

# Youth Aging Out of Foster Care: University Support

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## Abstract

*Youth aging out of foster care face multiple losses, including the loss of support from the child welfare system and the loss of emotional support that was being provided in their foster homes. Having previously lost support from their natural family, they are alone. Recognizing the growing need for transitional services, a rural university surveyed youth aging out of foster care to determine which resiliency characteristics they possessed and the extent to which they felt prepared for independent living. This article presents information on how a university can provide ongoing support to college-bound students who have left foster care. It also recommends that foster parents receive training that will help them better prepare foster children for independent living.*

## Introduction

Youth living in foster care have already lost the support of their family of origin. When they turn age 18, they are faced with yet another loss: that of support from the state child welfare system and their foster homes. Many of these youth are unprepared for the responsibilities of adulthood when it is thrust upon them.

This article discusses the problems faced by youth who age out of foster care and presents findings from research with high-school-age foster care youth who attended college preparation conferences at Texas A&M University–Commerce during the years 2005, 2006, and 2007. The article recommends that policymakers consider increased training for all foster care youth that addresses the problems of living on one's own. Additionally, former foster children who pursue a college education should receive increased university and community support, while foster parents

should receive early intervention and training that helps them prepare their foster children for independent living.

*Foster care* is the placement of youth in the care of court-appointed guardians who are subsidized by the state. Foster care is intended to protect and support abused and neglected children. Those who enter foster care usually have experienced abuse, poor physical and mental health, instability, low academic achievement, and economic adversity. A court appoints guardian foster parents for a child when the state child welfare agency removes the child from his or her home and assumes responsibility for the child's care, or when the court determines that the child cannot be reunited with his or her family or adopted. Guardianship conveys parental rights and responsibilities to the child's caretaker, including custody; responsibility for the protection, education, care, and control of the child; and decision-making as the child's caretaker.

## Review of Literature

More than half a million children are in foster care in the United States. Approximately 20,000 youth "age out" of the system each year as they turn 18 years old (Wertheimer, 2002). The relatively young age of many children when they enter foster care, combined with the high probability that a significant proportion will not return home or be adopted, suggests that a significant number of youth leaving foster care for independent living during the early years of the 21st century will have spent nearly all of their childhood in out-of-home care (Courtney & Barth, 1996).

Because many of the youth who are aging out of foster care have spent several years in the foster care system, they often

are isolated or estranged from their natural families. These young people rarely have the ongoing parental support available to their counterparts in biological families (Collins, 2001). The predicament faced by foster children as they leave foster care is that they have to live independently without support *and* without being prepared to do so. Accordingly, as they leave foster care and the child welfare system, they are placed in a vulnerable position without any support base. Accordingly, youth transitioning out of foster care are at high risk for financial, emotional, and other difficulties.

Youth are now taking longer to transition to adulthood than at any other time in U.S. history (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersen, 2004). Youth usually receive ongoing emotional and financial support from their families as they transition into adulthood. However, youth aging out of the foster care system find themselves trying to transition without the benefit of these supports. "Given the importance of the family home in these transition experiences, the family safety net for young people aging out of care may be nonexistent, problematic, or at best, capable of limited and sporadic support" (Collins, 2001, p. 271). These youth need a continuum of formal, comprehensive, and concrete support services, including educational, medical, psychosocial, and help with practical living skills (Dunne, 2004). However, as Collins notes, "the policy and programming that address transition experiences have been largely atheoretical" (Collins, 2001, p. 271).

#### Research on outcomes for adolescents aging out of care

In a study of 277 young adults who aged out of foster care in New York City, Festinger (1983) found that one-third had not completed high school and 21% were receiving public assistance. Barth (1990) reported similar findings in a study of former foster children in San Francisco: of the 55 young adults interviewed, 53% reported serious financial problems, 38% had not graduated from high

school, more than 56% had used street drugs since leaving care, 39% reported having problems with housing, and almost one-third had been involved in criminal activity. A national study conducted in 1990 on a sample of 1,644 youths discharged from care found that only 39% had any job experience, 38% had been clinically diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, 17% of the females had been pregnant, 17% reported problems with drug abuse, 12% had problems with alcohol, and 9% had health problems that required ongoing medical attention (Cook, 1994).

