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# Smoothing the transition to adulthood: Creating ongoing supportive relationships among foster youth

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the utility and effectiveness of a foster care model designed to improve youth transitions to adulthood. The model engages the youth's social network, helps youth to develop supportive, ongoing relationships with adults, and is heavily focused on youth empowerment. A three-year evaluation of 88 foster youth revealed that youth exposed to the model felt they had more power over their lives, had a wider variety of supportive adults in their lives, and could better regulate their emotions than those in a comparison group.



## 1. Introduction

Youth aging out of the foster care system experience a host of risks including lack of education, unemployment, criminal behavior, and inadequate housing (Courtney et al., 2011; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Reilly, 2003). Child welfare as an institution has an obligation to address the needs of youth aging out of foster care. This is evidenced both in the changing tide of child welfare services that attend more to transitional needs and is supported by public policy (Foster Care Independence Act, 1999; Fostering Connections Act, 2008).

### 1.1. Socio-emotional support

There is rising recognition that traditional independent living skills (ILS) are important but are not enough and do not ultimately provide what is needed to develop sustaining supportive relationships and truly become self-sufficient. Courtney et al.'s (2011) extensive longitudinal research on former foster youth has demonstrated repeatedly that despite rigorous ILS training, youth discharged from foster care continue to be un- or underemployed, experience recurring bouts of homelessness, engage in high-risk behaviors, and become incarcerated at rates substantially higher than in comparable populations of youth who were not in foster care.

Some of the shift toward meeting social and emotional needs is reflected in policy changes over the past decade. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which was created in 1999 as part of the Foster Care Independence Act, speaks specifically to the needs of transitioning youth. Much of this program was designed to address their concrete needs such as employment, education, and housing. However, another primary purpose of the program is to provide personal and emotional support to these youth via mentoring and "dedicated adults" (National Resource Center for Youth Development, n.d.).

Young adults depend on parents and other adults for support and guidance long into early adulthood. Foster youth, however, often enter adulthood with severed or compromised family relationships, histories of trauma, and a limited ability to trust others. Moreover, these youth may still be coping with losses and change resulting from their transition *into* foster care while they are expected to prepare for their transition *out* of foster care. The disruption of social networks when foster youth experience transition, whether it is entering care, changing placements during care, or when they leave care, can result in psychological distress (Perry, 2006). A strong network while the youth is in foster care has been found to reduce anxiety and depression (Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010).

Social support can include emotional support, advice or guidance, material aid, spending time relaxing with the youth, or a demonstration of love and affection (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Having a high level of social support is essential for youth transitioning out of the foster care system; yet many youth find that their social support needs are unmet at the time of their exit from care (Ahrens, Richardson, Lozano, Fan, & DuBois, 2007; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). While support from biological families and foster families is most common, youth may also find support from peers, support groups, or caseworkers (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Mitchell et al., 2010; Wade, 2008). In interviews with 96 former foster youth, Collins, Spencer, and Ward (2010) found that youth reported a wide range of mentors, many of which were informal relationships. The presence of mentors among these youth was significantly associated with an increased rate of high school

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graduation and decreased rate of homelessness. Formal mentoring has some challenges, particularly for this population of young people who may have learned not to trust adults. Current evidence suggests that mentoring relationships that occur naturally are most effective and help youth achieve competence in independent living after exiting the system, leaving them with support in the event of challenges or crises (Ahrens et al., 2007; Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Scannapieco et al., 2007; Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010).

Youth with larger support networks have more overall life satisfaction, leading to healthier lives, higher levels of education, as well as lower risk of suicide, sexually transmitted infections, and physical aggression, whereas youth with smaller support networks are more likely to experience homelessness after leaving care (Ahrens et al., 2007; Reilly, 2003). Increasing the level of social support youth receive before and during their transition out of the foster care system can minimize stress levels, creating more opportunity for success (Mitchell et al., 2010).

### 1.2. Trauma

The effects of past trauma can exacerbate foster youth's behavior and relationship-building skills. Almost by definition, children who have been placed in foster care have experienced some trauma, due to either the events that led to out-of-home placement, the experience of being removed from their homes, or both. Separation and loss from a parent at a young age can hinder one's ability to form trusting relationships in the future,

> The mechanism underlying the harmful effects of network disruption may be the inability to develop and maintain sufficient supportive networks to replace those that were lost (Perry, 2006, p. 386).

