

Voices in Foster Care: A Peer-Driven Perspective on Successful Development of Life-Skills Amongst Transition-Age Youth

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Hillsborough County Children's Services (Children's Services)

Every child deserves to have a loving, responsible family in which to live, learn, and grow. However, life circumstances do not always allow children this opportunity. When the latter is the case, many children end up in the care of the state – foster care, to be specific.

Provides 24/7 residential care including counseling, academic support, health/wellness services, and enriching activities

While the foster care system provides a safe alternative for child caregiving, members of the community recognize that there are changes which can be made to improve the experiences of youth whom the system is designed to serve.

Introduction

All youth experience a fundamental shift from childhood into adulthood. This transition period is often a complex, risky, and challenging timeframe for youth who grow up in traditional family settings.¹ **The journey into adulthood forcibly occurs much faster for youth leaving foster care inequitable parental support compared to general population.**² Thus, programs designed to assist transition-age youth with successful passage into adulthood are invaluable and hold great potential to help close the disparity gap.³

Background

Key concepts and terms:

- Transition-age youth⁵
- Life skills - Determined by Daniel Memorial Assessment⁶
 - relationship-building, managing finances, obtaining employment
- Age-specific needs amongst foster youth⁷
 - Younger children tend to have a need for safety and protection, adolescent youth have a greater need for self-government and opportunity to practice adult tasks and decision-making
- Self-Determination Theory^{8,9}
 - Based on 3 psychological needs:
 - Autonomy: “the ability to self-regulate one’s experiences and actions”
 - Competence: “the belief that one can influence one’s environment”
 - Relatedness: “the need for acceptance from and attachment to other people”
- Youth voice
 - Important for successful implementation of programs!

Background: National Perspective

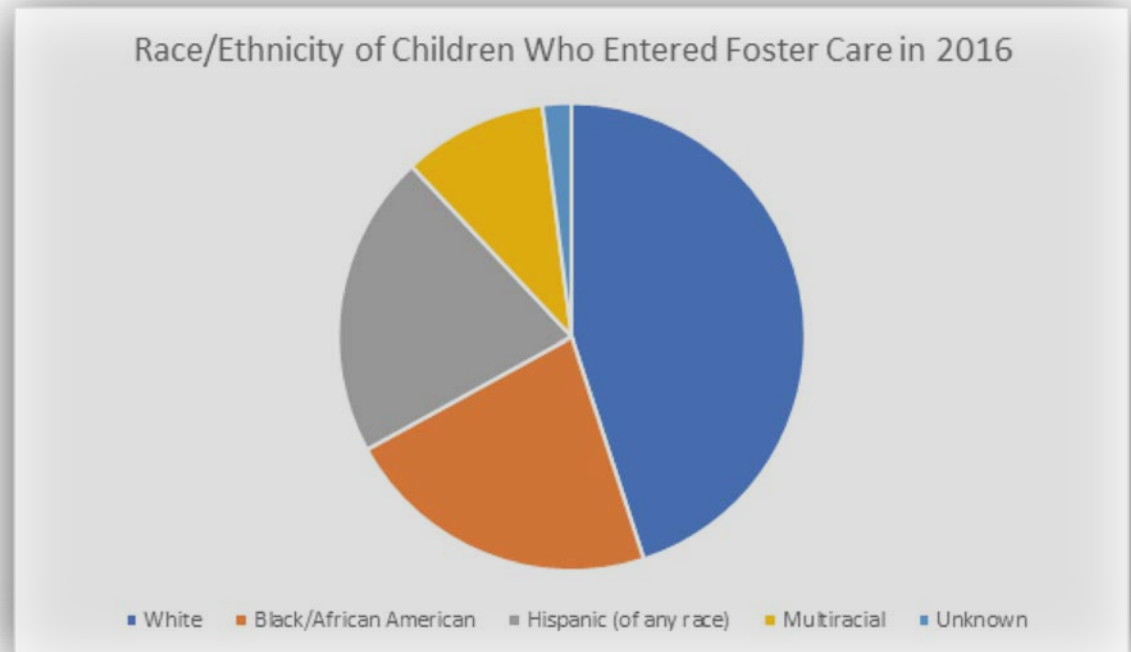
687,000 youth spend time in foster care in 2016, with approximately 20,000 aging out.¹⁰

In this same year, approximately 13% of the nation's youth spent time in foster care.¹¹

Racial/Ethnic Breakdown¹²:

- 44% White
- 23% Black
- 21% Hispanic
- 10% Multiracial
- 2% Unknown

Gender: 52% Male 48% Female¹²



Background: Risk and Protective Factors

Homelessness through transition

- 30% of homeless youth found in a count had a history of foster care (Osceola, Orange, & Seminole)^{13, 14}

