



Improving Social Capital for Youth in Foster Care

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Think about all of the people in your life who have helped you get to where you are today. Now, imagine if none of those people existed. Or, even worse, what if they did exist but you were not allowed to talk to them or interact with them at all. Your relationship died before it was even born.

The National Foster Youth and Alumni Policy Council's Social Capital Workgroup, recognizes that securing social capital is vital in the lives of our younger peers in foster care. Social capital refers to the network of social relationships that support healthy lifelong development. A sense of connectedness has been found to be protective against an array of health risk behaviors including substance use, risky sexual behavior, and violence. "Research during the past two decades shows that a sense of connectedness to others and key institutions in their lives is protective against an array of health risk behaviors and is associated with better mental health outcomes".¹ To strengthen existing research with lived-experiences of current and alumni of the foster care system, our workgroup developed a survey to uncover rich data to inform the social capital policy priorities. The survey was designed by the Council and dispersed through Council networks. The survey included 140 respondents (30 current foster youth and 110 former foster youth). The populations of the respondents were: 10% Hispanic or Latino, 23% Black or African American, 60% White, 4% Native American or American Indian and 4% Asian/Pacific Islander.

Young people in and from foster care need to have the ability and support in establishing long-term networks of people and resources. We seek to ensure that foster youth have support in fortifying existing relationships in family settings, schools, job placements, and the community, while building an enhanced network of supportive connections both in and after care.

The Council sees a dire need for government and communities to promote and preserve social connections in foster youths' lives. Without these connections, young people are vulnerable to poor outcomes that we know our youth face. Governments and communities must remove barriers that prevent access to:

- Family ties,
- School-based relationships,
- Mentors,
- Community connections, and
- Culturally inclusive supports.

Many factors impact foster youths' lack of social capital in these four key areas, all of which are

¹Bernat, B. H. & Resnick, M. D. (2009). Chapter 19: Connectedness in the Lives of Adolescents. In [Key Concepts and Research Findings: What Is Meant by "Connectedness"?](#)

Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., Kosterman, R., Abbott, R., & Hill, K. G. (1999). Preventing adolescent health - risk behaviors by strengthening protection during childhood. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 153(3), 226 – 234.

necessary for a youth to develop healthy adult relationships, and are beneficial for their transition into adulthood. Challenges can include: the number of moves foster youth face, a lack of commitment from those in their lives, and foster youths' hesitation to trust those investing in them due to painful past experiences. Areas where social capital development should be supported include: the workplace, higher education settings, and day-to-day life after leaving the foster care system.

Our priorities outlined below will provide foster youth with the same potential to build social capital as their peers who haven't experienced foster care. Taking these steps can help foster youth maintain and grow healthy relationships with their family (biological or foster) and to transition out of care successfully, with access to opportunities for personal, professional and educational growth. Healthy relationships aren't prioritized the same way in child welfare as permanency or safety. The Council wants to highlight the significance of these relationships, in hopes that service providers working with youth are intentional about helping them cultivate their social capital.

Based on the above information and through much deliberation among Council members, our priorities to increase social capital among our peers fall into four primary focus areas:

1. Recognize the importance of preserving healthy family ties,
2. Nourish school-based relationships,
3. Create opportunities for foster youth to access mentors, and
4. Involve foster youth in community-based and culturally inclusive services and activities.

1. Recognize the Importance of Preserving Healthy Family Ties

Parents, siblings, fictive kin, and extended family members can have an important long-term role in the lives of foster youth². For example, while older siblings who have already aged out of care may not be an appropriate placement option for their younger siblings, having this relationship supported can be vital to the emotional health and well-being of both siblings. The Council has taken into consideration the varying scenarios foster youth face with family members due to the nature of foster care, and recommends the following:

- Child welfare professionals should continue to assess the relationships a foster youth has with their immediate and extended biological and fictive kin family members and support relationships with family that are healthy for as long as youth remain in care.
- Child welfare professionals should regularly ASK their youth "Who do you have a positive or supportive relationship with?"
- Relationships with relatives must be supported even if the relative is not a prospective placement.
- Child welfare professionals should keep siblings together in foster care placements and accessible to each other. If the placement together is not possible existing state legislation that requires sibling connections, should be strengthened and expanded to all states.