A study comparing individuals aged 18 to 24 in the general population with those discharged from foster care showed that those who had been in foster care experienced significantly more problems than those in the general population (Cook, 1994). Those who had been in foster care were more likely to receive welfare (30% compared with 24% in the general population); less likely to have completed high school (54% compared with 78% in the general population); and, for single young women, had a greater likelihood of pregnancy (60% as compared with 24% in the general population). Housing was a problem for former foster care youth, with about one-third of them having reported living in five or more residences since discharge. An estimated one-fourth had experienced homelessness at least once. However, the reported consumption of drugs or alcohol did not differ significantly from that of the general population (Cook, 1994).

In response to the risks faced by former foster children, and because of their vulnerability, the federal government and a number of states have developed programs to help prepare youth in foster care for independent living (Dunne, 2004; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). In 1986, the Independent Living Initiatives bill (Public Law No. 99-272) amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to provide states with federal funds to help adolescents in foster care develop independent living skills. Each state could determine the scope of its independent living program, but the funds

were to be used for training programs, counseling, education, and employment assistance.

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Public Law No. 106-169) provided states with more funding and greater flexibility in helping young people transition into independence (Collins, 2001). The FCIA also expanded the population of youth eligible to receive independent living services by eliminating the prior lower age limit of 16. The majority of these programs focus on providing services directly to youth who are aging out of the foster care system (Dunne, 2004); however, there also is a need to help foster parents develop the skills necessary to prepare foster children to leave foster care.

In the state of Texas, any young person aging out of care is exempt from paying tuition at any state-supported college, university, or other vocational program. These students also are provided with a transitional living allowance, housing assistance, a household supplies allowance, and transitional Medicaid. The Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program was founded in Texas to ensure that older youth in substitute care are prepared for their departure from the care and support of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

Scannapieco, Schagrin, and Scannapieco (1995) found that educational attainment (high school graduation), employment, and self-sufficiency were higher for foster care youth who received independent living services than for those who did not. Collins (2001) also found that there were significant positive differences for foster care youth who received additional support, training, and assistance.

Despite of these laudable attempts to provide increased support to youth aging out of foster care, however, the U.S. Government Accountability Office has identified several limitations of independent

living programs (Collins, 2001). Most of the training for independent living involves classroom-based activities rather than hands-on experience. In addition, limits still exist on the availability and extent of housing and aftercare assistance to those leaving foster homes.

### *Resiliency theory*

In the face of overwhelming adversity, many foster youth nevertheless thrive. The ability of some foster youth to face difficulties and remain intact is attributed to their resilience. Resilient children usually have four attributes: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future (Benard, 1993). According to Benard, "resiliency, the ability to bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks, has clearly established the self-righting nature of human development. Furthermore, . . . protective factors in the child, family, school, and community can buffer life's stresses" (1993, p. 44).

Protective factors within the individual, family, school, and community contribute to an individual's resilience (Krovetz, 1999; Davies, 2004). Individual protective factors include good health, personality factors such as being easygoing and positive, above-average intelligence, history of adequate development, hobbies and interests, and good peer relationships (Davies, 2004).

Protective factors within the family include secure attachment and caring and supportive relationships, secure adult attachment patterns of parents, parental support in times of stress, household rules and structure that involve parental monitoring of children, support and involvement from extended family, stable relationship between parents, parents who model competence and good coping skills, family expectations of prosocial behavior, and high parental expectations, as well as high expectations and encouragement of children's participation (i.e., responsibility) (Davies, 2004, pp. 107-108).

Because foster children often have been deprived of the protective factors of the biological family, other caring adults are essential to the development of these protections. Therefore, to mitigate the effects of other risks and stressors, a child needs an “enduring, loving involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity with that child” (Bronfenbrenner, 1983, cited in Benard, 1991, p. 9).

