



Development & maintenance of social support among aged out foster youth who received independent living services: Results from the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs



Johanna K.P. Greeson^{a,*}, Antonio R. Garcia^a, Minseop Kim^a, Allison E. Thompson^a, Mark E. Courtney^b

^a University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy & Practice, USA

^b University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 December 2014

Received in revised form 13 March 2015

Accepted 13 March 2015

Available online 21 March 2015

Keywords:

Social support

Foster care

Child welfare

Aging out

Transition to adulthood

Life skills

Race/ethnicity

Multilevel longitudinal modeling

ABSTRACT

This study uses secondary data from the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs, a randomized controlled trial of four independent living programs for youth in foster care. The subject of this investigation is the Life Skills Training Program (LST) of Los Angeles County, CA. We had three interrelated aims: (1) Evaluate the effectiveness of the LST program as compared to services as usual on the change in social support over time; (2) Examine the differences over time in social support by race and ethnicity among LST participants; and (3) Investigate the explanatory value of prosocial activities, educational involvement, current living arrangement, employment, victimization experiences, placement instability, and behavioral health symptomology on changes in social support over time among LST participants. We employed multilevel longitudinal modeling to estimate growth in social support over three time points (baseline, first follow-up, and second follow-up) among 482 youth ($n = 234$ LST; $n = 248$ control). We found a significant reduction in social support across the three time points. But, there was no difference in the social support trajectory between the LST and control groups. In addition, no racial/ethnic difference in the social support trajectory was detected. Results underscore the need to critically examine how independent living programming is intended to increase social support and whether modifying these practices can improve promotion and maintenance of social support for youth who age out of foster care.

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Although the field of developmental psychology generally recognizes that autonomy and relatedness are two basic needs among older adolescents, the relationship between these needs has been disputed (Kagitcibasi, 2013). Traditional psychoanalytic theory postulates that autonomy and relatedness are in conflict with each other, and the need to separate from caregivers (e.g., separation–individuation hypothesis) is a part of normative adolescent development (Blos, 1979). According to such theory, increased independence and self-reliance occur simultaneously with the distancing of oneself from others, which serves as a milestone for entrance into adulthood. This prioritization of autonomy over relatedness, along with an American ideology that tends to idealize individualism, has no doubt impacted the development of youth programming and services (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). However, researchers across disciplines have begun to challenge this dichotomy, suggesting that a congruent relationship between autonomy and caregiver relatedness is necessary for healthy youth development

(Arnett, 2000; Kagitcibasi, 2013; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Tulviste, Mizera, & De Geer, 2012). In other words, it is desirable for young people to achieve both autonomy, in the form of increased agency and identity exploration, and relatedness with others, in the form of continued social support (e.g., caregivers, family members, other important nonparental adults, peers).

Research supports a number of positive well-being outcomes associated with the presence of social support among older adolescents in the United States, internationally, and among marginalized subgroups, including youth in foster care (Aquilino, 2006; Bowers et al., 2014; Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2011; Kim, Butzel, & Ryan, 1998; Meeus, Oosterweegel, & Vollebergh, 2002; Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013). Although this growing evidence suggests that developing youth thrive with intact social supportive networks, over 20,000 youth emancipate each year from foster care without achieving legal permanence and with limited social support (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2013). These marginalized youth are at increased risk for myriad negative outcomes including increased rates of unemployment and ensuing economic hardship, homelessness, low educational attainment, criminal justice involvement, unplanned pregnancy, and behavioral health symptomology

* Corresponding author at: University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Policy & Practice, 3701 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA. Tel.: +1 215 898 7540; fax: +1 215 573 2099.

E-mail address: jgreeson@sp2.upenn.edu (J.K.P. Greeson).

(Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Hook & Courtney, 2011; McMillen & Raghavan, 2009; Pecora et al., 2006; Vaughn, Shook, & McMillen, 2008).

Congress has attempted to respond to this crisis, recognizing the need to bolster social support for older youth at risk of aging out of foster care. For example, the *Foster Care Independent Act of 1999* (1999) mandates the establishment of “personal and emotional support to children aging out of foster care, through mentors and the promotion of interactions with dedicated adults.” Since 1999, child welfare jurisdictions across the country have implemented life skills programming aimed at the promotion of both “hard skill” development (e.g., vocational training, budgeting, maintaining housing) and “soft skill” development (e.g., interpersonal skills and improved social support) among older youth preparing to emancipate from formal out-of-home care systems (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009; Curry & Abrams, 2014; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). The Life Skills Training (LST) program of Los Angeles County is considered an exemplar of such programming (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2008). LST utilizes a traditional, didactic-style classroom based approach, and incorporates supportive case management in an effort to promote the achievement of positive well-being outcomes, such as educational attainment, employment, and interpersonal and social skills. Yet, little is known regarding the effectiveness of such life skills programming, and research is either absent or reveals mixed results regarding how social support among older youth in foster care differs based on individual and contextual factors.

