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## Foster Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

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# Foster Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

By Jaclyn Jones, BSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Social Work

St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas

St. Paul, Minnesota

In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University & the University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	II
Acknowledgements.....	III
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	4
• Foster Care Demographics.....	4
• Aging Out of Foster Care.....	5
• Challenges Youth Face in Foster Care.....	6
• Need for Support.....	10
• Importance of Mentoring and Relationships.....	11
• Programs Available for Youth.....	15
• Summary and Research Question.....	18
Lenses.....	20
• Theoretical Lenses.....	20
• Professional Lenses.....	21
• Personal Lenses.....	22
Method.....	24
• Sampling Procedures.....	24
• Protection of Human Subjects.....	25
• Instrumentation, Data Collection and Analysis Procedures.....	25
• Strengths and Limitations.....	26
Findings.....	27
• Description of Participants.....	27
• Observational Data.....	28
• Theme 1: Starting Services Early On (Harm Reduction.....	28
• Theme 2: Importance of Services.....	30
• Theme 3: Need for Permanent Connections.....	32
• Theme 4: Importance of the Relationship with Social Worker.....	34
• Summary.....	35
Discussion.....	37
• Findings Supported by the Literature.....	37
• Unexpected Finding.....	37
• Implications for Practice.....	38
• Implications for Future Research.....	39
• Conclusion.....	40
References.....	41
Appendices.....	46
a) Flyer.....	46
b) Consent Form.....	47
c) Interview Questions.....	49
Table List	
• Table 1: Description of Participants.....	28

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe ways foster care caseworkers help foster youth transition to adulthood successfully. Data was collected using qualitative interviews, with four professionals who have experience with foster youth aging out of the foster care system. A number of themes emerged from this data, including: the need to start harm reduction services early, the importance of services in general, the need for permanent connections, and the importance of relationships between foster youth and social workers. Findings suggest a lack of support for foster youth aging out of the system, and that the support they have is often paid support. Implications suggest that foster youth need longer lasting support as they continue into adulthood, and that they need more services tailored to their particular needs. Implications for social work practice, policy and future research are also identified.

*Keywords:* foster care youth, aging out, caseworkers, support

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

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## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Introduction**

Imagine being 18, with no parents or social support, little to no independent living skills, and then being told you are on your own and must learn how to support yourself. Imagine having no one to rely on when things get tough, and not knowing anyone who can lend you money if you are struggling to pay rent. Youth who age out of foster care also have a difficult time making social connections with their peers and elders because of the difficulties they encountered before and while they were in foster care. These are just a few of the challenges that foster care youth deal with once they age out.

This study defines aging out as a youth exiting the foster care system at age 18 or older. Youth aging out of foster care face many challenges while transitioning into adulthood. They are often on their own with little to no financial or emotional support. A study by Courtney (2005), suggests that youth are unprepared for daily activities without a caseworker or foster parent support. Depending on the state and agency, a youth can age out of the foster care system at age 18 or older. Youth who age out of foster care are not necessarily prepared for adulthood, based on educational achievements, independent living skills, and job preparedness. As a result these youth often experience homelessness, victimization and incarceration (Keller, Cusick and Courtney, 2007). By law, the foster care system is supposed to prepare teens for independent living, college, and/or employment before they age out. (Krebs and Pitcoff, 2006).

Child welfare workers must consider their impact on foster youth. According to a study completed by Stott (2012), foster youth can change placements up to every six months, which means caseworkers need to consider the impact of placement changes on the well-being of youth before making changes in the youth's placement. Academic success, positive relationships, and

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

access to positive social support networks are a few of the impacts that need to be considered (Stott, 2012).

Youth often do not have any support when they age out which is why caseworkers have an important opportunity to affect the success of youth transitions to adulthood by creating independent living classes that teach youth how to pay bills, obtain a job, how to make and keep connections with their peers, and assist them with the struggles of college. A caseworker's ability to connect youth with mentors facilitates a smoother transition because they have the opportunity to address and discuss their struggles. Scannapieco and Painter, 2014, state that youth who had mentors while aging out of foster care indicated that their mentors helped them with school, relationships with authority figures and self-confidence. Without these connections, youth often feel overwhelmed about being alone, and tend to transition poorly into adulthood.

A mentor is defined as a person a foster youth can feel comfortable talking to about issues that arise while they transition to adulthood. Mentors can help foster youth locate local resources to assist in college enrollment or job placement. They can also help find housing and create a budget. A mentor can be anyone, someone youth knew before aging out, or perhaps someone recommended by their foster care agency, teacher or other adult.

Youth who age out of foster care often have little knowledge about economic, social, education, or other critical support systems (Eskin, 2012 p. 30). Social workers who are involved in helping the youth transition successfully need to be willing to put forth time and effort, regarding a variety of items such as: helping youth review lease agreements, set up bank accounts and/or trust funds, order birth certificates and Social Security cards (Eskin, 2012). Social workers should also teach the youth how to budget and spend their earnings wisely, how to use appliances, how to maintain a household, and how to pay their bills on time to avoid

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

eviction. Youth aging out of foster care need to have someone they can rely on so they are not completely on their own, and social workers could possibly provide some support for these vulnerable youth.

A report from the Casey Family Programs states, “every young person who leaves the child welfare system” needs to be “connected with a competent, caring adult” (Spencer, Collins, Ward and Smashnaya, 2010 p. 225). However, this begs the question “should the role be filled by a volunteer mentor or a caseworker (who has known the child for years)? A caseworker may be more reliable in the future if the youth develops concerns about their transition to adulthood.

Therefore, this study’s purpose is to explore how foster care caseworkers might help youth successfully transition out of the foster care system to adulthood. In order to achieve this purpose, a literature review will be presented followed by a chapter on the researcher’s lenses. Next, a methods chapter will discuss methods proposed for this research project.



## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Literature Review**

Literature often portrays foster care youth as unsuccessful, homeless, early childbearing, uneducated individuals without high school or college degrees. In truth, many lead successful lives from which others can derive knowledge of how to follow in their tracks. The following section will present foster care and aging out basics, challenges often faced by foster youth, their need for support, importance of mentoring and relationships, and focus on current programs available for youth transitioning out of foster care.

### **Foster Care Demographics**

- In 2014, there were 415,000 youth in the United States of America living in foster care, which has increased since 2010 when it was 405,000 (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015).
- There were 22,000 youth who aged out of the foster care system in 2014 with the expectation of self-sufficiency (Reilly, 2016).
- Twenty-six percent of all children in foster care in 2014 were in the system for less than six months, another 20 percent spent six to eleven months in care (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015).
- Of the youth who aged out; 28 percent had spent one to two years in care, 21 percent had spent two to four years in care, and five percent spent more than five years in care (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015).
- Non-Hispanic white children accounted for 42 percent of foster children in 2014, African American children accounted for 24 percent of foster children, and Hispanic children accounted for 22 percent of foster children (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015).

