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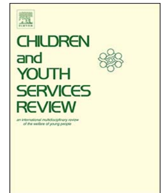

Coping with change: Using the Bridge's Transitions Framework with foster youth☆

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1. Introduction

Older youth in foster care face many stressors and obstacles that are unique to their situation, most notably the recurring transitions they endure. The original transition from biological home to foster care can be traumatic in the life of adolescents, for whom identity formation is still a major life task (ACS-NYU Children's Trauma Institute, 2012; Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010). As many as 20,000 youth per year will remain in care until they age out of the system and are launched into this significant developmental milestone, not by their parents but rather by the child welfare system (Children's Bureau, 2016a). Thirty percent of children in care are 13 years or older and nearly a nearly a quarter (26%) of all children currently in care were placed during their adolescent years (Children's Bureau, 2016a). As such, providers must often work to prepare older youth for their transition *out* of foster care while they are still trying to adjust to their transition *into* care.

The Bridges Transitions Framework (Bridges, 2009) implemented in this study shows some promise in smoothing foster youth reactions to change. The framework was adapted to help older youth, foster parents, and social workers look beyond the concrete goals of independent living (e.g., housing, employment). It is process-oriented and attends to the psycho-social reactions and emotions that youth experience during times of significant change. The framework as applied here provided knowledge, skills, and new tactics for youth, foster parents, and social workers to prepare youth for discharge to independent living (Bridges, 2009; Van Ryzin, Mills, Kelban, Vars, & Chamberlain, 2011). When youth and foster parents understand why youth exhibit certain responses to change, both parties have the opportunity to recognize and avert potential triggers. As such, the framework offers the potential to bring new understanding of otherwise challenging behaviors.

1.1. Transitions while in foster care placement

The typical adolescent entering foster care experiences several placement transitions before eventually exiting the system, most often by aging out (Stott, 2012; White, O'Brien, Pecora, & Buher, 2015). Youth who enter foster care at an older age than average have been found to experience higher rates of placement moves than others, despite having spent the least amount of time in care due to their late entry age (Havlicek, 2010; Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007). While the placement moves may at first occur between foster homes, among those entering care at age 13 or older, about half will shift away from family-like settings into congregate care (DHHS, 2015). Repeated placement moves can lead to a disrupted education, and are linked with later substance abuse and pregnancy at a young age, among other problems (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Scannapieco, Smith, & Blakeney-Strong, 2016; Stott, 2012; White et al., 2016).

These struggles are disproportionately experienced by youth of color, an artifact of the unequal ethnic distribution of children admitted to care. For example, although Black or African Americans only comprise 12.6% of the general population, they make up 24% of all children in care and 35% of 17-year-olds in care (Children's Bureau, 2016a; Children's Bureau, 2016b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Compared to their White counterparts, African American youth are more likely to be placed in foster care, are more likely to be placed as infants, have longer stays, and are significantly less likely to be reunified with family (GAO, 2007; Wulczyn & Lery, 2007). Moreover, African American youth are the least likely to receive independent living services to facilitate a smooth transition (GAO, 2007; Okpych, 2015).

Youth enter care with histories of trauma and, once in care, often feel a lack of control over decisions affecting their lives, which can compromise their ability to cope with significant life changes (Hébert, Lanctôt, & Turcotte, 2016; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Decisions about admission and placement moves arguably yield some of the most dramatic changes for youth, yet youth often have little say in them (Unrau, 2007). Youth can feel rejected when moved out of a placement, a feeling that can be exacerbated with each additional move (Hébert et al., 2016; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). To guard against feelings of rejection or of being unwanted, youth may "emotionally shut down" by withdrawing from people or behaving in ways that expedite another transition or rejection, further impeding their ability to connect with future caregivers (Unrau et al., 2008).

Decisions about parental visits are also typically not in the youth's

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control, yet can be a source of continued internal turmoil throughout the foster care experience. Children naturally form attachments with their parent, regardless of whether that parent maltreats them (Ainsworth, 1989). Parent visits are a critical child welfare intervention used to sustain the parent–child connection and are important for family reunification (Haight et al., 2002; Hess 1988; Samuels, 2009). Recognizing the value of family contact, the Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P. L. 96–272), explicitly requires family visits as a key part of family preservation efforts. Each family visit encompasses a smaller transition, both at the start and end of visiting time. Youth who spend time with family may have trouble letting go at the close of visits, though more frequent time with parents might ease the pain of separation (Lee & Whiting, 2007; McWey, Acock, & Porter, 2010; McWey & Mullis, 2004; Nesmith, 2013).

Learning about the process of adjusting to change while in care can normalize the feelings and reactions to the transitions youth experience, raise personal awareness about past traumas and triggers, foster psychological wellbeing, and enhance healthy relationships (Bridges, 2009; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

2. Transitioning to adulthood

The transition out of foster care is often the last in a long line of childhood moves that foster youth experience. To distinguish transition types, a foster care *spell* here refers to the time in care from admission to discharge; a single spell may include multiple *placements*. Placement moves during a foster care spell can have a cumulative effect on youth as they transition out of foster care into independent living. These moves can impact education, later employment and overall stability in early adulthood.

