



Case Planning for Healthy Development

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All young people need support throughout adolescence and young adulthood. During this time, they must achieve critical developmental tasks that prepare them to become successful adults. Families play an important role, helping to guide and support their children as they begin to figure out who they are and how they fit into the broader world. Building relationships within many different contexts—with extended family, peers, teachers, and coaches—is a foundational aspect of this developmental period. For young people in foster care, too often there are not consistent family or parental figures to guide them as they navigate their transition to adulthood.

A case planning process, mandated by child welfare law, guides a young person’s life during his or her stay in foster care. Case planning typically focuses on a young person’s physical safety and legal permanency. Through the case planning process, the agency with responsibility for the young person is legally required to assure that he or she “receives safe and proper care” and that services are provided to “facilitate return of the child to his own safe home or the permanent

placement of the child.”¹ The well-being of the young person is generally assessed and addressed primarily in terms of his or her physical and mental health and educational needs.²

To effectively meet the developmental needs of young people in foster care, the case planning process must go beyond foster care placement and the coordination of services. Case planning must support the key task of adolescence for all young people: establishing a stable and secure identity. For young people in foster care, the process of identity development can be extremely challenging, as they often have experienced disconnections from their families, their communities, their cultures, and the very information that is critical to their life stories.

Case planning also must be used to support the young person in building social capital across all critical domains—family, school, peers, and community. Social capital provides young people

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1 42 U.S.C. 675(1)(B).
2 42 U.S.C. 675(1)(C).

“What makes foster kids any different than other kids? It’s the system that makes us different. Young people in foster care age out, other young people grow up.”

—lpo

with the relationships and networks that support their healthy development and is particularly critical for older young people in foster care given the many relationship disruptions in their lives and the new developmental demands of adolescence and young adulthood.

Critical questions

How can the case planning process, which is required for all young people in foster care, be used to promote their healthy development? Specifically, how can case planning be used to support young people in developing positive and secure identities? How can case planning be used to support young people in developing strong and consistent networks of relationships that will be available to them not only during their stays in foster care but into young adulthood and beyond? This issue brief examines these questions and provides a framework for case planning that supports the healthy development of young people in foster care through promoting a strong and healthy identity and building sustainable social capital.

Identity development and case planning

Identity can be defined as individuals having a sense of who they are, where they belong, and where they are going.³ Erik Erikson and others have described the stages of human development. In each stage, growth is expected to build on the developmental tasks mastered in the previous stage and to take place

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3 Kaplan, 1998.

across multiple dimensions: cognitive/intellectual, social, emotional, behavioral, physical, and spiritual.⁴ During adolescence, young people are expected to achieve a range of specific tasks as they work toward adulthood. The major developmental tasks of adolescence are to create a stable and secure identity and begin the process of becoming a complete and productive adult.⁵ Identity development has come to be understood as having multiple dimensions.⁶ One’s core identity is comprised of personal attributes, personal characteristics and personal identity. Additional identity dimensions of race, culture, class, gender, and sexual orientation interact with core identity; and there are contextual influences on identity in the form of family background, sociocultural conditions, current experiences, and career decisions and life planning.⁷ Core identity considerations, the range of identity dimensions, and contextual influences play important roles in the ability of young people in foster care to form a positive and secure identity.

Research suggests that foster care may negatively impact identity development⁸ and impede a healthy process of growing up. The foster care experience has been found to present a particularly challenging context for identity development that can give rise to a stigmatized or devalued sense of self.⁹ One study found that the young person’s diminished status as a “foster child,” stereotypical views of young people in foster care, and the impersonal institutional structure of congregate care contribute to the

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4 Erikson, 1950, 1977.
5 Archer & Waterman, 1994; Harris, 1988; Steinberg & Morris, 2001.
6 Jones & McEwen, 2000; Reynolds & Pope, 1991.
7 Jones & McEwen, 2000.
8 Kools, 1997; McKinney, 2011.
9 Smith, 2011.

“In group homes, you feel like someone who is on a higher level must be a better person.”

—Shadow

devaluation of the adolescent’s self by others.¹⁰ Theories of identity development that focus on self-definition based on experiences with the external environment and presumptions of how others view the “self” provide a foundation for understanding the impact of foster care on young people’s identity development.¹¹ Additionally, adolescents who have not had consistent and unconditional support of family and other significant adults during their early childhood and adolescent years, may experience identity confusion as they try to understand who they are, what happened to them, where they are going, and who will be there to support them along the way. The multiple moves, relationship disruptions, and ambiguous losses that young people in foster care often experience contribute to a generalized anxiety. Too often, young people in and transitioning from foster care find it difficult to trust that adults who understand and can meet their needs will be there for them.