The challenge, then, extends beyond identifying a network for youth, to developing the skills needed to build and sustain such connections. Bruce Perry, a renowned authority on childhood trauma has demonstrated that a wide range of adverse experiences can disrupt normal brain development, including abuse, neglect, premature exposure to drugs or alcohol, and impaired early bonding (Perry, 2009). The neurological effects can include hyperarousal to triggers that may be unknown or misunderstood by foster parents, and can create significant problems with attachment and quality of relationships (Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995).

### 1.3. Empowerment

In child welfare, youth empowerment often is described as permitting youth to "give input" or "have a voice" in decisions. However, to adhere to an underlying social theory of youth empowerment, they must go far beyond this. In such models, youth play significant – not minor – roles in meetings and programming, many times taking on a leadership role (Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011; Kaplan, Skolnik, & Turnbull, 2009; Wehmeyer & Gragoudas, 2004). In other words, youth are not just provided an opportunity to give input; they are part of the decision-making process. Moreover, they have opportunities not only to receive support but to serve as mentors and educators as well. Another important dimension of empowerment is knowledge of power structures. That is, youth need to understand how decisions are made so they can navigate the system in their best interest (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006).

There has been movement toward giving youth more power at the point of transitioning to adulthood. This is seen in the federal John G. Chafee Program of 1999 which requires that youth are directly involved in planning, and federal requirements under the Fostering Connections Act which direct youth and their caseworkers to work together to create a transitions plan, typically in the final three months of care. However, it likely requires more than a few months to fully learn the skills necessary to make good decisions that affect one's life. Giving youth more power to make their own decisions earlier, rather than immediately prior to discharge, may present the opportunity to learn from their mistakes before they leave foster care, while the stakes are not as high.

### 1.4. The present study

Considering the grave long-term outcomes for former foster youth and their lack of social support, it is imperative to identify program models that have a demonstrated impact on helping youth develop a support network before they leave care. This study evaluated a model for older youth in foster care that integrates youth empowerment, trauma-informed practice, and emphasizes relationships. The model is called Creating Ongoing Relationships Effectively (CORE). Over the course of three years, we compared youth in this program to similar foster youth who received traditional independent living skills training.

## 2. CORE model description

CORE is a foster care program model designed to address the socio-emotional needs of older youth in foster care who are nearing transition to adulthood. The model was conceived and implemented by Family Alternatives, a private Minneapolis-based foster care provider (henceforth "the agency"). Typically, private foster care agencies provide services that are aimed at foster homes rather than the children, such as recruiting, training, licensing, and monitoring. This agency chose to make their services youth-oriented and to provide direct services to youth in addition to their foster home licensing services.

CORE was sparked by the agency director's observation that "focusing only on independent living skills perpetuated an adult-led paradigm and did little to meet youth's socio-emotional needs or to encourage foster parents and social workers to help youth take control of their own lives" (Riebel, 2010). The mission of CORE is to ensure that youth have the supportive ongoing relationships necessary to help them through their transition out of foster care and into living on their own as young adults. The model employs a holistic approach by educating youth, foster parents, and social workers, and by transforming the agency culture to one that empowers youth long before they embark on their transition. As such, the CORE model focuses on three areas: building supportive relationships, youth empowerment, and trauma-informed practice. Fig. 1 depicts the logic model for CORE.

### 2.1. Building supportive relationships

The CORE philosophy asserts that an agency serving youth who have been removed from their families must recognize and value the primacy of relationships. The agency aimed for youth to have at least one person looking out for them as they navigated their entrance to adulthood. The most likely supporters were foster parents and biological relatives. Both are important sources of support but cannot always be counted on for exiting youth. Foster parents have a continuous flow of children entering and leaving, and may not be able to provide ongoing support for every youth who leaves their home. Biological relatives, though often a top choice for youth, can be unavailable or unreliable for some of the same reasons the youth was placed outside the home. Therefore, CORE encouraged youth to look broadly to other people in their lives who might be willing to step forward to support them through their transitions. Because many foster youth lack basic relationship-building skills needed to develop such connections, the agency brought youth and their foster parents together to learn critical relationship-building skills that they could then practice together at home.

Agency social workers and psychologists with extensive training on relationship development skills created 12–15 week sessions that met weekly to help youth build their relationship skills. On a weekly basis, foster parents and youth ate a meal together while they were presented information on relationship skills such as emotion regulation, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness, mindfulness, and anger