The more moves a youth experiences, the more likely their education is disrupted, which can have lasting effects into adulthood. Transcripts and individual Educational Plans (IEP) often fail to transfer when youth move, causing them to fall behind academically, ultimately leading to low high school graduation rates observed among foster youth (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). Youth's level of educational attainment decreases with each additional move during a foster care spell (Scannapieco et al., 2016). In response to this problem, the Fostering Connections to Success Act (P.L. 110-351, 2008) states that when it is possible and in the best interests of the child, the child should remain in his or her current school. However, this has proven easier in theory than in practice. The necessary resources and coordination between schools and child welfare organizations are often lacking. In fact, by age 23, about a quarter of former foster youth still do not have a high school diploma or GED (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010).

After discharge, former foster youth are substantially more likely than other young adults to have significant problems securing employment and stable housing. By age 19 only a third of former foster youth are employed at least part-time, a figure that increases to half (52%) by age 21 (Children's Bureau, 2016b). Stable housing is even more critical. In the years following discharge, bouts of homelessness are common (Courtney et al., 2005). The most current data from the National Youth in Transition Database shows that by age 19, nearly one-fifth (19%) of former foster youth had experienced at least one bout of homelessness, and by age 21, that number climbed to 26% (Children's Bureau, 2016b).

The connections to family are critical to youth both during foster care and after they transition to adulthood. During care, when children and youth do not have regular access to their parents, they can suffer from ambiguous loss, the experience of grieving someone who is physically absent but psychologically present (Boss, 2006; Samuels, 2009). Yet, regardless of a maltreatment history and physical distance, a substantial proportion of former foster youth reconnect with their families of origin and a majority report feeling close to siblings and mothers (Courtney et al., 2010). While it is not yet known if those family ties are adequately supportive to smooth the transition to adulthood, certainly family is important enough that youth seek to reconnect soon after discharge (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney et al., 2005; Geenen & Powers, 2007). Though the role of parent visits during care can be a mixed experience, those relationships should not be overlooked as youth transition to adulthood and regain decision-making control about contact with family.

Independent living services that coach foster youth in concrete skills such as money management or resume and job interviewing training, are essential but not enough (Fowler, Marcal, Zhang, Day, & Landsverk, 2017; Greeson, Garcia, Kima, Thompson, & Courtney, 2015). There is a growing body of research pointing to the critical role of social and emotional support, particularly from an adult, that most young people need during the transition to adulthood (Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Samuels, 2008; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

The state of this research presents a compelling case to improve the stability and quality of care for youth during child welfare placements, one that attends to their educational, employment, familial, and socio-emotional needs as they prepare for discharge and independent living. At the same time, youth need strategies to navigate the emotional trauma of admission into care and repeated placement moves during out-of-home placement that may help them build healthier and sustained relationships.

3. Bridges' Transitions Framework

The Transitions Framework (Bridges, 2009) distinguishes between external *changes* and internal *transitions,* the latter of which is experienced by everyone in a personal way. *Change*, according to Bridges (2009), is situational and comprised of discrete events that individuals do not necessarily control, such as losing a job, the birth of a sibling, or in the context of this study, placement in foster care. *Transitions* are the inner psychological processes and reactions to external changes. Everyone experiences both, and the larger or more dramatic the change, the more difficult the transition can be. While the framework was originally developed with organizational management in mind, it has been employed in a variety of settings beyond the workplace. Theoretical applications of the framework have been used to assess foster youth and their caregivers, as well as direct applications with foster youth and with domestic violence programs (Anghel, 2011; Dima & Skehill, 2011; Shy & Mills, 2010; Van Ryzin et al., 2011). Yet there is scant empirical research assessing the utility and effectiveness of the framework in foster care settings.

The main steps in the Transitions Framework training and process include normalization of emotional reactions to change, becoming familiar with one's own internal transition process, and developing coping strategies built off this knowledge. The framework provides a path for youth – and adults in their lives - to understand why youth behave and feel the way they do after a change in their lives. The framework categorizes responses to change into phases called Endings, the Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings (Bridges, 2009). Though this generally represents a sequence, an individual may encounter aspects of more than one phase simultaneously. Central to the framework is the focus on process rather than goals, and moving at one's own natural pace. The following description of the phases draws on Bridges (2009) work.

Endings are triggered by loss: of a person through death or change in relationship, a living situation, a school enrollment or job, etc. The internal response may be mourning, sadness, regret, or wistfulness. During this phase, the individual focuses more on the past than the present or future. Critical to the framework, this is not the time to set goals or create new plans. Even when their biological family home was unsafe, children still typically love their parents and miss the familiar place they called home (Ainsworth, 1989). Problems with adjustment can occur if the past is not honored, or if youth are pushed to focus on future plans or 'look on the bright side' while they still grieve. The

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