Protective factors within the school are much the same as family protective factors: caring and support, high expectations, and encouragement of children’s participation. The educational system is of paramount importance to children in care (Gilligan, 1998; Jackson, 1994; Jackson & Martin, 1998; Dent & Cameron, 2003). However, the educational institution is often taken for granted, or its effect on children who lack family stability is minimized. When a foster child is moved to and from various foster homes, he or she also changes schools. Foster children who are able to stay in the same school while changing temporary home environments certainly benefit from the constancy of teachers, environment, and friends.

The final domain of protective factors lies within the community. There is community competence where protective factors are present (Benard, 1991); that is, community competence is characterized by the triad of caring and support, high expectations, and participation. Caring and support from a community is manifested through the availability of resources such as housing, health care, education, job training, employment, and recreation. High expectations include valuing youth as resources rather than seeing them as problems. This, in turn, relates to involvement of youth in community participation. Davies identifies “middle class or above socioeconomic status, access to health care, consistent parental employment, and family religious and faith participation” as additional social and environmental protective factors (Davies, 2004, p. 108).

## Conclusions and New Perspectives Drawn from the Literature Review

### *University support*

Foster children in Texas are automatically enrolled in the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program six months before their 16th birthday. The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services conducts a comprehensive assessment on all of these children based on an instrument developed by the Casey Foundation. Youth are required to complete PAL training in order to help prepare them for employment, financial and household management, employment, and relationships.

The Social Work Department at Texas A&M University–Commerce has had a Title IV-E contract with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services since 1998. In addition to providing student stipends, the contract requires that the Social Work Department provide training to child welfare workers and foster parents. Faculty members from the Social Work Department train foster parents four times each year; past topics having included “Alternatives to Medication,” “Positive Parenting,” “Understanding ADHD,” “The Warning Signs of Suicidal Youth,” and “Issues of Attachment.”

As part of the PAL program, Texas A&M University–Commerce hosts an annual statewide PAL conference. The weekend-long college preparation conference is an opportunity for young people to experience a college campus and gain an understanding of what is required to pursue a college education.

### *Purpose of the study*

Because the Social Work Department at Texas A&M University–Commerce has been involved with child welfare through its Title IV-E program, and because several of the university’s social work majors were former foster care youth, the researchers became interested in examining the relationship between resilience theory and

foster care youth who enrolled in college. This study sought to determine which resiliency characteristics were possessed by youth attending the PAL college conference and the extent to which they felt prepared for independent living. The researchers' goal was to use the findings to recommend support mechanisms for college-bound youth who are aging out of foster care.

## Methodology

After obtaining approval from the university's Internal Review Board and from the Texas Department of Family & Protective Services, the researchers surveyed PAL conference participants in Spring 2005, 2006, and 2007. As foster care youth and their adult sponsors from across the state arrived and completed conference check-in and registration, social work students welcomed and interacted with the young people and assisted with distributing and collecting surveys from the youth. The high school juniors and seniors were asked to assess their self-esteem, resiliency characteristics, and feelings about their own preparation for independent living.

### *Survey instrument*

The questionnaire distributed to PAL conference participants included inquiries on demographic information and questions on number of years in care, number of different foster homes lived in, length of time in current foster home, involvement in extracurricular activities, and employment. Participants were asked to respond on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = always true, 4 = never true) to 25 questions based on resiliency traits, such as:

- I like myself.
- I have friends I enjoy being with.
- I feel lovable just as I am.
- I am self-disciplined.
- I am flexible.
- I am motivated from within.
- I have a plan for the future.
- I have the skills I need to live independently

The 25 questions measured 4 constructs that are usually present in resilient children: social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose and future.

### *Sample*

A total of 146 participants who attended the PAL conferences completed surveys in 2005, 2006, and 2007. The youth ranged in age from 16 to 19 years old ( $M = 17$  years). Thirty-eight percent were males, and 62% were females. The youth came from all of the 11 Child Protective Services regions in Texas. The average time in foster care for participants was 6 years, with a range from less than 1 year to a maximum of 19 years. The range in number of foster home placements was from 1 to 25, with an average of 3.47 placements. The average length of time students had been in their current foster home (and the one they would "age out of") was 2.7 years.