²Children's Defense Fund. (2010). [Promising Approaches in Child Welfare: Helping Connect Children and Youth in Foster Care to Permanent Family and Relationships through Family Finding and Engagement.](#)

- Supporting these relationships includes: support for foster youth dealing with trauma, understanding healthy relationships and boundaries, and support for the biological family members.
- Caregivers should encourage and be in regular and reasonable communication with the biological family of the youth they care for whether or not the biological parent's rights are terminated.

Youth Voice: "They have each been very supportive of my goals. Never held judgement or bias against me for things that occurred previous to or while in care. Even after care."

--Former foster youth, 27, Oklahoma (on birth family)

Youth Voice: "I had a step sister and would have benefited from help contacting her. I would have benefited also from mediation/help connecting with my bio mother and stepfather and dealing with those unhealthy relationships, but not doing so entirely alone."

--Former foster youth, 22, New Jersey

2. Nourish School-Based Relationships

Relationships in school can be critical to a youth's academic trajectory, graduation/retention rates, sense of belonging, and belief in oneself. When a young person doesn't feel a connection to peers, teachers or school staff, they are less likely to build meaningful and sustained relationships in a school-based setting or be able to perform to the best of their abilities. Nationally, only 50% of foster youth obtain their high school diploma on time. In contrast, 84% of their peers who haven't experienced foster care graduate high school on time. Only 19% of foster youth 19 years old are enrolled in a post-secondary program.³ In comparison, the national average in America of 19-year-olds enrolled in college is 36%.⁴ Less than 3-4% of foster youth go on to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher.

The importance of school-based relationships cannot be overstated. One study by the National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) determined the importance of relationships in school, stating, "Supportive relationships [in school], and a positive educational experience can be powerful contributors to the development of resilience ... and are vital components for overall well-being."⁵

While many factors attribute to youth not completing high school, it is clear that relationships are a key factor. Youth must feel connected to their school community to increase their chances of success. Of our survey respondents, 51% said that a teacher had a positive and beneficial impact on their life, and 69% said that friends had a positive impact on their life.

The Council states the following will increase and maintain school-based relationships for foster youth:

- Child welfare professionals should work diligently to maintain school placements as a priority, especially if youth feel connected with their school of origin.

³Courtney M. E., Okpych, N. J., Pakjarita C., et al., (2017). Extending Foster Care to Age 21: Implications and Estimates from Youth Aging Out of Foster Care in Los Angeles. Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study.

⁴NCES IPEDS Enrollment Survey; US Census Bureau Population Estimates, 2010.

⁵Fostering Success in Education. (2014). [National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care](#). National Working Group on Foster Care and Education.

- Professionals and foster parents involved in foster youths' lives should encourage youth to discuss their school relationships and actively provide opportunities to help them build the skills necessary to maintain those relationships.
- Teachers and guidance counselors should be trauma-informed and have insight into the effects of foster care and the impact that trauma can have on foster youth.
- Foster youth should be encouraged and assisted to participate in extracurricular activities at school to establish peer-to-peer relationships and bond with coaches, mentors, or other positive adult role models.
- Foster youth should be supported by the child welfare agency in participating in 'normalcy' activities, such as sports, extracurricular, school dances, etc.

Youth Voice: "When I started high school, my life was in a downward spiral. I was fortunate enough to have some people that recognized that I had something better to offer and that I had the choice to change my life around. Without these people, I don't know if I'd be here today."

- Foster Youth, USA

3. Create Opportunities for Foster Youth to Access Mentors

Youth mentorship has been linked to positive outcomes, including increased graduation rates, improved behavior, and decreased likelihood of alcohol and drug use. Healthy adult relationships for foster youth must be with people beyond those who are serving them in a professional capacity as caseworkers, transition workers, and others who no longer stay affiliated with the young person after they leave foster care. A recent study released in September 2017 conducted by the Center on Children and Families revealed:

"The majority of [foster youth] reported having at least one adult in their life to whom they can go for advice or emotional support...however it is important to note that Mentors can be a very positive way to help fill that role...instead of tallying the number of 'supportive adults', it is important to assess these youths' abilities to sustain and forge new relationships." ⁶

Mentorship also provides young people with a greater sense of self-worth, tangible skills that can be applied in the future, and overall improved interpersonal skills. We recognize that because the way our survey outreach was conducted, a response bias may exist resulting in our survey respondents being some of the most connected youth across the country. Even within this population, still nearly 1 in 5 said they did not have someone they could look up to or consider a mentor. This underlines the importance for young people to have someone they see as a mentor.

