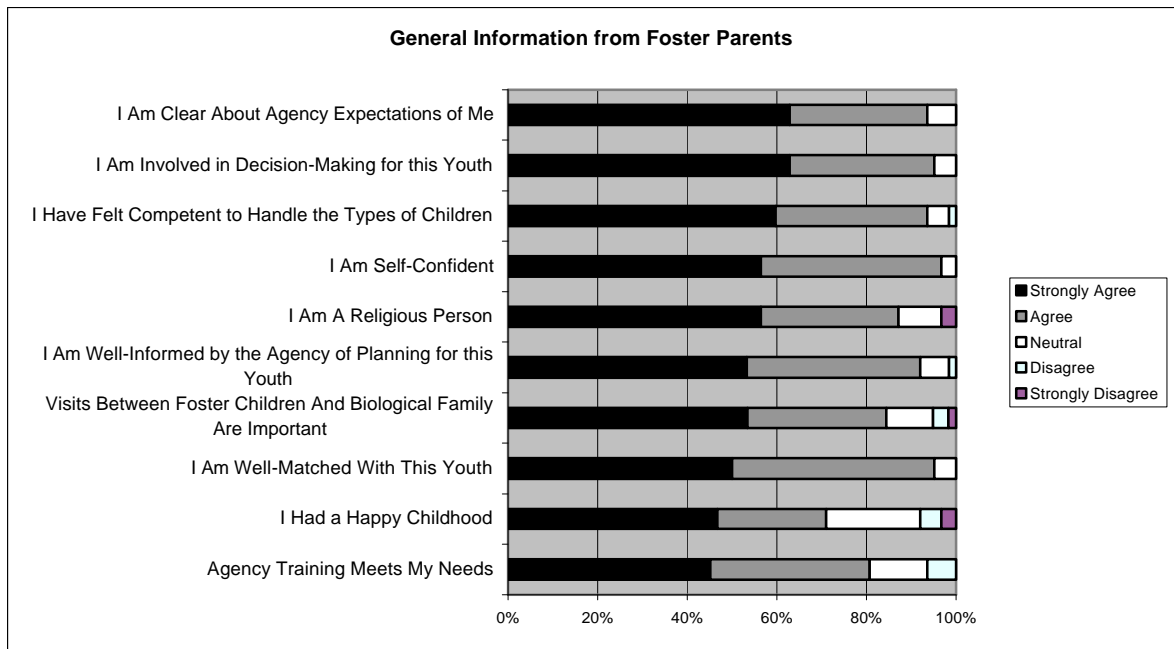
The majority of respondents helped to support these visits. The following tasks were identified (percents equal more than 100% due to respondents checking all that apply):

- Provide transportation 70%
- Initiate contact 56%
- Plan activities 33%
- Other 26%

*Other ways included encouraging the youth to stay in touch, hosting family members, helping to locate family members and helping the youth process through feelings after a visit.

Some respondents who did not help support visits commented that parental rights had been terminated, visits were not recommended, the parent was a negative influence, or that the agency arranged the visits.

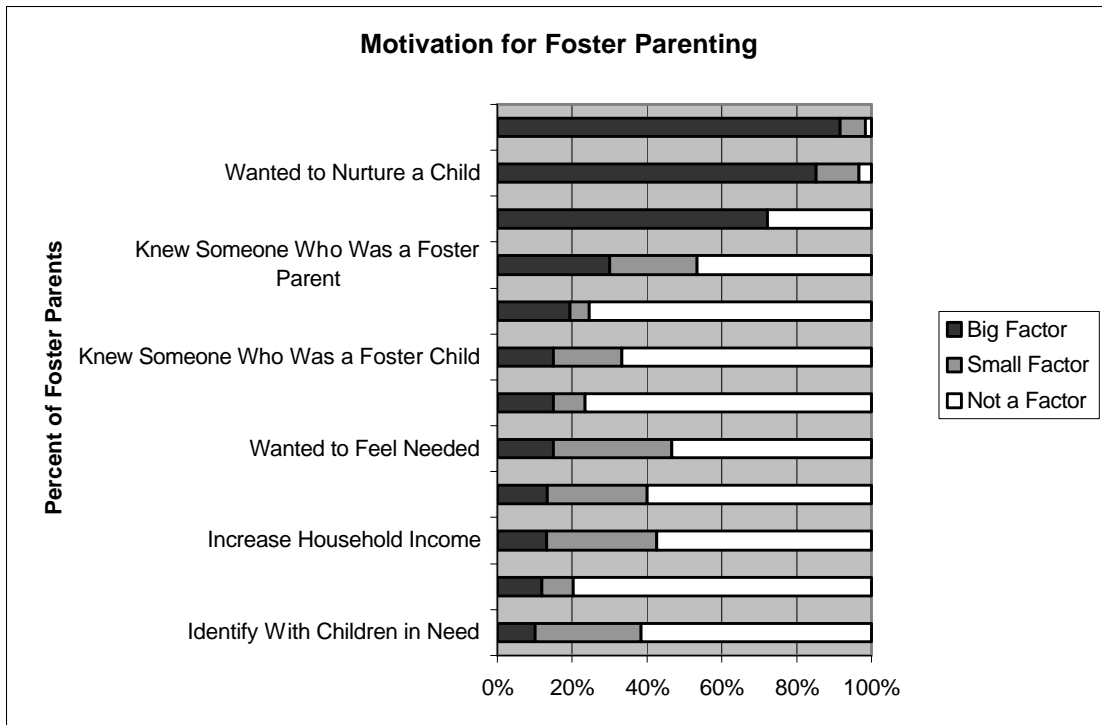
Respondents were asked to rate how much they agreed with the following statements. The chart displays the percentage that agreed or disagreed.