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

- About 80 percent of foster children have significant mental health issues which results in them being prescribed psychotropic medications at a much higher rate than non-foster youth (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016 p. 1).
- Children can enter foster care from infancy up to age 18, and in 2014 the median age for children in foster care was 8 years old (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016 p. 8).
- Of the 415,000 children living in foster care in 2014, 52 percent were male and 48 percent were female (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016 p.11).
- Twenty-nine percent of foster children were living in a relative's home and 46 percent of children were in non-relative foster family homes in 2014 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016 p. 2).
- Fifty-one percent of children who left foster care in 2014 were discharged to be reunited with their primary caregivers (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016 p. 2).
- Fifty-five percent of the children in foster care had reunification with their families as their case goal (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016 p.2).

### **Aging Out of Foster Care**

There are many reasons youth age out of the foster care system. Children are placed into foster care when it has been determined that it is unsafe for the child to remain at home due to risk of maltreatment, including neglect, physical, and sexual abuse (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). Children can also be placed in foster care due to behavioral issues. Wulczyn and Hislop discovered three main reasons for why youth age out of the foster care system (Courtney, 2009). First, most youth entering foster care after their fifteenth birthday have not found permanency; such as adoption, reunification, or transfer of permanent legal and physical custody to a relative before age 18. Second, older youth are less likely to live with kin and more likely to reside in

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

group homes. Finally, youth experience “other” exits (transfers to other child-serving systems) or run away from care (Courtney, 2009). If youth do not have permanency by age 21, they are forced out of the foster care system and have to learn to be self-sufficient.

### **Challenges Youth Face in Foster Care**

Youth transitioning from foster care face many more challenges than their peers. Compared to youth in the general population, foster youth sustain higher rates of public assistance, teen parenthood, criminal involvement, and lower educational attainment (Cosner Berzin, 2009 p. 190). Studies have found youth who age out of the foster care system are not prepared for adult roles, such as: education completion, independent living skills, and job preparedness; and experience homelessness, victimization and incarceration. (Keller, Cusick and Courtney, 2007). Reilly (2016) found that 25 percent of youth had been involved in criminal activities since leaving care, and 37 percent experienced one or more unwanted outcomes such as victimization, sexual assault, incarceration, or homelessness. By age 26, about 80 percent of foster youth aging out of foster care earned a minimum of a high school degree or GED in comparison to the general population which had, 94 percent achieve an equivalent level of education. Furthermore, only four percent of foster youth earned a four-year college degree at age 26, as opposed to 36 percent of the general population earning such a degree (Children’s Rights, 2016). Youth are often self-reliant during transition to adulthood, at a time when they should have a caregiver available for guidance with important decisions.

Caregivers, such as foster parents, should promote independent living skill development and establishing relationships, but often times they are not trained to do so. Keller, Cusick and Courtney (2007), believed there are seven different factors for a child aging out of foster care: employment, grade retention, parenthood, problem behavior, placement type, placement

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

stability, and runaway history. These seven factors all affect the success youth will achieve during adulthood.

**School to work.** Successful transition between school and work is necessary for foster youth to positively transition to adulthood. Successful transitions generally require higher educational attainment and economic self-sufficiency (Cosner Berzin, 2008). Foster youth tend to have lower earnings and greater welfare use compared to youth who were not in foster care (Cosner Berzin, 2008). Research on former foster youth shows that these youth give birth to more children in their twenties than non-foster youth (Cosner Berzin, 2008). This could attribute to “rates of criminal justice involvement and substance abuse of foster youth exceeding national averages. Studies report that they are arrested, spend more time in jail, and are convicted of crimes at higher rates than average” (Cosner Berzin, 2008). Child Trends Data Bank (2015), reported “only 48 percent of foster youth who had ‘aged out’ of the system had graduated from high school at the time of discharge, and only 54 percent had graduated from high school two to four years after discharge.” Children’s Rights (2016) noted by age 26 only four percent of youth who aged out of foster care earned a four-year college degree, whereas 36 percent of general population youth had done so.

**Mental health.** Foster youth often suffer from mental health problems, which negatively impact their transition to adulthood; frequently, these problems are often left untreated once youth exit care (Courtney, 2009). As many as 80 percent of foster care children suffer from significant mental health issues, as opposed to about 18-22 percent of the general population experiencing such problems (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). The eight most common diagnoses for foster youth are; post-traumatic stress disorder (21.5 percent), major depressive episode (15.3 percent), modified social phobia (11.9 percent), panic disorder (11.4

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

percent), generalized anxiety disorder (9.4 percent), alcohol dependence (3.7 percent), drug dependence (3.6 percent), and bulimia (2.9 percent) (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). Former foster youth are more likely to experience multiple chronic health conditions than the general population of similar age (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015).

**Traumas.** Adverse childhood experiences are “potentially traumatic events that can have negative, long lasting effects on health and well-being” (American SPCC, 2017). These experiences occur before the age of 18. Some examples of traumatic events may include: psychological (emotional), physical, or sexual abuse; violence against mother; living with household members who were substance abusers, mentally ill, or suicidal, or criminal or imprisoned household members (American SPCC, 2017). Abused or neglected children are at a higher risk for health problems as adults, for example; alcoholism, depression, drug abuse, eating disorders, high-risk sexual behaviors, smoking, and suicide (American SPCC, 2017). Experts link adverse childhood experiences to impaired adult physical and mental health, chronic disease, educational achievement or, economic, and social success (American SPCC, 2017).

Because of foster youth’s often traumatic history, they are often likely to exhibit high levels of behavioral and emotional problems (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). Thirty-eight percent of foster youth aging out of foster care suffer emotional problems, 50 percent used illegal drugs, and 25 percent faced legal system struggles (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). Research shows that four percent of emancipated foster youth enter a state prison within seven years of aging out of the foster care system (Cosner Berzin, 2008). Almost one-half of foster care children have sustained at least four potentially traumatic events resulting in multiple poor outcomes (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015).

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

**Early parenthood.** “Recent research comparing outcomes between young people allowed to remain under the care and supervision of child welfare authorities past age eighteen and those who have left care before that provides some evidence that extending the care results in improved outcomes in areas of service access, educational attainment, housing stability, pregnancy, and crime” (Courtney, 2009). Early parenthood is another life trial many youth encounter while transitioning to adulthood (Cosner Berzin, 2008). Pregnancy rates among former foster youth are higher than the national average, with reports indicating former foster youth bear more children in their teens or twenties than do non-foster youth (Cosner Berzin, 2008).

Scannapieco, Connell and Painter (2007), found foster youth experience the following issues after aging out of the system: 1) Foster care youth educationally lag behind their peers. 2) There is a higher rate of former foster care youth that have been in the criminal justice system. 3) As many as 25% of teens leaving foster care experience homelessness. 4) More than 60% of females who age out of the foster care system have a baby within four years.

**High mobility.** Stott (2012) discovered foster care youth maintain higher mobility/instability rates than peers, disrupting social connections and emotional and social well-being. Placement instability may result in: lower educational achievement and decreased self-esteem, increased school drop-out rates, identify confusion, drug use, juvenile arrest with higher incarceration rates, mental health care needs, and social network disruption (Stott, 2012). According to a study done by Stott (2012), research showed that foster youth can change placements up to every six months, which means caseworkers need to consider the impact of placement changes on the well-being of youth before making changes in the youth’s placement.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

*Child welfare policies and practitioners need to approach placement movement with a balanced perspective. Some moves can be delayed until the end of a semester, and some moves could involve more preparation. Child welfare practitioners could be encouraged to facilitate youth in visiting their next placement and schools, and remaining in contact with friends and natural mentors associated with former placements (Stott, 2012 p. 76).*

Foster youth often face more challenges than the general population regarding the transition to adulthood. Children are placed in foster care because of abuse or neglect and many often suffer mental and physical consequences caused by abuse (Courtney, 2009). Many foster youth face homelessness and poverty after leaving care (Courtney, 2009). After aging out of foster care, many youth end up partaking in criminal acts, causing them to enter into the justice/corrections systems (Courtney, 2009).

