

FOCUS: Preparing Teens for Their Future After Foster Care

Fostering FAMILIES TODAY

July/August 2017

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Parenting Teens, Preparing Them for the Future

Messy rooms, late nights and loud music seem to go with the teenage territory. Parenting biological children through their teens can be a challenge, so add a few layers of trauma, neglect and lack of attachment and foster parents of teens have the perfect storm for a really difficult parenting experience. But foster parents also have one of the most important roles during this time — preparing a teen for adulthood. Not easy under perfect circumstances, and kids who have gaps in their early development often have tremendous hurdles to overcome before being ready to walk over your threshold and into life on their own.

That's why this issue of *Fostering Families Today* is dedicated to giving you many tools to help build a foundation for your teen's journey to adulthood. We're talking about the importance of lifetime connections, life skills and so much more in this issue.

We start off with Imahny Walker, MSW, and Eileen Mayers Pasztor, DSW, sharing that it's time to move beyond terms like "aging out," "emancipating" and "transitioning" and instead provide children with the caring, loving adults who will forever be a part of their lives and help support them through the natural pitfalls

and successes that come for every young person learning how to make it in this world. We hope this gives our readers much to consider and reiterates the idea that every child deserves permanence.

In addition, there are articles about youth sharing their voices and experiences to impact systemic change, programs that are helping teens navigate their way into adulthood, and words of wisdom that will help every foster parent prepare the teens in their care for the future. It's our hope that with the stories and knowledge shared, you will feel better prepared to help the child in your care.

If we are successful, then hopefully together we'll be able to work toward turning the dismal statistics on teens aging out of foster care into more positives. It's not OK that kids who are still in the system at age 18 without permanency are more likely to be incarcerated, homeless, have an unplanned pregnancy and struggle in poverty for a lifetime.

So, whether the child in your home today is 2, 12 or 18, please read carefully, take a few notes and prepare for the teen parenting journey ahead.

Kim

kim phagan-hansel



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Keeping Kids Connected

Let's 'Age Out' the Term 'Aging Out'

BY IMAHNY WALKER, MSW, AND EILEEN MAYERS PASZTO

This article suggests that there is an inherently deficient approach to policies and programs that focus on “helping” young people in foster care “age out” or “emancipate.” It dates these programs back almost 40 years and explains why they may not be congruent with permanency and a strengths-based approach to child welfare. It concludes with the suggestion to abolish words and programs — that would not be used by most anyone reading this article regarding their birth children — by having true permanency for young people in foster care.

INTRODUCTION

In 1983, the U.S. Children’s Bureau funded one of — if not the first — federally funded research projects aimed at strategies to “prepare older adolescents to move out of foster care into responsible living.” It was

named Project Stepping Out, explaining that many “foster youth” were pushed out or they dropped out of care: rarely did they experience the steps that most young people — including probably everyone reading this article — take to transition from childhood and adolescence to young adult living and maintain relationships that are safe, nurturing and enduring. The findings of Project Stepping Out were described in the U.S. Children’s Bureau publication, *Children Today*. The journal was discontinued in 1997, but legislation and programs to help youth in foster care “emancipate” continue, impacting new generations of youth in care.

In 2010, *Fostering Families Today* published an article, “Transitioning – Foster Care to Adulthood,” providing the continuing negative statistics for young people in care who “age out” with too many risk factors

and not nearly enough protective factors to realize their dreams. Research reflects that most everyone — especially anyone who has experienced trauma — is ill-equipped to handle the realities of adult life at 18 years of age. “Aging out” means not having relationships that are safe, nurturing and enduring, but also being more likely not to have high school diplomas, be under- or unemployed, experience poverty and homelessness, have unplanned pregnancies, be at risk for trafficking, and enter the adult criminal system, according to the report “A Vulnerable Population at Risk” in the 2008 issue of *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*.

Federal and state independent living programs were designed to curtail those outcomes. They hope to help prepare for the enormous challenges of adulthood

and autonomy. They offer a wide range of assistance such as paying for educational/vocational, job start-up and housing start-up expenses. These programs can also offer daily living and job skill classes, funding for college or trade school, work clothes, uniforms, tools and union dues. What they fail to do is connect young people with that one essential requirement: permanency. This means having at least one, just one, adult who will make a commitment, provide continuity in the relationship, and afford the legal and social status that comes from being, as stated so beautifully by a former young person in care, Regina Louise, author of "Somebody's Someone."

