



Improving Well-Being by Addressing Normalcy for Foster Youth

Adopted April 2013

Overview

The National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Council members have been exploring how normalcy among foster youth impacts well-being and how normalcy can be improved by stakeholders in child welfare. The foster care system creates barriers that can cause young people to miss out on many activities experienced by their peers who do not experience foster care. The Council members acknowledge the long list of laws and policies aimed at the safety of youth in foster care, yet we also accept that the foster care system creates artificial and unnecessary barriers to normal experiences, such as going to sleepovers, extra-curricular activities, field trips and joining sports teams.

We should be allowed to experience the same opportunities as our non-foster youth peers in the most normal, healthy and safest method possible. We believe normalcy is a critical component to establishing well-being and normalcy for foster youth deserves a greater degree of consideration and legitimacy by policy makers, child welfare practitioners, caregivers, and other stakeholders of the child welfare system.

There is a lack of research and literature on the subject of normalcy for foster children and youth. We feel that it is important to gain a better understanding of how our peers in foster care define normalcy and how it impacts our experiences in foster care. We developed and implemented a normalcy poll, which helped inform our priorities.

The Council's Poll

Specific findings from our normalcy poll include:

- There has been progress in some areas of normalcy, such as earning an allowance (75 percent of current foster youth versus 52 percent of alumni) and the ability to be a part of a club, group, or sports team (92 percent of current foster youth versus 76 percent of alumni)
- There have been less improvements in areas such as learning to cook (77 percent percent of current foster youth versus 78 percent of alumni)
- Foster youth have experienced a backslide in normalcy in two important areas —staying the night at a friend's house (46 percent of current foster youth versus 54 percent of alumni) and working or volunteering (62 percent of current foster youth versus 76 percent of alumni).

We believe federal stakeholders must consider normalcy as an important component of well-being for young people in foster care. The following priorities have been compiled using the poll results as well as a small focus group established by the Council in order to discuss the poll results and to identify policy priorities.

PRIORITIES

- **Adopt a formal, federal definition of normalcy.** Normalcy is a concept that is often discussed in foster care circles, is nearly always named as a top priority when foster youth advocates assemble, yet lacks a formal definition which can guide child welfare stakeholders. We seek a definition of normalcy that recognizes the role of normalcy in youth development. Intentional and planned efforts should be made to establish normalcy for children and youth in foster care, as opposed to an afterthought to service delivery. The federal government should require states and tribes to address normalcy in their policies in an intentional and meaningful way.

We define normalcy as: the opportunity for children and youth in and out- of- home placement to participate in and experience age and culturally appropriate activities, responsibilities and life skills that promote normal growth and development.

Youth voice: "I believe normalcy is allowing foster care youth to have the same opportunities as those children living with biological parents. Too often there is a stigma attached to the term "foster care" and the children that come from it. The world seems to believe that foster care is where the difficult or criminal children go but that is far from the truth. Normalcy is trying to let these foster care youth live as close to a regular and normal life as they can with the situation they are in."

- **Foster care bureaucracy should not be allowed to create artificial obstacles that strip us of the opportunity normal childhood experiences and milestones.** Council members and youth advocates report that caseworkers and administrators often cite "liability and confidentiality" as blanket reasons for decisions and policies that prevent youth from normative experiences while in foster care. We believe this to be an over- and misused reason for denying youth normalcy, and that there should be a burden on states to provide justification for any policy that creates obstacles not experienced by young people, expressly for bureaucratic reasons.

Youth voice: "I think my caregivers acted out of fear of CPS/DCFS' rules. The system is often so overprotective that it stifles growth and development (no sleepovers, driving lessons, etc.)."

The Council recommends that States be allowed and encouraged to adopt a Reasonable and Prudent Parent standard, which would allow caregivers a level of protection when making decisions that include risks for the youth they care for. Least restrictive placement language and decisions should include consideration of normalcy opportunities. Reasonable steps included:

- Having adequate information (i.e. history, case plan, or court orders) about the child so informed decisions could be made
- Taking into account the type of activity that will be held, with whom the child will be going, and when the child will return
- Accounting for any foreseeable risks and establishing safety factors and direct supervision in order to prevent potential harm

In addition, states should provide child welfare professionals, caregivers, courts, and other stakeholders training such as Florida's "Don't say 'No' before you know," intended to dispel commonly held myths and educate adult supporters about the need for normalcy in a young person's life. We request that the ACF provide states and tribes training and technical

assistance so that state policymakers are not left without guidance regarding risk-management in their child-rearing duties.

