



## “It’s really overwhelming”: Parent and service provider perspectives of parents aging out of foster care



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### ABSTRACT

Rates of pregnancy and parenthood among current and former foster youth are two to three times higher than non-foster youth peers. Repeat pregnancies among young mothers aging out of foster care also occur at higher rates than peers not involved with the child welfare system. Furthermore, mothers aging out of foster care demonstrate high levels of parenting stress and risk for child maltreatment. Indeed, this population is in significant need of help; however, beyond anecdotal evidence, little is known about the needs and day-to-day experiences of this population. In order to tailor interventions to meet the needs of parents aging out, the perspectives of stakeholders must be taken into account. Using qualitative data gathered from separate small group interviews with parents aging out and service providers, this study examined participants’ perceptions of parents’ daily experiences, strengths, and needs. Findings indicated that parents aging out face overwhelming adversity and stress with little outside financial, emotional, or parenting support from family or friends. Yet, parents also expressed motivation to be good parents, resilience, and the desire to gain effective parenting skills. Although similar themes arose among parent and provider interviews, perceptions differed. Parents expressed hope and optimism in providing for their children while providers expressed systemic failure in preparing parents for independent living. Based on these findings, we conclude that parenting interventions specific to parents aging out may need to address three fundamental and key components: basic needs, social support, and effective parenting techniques.

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*“I’m almost 22, but when I think about myself maturely, I know I have a lot to learn. I am still a kid. That’s how I think. But I have a kid. And when her birthday comes up, I am celebrating that I kept her alive. This thing is alive; she’s not dead. She’s happy. I don’t understand how I did it. It’s hard because I didn’t have parents to set an example.”*

[Mother aging out of foster care]

### 1. Introduction

“Aging out” is a process that occurs when youth prepare to exit foster care and transition into adulthood. Youth “age out” of foster care when they are not reunified with their family, adopted, or placed in a legal guardianship by the time they reach the age when they are no

longer eligible for child welfare services. Although the age of ineligibility varies across the United States (U.S.), youth typically age out between the ages of 18 to 21. Prevalence data for youth aging out of foster care in the U.S. indicate that rates of pregnancy and early childbearing among current and former foster youth are two to three times higher than non-foster youth peers (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Oshima, Narendorf, & McMillen, 2013; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2015). To examine pregnancy rates, Courtney and Dworsky (2006) used data from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, a longitudinal study of young people leaving foster care in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, and found that almost 50% of females aging out of foster care had been pregnant prior to turning 19 years old compared to 20% of the general population of same-aged females in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health. In a national sample of over 15,000 17 year olds, 10% of females reported giving birth and 4% of males reported fathering a child, which are rates higher than the than their peers in the general population (Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2015). In addition, young mothers aging out of foster care have high rates of repeat pregnancies; approximately 30% of teen mothers gave birth a second time before age 20 (Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009; Putnam-Hornstein & King, 2014).

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Although there are high rates of pregnancies, births, and repeat births among young women aging out of foster care, few studies have examined the day-to-day experiences of parents aging out, their strengths, and their needs. This is an important limitation of extant research because understanding the experiences of these parents is an important first step in the development of relevant and effective interventions. This qualitative study contributes to the body of literature examining perspectives of current and former foster youth who are parenting. Using small group interviews with both parents aging out and service providers, we examined perceptions of the day-to-day experiences of parents aging out, their strengths, and their needs.

### 1.1. Background

Youth aging out—regardless of parental status—face many challenges as they transition from foster care to life on their own. They often face the demands associated with increased independence without the familiar supports of case management and other allied providers that had been available to them in the past (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Geenen & Powers, 2007). This experience contrasts with the general trend for non-foster youth whose parents are likely to extend support to their children throughout the transition to adulthood and beyond. Without support and with increased demands associated with transitioning out of care, youth aging out are at risk for poor outcomes across multiple domains including education, employment, housing, mental health, physical health, substance abuse, justice system involvement, and early parenting compared to non-foster care peers (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2003; Reilly, 2003). While the risk for poor outcomes in each domain is concerning, those related to early parenting are of central concern because they impact not only the youth aging out, but also the lives of their children.

The effort to transition to independence may be further complicated when the youth is a parent. Indeed, parenting is a challenging task, and negotiating the ongoing needs of a child while trying to manage the concomitant changes in one's hormones, emotions, physical appearance, sleep patterns, interpersonal relationships, and finances can prove taxing to even the most well-prepared adult. For a youth aging out, compounding these stressors with the strain of the aging out process often produces reduced coping abilities (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). A study examining the experiences of mothers aging out of foster care found high levels of parenting stress with 35% of the sample reporting clinically significant distress (Budd, Holdsworth, & HoganBruen, 2006). Many of the mothers in the sample displayed difficulties parenting; 22% scored low on quality parent-child interactions, 45% had high levels of unrealistic parenting beliefs, and 67% scored at elevated risk for child abuse. Additionally, the demands of early parenting may compromise employment, social, and educational opportunities (Connolly, Heifetz, & Bohr, 2012; Max & Paluzzi, 2005).