### **Need for Support**

The word “support” has multiple elements to define it; including financial support, emotional support and social support (Nixon, 1997). Financial support comes from the child-care agencies through the social worker and often the foster parents. Emotional support derives from family, friends, social worker, and foster parents. And social support is defined as backing by extended family, friends, neighbors, social worker, and foster parents (Nixon, 1997).

When youth age out of foster care, they often lack a reliable support system (Blakeslee, 2012). Commonly, youth who age out are disconnected from any form of social support. Curry and Abrams (2015), reference insufficient emotional, instrumental and informational support during the adulthood transition for youth aging out of foster care. Housing instability is also believed to attribute to inadequacy of familial support. In a study conducted by Curry and Abrams, youth reported that they experience anxiety about depending on other people and worry that they will be ‘shot down’ if they ask for help.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Importance of Mentoring and Relationships**

Unfortunately, it can be common for foster youth to lack strong healthy relationships while transitioning into adulthood paving the way for mentoring to fill the gap. Literature suggests there are many benefits, reasons and examples related to mentoring as an effective means of support for foster youth aging out of foster care.

**Benefits.** Many challenges opposing foster youth aging out of foster care relate to the shortage of strong, healthy and stable relationships, which are key for any youth's successful transition to adulthood (Spencer, Collins, Ward and Smashnaya, 2010). Foster youth possess a strong need for mentoring. (Taussig, Culhane, Raviv, Schnoll Fitzpatrick, and Wertheimer Hodas, 2010). Avery (2011) found that there are three positive effects of mentoring with foster youth transitioning out of care; 1) enhancing the youth's social relationships and emotional well-being, 2) improving their cognitive skills through instruction and conversation, and 3) promoting positive identity development by serving as a role model and advocate. In Avery's study, youth reported that they placed a high value on their mentors and indicated their need for ongoing mentor relationships. More frequent contact between youth and mentor resulted in more positive outcomes, like increased relationship length and (self-reported) emotional closeness. A study by Ahrens, Dubois, Richardson, and Lozano (2010), concluded that youth who were connected to an adult were more likely to be healthy overall, less likely to have suicidal thoughts, less likely to have a sexually transmitted disease, and lower overall deviant behavior. Youth who reported a natural mentoring relationship were more likely to have favorable outcomes in education/work, problem behavior, psychological well-being, and physical health (DuBois and Silverthorn, 2005).



## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

Scannapieco and Painter (2007) implemented a study that matched 200 youth under the age of 14 with mentors. Many youth in the study had not previously been mentored by a positive adult role model. They found that mentoring relationships that lasted for more than one year exhibited significant benefits for the youth. Youth rated themselves higher in all areas of the survey after the mentoring program. Ninety percent of youth stated mentors helped either “a great deal” or “somewhat” with school, relationships with authority figures, and self-confidence. Mentors saw biggest improvements in a youth’s school performance, self-confidence, and ability to secure a job in the future. With one exception, all youth enjoyed time spent with mentors and said they felt mentors assisted with improvement in self-confidence, school and relationships with foster parents (Scannapieco and Painter, 2007).

Consistent contact and an emotional connection are important features to help establish an effective mentoring relationship (Spencer, Collins, Ward and Smashnaya, 2010). Research suggests that the stable presence of a caring adult may help youth build an attachment and effectively cope with stress and promoting positive change in their relationships with others (Spencer, Collins, Ward and Smashnaya, 2010). Regular contact with mentors creates an opportunity for the mentor to become more involved in the youth’s life and can offer meaningful assistance, including instruction and guidance in areas of interest along with providing emotional and instrumental support (Spencer, Collins, Ward and Smashnaya, 2010). The presence of a strong emotional connection is associated with better outcomes, such as: improvements in a youth’s self-report on educational attainment, feeling of self-worth, and levels of emotional and behavioral problems. The bond that is formed between the youth and the mentor is the most important aspect of the mentoring process, not the amount of contact or the types of activities (Spencer, Collins, Ward and Smashnaya, 2010). If the youth does not feel comfortable around

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

their mentor, they will not open up to them to share their struggles or concerns regarding their transition to adulthood. No matter how many times mentors and youth meet for conversation, if there is no rapport between them, no learning or change will occur.

**Reasons for mentoring.** When youth age out of foster care, caseworkers discharge the youth from foster care, thus, the absence of the caseworker disrupts the overall flow of support to the youth (Blakeslee, 2012). Foster youth often require more personalized support and accessible resources for transitioning into adulthood than non-foster youth. Courtney (2005) found that youth are unprepared for daily activities without their caseworker or foster parents support. Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, shows that youth who had a mentor before the age of 18 for at least two years did better on self-reports of overall health, educational attainment, physical aggression, suicide risk, and risk of sexually transmitted disease than youth who did not have a mentor (Spencer, Collins, Ward and Smashnaya, 2010).

Social workers working with youth aging out of foster care must pay attention to a youth's connections to their family of origin (Courtney, 2009). Foster youth may not be able to rely on family as much as their peers, however, most have strong relationships with family and those relationships may be either helpful or harmful for them. Caseworkers must focus on helping youth maximize the benefits of these relationships while minimizing potential risks (Courtney, 2009).

Foster youth are less likely to have a mentor due to four complicated structural issues: 1) the inability to conduct school-based mentoring with children in foster care because of frequent changes in schools resulting from placement adjustment; 2) the need to register youth for a mentoring program when many do not have a permanent parent or guardian; 3) issues regarding who has the right to approve a mentor for the youth; and 4) the reality that placement changes

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

may cause challenges to a sustained mentoring experience (Taussig, Culhane, Raviv, Schnoll Fitzpatrick, and Wertheimer Hodas, 2010). Foster youth also experience difficulty trusting adults and forming positive relationships because of trauma they have experienced in their lives (Taussig, Culhane, Raviv, Schnoll Fitzpatrick, and Wertheimer Hodas, 2010).

