



PROMOTING SAFE AND STABLE HOUSING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



What Caregivers, Child Welfare Professionals and Other Caring Adults Can Do:

- Do what is in your power to ensure that the young person does not end up homeless. Leverage your advocacy skills within the child welfare system. Most child welfare systems have an ombudsman that can help.
- Teach young people what to look for and questions to ask when identifying, securing and maintaining housing. Help them figure out the real costs of living independently — not just rent, but utilities, meals and furnishings — and what they can afford after taxes.
- Connect to community resources and donations that can help youth to furnish their apartments. Have volunteers model care and cleaning, and help young people to feel like the apartment is home, not just a place to stay.
- Ensure young people can reach out to people in their support network — particularly family members, mentors, friends and role models who do not have a professional role in the young person's life — to talk with about their feelings and how to resolve issues that trigger untimely urges to move. For example, rearranging furniture every few months could fulfill a young person's need for change, but lessen their impulse to leave while still under a lease.
- Promote opportunities for typical activities during adolescence that will also help young people eventually exercise housing independence with confidence. These include getting a first job and developing basic money management skills.
- Help young people develop plans for their housing, step by step, with short- and long-term goals. Calendars, planners or dream boards can help them think ahead and organize, and connect their housing plans to transition plans.
- Identify and engage community partners, landlords and networks of support to build relationships with young people, connect them with housing options and create alternative requirements other than a credit score.
- Ask landlords if they will provide individual leases for young people living with roommates so the potential actions and consequences of one tenant do not jeopardize the housing of another.
- Support informal housing arrangements, such as leases with family members, friends or other people who are natural sources of support.
- Because many young people leave foster care to live with family members, help them plan for navigating emotions, stress and family dynamics. Talk through what it might be like to live with roommates and how to manage those relationships.
- Affirm to young people that they are capable of attaining skills and relationships. Use your influence and relationship to empower them to help chart a course for their future, including identifying the support they may need in seeking and maintaining housing.
- Reinforce that everyone, at every age, needs the help of another. Ensure the young person has safe, reliable and permanent connections to support them, especially in housing, as references and co-signers.
- Promote developmentally responsive financial literacy, financial capability and savings resources to ensure young people understand what credit is, how it is built, how to repair it and what their rights are.



Experiences in foster care may leave a young person wired to move, even from a stable place.



DID YOU KNOW? Each year **over 23,000** young people exit foster care without a permanent family.

Having **more than one** foster care placement makes a young person **1.5 times more likely** to experience homelessness.

Learn more by downloading the full paper, *The Road to Adulthood: Aligning Child Welfare Practice With Adolescent Brain Development*, at www.aecf.org/resources/the-road-to-adulthood.

Up to **50%** of young people previously in foster care have faced unstable or precarious housing.



The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative works to ensure all young people have safe, stable and affordable housing as a critical platform for long term success and well-being.

Moving out during late adolescence is considered a normal developmental milestone in many cultures. But young people who exit or age out of foster care without a permanent family go from being fully dependent upon the child welfare system to finding themselves on their own — often without the resources and guidance to navigate finding and maintaining a safe and stable place to live.

For some, this may mean living independently, with roommates or family members, on a college campus, or, in the case of young parents, having to find housing for themselves and their children.

Young people who have experienced foster care face external challenges and barriers, but it is important to bear in mind that they have often developed critical skills from their experiences. These skills have helped them cope, stay safe and navigate the feeling and experience of having to “grow up quickly” and “raise themselves.” Adult supporters should honor these strengths and build on them while supporting young people every step of the way in their housing transitions.

Rewiring for Stability

Young people in foster care are expected to adapt to and manage not just a new home, but new caretakers, new rules, a new school, new teachers and new peers. To cope with this reality, young people inevitably learn to remain hyper-alert and ready to move. Past experiences of rejection and disruptions may be unconsciously dictating the desire to move more than actual circumstances.

While many young people report that they are relieved to finally have a place of their own where no one could ask them to leave or kick them out, they also share feeling a persistent need to uproot and move again. This can ultimately lead them to break leases and incur fees, which can negatively affect both short and long-term stability by jeopardizing things like credit and future landlord references.

Fortunately, neuroscience shows that adolescence is the prime time for young people to “rewire” their brains to create new habits, build on and develop new and healthy relationships with others and learn new ways to cope with and heal from trauma, loss and patterns that may no longer serve them.

Cultivating Calm and Comfort

Child welfare workers, caregivers and supporters have both an opportunity and responsibility to support young people in further developing or transforming the vital coping skills that served them while in foster care so they are equipped and empowered to reach their goals.

For older youth who have experienced these repeated disruptions in their home environments, a first step is acknowledging this history of feeling deeply disempowered by the home moves others have forced on them. This acknowledgment can help young people understand why they might experience heightened stress or anxiety in establishing their own home stability, and that they may be unconsciously reliving painful experiences of the past.

Brene Brown defines calm as creating perspective and mindfulness while managing emotional reactivity.¹ The right to know and claim home and family may have eluded many older youth in foster care. They may have worked very hard planning and preparing for getting a place of their very own, yet achieving this milestone might also feel strangely unfamiliar and uncertain. To truly arrive home, older youth need a consistent, supportive dialogue with caring adults that honors residual feelings and worries while encouraging healing and understanding of the past.

¹ Brown, B. (2010.) The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think you are supposed to be and embrace who you are. Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing



One in four young people experience homelessness within four years of exiting foster care.

REWIRING FOR GROWTH: Transforming Conversations about Housing Stability

When a young person says:

I am ready to leave. I'm 18 years old now and all I want is to have **my own place. I'll just get a cheap apartment** and I'll be set.

They might mean:

I want to express myself without worrying this will result in me moving to another school and home again. If I can afford the rent, I won't get kicked out.

Or:

Being in foster care, someone is always telling me what to do. **I want to be able to make my own decisions and living in this area is the only thing I'm familiar with.** My friends and family live here.

Every interaction with a young person matters. Make yours count!

This is just one example of what a young person in foster care might say about their living arrangements – and what they might really be thinking. You can respond in a way that keeps the conversation going and wires the adolescent brain for trust, possibility and healthy interdependence with others.

Instead of responding this way:

Just because you move into your own place doesn't mean that you can do whatever you want. It comes with a lot of responsibilities that I don't think you're ready for.

Caring adults can say:

Tell me more – what does it mean for you to have your own place? **Let's think through** what it would mean to have your own place that is safe and stable. **What is most important to you** to keep in mind when we start looking for housing?

Or:

I can imagine you might feel you won't be independent until you have a place of your own, but the last thing I want for you is to move in somewhere and be asked to leave. **What would it take to maintain your own place?**

Have your own conversations with a young person.