Parents aging out may have had a limited number of people in their lives who modeled how to be “good parents” (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010, p. 61). Likewise, youth who spent time in non-family settings of congregate care facilities may be disconnected from models of parents and families. Poor or absent models may make understanding and enacting positive parenting behaviors difficult for parents aging out. Practicing ineffective parenting behaviors can then become a cyclical process whereby parents raise their children in the same manner in which they were raised, thus perpetuating an intergenerational continuity of problematic parenting (Conger, Schofield, Neppl, & Merrick, 2013; Herrenkohl, Klika, Brown, Herrenkohl, & Leeb, 2013).

Perhaps not surprising given the increased levels of distress and vulnerability, parents aging out have high rates of child protective services (CPS) reports for child maltreatment. Using administrative data from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Dworsky (2015) found 39% of foster youth who were parents had at least one CPS investigation, 17% had one or more indicated report, and 11% had a child removed from their home at least once before the child was

five years old. Another study of mothers aging out found almost one quarter (22%) had been investigated for child abuse or neglect, 10% had been investigated more than once, and 9.6% had a substantiated report (Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009). A surveillance bias may also contribute to high report rates (Widom, Czaja, & DuMont, 2015).

The prevalence of parenting among youth aging out, coupled with the challenges they face, position parents aging out as a group in significant need of help (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2012; Geiger & Schelbe, 2014). Due to their extensive needs, some have called for a focus on pregnancy prevention as well as parenting interventions (Aparicio, Pecukonis, & O'Neale, 2015; Geiger & Schelbe, 2014; Hudson, 2012). Further, there is “twice the opportunity” to intervene influencing two generations, which strongly legitimizes the need for tailored interventions (Center for the Study of Social Policy, n.d.). Notwithstanding challenges, parents aging out generally view parenthood as an opportunity to develop loving relationships, create safe environments, and break the cycle of abuse; they also seek parenting guidance to do so (e.g., Connolly et al., 2012). Despite priority, interest, and need, currently no empirically supported parenting interventions have been developed for this population.

### 1.2. Perspectives of parents aging out

Research on parents aging out is a relatively new phenomenon. Although studies have examined the experiences of teens aging out of foster care, little work has focused exclusively on parents aging out. The best source of information to date comes from a recent meta-synthesis of 17 qualitative studies examining parents in and aging out of care from the U.S., United Kingdom, and Canada. The results from this meta-synthesis identified common themes of risk and protection amongst parents in foster care (Connolly et al., 2012). Findings suggested that parents aging out faced undoubted risk factors. Custodial parents were often single mothers with limited social and financial support. Parents aging out reported feeling that both their biological families and the foster care system abandoned them. Limited support networks also translated to few parenting role models. Because most youth in foster care experienced some form of abuse or neglect, they did not want to duplicate their childhoods; however, they lacked experience or modeling in creating nurturing environments for their children (Connolly et al., 2012; Pryce & Samuels, 2010).

Despite the challenges and hardships associated with having a child while aging out of care, Connolly et al. (2012) work also illustrated that parents aging out may perceive parenthood as an opportunity. Mothers aging out described having a child as a chance to work through their childhood and create a family different from the one they experienced as a child (Pryce & Samuels, 2010). Likewise, pregnant and parenting youth aging out expressed that their children provided them with someone to love, a chance to be part of a family, and a motivation for achievement and responsibility (Love, McIntosh, Rosst, & Tertzakian, 2005).

Although Connolly et al.'s (2012) meta-synthesis provides an excellent backdrop to the qualitative literature on parents aging out, results demonstrated key gaps in the literature. First, little extant research specifically examines parents in the U.S. Of the 17 qualitative studies in the meta-synthesis, only three were peer reviewed published manuscripts conducted in the U.S.; one was a report and the other an unpublished dissertation. Given countries' unique child welfare systems as well as their distinct sociopolitical and economic contexts, parents in the U.S. foster care system deserve rigorous research that takes their specific context into consideration.

### 1.3. Gaps in the literature and study rationale

There is a lot to learn about the experiences of parents aging out, particularly within the U.S. context. Available studies interviewing and observing parents aging out of foster care often focus on reducing

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