To support this focus area, the Council recommends the following:

- Matching youth with a mentor who they can stay connected to throughout and beyond their time and in care, even when they move to different locations.
- Social service providers should develop a mentor questionnaire and ask youth to get a sense on what kind of mentor the young person is looking to connect with.
- Foster youth should be provided a space to give feedback to their mentor in order to

⁶ Center on Children and Families at Brookings. (2017). [Care and connections: Bridging relational gaps for foster youth](#).

enhance the mentorship.

Youth Voice: "These people helped shape me into the person I am today. I took parts from people I admired and wanted to be like. They helped keep me out of trouble and see [toward] the future. They gave me a direction to look. Forward." - Former foster youth, USA

Youth Voice: "Having someone who not only believed in but supported growth of self belief in my worth, voice, and ability to thrive has pushed my life onto a positive path that's unstoppable." -Former foster youth, 23, Pennsylvania

4. Involve Foster Youth in Community-Based and Culturally Inclusive Services and Activities

Our society often references the saying, *"It takes a village to raise a child"*. For foster youth, that saying is especially true. It is imperative that youth in care not only connect and build relationships with supportive adults, but with the communities they live in and identify with. Our survey showed that being able to create lifelong relationships is important to both current and former foster youth. Specifically, 95% of our respondents reported that it is important for them to be able to create lifelong relationships.

It is important for young people to engage in community-based activities in order to develop social connections and skills, which in turn help to create social capital. The foster care system often isolates youth from their communities: 45% of respondents to the survey said they were not allowed to explore cultural and community activities. Young people must engage, make friends, and partake in activities that will prepare them to function in a group society as an adult.

To support this focus area, the Council recommends the following:

- Child welfare professionals and caregivers should facilitate participation in the following types of programs to help build social capital:
 - Youth Groups (faith-based activities of a youth's choice),
 - Youth/alumni boards,
 - Organized sports,
 - Strength-based activities, and
 - Focused efforts on awareness and access to aforementioned programs.
- Child welfare professionals should get input from youth to find the appropriate community-based activities that fit the youth's needs. Youth shouldn't be forced to participate in activities they don't have interest in, and youth have the right to participate in activities in which they feel individually and culturally supported.
- Youth should also be able to participate in informal community activities to allow for relationships to organically emerge. Some examples of these type of activities include:
 - Pickup basketball games in the neighborhood,
 - Playing at the park,
 - Community cookouts and BBQ's, and
 - Cultural activities of the youth's choice.

Youth Voice: "I was able to explore more about my Queer self, and was encouraged to be involved in the LGBTQ community." --Former foster youth, 36, North Carolina

Youth Voice: "It would have been impactful to be placed with a family that was inclusive, open-minded and accepting of my culture without them attempting to force me to conform to theirs or exclude me all together."

--Alumni of Care, 21, North Carolina

Youth Voice: "Having a mentor and connection with someone that spoke Spanish and was of Latino decent helped me reclaim my language and sense of identity that was lost while I was in foster care, "

--Alumni of Care, 37, Illinois

Conclusion

In conclusion, we as alumni of the foster care system recognize the positive impact that social capital can have on our lives, and the detriment which can occur when social capital is lacking. Learning to develop relationships starts at childhood; however, youth in care often have complex, unhealthy or disrupted relationships from an early age. It is important to help young people start developing and building the skills necessary to cultivate healthy relationships themselves. Healthy, consistent relationships with supportive adults is vital to our success.

Social capital is undervalued in our society. Often, it is social capital that provides the opportunity for job interviews or access to education; it applies to the opportunities we receive and the relationships we maintain. Being able to develop social capital is essential in everyone's life. It is up to all adults involved in a young person's life to help establish these relationships and, most importantly, help young people cultivate the skills they need to develop their own identity and healthy relationships for the rest of their lives.

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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 experienced the child welfare system first-hand. The Council is a partnership between Foster Care Alumni of America and FosterClub, with generous support from Casey Family Programs.

