



JIM CASEY

YOUTH

OPPORTUNITIES
INITIATIVE

Social Capital: Building Quality Networks for Young People in Foster Care

Social Capital: Building Quality Networks for Young People in Foster Care

Social capital—social relationships and networks that support healthy development—is essential for all young people. Research, the experiences of child welfare professionals, and young people in foster care make clear that social capital is particularly crucial for older youth in foster care as they prepare to make the transition to adulthood. Because of these young people’s experiences with loss, separation, and disruption of relationships, it is critical that they develop and sustain diverse social networks comprised of quality relationships with their families, schools, neighborhoods and communities, and peers. However, far too often, young people’s ability to create and maintain social capital is hindered by their past experiences and trauma, and by child welfare policies and practices that do not promote healing and building of relationships.

Defining social capital

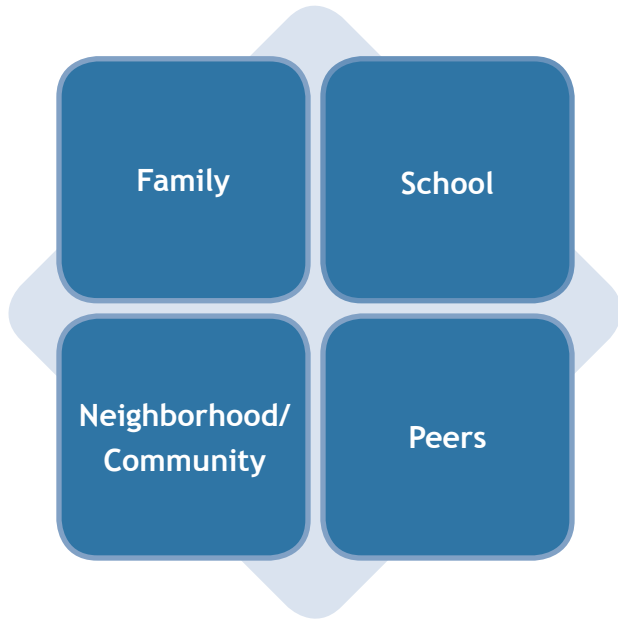
Social capital is comprised of social networks and social relationships, a bonding between similar people and a bridging between diverse people.¹ One scholar described social capital as the value that is created by investing in relationships with others through processes of trust and reciprocity.² There are three recognized dimensions of social capital: (1) the quantity of an individual’s social relationships, (2) the quality of those relationships, and (3) the value of the resources that partners in social relationships can potentially make available to one another.³ Social capital is fundamentally about how people interact with each other.⁴

As shown in Figure 1, young people build social capital in the context of four communities: the family, school, neighborhood, and peers.⁵ It is in

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1 Adler & Kwon, 2002; Dekker & Uslaner, 2001; Uslaner, 2001.
 2 Coleman, 1988, 1990.
 3 Astone, et al., 1999.
 4 Dekker & Uslaner, 2001.
 5 Ferguson, 2006; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Putman, 2000.

FIGURE 1. SOURCES OF SOCIAL CAPITAL



these communities that young people meet and associate with the most important people in their lives; learn what is expected of them and what to expect from others, particularly adults; and learn positive or negative lessons about the role of the individual in society.

Young people in foster care

Establishing interpersonal bonds and a sense of closeness, warmth, caring, and interpersonal commitment are a central element of social development.⁶ Quality relationships with family and community play a central role in particular during adolescence.⁷ Generating and obtaining social capital during this time enhances the individual's productive capabilities and chances for success throughout the course of life.⁸ Social capital has a protective function as well. The adolescent's mental health and well-being is tied to social environments that offer protective factors and limit exposure to risk factors that can compromise mental health.

The more often people experience the positive effects of protective factors outweighing risk factors during childhood and adolescence, the more likely they are to achieve and sustain well-being later in life.⁹ Studies show that strong, positive connections in the family and the community are associated with lower levels of unhealthy risk taking and the development of caring, confident, and competent young people.¹⁰ These connections provide a conduit through which adolescents know they can contribute meaningfully to the broader social order.¹¹

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6 Hawkins & Weis, 1985.
7 Duke, et al., 2009.
8 Brown, 2011.
9 World Health Organization, 2007.
10 Bernat & Resnick, 2006; Youngblade, et al., 2007.
11 Wray-Lake, Flanagan, & Osgood, 2010.