**Mentoring program/resource.** One mentoring program is Fostering Healthy Futures (FHF) which provides nine months of one-on-one mentoring graduate student mentors. Mentoring activities are based on a youth's presenting problems, strengths, interests, as well as family and placement characteristics (Taussig, Culhane, Raviv, Schnoll Fitzpatrick, and Wertheimer Hodas, 2010). There are five basic training and supervision activities that are helpful for mentors to know while working with foster youth. They are described below:

*The training and supervision activities described below were designed to support mentors as they 1) created empowering relationships with children by serving as positive examples for future relationships; 2) ensured that children received appropriate services in all domains and served as a support for children who faced challenges within various systems; 3) helped children generalize skills learned in weekly skills groups to the "real world" by completing weekly homework assignments; 4) engaged children in a range of extracurricular, educational, social, cultural, and recreational activities; and 5) promoted attitudes that fostered a positive future outlook (Taussig, Culhane, Raviv, Schnoll Fitzpatrick, and Wertheimer Hodas, 2010 p. 18).*

The Youth Connections Scale was developed to help child welfare agencies and organizations find ways to better work with youth in strengthening and building a supportive safety net for all youth in foster care (University of Minnesota, 2012). "The Youth Connections Scale was developed to fill a current gap in the field to measure and evaluate increased efforts to identify and strengthen supportive connections" (University of Minnesota, 2012). This scale helps youth identify the amount of meaningful and supportive relationships they have with adults at assessment completion time.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Programs Available For Youth**

Finding resources and additional funds for youth aging out of the foster care system is often very challenging. There are many hidden resources to assist foster care youth while they are transitioning into adulthood (Eskin, 2012). One example of a program for youth is the Independent Living Program, which is federal legislation that was created in the 1980s (Curry and Abrams, 2015). This program addresses the needs for youth aging out of foster care, including instructional programs that focus on job readiness and retention, nutrition and housekeeping. It also covers services such as transitional housing and assistance with obtaining a high school or college degree. Curry and Abrams found that there is little known about the effectiveness of the Independent Living Program with youth aging out of foster care.

Krebs and Pitcoff (2006) found that there are many unsuccessful programs that are created to help prepare youth aging out of foster care for independent living. Often, there is inadequate training for professionals to create meaningful and effective programs to prepare youth for independence after aging out. Most independent living workshops leave youth unengaged and staff unmotivated to teach. Only 20% to 50% of foster youth regularly attend independent living workshops. Krebs and Pitcoff believe the most effective workshops would result from interaction with a community member not associated with the foster care system in order to encourage youth participation and engagement.

One successful program for foster youth in college is the Seita Scholars Program. The overall goal of the Seita Scholars Program at Western Michigan University is to “increase opportunities for young people who have aged out of foster care to pursue higher education and to provide support that promotes success and well-being throughout the undergraduate experience at Western Michigan University” (Unrau, 2011). Students are encouraged to express

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

their feelings about the program and suggest ways to improve it. This program was created to help prevent unemployment, homelessness, and poverty in former foster youth who often drop out of college. Unrau believes that more colleges and universities need to work together with foster care agencies to help support foster youth access and succeed in college.

The Fostering Connections to Success Act is federal legislation that was signed into law in 2008 (CASA, 2017). It offers federal funding to states who choose to support foster youth beyond the age of 18. Youth must be involved either in school or vocational training, or employed for a minimum of 80 hours per month to be eligible. Foster youth can also be eligible by enrolling in the program to reduce barriers to employment, or if they are unable to do one or more of the previous eligibility criteria due to a documented medical condition. CASA (2017), states that research shows outcomes for youth remaining in care to age 21 are significantly improved over youth who leave the system at age 18.

The Support for Emancipation and Living Functionally (SELF) Program is Minnesota's Chafee sponsored program. It offers services to youth ages 14 to 21, who are currently in foster care or who left foster care after the age of 18. SELF services help youth meet their independent living plan goals by way of assistance with: independent living skills training, transportation, education, employment, permanent connections, and housing (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016).

Minnesota's Youth Leadership Councils consist of current and former foster care youth. The missions of the Youth Leadership Councils include: providing increased youth voices about the implementation and evaluation of foster care policy and practices, advising the department on state policy affecting children in the foster care system, developing a speaker's bureau of foster youth, and educating and training other youth, resource families, child welfare workers and the

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

general public (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016). “Council members also educate foster parents, youth in care, social workers and other professionals, as well as raise funds to support issues they care about” (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016).

The Healthy Transition and Homeless Prevention Program aims to help youth ages 14 through 21, transition from foster care to adulthood and prevent homelessness (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016). Youth can receive help with the following; completing an independent living plan, getting vital documents, reviewing eligibility for extended foster care benefits to age 21, finding affordable housing, receiving financial management training, identifying and developing at least one permanent connection to a caring adult, completing a high school diploma or GED, completing driver’s education or learning how to use public transportation, researching post-secondary education options, securing and maintaining a job, receiving health care coverage, and completing a screening for trauma to determine if additional services are needed (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016).

The Title IV-E Foster Care program of the Social Security Act provides federal funding to offset states’ costs for foster care, including youth in foster care who are transitioning into adulthood. It provides federal reimbursement for board and care and associate administrative costs for out-of-pocket care past the age of 18. This option is important because states may not use more than 30 percent of their share of Chafee Program funds to provide housing for current and former foster youth between ages 18 and 21 (Courtney, 2009).

There are many health needs for foster youth, including high rates of mental health problems, which is why it is important that foster youth are able to access health care. The Affordable Care Act extends medical assistance benefits to youth leaving foster care on or after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, to age 26 (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016).

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

Often times there is poor coordination and integration of independent living services for foster youth with the efforts of other public institutions such as educational institutions, welfare-to-work programs, and housing programs, which limit the effectiveness of the services (Courtney, 2009). When formal institutional supports do not communicate with one another very well, it leads to duplication of effort and gaps in service availability (Courtney, 2009). Youth in foster care previously stated that they often do not have any say in case plans and that their caseworker, youth and foster parents all need better communication so they are aware of what is going on prior to the youth ageing out of foster care (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick and Painter, 2007). This issue was addressed by the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act. “When a child is age 14 or older, the case plan must be developed in consultation with the child, as well as two members of the case planning team who are chosen by the child and are not the child’s foster parent or caseworker” (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016).

Courtney (2009), found research that compares foster youth remaining under child welfare authority supervision beyond age 18 with youth exiting care prior to this age. Results show evidence that extending care improves service access, educational attainment, housing stability, and reduces pregnancy and crime outcomes.

### **Summary and Research Question**

Youth aging out of the foster care system face many challenges while transitioning to adulthood, who often lack support in general. Social workers must be willing to put in a lot of time and effort if they are involved with helping youth transition successfully. Foster youth aging out need to have someone they can rely on so they are not on their own. Social workers have the opportunity to be that support system for these youth.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

Caseworkers can also set up youth with mentors who can help them transition smoothly because they have someone they can talk to about their struggles. Without appropriate connections, foster youth are often overwhelmed about being alone while they transition, and tend to do poorly in adulthood. “Ongoing parental support during this period has become normative in the United States, and former foster youth are in greater need for this support, on average, than their peers” (Courtney, 2009 p. 54). Social workers have the ability to work with these vulnerable youth and give them the resources and support that they need so they can be successful in their adult life. Therefore, the research question guiding this study is: How do foster care caseworkers currently help youth successfully transition out of the foster care system?



## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Lenses**

Research lenses are important because the readers gain a better understanding of the researcher's beliefs and biases. Research bias affects how research is gathered, analyzed and presented. Readers must understand these biases so they can comprehend how the study was completed. By reading this section, readers will learn about my theoretical, professional and personal lenses and how they influenced the research study.