INCONGRUENCE WITH FOSTER CARE GOALS

The goal of foster care is to provide children with safe, nurturing relationships and meet their developmental needs with the aim of reuniting them with their parents or connecting them with other relationships that are intended to last a lifetime. The child welfare system has a history of being more successful attaining this goal for younger children, but permanency has been more elusive for older children and youth who at some point are assessed to be "hard to place." That is one of the most "blame the victim" deficit-based expressions invented by the child welfare profession. Children are not hard to place, but safe and nurturing families are hard to find. This puts the responsibility on agencies and communities. It is truly believed that children grow up better in families than in institutions, according to the article "Essential Requirement for Permanence: A Model of Practice and Children's Perspective" from a 2015 issue of *Fostering Families Today*.

Independent living programs are not a plan for permanency. Everyone needs skills to transition to adulthood but these skills should not replace the need for human relationships. Young people in foster care should not be prepared for their transition to community living with participation in

an independent living program as their final destination. Rather, they need connections with nurturing adults who can help them thrive, and safely.

A STRENGTHS-BASED LANGUAGE AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Much of the available literature on youth in foster care is contradictory, stating that children are being prepared to "live on their own" or "independently," which is often a false prophecy. Alternative programs would

Support Resource Families as Team Members in Child Protection and Trauma Informed Care of Children" from the Child Welfare League of America. This includes ensuring that, while providing around-the-clock care, foster, kinship and adoptive families support cognitive and academic development, help develop social skills, and are respectful of cultural, gender and sexual expression as well. Resource families should support positive relationships between children and their birth families. Supporting these

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be those that focus first on preventing children from being separated from their parents. This requires strategies that reduce abuse and neglect and provide quality family preservation services to the fullest possible extent. These strategies must recognize that economic challenges and substance use are significant factors, in addition to institutional racism (which was identified by Dr. Ruth McRoy in the book "Child Welfare for the Twenty-first Century" from Columbia University Press), that must be addressed.

When children have to be separated, the families that they join — kinship, foster and adoptive — must have the skills, resources and commitments to ameliorate loss and trauma. Note the word "join" and not "place" as children are not objects, according to "The PRIDE Model of Practice to Develop and

relationships is essential, as research finds that one in every two children in care is of transitional age, and only about one in five of them is adopted. Teamwork is essential among children's families and service providers, using the mantra: Minimize trauma, maximize teamwork. This is going to happen only when agencies have a model of practice that recruits, assesses, selects, trains, retains and supports foster, kinship and adoptive families as team members or collaborators in child protection and trauma informed care of children, according to "The PRIDE Model of Practice." And this model of practice must include a skilled child welfare workforce that is educated and experienced, and committed to ethical principles proposed by the National Association of Social Workers: competence, dignity, integrity, importance of relationships, service and advocacy. In other words, give

families and the child welfare staff who work with them the strengths, skills and supports that are needed to ensure no disruptions for the children in their care and in their service.

The social work profession emphasizes a "strengths-based approach." This means understanding that while individuals, families and communities have challenges or needs (not weaknesses), it is essential to first recognize any positives. These can be relationships, resources, abilities, skills, knowledge and networks. In child welfare, strengths-based words and expressions remind us that we are serving children and families who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Not only does the social work profession champion the use of strengths-based words, but so do young people who have strong feelings about the labels attached to foster care. As one young person stated, "I am not a label, I am a person who has been labeled all my life and I've always fought it."

Let's make "aging out," "emancipating" and "transitioning" non-issues. It is an abject failure of policies, programs and practices to replace the right of children and young people in care to have families providing them with continuity, commitment and legal and social status with made up words and pretend programs.

Earlier this year, 34 years after Project Stepping Out published its report, a group of young people ages 20-21 with foster care experience worked with a committed advocate, researcher and writer, Dr. Monique B. Mitchell, to publish "Living in an Inspired World: Voices and Visions of Youth in Foster Care," which can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/y8r853zq>. They offer more than 300 pages of positive perspectives on how they can live in an inspired world. Let's help them be inspired. We owe each one of them the realization of their inspirations and aspirations. ☀

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