

Supporting Foster Youth and Their Family Connections: Policy and Practice Recommendations

In this study, a research team from UCLA learned directly from the youngest generation of foster youth transitioning into adulthood about the issues facing them personally and in relation to their family connections. We heard about issues that impacted them during childhood in the foster care system, what could have made their experiences and relationships healthier, and what supports and resources could still help them rebuild those relationships if they are interested in doing so.

The information described in this research brief is important because it is informed by participants' lived experiences and was gathered in a trauma-informed environment that valued youth agency and autonomy. In order to improve the lives of individual youth and their family connections, people working with foster children must seek authentic youth engagement, prioritizing their voices at every stage of case planning, program development, and system reform.¹

The Approach

This educational resource is based on a qualitative participatory action research methodology called Photovoice. By giving youth a chance to tell their stories through autonomous and personal ways, Photovoice empowers them to use their creative expression to build public awareness and inform policy. It uses photography and analytical discussions to examine issues of concern to a particular population and helps participants brainstorm



The Issue

Youth who are transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood are the experts in their own lives, and yet these Transition Age Youth (TAY) often have critical decisions made for them. Foster youth are often left out of conversations impacting their day-to-day lives and family dynamics — who they live with and whether they can see siblings or extended family. This research brief presents recommendations to improve policies and practices related to foster care and the preservation of family and sibling connections during and after care. These recommendations were developed in concert with current and former foster youth living in Los Angeles County, California, relying on a qualitative study led by UCLA researchers in July and August 2023.

¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). *Prioritizing youth voice: The importance of authentic youth engagement in case planning*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/youth-engagement>



and advocate for relevant policy changes.² The current research brought together seven Transition Aged Youth (TAY), ages 18-23, to develop their photography skills, personal narrative development, and critical thinking through eight group meetings. Participants photographed situations that reflected their current lives and challenges as well as what they remembered about their foster care experience, then met in groups to discuss the photographs and their responses to them. This resource presents suggested solutions to the youths' identified challenges.

Summary of Recommendations

To support their transition to adulthood, Transition Aged Youth need system actors like judges, attorneys, social workers, case managers, and other practitioners to:

- Implement and enforce policies to protect youth, encourage their autonomy, and respect their decisions and privacy
- Provide more tailored support and opportunities for meaningful connection between youth and families
- Ensure youth's mental health and well-being is prioritized and supported — and that they can feel like normal kids and teens
- Work to destigmatize foster care and foster kids

Identified Issues, in Detail

Personal Impacts

Members of the research collective identified a variety of personal impacts of involvement in the child welfare system. The study participants, or TAY, reported feelings of instability, confusion, and isolation while in care. They reported not knowing what resources were available to them both during and after care and not having access to needed resources while in care. Some reported that foster parents spent funds received for the youth on themselves. As a result, TAY reported feeling behind their peers, not being able to engage in normal youth milestones and activities, including

² Wang, C. C. (2006). *Youth participation in Photovoice as a strategy for community change*. *Journal of Community Practice*, 14(1-2), 147-16

joining a sports team, participating in extracurricular activities, or getting a driver's license.

While in care, TAY reported receiving a lot of attention from well-meaning system actors and also their peers, who noticed that they were frequently taken out of class for meetings with case workers, counselors, and other professionals. They said it felt like everyone knew their private business and they felt stigmatized for being in foster care, as if they were being viewed as “bad kids.” This is particularly problematic because, generally, these young people were removed from family situations in which they were victimized.

TAY reported that being involved in the child welfare system felt dehumanizing. They often felt like they were treated as a case file instead of as an individual with distinct views, wishes, and needs. At a young age, they were exposed to emergency responders, judges, attorneys, etc., with minimal explanation and little to no emotional support. As a result, many now struggle with developing and maintaining interpersonal trust, suffer from anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, and remain unsure of where and with whom they belong.



Effect on Family and Sibling Relationships

TAY also reported a variety of ways involvement in the child welfare system impacted their family and sibling relationships, and their lasting views of family. Youth reported growing up without parental figures, people who would be there to consistently guide them through their experiences and milestones. Foster parents, social workers, attorneys, and other system actors were frequently reassigned or removed from the youth's cases and lives so there was often little consistency in who they could turn to as they grew. TAY often lacked examples or role models of loving and appropriate parenting. Such experiences can contribute to generational cycles of foster care involvement. Although none of the study participants had a child removed from their care, they reported that other members of their families or other personal connections were system involved.