Research further indicates that young people who emancipate from foster care at the age of 18 and attempt to establish themselves independently face significant identity development challenges. These changes are especially great when they do not have family members and other significant adults whom they know are committed to their ongoing well-being no matter what. One study found that the difficult experiences of emancipating from foster care influenced an evolving sense of self.¹² Study participants identified strongly with self-sufficiency and help-avoidance and reported an inaccessibility of

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10 Kools, 1997.

11 See Cooley’s (1902) theory of the “looking glass self” and Bruner’s (1990) theory of the “distributed self”.

12 Mulkerns & Owens, 2008 .

peer support that would have helped them establish a strong sense of self.¹³

When asked about their experiences in foster care as they relate to identity development, Jim Casey Initiative Youth Leadership Institute participants described unique identity challenges during adolescence as a result of having experienced foster care. These young people reported feeling a lost identity after entering foster care as they became disconnected from family, friends, school, and community. This sense of disconnection deepened for many young people as they moved from one foster care placement to another. These young people described having developed a new identity to help them survive the foster care experience. Many young people stated that they hoped to achieve the stable and secure identity they had long been seeking, and others stated that they were unable to adjust their identity as their life situation changed.

Case planning can play a critical role in supporting young people in foster care in developing a positive and secure identity. The case planning process must:

- Assist the important adults in the young person’s life in understanding the normative and the unique developmental challenges that young people in foster care face in identity formation
- Place priority on developing and supporting a family structure for young people as a critical environment in which identity development occurs.¹⁴ All young people, and particularly young people in foster care, need

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13 Mulkerns & Owens, 2008.

14 Archer & Waterman, 1994.

“Individualized case planning is important. Every youth is different and we must also look to who youth are in care AND before care. Who you are versus who you became.”

—Alexandria

support with individuation (where young people are encouraged to develop their own identity through a process of becoming) and connectedness (which provides a secure base from which the young person can explore his or her identity). Family and other important adults in the young person’s life can help the young person reflect on his or her identity and achieve a strong and healthy sense of self by facilitating both individuation and connectedness.¹⁵

- Support young people of color in developing their racial and ethnic identity and integrating their race and ethnicity into their larger sense of self¹⁶
- Recognize that during the sexual changes of puberty, issues of gender and sexual identity become especially relevant for all young people, including young people in foster care, and support young people in exploring and navigating the identity issues related to sexuality, gender and sexual orientation¹⁷
- Support young parents in foster care in navigating the multiple identity challenges they face as they develop and integrate a personal sense of identity and the identity role of parent. Studies indicate that one implication of adolescent parenting is that the young person has less opportunity to develop an autonomous sense of self.¹⁸ Adults must provide the young parent with additional supports to cultivate a

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15 ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence, 2002.
16 Phinney, 1990.
17 ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence, 2002; Savin-Williams, 1998.
18 Brooks-Gunn & Chase-Lansdale, 1995.

healthy and secure personal identity as he or she develops an identity as a parent.

One framework for supporting identity development is the Four L’s of Building Adolescent Identity developed by the Laboratory for Student Success (see next page). These highlight how healthy and secure identity among young people needs the engagement of family, other caring adults, school and community—a similar frame as social capital.

Social capital and case planning

Enduring relationships are essential to healthy adolescent development and successful adult outcomes.¹⁹ It is within the four domains of social capital—family, school, community/neighborhood, and peers/friends—that young people interact with the individuals who are critical to their construction of a coherent life story and develop realistic expectations of future relationships (see Social Capital: Building Quality Networks for Young People in Foster Care). A growing body of research suggests that generating and sustaining social capital during adolescence cumulatively enhances the individual’s productive capabilities and life chances throughout the life course.²⁰ Social capital also serves a protective function by providing caring relationships—a key protective factor in young people’s lives—and limiting exposure to risk factors that can compromise the young person’s emotional well being.²¹ Studies show that strong, positive connections with family, school, peers, and community, support the development of caring, confident, and competent young people.²²

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19 Kerman & Glasheen, 2009.
20 Brown, 2011.
21 World Health Organization, 2007.
22 Bernat & Resnick, 2006; Youngblade et al., 2007.