Behavioral Health

- Complex trauma
- Risk for complex trauma (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, domestic violence)¹⁵
- 4 times more likely to report suicide
- 3 times as likely to report 8 or more years of anxiety
- Higher use rates (regular or experimental use w/o addiction or inhibition of daily activities)¹⁶



Education

- Can serve as a risk or protective factor
- Approximately 50% graduate highschool and are less likely graduate from a four-year institution¹⁸
- Substance use disorder rates may be similar (clinical impairment)¹⁶

Background: Risk and Protective Factors

3 Traits of Self-Determination Theory serve as protective factors.

- Mentorship can serve as form of enhancing relatedness¹⁷
- Youth report benefit from normality and independence
- Staff report benefit for youth by readiness for emancipation and self-regulation¹⁹

Youth need chances to exercise **autonomy**.⁷

- A form of self-regulation desired by both youth in foster care and their caregivers. However, the nature of foster care often limits opportunities for independent decision-making.

Youth desire a sense of **competence**.^{20,21}

- Children living in foster care can feel as though they lack control over many aspects of their lives

Youth value **relatedness**.^{22,23}

Developing Aims of Research

Collaborative brainstorm effort to build rapport, discuss nature of research relationship, and determine how we could merge ideas to best benefit the youth in care

Common themes of our discussion

- Lack of buy-in amongst youth who opt into the life skills program
- Low perceived risk for negative life outcomes
- Value the information more after they have aged out and are in transition

Children's Services expressed a desire for more effective programming

Recognized that adult/employee input was great, but hearing the youth perspective would be the most beneficial

Purpose: To explore facilitators and barriers of youth participation and interest in the Life Skills Program through the lenses of self-determination theory and program evaluation.

Methods



Population Description:

Children's Services - Lake Magdalene location

18 youth currently in care

- 61% boys, 39% girls
- 8 of these youth participated in the study



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Study Sample:

Residential youth and aged-out youth; All participated in life skills at Children's Services

- convenience sampling

Demographics

- 10 total participants
- Ages 15-19
- 60% African American; 30% White; 10% Other
- 70% boys; 33% girls

GAIN(Global Appraisal of Individual Needs)

- shortened version
- 50% reported no use of alcohol or illicit drugs
- 40% reported alcohol or drugs causing less involvement in enjoyed activities
- 20% reported withdrawal symptoms

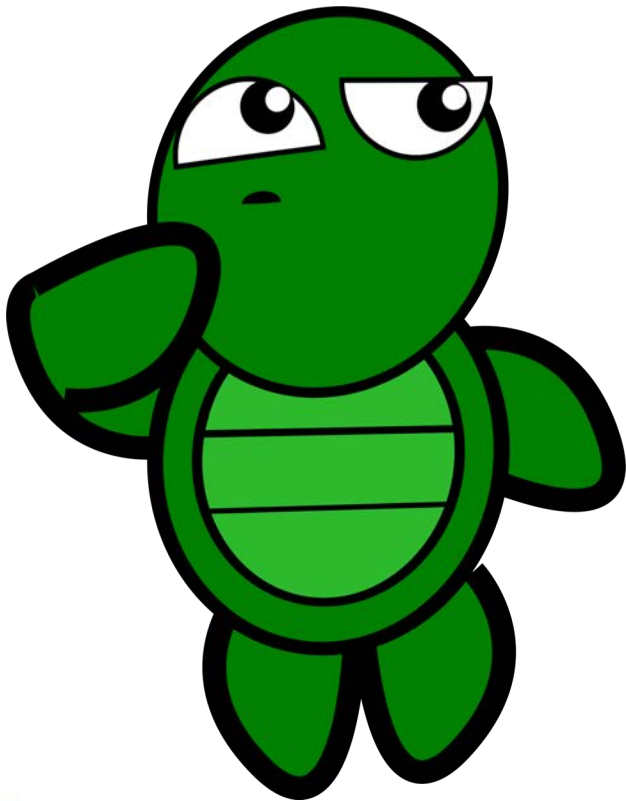
Data Collection:

- Individual in-depth interviews with a notetaker
- 9 questions
 - Self-Determination
 - Program evaluation
- Analyzed transcripts for themes
- Aim for 70% inter-rater reliability

Methods

1. In what way has the Independent Living classes supported your ability to make decisions now in adulthood?
2. I am going to show you two statements. You will notice a scale ranging from 1 to 5, 1 being “Most of the things I do I feel “I have to” and 5 meaning “I have a choice and freedom in the things I do here at Children’s Services. Will you please rate how you relate to this statement?
3. Please tell me a bit about how confident you are in your ability to live independently in adulthood after you transition out of Children’s Services.
4. How easy is it for you to form close relationships with the people around you?
5. Please discuss any doubts or concerns you may have about transitioning into adulthood?
6. How would you describe a close relationship?
7. Tell me a bit about your confidence level in planning and management important tasks?
8. Talk about your skills in making important choices. In what ways is the Independent Living program helping you develop these skills?
9. In what ways do you value the Independent Living classes as an important tool for you?