ABOUT JIM CASEY YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative's mission is to ensure that the young people who leave foster care are able to make successful transitions to adulthood. In an effort to improve the systems that support them, the Initiative promotes the strategies of: youth voice, community partnerships, research and evaluation, public will and policy, and the creation of a range of opportunities for young people. It works in partnership with communities and states across the country to integrate these strategies into the core work of state child welfare agencies and other strategic allies.

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Too often, however, young people placed in foster care become disconnected from their parents, other family members, school, their neighborhoods, and their friends, losing the strong, positive connections they may have once had with their social networks. Although child welfare agencies work to ensure that each young person leaves foster care to join a family through reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship, rarely are complementary and concurrent efforts made to ensure that the young person's broader social network is maintained or created. There is a pressing need to strengthen the full range of social capital resources for young people in foster care. When young people receive *interdependent living* rather than *independent living* services in preparation for adulthood, they can develop the knowledge, practical skills, and social capital they need as they begin to take on new roles and responsibilities.

Family

“Family, especially a sibling, is all we have and is someone who knows our situation because she or he has been through it—someone who we can relate to. They become our biggest supporter, our inspiration, and, in turn, we become theirs.”

—Gernani Yutob Jr., age 21

Successful development through adolescence and early adulthood is tied to a young person's family relationships.¹² Family social capital:

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12 Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Cooney & Kurtz, 1996.

- influences the psychological development of emerging adults and impacts their ability to establish healthy interpersonal skills and form intimate relationships;¹³
- plays an important role in a young person's academic self-concept and educational attainment;¹⁴ and
- impacts young people's later civic involvement as young adults.¹⁵

Although family social capital is critical for all young people, it is especially vital to older youth in foster care who have experienced family disruptions. Without the security of a family, young people in foster care generally lack the base of operations they need to explore the new roles of adulthood.¹⁶

The most secure, long-lasting, and strongest social capital for young people aging out of foster care is a permanent nuclear and extended family.¹⁷ Young people in foster care maintain strong hopes for connection to their families of origin¹⁸, and many who “age out” of foster care return to live or reconnect with their biological families or attempt to do so.¹⁹ The urgency of achieving family permanency for young people in foster care greatly intensifies as they approach adulthood because of the significant challenges that they will face if they age out of foster care without a permanent connection to at least one caring adult.²⁰

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13 Masten, Obradovic, & Burt, 2006; Scharf, Mayseless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2004.
 14 Etcheverry, Clifton, & Roberts, 2001; Sandefur, Meier, & Hernandez, 1999.
 15 Brown, 2011.
 16 Avery & Freundlich, 2009.
 17 Avery, 2009.
 18 Petr, 2008.
 19 McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008.
 20 Walters, et al., 2010.

POLICY AND PRACTICE

To help older youth in foster care build and sustain family social capital, we must develop and implement policies and practices that:

- **Ensure that all systems serving emerging adults give young people opportunities to develop relational competencies**—the skills needed to form and maintain healthy relationships and to continue to build family relationships and networks. If a young person is not ready to be a part of a legal family, efforts must be made to help that person work towards building “family” as he or she defines it.
- **Fully engage young people** as the drivers of their permanency planning process and support them in developing relationships that allow them to feel that they truly belong to a family.
- **Engage birth family members** in planning with the young person regardless of their ability to be the caregiver. Older youth must be supported in their desire to maintain or renew connections with birth family members and see that their ties to biological family members are respected and valued.
- **Support sibling connections** throughout a young person’s time in foster care. These are often the most critical and intimate relationships that young people have, and yet, they are often disrupted by the foster care experience.
- **Address family social capital continuously**, from the time a young person enters foster care onward. Supports to promote relationships with the birth family, new permanent family, and/or other caring adults must be

provided concurrently with interdependent living services. It is within healthy family relationships that young people develop and maintain both a sense of ongoing emotional connectedness (characterized by support, involvement, and personal relationship) and a sense of separateness (characterized by autonomy, uniqueness, and freedom of personal expression).²¹ Permanency services must not be contingent upon a young person’s age, and all relationships should be supported to become lifelong and legal if possible.