“ A little bit about foster care is... you don't know when the next court date is. You don't know when your social worker is going to call you back. You don't know what's happening. [You don't know] if you could stay with the family you like... ”

“ It's so hard to feel normal when you're getting all of this attention from the people around you, which they're trying to help, but it — it puts all the eyes on you, and the last thing you want is all those eyes on you. Because...you're trying to...get away and not be seen as the problematic child or the child who has less than, or who doesn't want people like — you don't want people to know that this is who you are, you are your own person. And you don't want your situation defining you. ”

The youths also reported insufficient awareness of and access to resources such as phones or money that would enable them to remain in contact with their siblings and extended family members. They reported that system actors often did not understand the diversity of family situations. They made assumptions about how siblings could and should connect and with whom they needed to be placed based on external opinions or the needs of foster parents instead of consulting the youth directly affected by these decisions.

Even when youth were in close proximity to siblings, for example at a court date, they reported not being able to engage with siblings of different age groups. For example, at Edelman Children’s Courthouse in Los Angeles, teens are separated from younger children. While this may make sense from a developmental perspective, it prohibits youths of different age ranges from being able to engage with their siblings even when they are nearby.

Being removed from their family home would be difficult for any young person. Being abruptly placed with a family they don’t know at the same time was particularly difficult for the youths in our study. Many reported difficulty building connections with their foster families. Part of this was due to a lack of cultural sensitivity or responsiveness on the part of the foster parents, but it was also the trauma of being removed from everything familiar and placed into an environment to which they immediately had to adapt with no notice or playbook. Some youth also reported abusive experiences in their foster homes, including foster parents who yelled at the children, made them perform hard manual labor as chores, or enforced strict gender roles and expectations. These experiences compounded the challenges of being removed from home and placed in an unfamiliar environment.

“ As the oldest sibling in foster care, not knowing how [my siblings] were doing and not really contacting them because I wasn’t allowed to really impacted me and us altogether. ”

“ It got me thinking about the first time I was placed into a home. And I vividly remember staring at this tub of ice cream. It was the vanilla, the strawberry, and the chocolate, and it was a huge tub of ice cream that our foster parents tried to give us for dinner because we wouldn’t eat. And I just remember I was just staring at the tub on the counter and they’re like, ‘You have to eat something. Do you want some ice cream? We bought this because you guys were coming today.’ And I was like, ‘Oh, you knew we were coming? I didn’t know we were coming.’ ”

Expanded List of Actionable Recommendations

Solution 1: Implement and enforce policies designed to protect youth, encourage their autonomy, and respect their decisions and privacy.

New policies:

- Ensure everyone within the system treats foster youths and their families with respect and seeks to humanize “case files.”
- Better allocate funding so that caseworkers can have smaller caseloads and more time to interact with families and children.
- Respect youths’ decisions regarding whether they want to share their foster youth status or keep their status private.
- Implement policies that enforce privacy (e.g., at schools, authority figures should not be allowed to share a youth’s foster status or call students to their offices during class time.)

- Social workers should provide better oversight to foster parents by
 - Asking questions regarding what type of chores are being delegated,
 - Checking if foster family interactions are coercive,
 - Making sure the youths are not being yelled at, and
 - Ensuring foster parents are not imposing strict gender roles or gender discrimination.

Changes to existing policies:

- Enforce system actors to explain to youths and their families exactly the steps that will occur and have set interval dates and times to follow up.
- Enforce cultural awareness and responsiveness trainings.
- Enforce anti-discrimination laws in the foster care system (e.g., AB 458, the Foster Care Non-Discrimination Act.)

Solution 2: Provide More Tailored Support and Opportunities for meaningful Connection Between Youths and Families

- Consult youths directly regarding sibling connections and visitations.
- Implement trauma-informed visitation, allowing siblings to connect at Edelman.
- Create activities for teenagers at Edelman and other children’s courts.
- Break cycles of foster care involvement through anti-racism/ anti-discrimination/ anti-stereotype trainings for system actors and trainings for foster youths and families on breaking cycles of abuse.
- Conduct training on individualized approaches. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to every family or child who enters the child welfare system.
- Provide access to free family therapy and support groups.

Solution 3: Ensure Youths’ Mental Health and Well-Being is Prioritized and Supported — and That They Can Feel Like Normal Kids and Teens

- Provide an annual stipend for foster youth that can be applied toward participating in extracurricular activities.
- Develop better and more accessible foster parent training and resources to ensure youth in foster homes feel supported and included as part of the family.
- Set a budget for foster parents that must be used on hygiene for the youth in their care. Require receipts or other verification of spending.
- Ensure that information about available resources for foster youths is widely disseminated. Creating a central website/master list with all available resources would be a good start.

Solution 4: Work to Destigmatize Foster Care and Foster Kids

- Provide more support and awareness of the issues facing foster youth through funding for anti-discrimination newspaper ads, billboards, and social media.
- Help to destigmatize involvement in the foster care system by sharing foster youth success stories.
- Stop psychiatrists from overprescribing to system-involved youths.
- Stop foster parents from claiming the children are disabled so they can receive higher stipends.

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