Most of the PAL students (81.6%) indicated that they had not received special services at school. However, 84% also indicated that they had received some type of counseling. (It appears that the students did not believe that counseling constituted "special" services.) Almost 40% were employed, and 65.8% were involved in extracurricular activities.

## Results

When all 25 questions dealing with resiliency were totaled, the overall average was 1.52 on a 4-point scale (with 1 reflecting a strong sense of resiliency and 4 reflecting poor resiliency). More than 90% of the respondents rated their responses as one (1 = always) or two (2 = almost always) on most statements. Table 1 illustrates the responses when questions were summed according to their related construct.

Although the scores for all four constructs reflect relatively high resilience, participants indicated they were weakest in "problem solving" ( $M = 1.71$ ). Participants scored highest on "purpose and future"

**Table 1** Scores Measuring Resilience by Construct

1 = High Resilience

4 = Low Resilience

	Total Score	Social Competence	Problem Solving	Autonomy	Purpose & Future
<b>N</b>	126	134	141	144	140
<b>Mean</b>	1.52	1.49	1.71	1.51	1.43
<b>SD</b>	.51	.54	.54	.61	.56

(M = 1.43), and the scores were fairly close for “social competence” (M = 1.49) and “autonomy” (M = 1.51).

There was no statistically significant correlation in the total score for resilience and the total years in foster care. Also, no statistical significance appeared when correlations were analyzed for resilience scores and the number of different foster homes and the length of time in current foster home. The participants did indicate that 77.6% of them felt their foster parents had been very helpful in preparing them for independent living, and another 21.5% rated them as somewhat helpful. Less than 1% indicated that their foster parents had not been helpful in this regard.

## Discussion and Recommendations

This exploratory study sought to examine the self-identified resiliency characteristics of college-bound foster care youth. The data revealed that the youth attending the PAL college preparation conference had many of the characteristics related to resiliency. It is important to note, however, that the youth attending this conference might not be representative of all foster care youth, since the youth at the conference were planning on attending college. Further study is needed to determine whether self-assessed resiliency is inherent, because of the challenges faced by foster care youth, or is reflective of this purposive sample of youth who have college ambitions.

## Recommendations for assisting foster youth who enter college

There are opportunities to provide effective foster parent training as a form of early intervention with foster families. There also is a need for university support that includes mentors and a variety of support activities. There is a further need for ongoing community support for these young people. Consistent with findings regarding resiliency, involvement with the community constitutes an irreplaceable protective factor for these vulnerable youth.

### *Foster parent training*

A key element in ensuring success for foster children as they leave foster care is the previous involvement of the foster parents. Too often caregivers are overlooked as potential resources for helping youth be successfully emancipated from foster care.

To assist foster parents prepare their foster children for independent living, the Texas A&M University–Commerce social work faculty is engaged in ongoing development of a training model in which foster parents are provided with information on resilience and behavior management. The training began as a pilot project in the spring of 2004. Foster parents with a wide range of experience, age of children, and number of biological/foster children in the household attended day-long training on attributes of resilience and protective factors in the family, school, and community.

Foster parents also were taught the key elements of behavior management, including how to complete a Functional Analysis Assessment. The foster parents were taught how to select and define a target behavior, monitor the target behavior, evaluate progress, and fade the self-monitoring of the behavior (Zirpoli & Melloy, 1997). Parents received instruction on how to develop a behavioral contract, identify consequences, and use this information as part of an overall behavioral management plan.

The basic training model included information on resilience and behavior management, but future training should also include information about what students need to succeed in high school and during the transition into independent living. Good predictors of success after leaving foster care are:

- Completion of high school while in foster care
- Access to postsecondary educational opportunities, such as college or vocational training
- Life skills/independent living training
- Not being homeless within one year of leaving care
- Participation in clubs or organizations while in care
- Minimal academic problems
- Minimal use of alcohol or drugs (Casey National Alumni Study, 2004).

These elements are being incorporated into future foster parent training.