### **Theoretical Lenses**

The first theoretical lens that applies to this research is attachment theory. "Attachment theory guides the treatment as the therapist develops the therapeutic relationship by providing a secure base from which to work" (Cooper and Lesser, 2015 p. 89). Attachment theory can be used by clinicians in assessments to evaluate strengths and weakness in the client's capacity for relating and also in methods of engagement (Cooper and Lesser, 2015). Youth in the foster care system often do not have healthy attachments to adults other than their foster care caseworkers, and must be able to maintain that relationship as they transition into adulthood. "As clinicians, we are objects of attachment and detachment, actively interpreting how the patient, in the transference, uses us to replay interactions of internal objects as they come to light in the transference and counter transference" (Cooper and Lesser, 2015. P. 89).

The second theoretical lens that applies to this research is resiliency theory. Resilience is often thought as "bouncing back" (Walsh, 2006). It can be defined as "the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful" (Walsh, 2006 p. 4). Youth transitioning out of foster care often have been through many traumatic events, and their willingness to "bounce back" will help them become able to successfully transition into adulthood. Walsh, 2006, believes that with supportive relationships and practice, we can strengthen resilience to deal

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

better with traumatic events and life challenges. Foster care caseworkers and others can have those supportive relationships with foster youth, encouraging resilience for a successful transition into adulthood. Without supportive relationships, foster youth will be less likely to become resilient and have worse outcomes during their transition into adulthood. This lens influenced my research design by how I developed my interview questions. Some of my interview questions were focused on how foster care caseworkers believe foster youth are resilient and if that helps them become successful adults.

The third theoretical lens that applies to this research is systems theory. Systems theory can be defined as explaining human behavior as the intersection of the influences of multiple interrelated systems. “According to this theory, all systems are interrelated parts constituting an ordered whole and each subsystem influences other parts of the whole” (Theoretical Approaches: Social Work Systems Theory, 2017). For foster youth to be successful after they leave care, I believe everyone in that young person’s life must work together for the common interest of the youth. I believe that the foster family and the foster care agency have to maintain a strong relationship so the foster youth will be able to acquire the resources and skills they need before they age out of foster care. As social workers, we must be mindful of all the systems the foster youth are involved in, and incorporate them into their plan for transitioning out of foster care.

### **Professional Lenses**

During my field placement for my Bachelors of Social Work, I was at a foster care agency. Although I did not have direct contact with youth aging out of the agency, I knew that there was little to no support for them once they turned 21. I wanted to know how the foster care workers could help the youth at their agency become successful adults and support them through their transition. In the year that I was at the agency, I only heard the foster care caseworkers

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

mention youth transitioning out of foster care a handful of times, and it made me concerned for the youth who were close to aging out.

During my time at Saginaw Valley State University, I took an elective that focused on youth aging out of foster care. This class opened my eyes to the hardships that foster youth go through on their own after they age out of the system. The professor gave us real life examples of what happens when youth age out of foster care without a good support system. I was shocked that youth ages 18 to 21 were forced to learn how to become adults without much support once they exited care. It made me want to learn more ways that social workers can help these vulnerable youth become successful during their transition.

Qualitative method of interviewing was chosen because I believe that talking with participants directly is the best way learn how to effectively help youth aging out of foster care. Interviews give the participant a way to explain themselves and tell stories unlike using a survey would do. I believe that qualitative method was best for my research because I wanted to hear participants' experiences with foster youth aging out.

I decided to interview foster care caseworkers because they have experience with youth aging out of foster care, and have great insight into what they believe will help youth to become more successful in adulthood. I decided to only interview foster care caseworkers who have worked with youth aging out of foster care. I ruled out interviewing former foster youth who aged out, because it was too difficult to contact them in the community.

### **Personal Lenses**

The personal identities and experiences that influenced my approach to the project come from me being an only child and wanting my parents to adopt. Growing up, I knew that there were a lot of children who did not have parents and desperately needed them. I always hoped my

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

parents would adopt a child to prevent a child from living in the foster care system and possibly aging out of the system. My personal experience working with foster youth has created a bias for me wanting to help them. I have had experience at a foster care agency, and grown attached to the youth in the foster care program. I believe that it is not fair to force them out of the program and make them transition into adulthood without support.

My personal bias is that foster care caseworkers should stay in contact and be a positive support for foster youth once they age out. I realize that I will need to deal with this bias and I plan to do that by looking to see how foster care caseworkers can assist youth aging out of foster care and connect them with other positive supports. My biases have impacted the development of the project thus far through my belief that the foster care caseworker is responsible for foster youth to become successful after they transition out of foster care. I believe that many foster youth do not have a strong support system while they are transitioning out of care, and they need to have at least one supportive adult whom they are comfortable. Many youth have been in the foster care system for years and have grown close to their foster care caseworkers. Their relationship should not end when they age out of the foster care system; the relationships these youth have created needs to be maintained during their transition to adulthood.

While I conducted my research, I dealt with my bias by remembering that many foster youth are able to transition successfully to adulthood with little to no support. I needed to keep my bias in check while I interviewed foster care workers about their experiences with youth aging out. I also needed to understand that each agency functions differently and that maybe their youth are ready to age out of the foster care system and become successful adults.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Method**

How do foster care caseworkers help youth successfully transition out of the foster care system? A qualitative study was chosen as a method for answering this question. According to Berg (2004), “Qualitative research properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative researchers, then, are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth” (Berg, 2004 p. 7). More specifically, semi-structured interviewing was chosen while interviewing foster care caseworkers. This was an effective way to gather perspectives and answers to this research question. This chapter explains sampling procedures, protection of human subjects, instrumentation and data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and the strengths and limitations of this research design.

### **Sampling Procedures**

The researcher interviewed four social workers who had experience working with youth aging out of the foster care system. The participants were recruited by contacting social workers who are part of the Healthy Transition and Homeless Prevention Grant through the Department of Human Services. I contacted these social workers by emailing them and sending them my research flyer (Appendix A). By contacting multiple agencies, I was able to obtain a variety of perspectives from workers practicing in different settings. This purposive sampling procedure used “a nonprobability sampling procedure in which research participants with particular characteristics were purposely selected for inclusion in a research sample” (Grinnell, Williams, & Unrau 2016 p. 541). This method helped me recruit four participants.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Participants in this study were protected in many ways. The researcher completed Collaborative Institution Training Initiative (CITI) prior to submitting an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application to the University of St. Thomas. The training focused on the protection of human subjects, and it is used to ensure adequate training and procedures. University of St. Thomas's IRB reviewed my application to ensure that the records of the study were kept confidential, that the researcher was the only person with access to the data, and that any identifying information would be removed.

There was minimal risk of harm in this study because the researcher interviewed professionals who volunteered to participate. The flyers were used so that interested participants would know how to contact the researcher directly and no one else would find out if they decided to participate. At the start of the interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form to make sure the participants understood the study (see interview schedule in Appendix B).

### **Instrumentation, Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

Data was collected using an interview schedule. Questions were developed based on the literature and purpose of this study. Questions were reviewed by the research committee and IRB to ensure validity. The researcher asked social workers who work with youth aging out of foster care what they thought works best with vulnerable youth, and what they thought would be more effective to help them transition successfully (Appendix C).