To fully meet the developmental needs of young people in foster care, the case planning process must incorporate concurrent efforts to maintain the young person's existing social networks and create and sustain a broader social network to fill the relationship gaps in his or her life. Enhancing a young person's social capital can help to build many of the protective factors associated with supportive relationships and is known to be the strongest contributor to the development of resilience. (See Promoting Development of Resilience among Young People in Foster Care.) Robust social capital provides young people with such protective factors as attachment to family, social skills, access to support networks, a sense of belonging, community networking, and participation in community groups.

The case planning process has enormous potential for positively impacting the scope and reach of a young person's social capital. The building and enrichment of the young person's social capital begins with his/her relationship with the caseworker and the team charged with planning with and on behalf of the young person. The relationship a young person has with his or her caseworker and team members can support him/her in developing and refining key relational skills (see next page).

Teaming is a vital case planning approach that helps ensure that case plans for young people are individualized and that young people have opportunities to lead their own planning process while developing relationships with caring and supportive adults. (See Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth Adult Partnerships.) Integral to a team planning process driven by young people themselves is the opportunity for them to have people who are most important to them on the team (existing social capital) and to build relationships with supportive adults

“Social capital is important to identity because friends help you see who you are, who you can relate to, helps you develop a sense of belonging. Friends are your mirror, a way to identify yourself.

I also need to be able to be involved in my community because I am a reflection of them.”

—Adrian

THE FOUR L's OF BUILDING ADOLESCENT IDENTITY

Family, other caring adults, school and community can support adolescent development through:

- *Love and Caring:* Communicating to young people that adults love and care for them so that young people feel supported in their efforts to learn and grow
- *Laughter:* Bringing a humorous attitude to the frustrating behaviors that young people can show in the process of finding themselves
- *Limits:* Providing limits that focus on finding focus and setting direction; providing young people with opportunities to set goals, solve problems, and build decision-making skills
- *Linkages:* Providing opportunities to young people to develop their talents, make a difference in the community, have a sense of belonging, and learn skills they can use in the real world

Source: Elias & Bryan, 2002.

“Social capital sets the stage for a sense of belonging. Dr. Maslow found that it is human nature to want to belong. Everyone wants to be part of a group—wants to belong.

I felt like I was in a cage, I wanted to be a lion but a lion can’t be a lion in a cage.”

—Adrian

who are new to them (expanded social capital). This combination of adults supports young people in a variety of ways: helping them search for information about who they are, what happened to them, where they are going, how they will get there and how and when they will know they belong;²³ helping them reconnect with family members and other important adults previously in their lives; connecting them with other adults in the community who can support them in their educational and employment efforts; and linking them with community resources and supports that can play important roles in their lives during and after foster care.

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23 Henry, 2005.

Family

Case planning typically focuses on finding those one or two adults who can provide permanency for a young person. While absolutely critical, this approach often fails to recognize the need for adolescents and young adults to begin to develop an array of committed relationships, including an array of family relationships. To meet the developmental needs of adolescents and young adults, the case planning process must include the opportunity for them to define who “family” is to him or her. Family may be comprised of his/her birth family members, current and/or former caregivers, other adults who have been “like family” to the young person, and/or individuals who are family by choice. Case planning practices can support young people in the family domain of social capital by:

- Ensuring young people have family-based placement experiences where they are able to interact with their relative or non-relative caregivers and others in the home, building relational skills and exploring the development of new supportive relationships both within and outside the home. Congregate care settings, which are too often the placement of choice for adolescents in care, significantly limit the ability of young people to build connections with family members, peers outside of the placement setting, their school community, and their neighborhoods.
- Supporting young people’s ability to have safe and healthy relationships with birth family members. Young people need to be supported as they learn how to maintain positive connections with siblings and with extended family members with whom they have had a relationship, and to renew or build new

KEY RELATIONAL SKILLS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

- Using appropriate conversational skills
- Finding common interests by trading information
- Appropriately using humor
- Entering and exiting conversations between peers
- Handling rejection, teasing, and bullying
- Being a good host during get-togethers
- Choosing appropriate friends
- Being a good sport
- Handling arguments and disagreements
- Dealing with peer pressure

Source: PEERS for Young Adults, UCLA

relationships with family members with whom they have not had opportunities to build healthy relationships.

- Supporting young parents in connecting with other parents who can provide guidance and support. They need support as they determine how they might engage the extended family of their children as potential sources of social capital.