School

“Probably the most traumatic experience was all of the moving I did. Moving foster homes is one thing, but what I found very challenging was also moving schools, because I left a whole support system behind.”

—Josh Grubb, age 19

Social capital takes many forms in the educational context. It exists in parents’ or caregivers’ expectations and obligations with respect to educating their children, the social networks developed among the families that the school serves, the relationships between young people and their teachers, the disciplinary and academic climate at school, and the cultural norms and values that promote student efforts.²² Social capital in school is also generated by

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21 Sabatelli & Anderson, 1991.

22 Paxton, 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999; Schmitt & Kleine, 2010.

young people’s membership in certain communities or networks that provide positive role models, encouragement, support, and advice.²³ Engaging with like-minded friends who value education can promote school success and reduce rates of dropping out.²⁴

Young people in foster care often must change schools as their foster care placements change.²⁵ These changes disrupt the young person’s development of social capital as he or she loses friends, teachers, coaches, the educational expectations of caregivers (who may change as well), and the familiar school setting.²⁶ The loss of social capital at school has academic implications, as young people lose connections with people who could provide direction and guidance in coping with gaps in knowledge and skills, stress, and experiences of failure in the classroom.²⁷

POLICY AND PRACTICE

In order to help students in foster care access and retain the social capital developed at school, we must implement policies and practices that:

- **Make school stability a priority.** The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 requires that states keep children in the same schools when they enter foster care unless it is not in their best interest to do so. Child welfare and education agencies and the courts must make *all* efforts possible to keep young people in their original school. It

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23 White & Glick, 2000.
24 Ream & Rumberger, 2008.
25 National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2008.
26 Gaddie, 2010.
27 Puentes, Herrington, & Kritsonis, 2008.

“What’s important to have is stability and courage to trust people with your heart and break down walls you’ve put up to block them out. Sometimes walls are put up not to keep people out, but to see who cares enough to break them down.”

—Tacandie Richmond, age 18

is through school stability that young people sustain important sources of social capital in their lives.

- **Help young people who must change schools build new social capital.** When a young person must change schools, he or she must be supported in developing new relationships with teachers, coaches, and others who can serve as positive role models and academic and social support. Young people also must be assisted in developing new peer relationships. Research shows that these relationships can promote the ability to adapt to school stresses, especially during the transition to a new school.²⁸ School records should be transferred immediately to ensure enrollment in appropriate classes, and they should include information on the young person’s extracurricular interests to facilitate his or her re-engagement in these activities.
- **Engage young people as partners** in making decisions about their education. Young people need to have a voice in the decisions that impact their educational experiences and progress. Caregivers, Guardians ad Litem, Court Appointed Special Advocates, and other adults who are important to young people in foster care need to support them in participating in decisionmaking.

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28 Juvonen, 2006; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004.

Neighborhood and community

“Neighborhood and community connection helps us figure out how to reach out to others when tough times come about, and ... it shows and teaches us how to extend and give back.”

—Eddy Vanderkwaak, age 20

Neighborhoods are important contexts for adolescents and have a significant impact on young people’s well-being.²⁹ From early adolescence onward, young people are increasingly exposed to neighborhood settings and conditions and have greater direct contact with members of their neighborhoods.³⁰ It is in the neighborhood that adolescents find opportunities to forge supportive networks with a broad range of people and organizations.³¹ Community networks may include positive role models and community-based organizations that foster civic engagement and opportunities for youth leadership.

Community networks and relationships can provide young people in foster care with access to adult support outside the family and the foster care system, opportunities to explore employment and educational interests, and connections with individuals and groups that share and can advance their special interests. Young people also have much to offer their communities and can reciprocate the support the community provides to them. Many young people in foster care have been removed from natural opportunities for leadership and engagement

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29 Brooks-Gunn, et al., 1997; Ingoldsby & Shaw, 2002.

30 Allison, et al., 1999.

31 Dallago, et al., 2009; Pretty, 2002.

in their communities, and many experience a sense of powerlessness resulting from being in foster care. The intentional creation of community networks and relationships is particularly important for them.