Data was collected via individual interviews, which were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Once the data was collected and transcribed, the researcher reviewed transcripts for accuracy and stored the data in electronic files.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

The first step in data analysis was to read all of the transcripts in one sitting without taking notes. The next step was to re-read each transcript again without making notes. This discipline process of data entry was critical because the researcher is an important instrument in qualitative research. The next step was open coding. The researcher went line by line, taking notes, circling words, and using symbols to describe what was emerging in the data. After that the researcher printed each transcript on different colors of paper so that as categories emerged, quotes could be sorted. The quotes related to emerged themes were then put into separate folders that were then used to help compose the findings section.

The researcher was able to ensure rigor use of the qualitative discipline of reflexivity. Reflexivity has to do with how the background and positions of researchers impact “what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions” (Malterud, 2001, p. 483-484). During data collection, the researcher asked questions consistently that would elicit answers to the research questions, making every effort to keep her perspective from biasing the data analysis process. She reviewed the data multiple times, and used a disciplined process of open coding to arrive at the final themes.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

One strength of this qualitative design is that it allowed for in-depth exploration of the issues. Data was collected in the words of the participants themselves rather than obtaining forced responses on a survey. The flexible nature of the interview allowed the researcher to probe participants’ experience and knowledge related to foster youth aging out. One limitation of this study is the small sample size. Due to time restrictions and scheduling, the researcher was only able to interview four participants. Results are therefore not generalizable.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Findings**

The following is a presentation of the findings from this qualitative study conducted with social workers who had experience with youth aging out of foster care. The purpose of this research was to discover how foster care caseworkers help youth successfully transition out of the foster care system. The results of this study will begin with a description of the research participants and relevant demographic data. Next, observational data will be presented. This will be followed by the presentation of the themes that emerged from the data: harm reduction, services, permanent connections, social worker's relationship with youth, along with supportive documentation.

### **Description of Participants**

The study sample consisted of four social work professionals who work with youth aging out of foster care. The professionals selected for this study were currently working or have worked with foster youth in various agency settings. There were three female and one male participants. Two of the participants had a Masters of Social Work (MSW) and two had a Bachelor's of Social work (BSW). They all have a social work license. The participants ranged from 6 years to 40 years' experience working in the social work field. The social workers worked at various agencies throughout the Twin Cities area, including a foster care agency, a homeless shelter, specialized foster care agency for older youth, and the Department of Human Services. For more detail on the participants please refer to Table 1 below.



## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

Table 1: Description of Participants

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Social Work License</b>	<b>Time in the Field</b>	<b>Type of Agency</b>
<b>Participant 1</b>	Male	BSW	LSW	19 Years	Department of Human Services
<b>Participant 2</b>	Female	MSW	LISW	6 Years	Specialized Foster Care Agency
<b>Participant 3</b>	Female	MSW	LICSW	40 Years	Agency for Homeless Youth
<b>Participant 4</b>	Female	BSW	LSW	7 Years	Private Foster Care Agency

**Observational Data**

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. The interviewees expressed a lot of emotion while the interviews were being conducted. One interviewee stated that she was thankful that someone was researching on this topic and that more attention needs to be brought to these youth aging out of foster care. Another interviewee stated that the interview “triggered all kinds of memories” for her. Some interviewees displayed being happy while they were telling me stories about former foster youth and some success stories, and appeared sad when talking about unsuccessful stories. One interviewee appeared emotionally flat during the whole interview and did not show much emotion.

During recruitment, I noticed that many of the social work professionals were interested in my research but reported being over-worked and did not have extra time to participate in my study. I also had a hard time with people calling or emailing me back when I reached out to them.

**Starting Services Early On (Harm Reduction)**

All four of the participants reported that there needs to be more harm reduction and preventative actions to help youth age out of the foster care system more successfully. They stated that there were many services that the youth were involved in, but they often need to start

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

earlier and stick with the child until they age out of foster care. The researcher defines harm reduction as the steps taken to improve the lives of foster youth aging out of the foster care system by providing resources and personal connections to them early on.

Two out of the four participants agreed that starting foster youth in services early is good harm reduction and will help them have a successful future after they age out of the foster care system. They believe that the earlier foster youth start in services that can help with aging out, the better the outcomes will be. For example, two participants noted the importance of starting foster youth early in services:

*Start as early as possible. I think starting as early as possible doing those assessments, working with the youth, and letting them run their own case plan.*

*Starting youth at like age 14 or doing a plan for them. And you know like going through those life skills and going through those things they will have to do when they are 18, 19, 20, or 21.*

The participants in this study also stated that there needs to be more prevention. There should be more prevention to help foster youth as they age out of foster care. They believe that more can be done so foster youth have a chance at being successful after they leave the foster care system.

*So prevention, if we can do more long term and more intensive work... Our whole mission is to prevent kids from aging out, or aging out without a permanent resource.*

One participant shared a story about how a youth might end up in jail if he does not get the correct services and resources before he ages out. She stated that she is worried about him, and that there needs to be more prevention before he is able to be on his own without help from the foster care system:

*So the point is that he is an example of someone who's like, "Get the system out of my life." I'm super worried about him. I mean the minute he turns 18, if we don't have a resource or if he doesn't have anyone, he will end up in jail.*

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

One of the participants reported that the best harm reduction for foster youth aging out was to connect them with a caring adult as they transition out of foster care. Throughout the interviews the participants reported that many foster youth do not have a permanent committed adult when they age out of foster care. By connecting foster youth with a committed supportive adult, they will have someone they can turn to in times of crises, which is good harm reduction for their future.

*It's good harm reduction to get kids connected. You know and the last thing is just getting them connected to committed adults who want a lifelong commitment. Because a lot of these kids have never had that.*

### **Importance of Services**

All of the interviewees stated that their agencies provided many different resources to youth before they aged out of the foster care system. The participants all stated that resources are important for youth aging out of foster care. They also stressed that programs that stick with the youth for multiple years, and that cater to individual needs of youth are the most effective. For example, two participants noted the importance of long-term programs with youth aging out of the foster care system and catering to a youth's individual needs:

*The longer a program can stick with a kid or a young adult, the better.*

*[A particular agency] They treat every individual youth as their own assessment. The workers kind of meet them where they are at and their individual needs. They kind of cater the case based on that.*

**Implementation of laws and regulations.** The participants of this study reported that laws are made with good intentions in mind, but sometimes are not executed in the best way. Participants stated that when law makers are creating new laws that could affect foster youth, they need to consider the reality of what could happen to the youth. One interviewee stated the

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

importance of laws and regulation when it comes to youth aging out of the system. She believed that the laws often had good intentions but were not always executed in the best way:

*Implementation of rules and laws and regulation has to be done with sensitivity with heart and with understanding the reality of that young person's life.*

*All of those skills and having those pieces in place doesn't happen in 90 days or 6 months... So I mean I think right now doesn't the law say that the young person needs to receive notification six months before (they age out). That's way too short.*

Participants reported providing a variety of services including: independent living skills, support groups, transitional programs, and therapy. The following are examples of services that the participants shared during their interviews:

*We did independent living skills and mentoring... I think giving them more tools which they can take into adulthood would be more beneficial.*

*The kids are all in therapy...I mean I think they need to continue therapeutic intervention. They still can't regulate and so I mean I don't know how you can't really implement that. But you know those services I think are crucial for moving forward indefinitely... Unfortunately we have this rush to move them to independence and they are not even capable of regulating themselves.*

The participants stated that after everything these youth have gone through, before foster care and during foster care, the least they can do is give them effective resources so they have a successful future they can look forward to. They stated that without these resources, these youth have less of a chance to become successful adults. The participants reported that social workers should advocate for effective laws and regulations that affect foster youth, as well as provide them resources early on that are helpful, and keep them in those resources for a long time.