Results



Results

Theme	Sub Theme	Definition
Program	Positive	A positive view of independent living skills program
	Negative	A negative view of independent living skills program
	Neutral	A neutral view of the independent living skills program.
Autonomy	Satisfaction	Satisfaction with current Autonomy
	Frustration	Frustration with current Autonomy
	Combination	A combination of messages of frustration and satisfaction with autonomy
	Self-Regulation	Sign that youth is learning/has learned to self-regulate
Competence	Satisfaction	Satisfaction with current competence
	Frustration	Frustration with current competence
	Combination	A combination of messages of frustration and satisfaction with competency
Relatedness	Satisfaction	Satisfaction with current relatedness
	Frustration	Frustration with current relatedness
	Trust	Trust is a key component of a close relationship
	Loyalty	Loyalty/dependability is a key component of a close relationship
Transition	Doubt	Doubts about transition
	Confidence	Confidence in ability for transition/future
Youth Suggestion	Financial	Suggestion for more classes on financial literacy or mentoring
	Unrelated	Suggestion that the particular activity is unrelated to life skills attainment/transition or repetitive
	Input	Suggestions from youth about what Children's Services can do to improve life skills program and residential experience
Future	Education	Goal to pursue higher education or vocational school
	Employment	Goal to pursue employment or further employment
	Finance	Set a future financial goal for oneself
Residential Experience	Positive	Positive view of residential experience outside of life skills program
	Negative	Negative view of residential experience outside of life skills program
	Contrived	Recognition that life outside of foster care is different

- **Autonomy**

"Like on weekends and studying or like before I go to school, I like to wake-up and I like to at least get 2 miles running in and I just wake up by myself instead of staff coming to wake me up"

- **Competence**

"I felt like my confidence went up when they let me emcee an event one night for county commissioners and stuff like that. I was very happy that I could do that. I went up there and talked to everybody and I wasn't nervous. I just felt really confident doing it. If I can sit there and talk to a room full of people – as a 17 year old girl talking to a bunch of grownups – I feel like I can go out into the world and be just like them; be an adult. I feel like I carry myself just like an adult to, when I volunteer to do things like that here or when I'm nominated to do stuff like that here. It gives me a lot of confidence for when I become an adult. ."

- **Relatedness**

"I did build close relationships before with people in the past and as soon as I get close to them, its like they sit there and get close to me for a while and then they turn around and they're back out of my life, and disappear"

When asked about freedoms on a likert scale (1-5)

- Youth reported an average of 3.1.
- Youth reported some freedom in decision making but also restrictions.

Contrived experience

- Youth believed foster care experience to be different from “real life”.
- “Because I umm we’re not in real life right now, but will have to do stuff alone without parents.”

Youth Suggestions:

- Interactive Activities
- More activities dealing with finances and employment
- Cutting out or minimizing unrelated/repetitive components

“I wouldn’t mind if they did something like financial maybe something like that but most of the time we do something it be like life skills, like hygiene and stuff like that right I know that stuff already. Teach me stuff like banks how to open about accounts and stuff like that.”
- Could be replaced with more in-depth materials
- Connecting skills in a logical order

Next Steps and Implications



Importance of youth voice

- Better engagement

Adaptability of needs ²⁴

Importance of adults voice after transition

- Outcomes

Strong mentors ²⁵

- Higher educational attainment
- lower risk of homelessness

Keeping contact and tracking progress

- Issues of keeping contact ²⁶



Implications for Children's Services

- Better instillment of life skills
- Sets basis for informed adaptation
- Community informed

Healthy transition into adulthood

Larger Implications

- Plethora of programs implemented
- Supports autonomy
- Youth specific life skills
- Voice guided change



“When we need to get information on what we’re gonna need later on in life. Like when we turn 18, we need to know what we’re gonna need in our life. And that way, we could get it to *staff* and everybody and say “this is what we need instead of *this*” and “this is what we don’t need and this is what we do need”.

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Questions



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The background of the image is a complex geometric pattern of overlapping triangles and polygons in various shades of green, yellow, and grey. The colors transition from light yellow-green at the top to darker teal and green towards the bottom and right. A white rectangular box is centered in the middle of the image, containing the text 'USF' in a large, teal, serif font.

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