Respondents overall agreed (more than 90% agreed; more than 60% strongly agreed) that they were clear about agency expectations and were involved in decision-making for the youth. Respondents also reported being self-confident, feeling competent to handle the types of children they have fostered, and being religious. More than 80% of respondents agreed to all of the above statements, except for “I had a happy childhood,” for which only 70% agreed. This reflects the fact that having a negative experience in childhood and therefore being able to identify with the youth was a reason some respondents offered for becoming a foster parent.

MOTIVATION FOR FOSTER PARENTING

Respondents were asked what motivated them to become foster parents. The most common reason for foster parenting was wanting to offer security to a child, or to nurture a child. The following chart displays the reasons for foster parenting and the percentage who answered whether each of the reasons was a “big factor,” a “small factor,” or “not a factor.”



The “Other” reasons for fostering included:

- Called by God
- Wanted to share life/offer skills to a child
- Love for children
- Wanted a career with kids/at home

When asked how fostering affected their family, 59% said the effect had been positive (of those, 15% answered “Very Positively”). The remaining 41% stated the effect had been a combination of mixed positives and negatives. No respondent reported fostering had a negative effect on his/her family.

Respondents were asked what enabled them to be successful foster parents. The most common answers were training and/or education (22%) and providing lots of love and support (21%). Other answers were as follows:

Patience	19%
Support of Family/Spouse	17%
Commitment to Foster Parenting/	16%
Hard Work	14%
Agency Staff Support/Professionals	10%
Successful Parenting Experiences	10%
I Am A Good Listener	10%
Enjoy Teens/Children	10%
Prayer/Faith	10%

When respondents were asked what guiding values or beliefs drive their work with adolescents, the most common response (28%) was children need to be loved/children

need to experience a family. Another common guide for foster parents (21%) was their faith/religious belief or spirituality. Other guiding values or beliefs were:

Love for Children	16%
Want to Help Youth Develop Their Lives	16%
Youth Have Strengths/Can Change	14%
Believe We Should Help Those in Need	12%
Everyone Deserves A Chance	12%
Believe We Can Make a Difference	12%
My Upbringing/Morals	11%
Determination/Dedication/Work Ethic	9%

Prior experiences that respondents attributed to benefiting them in their work with adolescents included parenting their biological children (34%) and employment that involves children, such as teaching, day care, and coaching (29%); and social work (21%). Other experiences that helped respondents foster parent were:

Positive Upbringing/Morals	12%
Religious Work with Kids (Sunday school teacher, youth group leader)	9%
Foster Parent Experience	9%
Life Experience	9%
Negative Upbringing/Abuse	9%
Foster Children Succeeding/Keeping in Touch	7%
Remembering My Own Adolescence	7%

Respondents were asked if they considered themselves to be a permanent caretaker for this child, or a temporary placement. The majority (64%) answered permanent caretaker. Respondents were asked to explain their answer. The most common reasons provided for those who considered themselves permanent caretakers were:

- Youth will always be family
- Permanent until emancipation
- Long-term foster care is appropriate for this youth
- Family can't take/doesn't want youth
- We plan to adopt youth

The most common reasons respondents considered themselves temporary placements were:

- The goal is to return home
- Youth is in process of emancipation
- Youth is being referred elsewhere
- Youth looking forward to living on own at 18

ADOPTION

Just twenty percent of respondents had considered adopting the youth. The 80% of respondents who had not considered adopting the youth provided the following reasons:

Reason	Percent
Adoption is Not an Option for Youth	39.6%
I Am Not Interested in Adoption	22.6%
Other Reason	6.91%
Child Is Not Interested in Adoption	9.4%
Financial Reasons Make Adoption a Poor Choice for Me	9.4%

The “Other” reasons provided included:

- Youth’s age makes adoption a moot point
- Youth’s needs require state support
- Youth didn’t want to abandon siblings
- Respondent didn’t want to close his/her doors to other foster children
- Youth wanted to keep his own parents.