#### *Focus on completing high school*

A primary focus of the revised curriculum involves a team approach between the school, the child, and foster parents to assure school success for foster children. Because education is the leading predictor of adult success (Casey National Alumni Survey, 2004; Jackson & Martin, 1998; Gilligan, 1998), it is critical to provide

a positive academic atmosphere that will keep foster children in school.

One of the most serious risks faced by foster children is failing to achieve their educational potential. This failure also has the most serious long-term effects. A survey conducted by the Casey Foundation on foster children found that 38% received special education services, more than 36% repeated a grade in school, 67% attended three or more elementary schools, and about one-half of those attended five or more elementary schools (Garcia, 2004). Schools that establish high expectations for all students and give them the support necessary to live up to those expectations have much higher rates of academic success (Benard, 1993). Teacher support also has been linked to the attainment of educational goals (Wilson & Wilson, 1992).

#### *Life skills/independent living training*

One of the best ways foster parents can help a child is to assist him or her develop skills in communication and problem solving, self-reliance, the personal integrity to accept the consequences of one's own behavior, and a sense of self-worth. All of these help the child become more resilient to the myriad stressors in the environment.

These skills will also serve the students when they join the workforce. To be gainfully employed, a person needs not only job skills, but also the maturity to show up for work every day and assume responsibility. Foster parents can teach responsibility by making students accountable for themselves. Foster children should have specific jobs at home and standards for school performance.

#### *Education about drugs and alcohol*

Many school districts provide guidance classes on drug and alcohol abuse. These programs provide excellent information and should be geared toward young children to serve as preventive education.

*Encourage participation in clubs or organizations both in school and in the community*

Foster parents can work cooperatively with school counselors and social workers in setting up peer mentoring or service-related activities for adolescent foster children. Also, civic participation can help build well-rounded youth and adults (MacArthur Research Network, 2005). Many volunteer clubs and organizations welcome youth involvement. The foster parents and school personnel can help youth organize and implement specific service projects to meet community needs.

*Recognition of cognitive and emotional problems*

Foster parents need training to help them recognize cognitive and emotional difficulties in their foster children. About 20% of adolescents suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder in any given year, and a significant majority of these disorders will continue to affect youth as they age into adulthood (MacArthur Research Network, 2005). Problems range from relational and coping difficulties and school failure to emotional and behavioral disturbances causing moderate to severe impairment. Conduct disorder, attentional disorders, aggressive behavior, and depression are the disorders most commonly reported (Pilowsky, 1995). About one-half of the youth in juvenile justice suffer from mental health issues, yet only 15% to 20% receive help for their problems. Foster parents must be trained to recognize and seek early help for cognitive and emotional problems.

Members of some cultures and socioeconomic groups find it difficult to seek outside help in dealing with mental health issues. Many foster children lived in homes with low socioeconomic status prior to their removal. A background of poverty often includes family disruptions, disconnected parents, stress, and social problems. Poverty predisposes children to emotional and cognitive problems. Maltreatment and neglect, as well as entering the foster care

system, present emotional and psychological challenges for children (Leslie, Landsverk, Ezzet-Lofstrom, Tschann, Slymen, & Garland, 2000).

*Access to postsecondary educational opportunities*

Programs can be developed to help youth become ready for work. In school districts where vocational counselors are employed, the school social worker should help link at-risk students to these vocational counselors. Schools need to focus on teaching students skills that will assist them in becoming employed.

Some successful national programs offer counseling in violence prevention and links to business leaders (MacArthur Research Network, 2005). Schools and community agencies need to work together to provide networks for job opportunities and to give students the training and interpersonal skills to handle jobs.

Many youth need assistance with making plans for after high school. Where families have expectations and goals that have been established from a young age, adolescents usually have some idea of what to aim toward. However, at-risk children and those from backgrounds with very low expectations need help in clarifying the possibilities for their future.

Strong high school graduation rates are not always predictors for future success and successful transition into college. Just over 40% of former foster children attended some college, compared to more than 50% of the general population (Casey National Alumni Study, 2004). Fewer than 11% received undergraduate degrees, compared to more than 24% of the general population (Garcia, 2004).