Peers and Friends

Peers and friends play significant roles—if not the most significant roles—as social capital in young people’s lives. Peer groups provide meaningful connections and emotional support to young people. Studies show that peer acceptance is associated with greater feelings of belonging,²⁴ and friendships directly influence feelings of loneliness.²⁵ Developing high quality peer relationships and friendships is developmentally important because these connections are related to the development of social competence; they can buffer young people

from the negative impact of family troubles; and they are associated with self esteem.²⁶

For young people in foster care, case planning often ignores, or even impedes, ongoing peer relationships. Case planning must support peer connections and friendships that exist prior to young people’s entry into foster care and those that are built after they come into care—with school mates, neighborhood friends, and other young people in foster care.

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24 Brown & Lohr, 1987.

25 Bukowski, Hoza & Bolvin, 1993.

26 Azmitia, 2002; Bolger, Patterson, & Kupersmidt, 1998; Gauze, Bukotwski, Aquan-Assee, & Sippola, 1996; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995.

The case planning process must support young people in developing and sustaining healthy peer relationships and friendships by:

- Fully supporting young people in maintaining existing peer connections and friendships.
- Fully supporting young people in developing new peer connections and friendships that support their continuing development.
- Providing opportunities for young people to develop social skills such as anger management, fairness, and sensitivity; develop companionship skills through literature, sports, games and music; develop empathy for others; develop skills to resolve conflict and disagreements effectively; and identify and explore peer tutoring.²⁷
- Ensuring interactions among young people who have experienced foster care. Young people report the unique emotional support available through peer connections and friendships with other young people with foster care experiences. Peer connections also can help connect young people with programs and services.
- Assisting young people in the process of managing the peer relationships they have. Young people who have not had typical growing up experiences may need support in identifying unhealthy relationships and bringing them to a close in a safe and respectful manner.

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27 Yu, Tepper & Russell, 2012.

School

It is through schools that young people first broaden their social capital outside of the family. At school, young people build social capital through relationships with teachers, coaches, counselors and class mates. Many young people in foster care lose the social capital of their current schools when they enter foster care and when their foster care placements subsequently change. The case planning process must preserve and build young people's social capital in school settings by:

- Ensuring young people can maintain important connections in their schools and when young people must change schools, supporting them in building new connections. Students in foster care who have been held back are old-for-grade and may need extra support in building connections with peers their own age. The young person's caregivers (relatives, foster parents, group care staff) must be actively engaged in supporting the young person's existing and new school connections.
- Ensuring that young people can participate in extracurricular activities of their choosing. Case planning should pay attention to the adult leaders and volunteers in these activities to ensure that they sincerely care about the well-being and future of young people and will promote positive social interactions and development.
- Identifying and engaging supportive adults in the school setting who can help the young person realize his or her full potential. Young people need adults in school who can advocate for them and ensure that they receive the supportive services they need to succeed academically and socially.

Neighborhood and Community

Neighborhoods and communities are important components of social capital for young people. Community members and groups that share a young person's experiences, history, and culture can provide them with an ongoing sense of connectedness and belonging, and they can offer additional supports to young people in the areas of employment and civic engagement. Young people in foster care often struggle to maintain connections to their neighborhoods and communities when they enter foster care and as their foster care placements change. Case planning can support young people's neighborhood and community social capital by:

- Fostering the young person's connections with community groups by inviting them into the planning process and/or engaging them around the young person's strengths, talents, interests and needs. Faith-based organizations, community associations, and cultural and activity groups often provide strong sources of social capital for young people in foster care.
- Allowing and encouraging young people to be engaged in multiple community activities that provide them with opportunities to explore their interests and build their skills while developing relationships with community members.
- Empowering young people to be leaders in their communities and neighborhoods, forging relationships with individuals who share their interests and goals.

Conclusion

It is essential that case planning support the healthy development of young people in foster care by building their social capital and promoting the development of a positive and secure identity. The traditional focus on placement and service provision must expand to building a relational culture for young people that elevates relationships as the conduit for growth and development. It is through these relationships that young people in foster care can build and sustain the social capital critical to their healthy development as adolescents and adults and develop a strong, secure identity. Moving public and private systems in a direction that leads to being more relationally attuned will require intentionality, resources, and a commitment to attending to the well-being of young people as they begin the transition to adulthood.

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ABOUT THE JIM CASEY YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE

The mission of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is to ensure that young people—primarily those between ages 14 and 25—make successful transitions from foster care to adulthood. We do this by working nationally, in states, and locally to improve policies and practices, promote youth engagement, apply evaluation and research, and create community partnerships. Our work creates opportunities for young people to achieve positive outcomes in permanence, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital.

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