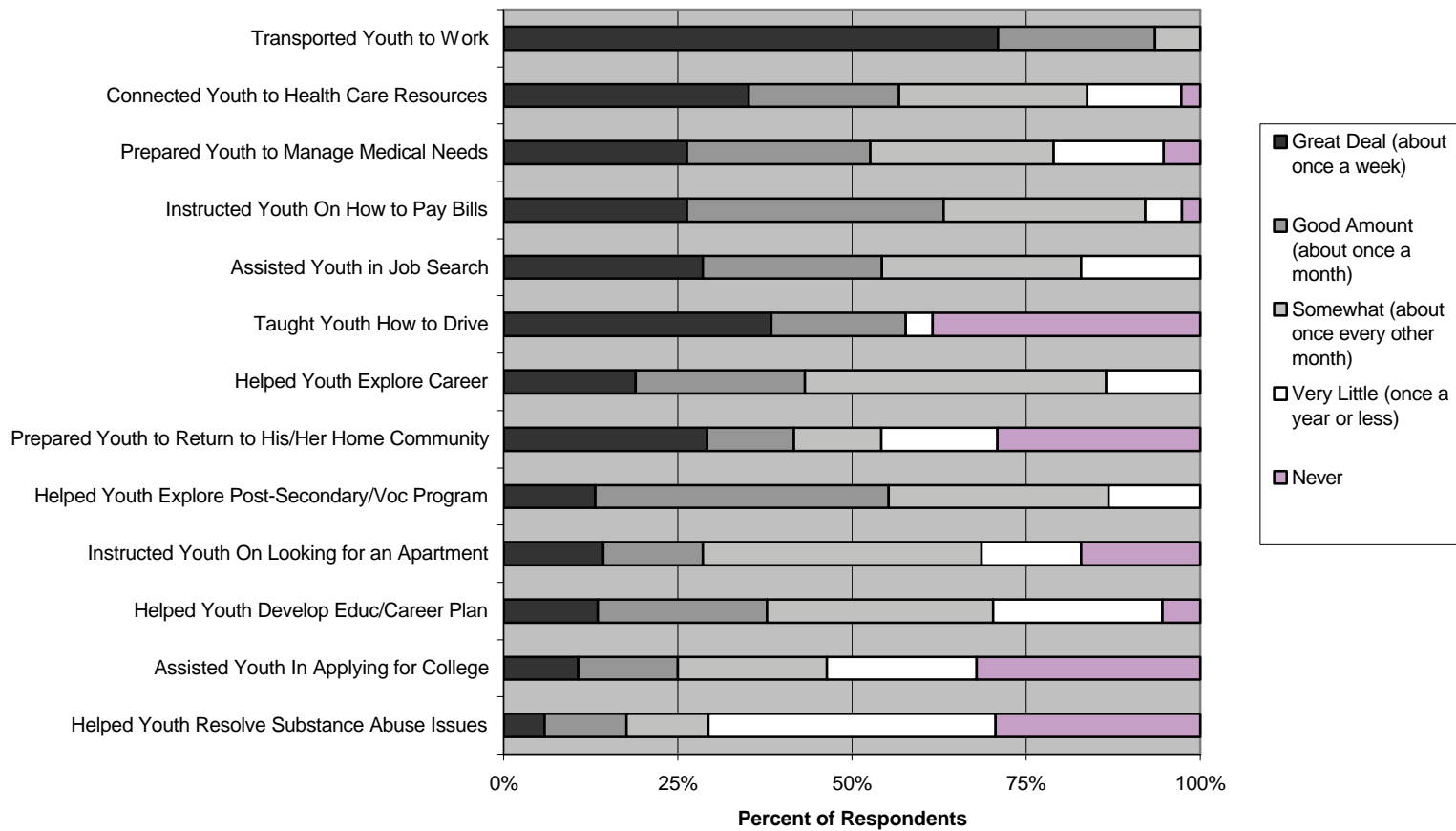
PRACTICES WITH YOUTH

The charts on the following pages depict how often foster parents engaged in specific practices with youth, respondents chose from these options:

- A great deal (about once a week)
- A good amount (about once a month)
- Somewhat (about once every other month)
- Very Little (once a year or less)
- Never

Three of the options imply relatively frequent activity (A great deal, A good amount, Somewhat). For each practice, the response percentages of these three options have been combined and reported together.

Practices with Youth Age 16+



Practices with Youth

