



National Resource Center for Youth Development

Life Skills Training Tips from Child Welfare Practitioners

Life skills education is a primary service to prepare adolescents in foster care for adulthood. Even prior to the first Federal Independent Living Initiative (created by P.L. 99-272 in 1986), jurisdictions were developing independent living policies, which included life skills assessment and instruction. In Richmond, VA, the Gaining Occupation and Life Skills (GOALS) Project, funded by Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) in 1979, provided community based life skills education for youth in foster care. This project offered a psycho-educational experience that included personal planning, cognitive development, experiential learning, and peer support. In 1983, West Virginia developed a comprehensive independent living policy, including life skills development, to address the needs of the growing numbers of teenagers in their child welfare system.

Over the last 30 years, life skills education has changed as workers have gained a greater understanding of positive youth development; technology has introduced new ways of working and new skills to be learned; new federal and state reporting requirements have been put into place; and state resources have increased and decreased. In many states, young people now have until age 21 to practice and learn important life skills.

What does life skills education look like today? In 2012, the National Resource Center for Youth Development (NRCYD) asked states, counties, private providers, and foster parents how they taught important life skills to youth. Twenty-one jurisdictions shared their approach to the delivery of life skills services. This is what was learned:

- All jurisdictions were using some type of life skills assessment. Often a specific assessment is required by policy.
- Assessments were used to either make decisions about life skills instruction or to develop case goals.
- In most jurisdictions, individual learning goals were being identified and documented.
- Foster parents were listed most often as a provider of life skills instruction. Although in follow-up interviews, jurisdictions admitted to difficulty in gaining and maintaining foster parent involvement.
- Several jurisdictions indicated that life skills were taught in a variety of ways including: one-on-one instruction, group instruction, field trips, leadership activities, life skills worksheets, and teachable moments at home.
- Only half of the jurisdictions are attempting to evaluate their efforts. Several states indicated the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) would provide the evaluative data needed.

What are some tips from the field? Follow-up conversations with state policy makers and practitioners revealed many good ideas.

- 1. If you want foster parents to be involved, you have to expect them to be involved.** While most jurisdictions described problems with high levels of foster parent involvement, three states said they have up to 75% of foster parents completing the assessment. When asked what attributed to this success, the response was, "It's expected."
- 2. Foster parents can partner with life skill contractors to teach the "at-home" skills.** In one state, foster parents are expected to complete the life skills assessment and based on the assessment, to teach the home-based skills like cooking and cleaning. A contractor teaches the other skills. Foster parent training was provided to assist them in their role as life skills educators.



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3. **Life skills education is better when it is experiential and personal.** On a state survey, youth said they wanted life skills instruction to have less classroom time and no more worksheets. Two programs in another state use highly experiential instruction, very little traditional classroom time, and report high completion rates.
4. **A standardized curriculum is better when it is used only as a guide.** Many states have invested in the development of standardized life skills curricula to ensure that all youth are receiving the same service. Often these curricula contain quizzes and worksheets. One state has considered eliminating their curriculum because workers often view it a “required document to complete.” The state would prefer that the workers use the curriculum to spark their own creativity for teaching needed skills.
5. **Any youth activity or event can provide opportunities to learn life skills.** Life skills instruction can be integrated into youth leadership activities. One jurisdiction talked about allocating time at each youth advisory board meeting for life skills instruction.
6. **When Positive Youth Development (PYD) strategies are used, youth are more likely to stay involved.** The two programs that reported high completion rates also described the use of PYD strategies. Youth are involved in selecting topics for discussion and in determining the rating scale to be used at the end of the learning session. Youth also have an opportunity to become peer mentors, peer educators, members of the advisory board, and sit in on staff interviews.

Where is more information available?

Visit the National Resource Center for Youth Development’s Learning Center (www.nrcyd.ou.edu/learning-center) to find free publications, webinars, and digital stories. Also, visit Youth Port (www.nrcyd.ou.edu/youth-port), a web page that is updated frequently, designed for youth.

Contact Us:

National Resource Center for Youth Development

Email: nrcyd@ou.edu

Phone: (918) 660-3700

Website: www.nrcyd.ou.edu



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4502 E. 41st Street, Building 4 West, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74135-2512

(918) 660-3700 | FAX (918) 660-3737 | www.nrcyd.ou.edu