The best tools to help adolescents recognize their abilities are vocational interest tests. Once the students have taken the tests, the students and foster parents can help utilize the adolescent's strengths and

abilities. Individual counseling and goal setting are necessary to help adolescents realize what possibilities their abilities may offer them.

### *Providing university support for former foster students*

There are numerous challenges to tracking youth and determining if they enroll in a college or university once they age out of the system. Unless former foster children self-identify, the only way they can be found once they enter a university is to find out who has received the state housing and tuition stipends, which is an invasion of the student's privacy. It is hoped that if the programs put in place within the university are well publicized and highly regarded, they will attract the former foster care students.

Many university resources exist to provide support to former foster children. Freshman seminars should be instituted that address social skills (appropriate for classroom, library, and dormitory life) and life skills such as budgeting and independent living. University counseling center staff can work with department heads to help teach faculty members how to guide and mentor these students appropriately.

It would be helpful to assign student mentors to younger students entering each department. Mentors can answer questions, help students decide which classes to take, and serve as a positive role model to younger students. Current and retired faculty, staff, and administrators who are sensitive to this special population could be recruited to provide mentoring and support.

Although many former foster youth want to be college students without special distinction, "just like everyone else," this population needs additional support. Universities should recognize this somewhat invisible population and develop responsive initiatives to ensure that these students continue to build upon their resiliency and become successful graduates.

### *Community support and linkages*

Certainly, foster parents and university personnel provide support for former foster care youth pursuing higher education; however, community social workers who are involved in foster care and independent living programs can help these youths while they are attending college. Because many children who leave foster care return to their family of origin, even those whose parental rights have been terminated (Avery & Freundlich, 2004), there is a strong need for community support for these families.

Texas A&M University–Commerce Social Work Department had contact with a local church group that "adopted" the former foster students enrolled at the university. The church has provided end-of-semester "care" packages that the Social Work Department distributed to the students. The packages included a gift card to a local discount department store, office supplies, and a variety of edible treats. The students were notified of these gifts and came to the Social Work Department to pick them up. Most of the students expressed great gratitude and surprise.

There is a need to connect former foster children with agencies that provide services for special needs. "Most children with mental illness and behavior problems will not make it on their own" (Ellertson, 2002). The community connections will provide assistance from social workers who engage community organizations to provide support and activities for these students in addition to what is offered at the university.

### *Recommendations to policymakers*

The youth who attended the PAL conference ranked themselves relatively high on resiliency factors. That these youth have made the decision to attend college illustrates their determination and ability to overcome hardships. However, the PAL conference youth also indicated they need help with problem-solving skills.

Youth in foster placements who do not have the ability to continue their education need particular preparation and training for independent living. All foster youth need to be taught problem-solving skills to help them learn how to solve financial, educational, interpersonal, and job-related problems. Programs must be funded to assist with program development and training youth and foster parents in problem-solving and preparation for living on their own. Currently, state support is not available for youth who do not attend college, and this issue should be addressed and programs created to help these youth get launched into skills training. Because the state assumes responsibility for the care of these youth, it is essential that this support extend until the youth can demonstrate that they are prepared to live on their own.

## Conclusion

Leaving home and establishing independence is part of the normative transition to adulthood (White & Lacy, 1997). However, for youth aging out of the foster care system, there is no transition period or “safety net.” Upon the 18th birthday, these youth are declared independent, and any support from the foster parent program ends immediately. To ensure that these youth have every chance for success, efforts should be made to increase their resiliency before they leave the foster care system. Foster parents, schools, universities, and communities all have responsibilities and roles to play in enhancing protective factors.

Foster parent training is essential and should include content on resiliency theory and behavior management. While foster parents may seek help in areas that assist them with their current foster parenting, training must be redirected to address the role foster parents must play in preparing their foster children for future independent living. University support and community linkages also must be in place, to ensure that these youth do not fall through the cracks when they leave foster care. This ongoing support may provide former foster children with the education and support they need to move into adulthood with an education, skills, and ongoing support.

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