*The best thing you can give young people is resources....The least we can do is be a support to provide the resources necessary that they're going to need to be able to live independently on their own.*

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### Need for Permanent Connections

The participants reported that foster youth often do not have a permanent connection with an adult when they age out of foster care. They stated that youth often do not have anyone they can turn to when they are in a crisis or when they want to celebrate something that they achieved.

One participant shared with me what she likes to tell her foster youth before they age out:

*When you're 25 and your car breaks down and who are you going to call? And when you're 35 and you're having a kid and you're in the hospital who is going to be there? And when you're 45 and get sick like you know and I just sort of try to paint the picture because when you're a teenager you don't really understand.*

This study also had an unexpected finding of foster youth to be adopted, and then for the adopted parents terminating their rights, a dissolved adoption. Possible explanations include mental health issues and/or lack of parental knowledge about mental health issues. The literature did not show the number of youth who experienced a dissolved adoption, but the topic came up during two out of the four interviews. One social worker stated that at her agency they have a panel of youth who speak to prospective adoptive parents:

*She's like listen up, we are not returnable, we do not come with a receipt.*

This is very powerful and prospective parents must remember the struggles they will endure before they decide to adopt a child. These youth have experienced trauma and all children are not able to handle the loss of another family if their adoptive placement does not work out.

**Foster parents.** Foster parents can be a great permanent connection for foster youth aging out of care. Youth are able to gain daily support through their foster parents before they age out, which is important for them to become successful once they age out of the foster care system. There are many foster parents that stay in a foster youth's life after they age out:

*I think I see a lot of caring foster parents that really do let the kids come back in for whatever they need and the holidays...So there's some great foster parents and some really committed, dedicated foster parents that commit to them.*

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

*There were foster parents who were willing to stay in contact were really valuable and important...Lots and lots of young people stay in touch with their foster families.*

**Unpaid permanent connections.** One of the most important things that the participants believed with caring permanent adults for foster youth was for them to be unpaid. The participants stated that many of the people are paid to be in these youths' lives. They reported that this can affect the foster youth's connection with them and they may not be in their future after they are out of foster care. Two of the participants noted the importance of permanent connections in foster youth's life to be unpaid:

*So our young people, in order to be successful, they need someone in their life that they are able to talk to and be a support. That person has to be someone that's not paid to do it... I define a permanent connection as an unpaid adult. So someone that's not getting paid, that works with the young people that you can define as being a support for our young people.*

*These kids don't have anyone they know that aren't paid to be there. And that is problematic from an attachment and relationship standpoint.*

**Connection services, resources and tools.** One participant shared specific tools/resources that they use to help find foster youth caring permanent connections for when they age out of foster care. These resources help youth find adults that want to be there for them during good and hard times. Many youth struggle to find a permanent adult that they can trust in their life, and these tools help social workers connect them with someone who they can rely on after they leave the foster care system. The participant noted two tools that she uses with foster youth to help them make permanent connections:

*One of the biggest tools that we use is the Permanency Pact. It's a document that is available online that assist our young people in finding a permanent adult. And then another tool that we use a lot is called the Youth Connection Scale, also available online. It's a Minnesota tool that was created by the University of Minnesota to assist and connect our young people to a supportive adult.*

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Importance of the Relationship with Social Worker**

The participants noted that often social workers are the only adult that the foster youth has created a connection with before they age out. They stated that this connection is important for foster youth, but it is also important that they are able to make other permanent connections in their life besides their social worker.

Participants reported that the relationship between the worker and the foster youth is important because often a youth does not have adults they can trust. They noted that the social worker must maintain a professional role while working with the foster youth, and remember the best interests of the youth. All four of the participants noted the importance of the relationship between the worker and the youth:

*A social worker can bring something to life or they can complete the paperwork because the paperwork has to be completed.*

*I feel that the absolute most important thing is the connection that you make with the young people, because if you don't build that connection, they are not ever going to contact you for you to be able to provide those resources. So I think the connection that you make with the young person is the single most important thing for success later on when the youth age out of foster care.*

*So with young people that are aging out, building rapport is huge. And so my strategy was always to be as real as possible. And I think the best method that you can be is to be honest, upfront, and real with them... By letting them make decisions, that's going to really improve your relationship with the young person, letting them drive the case.*

The researcher asked all four of the participants if they kept in contact with the youth after they leave foster care. Each of them reported that they are still in contact with some of their former foster youth. The participants stated that they do not contact the youth, but the youth often contact them. All four of the participants noted the importance of contact after the termination of services between the social worker and the former foster youth:

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

*I mean some of them still call me to this day and ask me questions, so yeah they need to connect easily with their social worker. [The agency] would rather have us be that support for the child or the youth and be that mentor rather than just leave them hanging.*

*Typically I don't keep in contact with them because I feel that's kind of a boundary issue. There's always those young people that feel that I'm a support to them and I'm a permanent connection. I never reach out to them first. Our young people find me on Facebook... They connect with me on Facebook quite a bit. That's how I have contact with some of my former young people that I worked with. I understand that they see me as a permanent connection and a permanent support, so I still try to be a resource for them. Yeah, so as long as they continue to want help and support. There's probably only maybe 10 young people right now that I still keep in contact with. And when I say regular basis, probably like at least every few months.*

*Almost always youth contact me after they age out.*

The participants in this study stated that their role in the foster youth's life should end when they leave care, and that they should either have enough resources or have another permanent connection to help them become successful after foster care. One participant stated that she wants to be replaceable and that the youth should not be calling her when they are in crisis:

*I don't want my kids to grow attached to me. I want to be replaceable because my role is not to be there for the holidays. Part of my role is relationship and trusts building... I should never be that person they are calling at midnight... We should be replaced and workers should not be these kids everything.*

Another participant also stated that the social worker must work with all the people in the foster youth's life in order for them to be successful. This participant noted that there must be a good relationship between the social worker and the foster parent so that there is a good plan for the youth after they leave foster care.

### **Summary**

According to the participants in this study, the success of foster youth aging out of care is a complex issue with many contributing factors. The participants stated many reasons that were attributed to the success of foster youth after they transition out of foster care. The participants



## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

were social workers who had experience with youth aging out of foster care. While it is a complicated issue, the participants attributed the integration of harm reduction, services, permanent connections, and social workers to the success of youth aging out of foster care.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Discussion**

Foster youth need continued support as they transition from foster care to adulthood. Many of them do it on their own without any support from caring adults. Foster care caseworkers need to help these youth set up connections with a caring adult who can support them before they transition out.

### **Findings Supported by the Literature**

A number of this study's findings are consistent with what the literature would have predicted. The finding that foster youth need more support is consistent with what several scholars (Curry and Abrams, 2015; Eskin, 2012; and Nixon, 1997) have suggested. The literature stated that many foster youth age out of care without any support from a caring adult, and that they often have no one they can turn to in time of crisis. The findings also support this by showing that these youth do not have unpaid adults in their life before they age out of foster care.