POLICY AND PRACTICE

In order to help young people in care build and sustain neighborhood and community social capital, we must implement policies and practices that:

- **Keep young people in one community** where they can establish and maintain connections with positive role models and organizations that support their healthy development. If a young person must move away, it is important to arrange for continued contact with key people and organizations from their community.
- **Place young people in family-based settings** that meet their needs and support engagement in community activities as normative adolescent behavior. Such opportunities are generally not available in congregate care settings, where access to community and neighborhood activities is restricted.
- **Support young people in connecting** with a wide range of adults, such as faith-based or cultural mentors, job mentors, and school counselors, who can help them feel rooted and, through modeling and relationship development, provide opportunities to develop adult skills.
- **Provide supports that enable young people to participate** in a range of social and faith-based events. These supports can be concrete, such as transportation to events, and abstract, such as

having flexible expectations of a young person so that he or she can have a part-time job, spend time with friends, date, and take part in community activities.

Peers

“It was difficult to build peer relationships in the beginning once I got into the foster system, because I was very off to the side. I didn’t want to get into the relationship with friends, because I knew momentarily that I would be moving from that situation to another school. I knew eventually it was going to be cut off. Once I started opening up, I realized there were other people going through what I was. It built a bridge, and I realized I’m not alone.”

—Jen Ligali, age 24

Peer relationships play an important role in the social and psychological development of adolescents and are an important source of social capital. Because peers are generally of similar ages and share a social status and competencies, peer groups tend to be egalitarian and provide young people with opportunities for cooperation, mutual altruism, and reciprocity that typically are not available in relationships with adults.³² Peer relationships offer lessons in conflict resolution and opportunities to practice negotiation strategies in managing conflict, laying a foundation for skills that can prove crucial in adult relationships.³³

32 Furman, 1999.
33 Crockett & Randall, 2006.

The quality of peer relationships is associated with the young person’s school performance and belief in his or her ability to succeed, development of pro- or anti-social behaviors, and experience of emotional and mental health problems as adults.³⁴ Peers promote psychosocial development by providing a reference group for identity development; it is in peer relationships that young people individuate from their families, experiment with different roles and responsibilities, and experience intimate and sexual relationships.³⁵

All young people need multiple supportive relationships with peers as well as adults. For youth in care, peer relationships—with others in foster care and with peers outside of foster care—can be a significant source of emotional support, guidance, and instrumental help. It is in peer groups that young people in care learn to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships based on clear communication, cooperation, resistance to inappropriate pressure, negotiation, and the seeking of help when it is needed. They also learn how to allow others to depend on them for informal and formal support and leadership.

POLICY AND PRACTICE

To help older youth in care build and sustain peer-based social capital, we must implement policies and practices that:

- **Support young people in sustaining healthy connections with peers** when they enter foster care and throughout their foster care

34 Sabatelli & Anderson, 1991.
35 Hill & Holmbeck, 1986.

“My circle of support impacted me in a way that allowed me to comfortably transition into adulthood with little to no fears about my tomorrows. I looked to my future as a college student and as a young woman with faith that everything would work out and it was all due to my web of support. My church is my biggest and most reliable support net. They’ve been there through thick and thin. Through my most shameful moments to my most resilient and exciting bounds in my life, they stuck it out and are still here with me and tell me all the time how proud they all are of me. They are part of my ‘family.’”

—Nicole Byers, age 21

stays. Young people’s relationships with peers are supported by family-based placements that allow them to remain in their same schools and communities. When young people must change schools and communities, they must be supported in maintaining peer relationships.

- **Support young people in developing new healthy peer relationships.** Peer-based social capital is promoted by providing young people in care with opportunities to socialize with each other (through, for example, youth advisory groups, workshops, and informal gatherings) and with others who share their interests.

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Related Publications

This issue brief draws from a research base and set of recommendations described more fully in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative's publication *The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning From Foster Care*. Also part of the series is the issue brief *Foster Care to 21: Doing It Right*. For copies of these and other resources, visit the Initiative's web site at www.jimcaseyyouth.org.

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