

# WHAT'S GOING ON IN THERE?

*Understanding the Adolescent Brain and Its Implications  
for Young People Transitioning from Foster Care*

Recent research has helped us understand the adolescent brain in new and powerful ways. Because of this research, it is now widely understood that young people between the ages of 14 and 25 must take on distinct social and developmental tasks to become healthy, connected, and productive adults. Young people who are removed from these tasks or prevented from taking them on, have greater difficulty achieving success in school, work and life. Young people in foster care too often face these unnecessary barriers to success.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is committed to improving the lives of young people **transitioning from foster care to adulthood**. These latest research findings offer a map for doing just that.

**Here's a glance at some of the research findings, and how they apply to young people in foster care:**



## **ADOLESCENCE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD PROVIDES JUST AS MUCH OPPORTUNITY TO IMPACT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AS EARLY CHILDHOOD.**

Between ages 14 and 25, a person's brain experiences a period of major growth and development. This period shapes the planning, decision-making, judgment, and coping skills a person needs as an adult.

***How does this apply to foster care?** Too often, the foster care system falls short of meeting young people's needs, and nurturing their developing brains too. Let's work together to ensure that older youth in foster care have better access to opportunities to grow, learn, and prepare for adulthood.*



## **THERE ISN'T A "POINT OF NO RETURN" FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA.**

Young people in foster care have often experienced a range of stressful and traumatic experiences. There is a window of time, though, to counteract the damage caused by those experiences. Adolescence is that time and it offers tremendous opportunity for young people. When the adolescent brain is exposed to developmentally healthy experiences, it can actually "rewire" itself. This can help any young person, regardless of prior trauma, get on a better path to a bright future.

***How does this apply to foster care?** Many young people in foster care, especially those who abruptly age out of the foster care system at age 18, lack access to a supportive family or network. Healthy relationships are critical to coping with the stressful and traumatic experiences that foster youth too often face. Let's do more to support their resilient brains. Let's call for supportive, age-appropriate social services that more closely mirror the experiences of young people in supportive, intact families.*





## EXPERIENCE MATTERS.

Experience matters more than we ever thought during adolescence, especially experiences within relationships. The more and varied relationships a young person can maintain within family, peers, school, work, or in their community, the better positioned they will be to achieve a healthy and balanced adulthood. Experiences during adolescence can largely determine the rest of that person's life trajectory.

***How does this apply to foster care?** Young people in foster care are not only removed from their immediate family members, they are often in restrictive environments and disconnected from extended families and friends. Let's work together to keep relationships alive for a young person while they are in foster care. This involves restoring important connections so that young people in foster care are not cut off from everything and everyone they had previously known.*



## RISK-TAKING SERVES A PURPOSE.

The chemical changes in the brain that prime adolescents for risk-taking are creating the capacity young people need to practice adult roles and responsibilities while in a supported environment. While parents may tend to over-protect their children, they also know that some level of risk-taking is to be expected as their children grow into adults. Research tells us this is a necessary and positive factor in building a healthy and productive adult. Rather than trying to stop it altogether, parents and guardians should provide a safe and supportive environment where young people are free to experience challenges, make hard decisions, and learn from their mistakes.

***How does this apply to foster care?** The life of a young person in foster care is dictated by outside forces, while peers in intact families are exposed to more decision-making opportunities. Let's do our part to improve the experience for young people in foster care, and to give them the same level of guided decision-making power that their peers have.*

## Use It or Lose It?

*Activities and experiences are getting hard-wired into the brain during adolescence – young people need opportunities to **exercise their brains** – this means letting them plan their own lives and make their own decisions, with support and guidance from caring committed people.*

*Since 1999, more than 230,000 young people have left the foster care system in America, typically at age 18, without having a stable family. Far too many of these young people face troubling challenges upon aging out of foster care, including homelessness, lower graduation rates from high school and college, and difficulty securing stable employment.*