The finding that services are important for foster youth to become successful during their transition into adulthood is consistent with what several scholars (Eskin, 2012; Curry and Abrams, 2015; Kerbs and Pitcoff, 2006; Unrau, 2011; and Courtney, 2009) have suggested. The literature states that these services are often ineffective for foster youth. The findings support the literature by showing that the resources do not stick with a foster youth long enough and they are not able to get everything they need out of the services that are provided to them.

### **Unexpected Finding**

One unexpected finding from this study was that almost all former foster youth contact their foster care caseworkers after they age out. One possible explanation for this is the lack of support they receive once they age out of foster care. Other possible explanations include a close connection they have with their worker and/or the need for extended support and services. The

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

literature showed that foster youth often contact their former caseworkers, but after conducting interviews the researcher found that almost all of the former foster youth have contacted their caseworker at some point after transitioning. Because of the lack of support they often receive after transitioning out of care, youth feel like they can look to their former caseworker for advice and guidance. It was surprising to see many of these youth do not have anyone else they can contact and how much they rely on their caseworker. The social workers stated that boundaries with former foster youth is an issue they deal with, which was a surprising finding. They stated that they do not want the youth to become too attached to them, and that they should have other people to rely on. Even though they do not want to be these former foster youths' only support, it seems from the interviews, that often happens and the youth turn to their former foster care worker in time of crises.

### **Implications for Practice**

This research suggests a number of important implications for social work practice. These include the need for unpaid support for foster youth, increased time that the youth spends with services before transitioning, and youth specific services and treatment plans.

Youth aging out of foster care often do not have anyone supporting them that is not paid to be there. This is troubling because foster youth need continued support once they transition out. Foster care caseworkers can help connect these youth with adults who are unpaid and willing to be a support for them during their transition and throughout their life. By finding unpaid supports for these youth, they will have someone they can rely on and turn to when times get hard.

Foster youth are often involved in services before they transition out of care, but these services are often short lived and the youth do not stay in them long. For foster youth to get more

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

out of these services they should be in them longer and the services should move with the child when they are relocated. Foster care caseworkers should be more vigilant about foster youth staying in services and try to reduce the amount of moves they experience so they can stay in services. By having the youth participate in services a long time, they will learn the skills they need so they can have a more successful transition to adulthood.

Foster youth need to have a say in their specific services and treatment plans so their unique needs are met before they transition out of foster care. It is important for youth to have a say in their treatment plans so they are able to get what they need out of foster care before they age out. By doing this the foster care worker is often able to gain a better relationship with the youth. Foster care workers are required to work with the youth to create treatment plans that are useful for them, and to get them in services that will be beneficial for the specific youth.

According to the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, “When a child is age 14 or older, the case plan must be developed in consultation with the child, as well as two members of the case planning team who are chosen by the child and are not the child’s foster parent or caseworker” (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016).

### **Implications for Future Research**

This research suggests the need for more research related to ways that youth can be connected to supports who are unpaid during their transition. The research found the importance of unpaid supports for foster youth during their transition, but it did not state how to find these supports. Foster youth are often transitioning with little to no support, but finding them unpaid support before they transition out means they will likely become more successful. There needs to be more research on how youth can become connected to these supports before they transition out of foster care.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study sought to answer the question: How do foster care caseworkers currently help youth successfully transition out of the foster care system? Foster youth need more support as they transition from foster care to adulthood. This study found that there was a lack of support for these youth, and the support was often paid to be there with them. Foster youth need longer lasting support as they continue on into adulthood. This study also found the need for foster youth to have more individual services. Foster care caseworkers can help these youth by finding them permanent connections to supportive adults and to help them create individual services that fit their specific needs.

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

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## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

### Appendix B

#### Consent Form

#### 997080-1 Foster Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

You are invited to participate in a research study about how foster care caseworkers might help foster youth age out and become successful adults. You were selected as a possible participant because you have had experience working with foster youth aging out. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Jaclyn Jones as part of St Thomas's Masters of Social Work Program. The research advisor to this study is Mari Ann Graham. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

#### **Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to explore ways that social workers work with youth aging out of foster care.

#### **Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: answer questions during a face-to-face interview that will last about 1 to 1.5 hours. The interview will take place at a location of your choice, for example a public library or other private setting. There will be 8-10 participants in this study. The interview will be recorded. We will only meet once, and I therefor will be no follow up.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

This study has no known risks.  
There are no direct benefits for participating in this study.

#### **Compensation**

You will receive a \$5 Caribou Coffee gift card for being part of the study. The gift card will be given to participants even if they decide to withdraw from the study.

#### **Privacy**

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. Participants will be able to choose location and timing of the interview so that they feel comfortable. Their information will not be shared under any circumstances.

#### **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include audio

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

recordings, transcripts and notes. Audio recordings, transcripts, and notes will be saved in a password protected file on my personal computer. Paper consent forms will be kept in their original format for three years due to federal regulation. Hand-written notes will be scanned and then destroyed; scanned images will be stored in a password-protected file on my personal computer. I will only be traveling from the interview location to my home, and all research materials will be with me at all times in a bag (i.e., not visible to others) as I travel. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserves the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with any individuals, employers, cooperating agencies, or institutions, or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used. You can withdraw by simply telling me. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

### **Contacts and Questions**

My name is Jaclyn Jones. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 248-565-6070 or [jone2426@stthomas.edu](mailto:jone2426@stthomas.edu), or my research chair, Mari Ann Graham at 651-962-5812 or [magrahm@stthomas.edu](mailto:magrahm@stthomas.edu). You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or [muen0526@stthomas.edu](mailto:muen0526@stthomas.edu) with any questions or concerns.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. **I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.**

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

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**Signature of Study Participant**

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**Date**

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**Print Name of Study Participant**

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**Signature of Researcher**

---

**Date**

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

**Appendix C**Foster Youth Transitioning to Adulthood Interview Questions

- 1) Tell me about yourself, your age, education level, and how long you have been in the field.
- 2) How old are the youth when services are provided to them about transitioning?
- 3) What kinds of services are provided to the youth?
  - a. What do they teach the youth?
  - b. Are there required meetings for the youth to attend?
    - i. How many do the youth need to attend?
  - c. Are the youth excited about transitioning?
- 4) How often do the youth have access to your support when they have questions about transitioning?
- 5) Without divulging client names or any information that would potentially identify clients, please tell me a story about a successful transition.
- 6) Without divulging client names or any information that would potentially identify clients, please tell me a story about a former foster youth that you still worry about.
- 7) How do you see yourself helping youth transition?
- 8) What do you see other social workers doing that seem effective?
- 9) What are the methods that seem to be most effective to you?
- 10) What are the obstacles to those methods?
- 11) How long do you usually keep in touch?
  - a. Do you use Facebook, texting or email, or is it face to face?
- 12) What other sources of support do you think are important as youth transition?

## FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

- a. Mentors, foster parents, other caring adults?
  - b. Youth leadership council, community based programs?
- 13) What do you think is more important, the resources you taught the youth, or the time the youth spend with you?
- 14) How do you think workers could be more helpful?
- 15) What would you like to tell me that I have not asked?