- **Provide young people in foster care with a right to know their rights.** When discussing normalcy policies across the states, we recognized that there was a lack of clarity about what rights youth had in various states. States should be required to provide clear communication to the youth they serve about their rights.

While some states have produced a list of rights for foster youth, dissemination of these lists is spotty at best. We believe caseworkers should be required to share and review a youth-friendly list of rights, as defined and if they exist in their state, at periodic intervals. We believe that a young person's awareness of their rights in foster care leads to active engagement in case planning and improved outcomes. If well-being of young people in foster care is to be ensured, we must provide these primary stakeholders with the capacity to advocate for their own best interest. Best practice would also include having adult supporters like CASAs and attorneys to help youth understand their rights.

Youth voice: "On very rough nights I would call a close older friend and I was yelled at and told I couldn't use the phone as I was balling my eyes out on the phone. Certain phone calls should be allowed at any time."

The Council recommends that these rights are communicated to the youth upon entry and reviewed annually as a different way of ensuring that their needs are being met. Youth and caseworkers should be required to sign off on reviewing these rights. During reviewing the youth rights, the appeals procedure should be discussed. The communication and posting requirements of rights should be required and monitored. All youth should have access to an appeals process, such as the California Ombudsperson program, and all youth should be made aware of how to advocate for themselves when it comes to unjustified infringement on their opportunities or their rights.

- **Track normalcy policies and practices across states and tribes.** Many Council members, through the perpetration of myths, thought that certain activities were not allowed (even though there was no state policy restricting the specific activity). We recommend that the ACF, should track and publicly post normalcy policies in each state.

Youth voice: "Normalcy does not apply for my longest placements. But for the placement when I was 17 preparing to age out of care, I was assigned an Independent Living Worker, and she taught me budgeting; we practiced shopping for groceries, and she helped me apply to colleges and scholarships."

The reasons to collect this data are to communicate this information to youth, to allow support staff in the states to know what the rules are, and to give the opportunity for peer sharing among states. The data could include an inventory of allowed and disallowed activities, including employment, school clubs and sports, social media, and faith based activities.

For states that don't have normalcy policies and practices, training and technical assistance should be provided to assist states and tribes in developing least restrictive normalcy policies.

Youth voice: "Everything and anything was restricted. Use the bathroom on my own wash my clothes use the phone, watch TV, have a cell phone, go out with friends, go to the mall, go to school, activities, eat."

- **Evaluate the role of normalcy in securing safety, permanence and well-being for youth.**

We believe that normalcy is a critical component for achieving the goals of safety, permanency, and well-being in foster care. When we engage in normal age appropriate activities, we develop the skills to decipher safety concerns, and the lack of normalcy can delay permanency for us. Without normalcy, we often feel like we are different from others and we find it difficult to establish lasting relationships. Additionally, young people and child welfare practitioners alike understand that normalcy is a critical component to well-being.

Youth voice: "I took acting, singing, dancing, and ice skating lessons. I was a cheerleader, snowboarder, softball player, etc. I went to after school programs, day cares, day and night camps... I felt I was given the opportunity to try a little bit of everything. I think the hard part was that my gram had to still take care of four other grandkids and two of her own children all by herself, still work a full-time job."

We recommend the ACF formally acknowledge and adopt normalcy as one of the strategies for increasing social and emotional well-being under state guidance, and that normalcy be considered when implementing policies and practices related to safety and permanency.

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*About the Council: The National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Council convenes to provide federal stakeholders with relevant and timely information as policies and procedures are created that will affect children and families throughout the country. The Council represents a collective viewpoint of youth and alumni who have personal experience in the child welfare system. The Council is a partnership between Foster Care Alumni of America and FosterClub, with generous support from Casey Family Programs. Visit us online at [www.nationalpolicycouncil.org](http://www.nationalpolicycouncil.org).*