Thus, the present study significantly contributes to the literature by investigating the change in social support over time among a sample of 17-year old youth residing in out-of-home care through the Los Angeles Department of Child and Family Services and participating in the Life Skills Training (LST) program. Our investigation was guided by the following research questions: 1) Is the Los Angeles Life Skills Training (LST) Program more effective than receipt of services as usual in increasing social support over time among older youth in foster care? 2) Are there differences over time in social support by race/ethnicity among older youth in foster care? 3) To what extent do prosocial activities, educational involvement, placement history, victimization experiences, and behavioral health symptomology explain differences in social support over time among older youth in foster care?

1.1. Social support and the transition to adulthood: theory and research

The term social support has been broadly applied to include actual and perceived assistance and protection provided by others (Curry & Abrams, 2014). Social support can take on various forms and can originate from multiple sources. Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, and Lillis (1997) identify four main types of social support, including instrumental or tangible support (e.g., financial and material assistance), emotional or intangible support (e.g., caring, listening, and empathy), informational support (e.g., problem solving, guidance, and advice), and affirmational or appraisal support (e.g., evaluative feedback, self-esteem enhancement). The sources of social support vary and may include both informal systems (e.g., parents/caregivers, peers, important nonparental adults) and formal systems (e.g., teachers, case workers, therapists). The most important features of social support networks reported by youth in foster care include the relationships' longstanding and consistent nature, acceptance of the young person, constant encouragement, and reliability (Collins et al., 2010). Theory and empirical research suggest that strong social support is a necessary requisite for a successful transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Collins et al., 2010; Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Jones, 2014; Kagitcibasi, 2013).

The degree to which jurisdictions assist youth in foster care with developing and enhancing their social support networks is unclear and warrants further research. Independent living programs (ILP), as reflected in their name, may emphasize the skills thought to be necessary for self-sustained independent living over relational skills

associated with interconnectedness and social support (Antle et al., 2009). In fact, the effectiveness of ILPs in improving social support has yet to be established (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2014), though one recent study provides a first step. Nesmith and Christophersen (2014) conducted a three-year effectiveness study of a foster care model designed to support and enhance youth's social support networks prior to their transition to adulthood. Compared to the comparison group, youth who received the intervention felt more empowered, had better emotional regulation, and had improved social support as demonstrated by a wider variety of supportive adults in their lives.

1.1.1. Developmental theory

Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood has been used to describe the developmental period that corresponds with a young person's gradual transition to adulthood, which generally occurs in the late teen years and extends through the mid to late twenties. This period is distinct demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity exploration, and is characterized by a period in which it has become normative, and even potentially beneficial, to not adopt the roles and responsibilities of full adulthood following adolescence in order to explore world views, values, work, love, and identity. For many youth in the general population, it is a period of “rolelessness,” optimism, and opportunities as emerging adults regard themselves as neither adolescents nor adults but in between the two life stages. Fundamental to the theory of emerging adulthood is the assumption that youth possess adequate and enduring social support networks, which allow them the freedom to experience increased agency and free exploration of thought, which together contribute to the development of their individual identities.

Kagitcibasi (2013) similarly proposes a theoretical framework to explain the need of older adolescents for both increased agency and exploration of thought within the context of a solid social support network. She conceptualizes adolescent development as a period characterized by two separate, but related, dimensions: agency and interpersonal distance. Adolescents who experience a high degree of agency are described as autonomous (i.e., controlled by self), whereas those who experience a low degree are said to be heteronomous (i.e., controlled by others). Likewise, interpersonal distance falls on a spectrum between relatedness and separation. Kagitcibasi (2013) proposes that adolescents have a need for both autonomy and relatedness. Thus, the autonomous-related self is considered to be ideal in that both needs for autonomy and relatedness are mutually met. Autonomous-separate selves and heteronomous-related selves only have one of the two needs met, and heteronomous-separate selves do not have either need met.

Though youth in the general population may experience the benefits of emerging adulthood associated with autonomous-related selves, disadvantaged youth, including those in foster care, often lack strong social support and are not afforded the same opportunities as their peers in the general population (Avery, 2010). Their state may be described as autonomous-separate, as many youth in foster care experience an autonomy defined by independence and self-reliance in the context of insufficient social support and relatedness (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Youth in foster care generally suffer from fractured social support networks due to their removal from their families and communities of origin, multiple moves while in out-of-home placement, and the loss of state support at emancipation (Jones, 2014). Singer et al. (2013) investigated the way in which older youth in foster care utilize their social support networks in an effort to identify possible “holes.” Although youth identified a number of socially supportive relationships that were present during their transition to adulthood, most of the support provided by enduring, informal network members was emotional or informational in nature. Child welfare professionals (e.g., county caseworkers, therapists) largely provided the instrumental and appraisal support, though this support was impermanent and ceased when the youth emancipated from care.

When sufficient social support is not present, marginalized youth are forced to enter a state of self-reliance and must prematurely adopt

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6834015>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6834015>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)