

An Evaluation of Independent Living Skill Programs for Youth in Out of Home Placements:

Recommendations for successful programs.

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Abstract

An Evaluation of Independent Living Skill Programs for Youth in Out of Home Placements:
Recommendations for successful programs.

Laura Clark

Under the Supervision of Dr. Cheryl Banachowski-Fuller

Statement of the Problem

Research has identified that youth who are placed in foster care lack the necessary skills to be self-sufficient upon emancipation. This skills deficit leads to issues including high levels of criminal activity, a lack of physical and mental health services, homelessness, and an increased risk for victimization (Hollander, Budd, Petulla, Staley, 2007). Youth in out of home care are already receiving mandated independent living skills programming however, the quality and frequency of this programming varies widely and results are often not proven.

Given that youth in foster care are continuing to fall behind their peers in educational achievement, wages, housing stability, and many other aspects of self-sufficiency (Osgood, Foster, Courtney, 2010) it is safe to say that the current independent living skills programming is ineffective. The negative outcomes of these youth pose threats to themselves and their communities and the cost of their failure is immense.

The issues faced by foster youth often encompass several key areas of skill development. Youth who have been in foster care are more likely to experience job instability which is

related to their housing instability (Dworsky, Napolitano, Courtney, 2012). Once they become homeless they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors including drug use and promiscuity (Dworsky, Napolitano, Courtney, 2012). Being that a large majority of youth exiting the foster care system have not achieved a high school diploma or equivalent (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, and Wyatt, 2005) the lack of education may be a contributing factor in their employment instability. All of these factors point to a need to reexamine the current systems in place for preparing youth for self-sufficiency and ensure that programs that are being utilized are achieving the best possible outcomes with the resources at hand.

Method of Approach

The paper will utilize secondary research derived from peer reviewed articles, scholarly journals, government publications, and internet sites providing information on independent living skills program models. The research will apply the theories of social bonding and social learning to assess the relevancy of the presented program models. The study will then examine effective program models and discuss their operations and proven outcome measures.

Summary of Results

The results of this study have revealed that there is a need for more evidence-based independent living skills programs. The effectiveness of independent living skills programs was shown to be higher for programs that emphasize social support, provided hands-on learning opportunities, and provided support past the age of eighteen.

The paper provides several model programs that may improve the readiness of foster youth for the transition to adulthood. These models include mentoring programs, caregiver education, and transitional living programs. The unique aspects of these programs are

examined to identify what sets them apart from other independent living skills programming.

Lastly, recommendations are made for the successful implementation of future programs.

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I. Introduction: Effective independent living skills are necessary to produce successful adults.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, independent living skill programs have increased as a necessary component for youth in out of home placements. The United States Congress passed the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act in 1999 in an effort to address the shortcomings of the foster care system (National Indian Child Welfare Association, n.d.) and assist states in preparing foster youth for adulthood. The act increased the amount of federal funding available to states to prepare foster youth for independence to over 100 million annually. These funds are available to youth to assist in the development of employment skills and post-secondary education. However, states are given individual discretion to choose the programs they fund creating wide disparities in the effectiveness of the programs.

Independent living skills are essential to maintaining an independent living situation and avoiding homelessness, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse and incarceration. Youth who age out of the foster care or other out of home placement are more likely to experience struggles with homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, and access to health care (Children's Bureau, 2014a). Despite the fact that all states provide some form of independent living skill program foster youth still face significant adversity upon emancipation.

Statement of the problem

When youth are placed out of their homes, whether with family members, foster care providers, group homes, or detention centers; they become the legal responsibility of the state.

Each of these forms of placement is supervised by a government agency or secondary agency licensed by the government and is considered a component of the foster care system (Children's Bureau, 2014a). According to the Children's Bureau (2014b) 16 percent of youth in foster care are over the age of 16. In 2014 over 20,000 youth exited foster care through emancipation and became legally responsible for their own wellbeing, regardless of their preparedness.

Independent living skills experience a substantial amount of growth and development during the teen years and many children struggle to develop these skills while in the foster care system.

Without the proper training and education needed to prepare these youth for adulthood they are at an increase risk for lower educational attainment, unemployment, homelessness, poor physical and mental health, poor social supports, and criminal activity.

Youth in foster care system often undergo multiple periods of transition and instability, which can affect their educational outcomes. Due to the crisis situations that surround placement in foster care, educational performance can be put on hold and neglected for a period of time (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006). Even if youth do not miss excessive amounts of school they are still considered a vulnerable population during the transition to adulthood due to their potential exposure to trauma (Osgood, Foster & Courtney, 2010). Navigating high school and college can be daunting to youth and those emancipated from the foster care system are at elevated disadvantage if they lack a strong support network to assist them. Without an education these individuals are likely to have lower incomes than their counterparts and are more susceptible to unemployment and layoffs.

Maintaining employment and financial stability is a key component of achieving self-sufficiency. Foster youth demonstrate poor employment outcomes and extended periods of job instability upon aging out of care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). This

period of instability has shown to extend past the age of 24 with youth making about \$1,000 less per month than the average 24 year old (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Compounding this issue is the fact that many youth have no experience managing finances and lack a social support network to rely on in times of financial need.

Unlike youth transitioning from a traditional home, under the care of their parents or other family members, youth in foster care lose the support of their caregivers upon turning 18, or 21 in some states. This places them at a high risk for housing instability (Dworsky, Napolitano, Courtney, 2012). Youth are responsible for their own well-being for the first time and can find it hard to locate and secure housing. Even youth that have an established transition plan in place they are also at risk and can easily become homeless if their economic situations change. Once the youth becomes homeless they are placed at an increased risk for issues related to mental health, physical safety, sexual abuse, and a lack of healthcare (Dworsky, Napolitano & Courtney, 2012).

Former foster youth have demonstrated significant risk for drug or alcohol abuse, early pregnancy, STDs, and poor health. Longitudinal studies report that 30 percent of foster youth have been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease, 9 percent reported having sex for money, and almost 80 percent report not using a condom regularly (Ahrens, McCarty, Simoni, Dworsky, and Courtney, 2013). Foster youth are also likely to engage in other risky behaviors that can affect their overall health. They are more likely to use alcohol, marijuana, and smoke cigarettes than youth who have never been in foster care (Thompson & Hasin, 2011). Foster youth are also more likely to receive disability due to physical or mental health needs and report higher rates of health issues interfering with daily living activities (Salazar, 2013).

Upon leaving foster care or another form of out of home placement, youth often lose the most significant adult influences in their lives. Young adults are shown to leave the home of their parents at an average age of 23 and often return home after failed attempts to be self-sufficient (Jones, 2013). Foster youth are unique in this aspect as many of them have unstable family homes or lack the familial bonds of traditional youth. Without a traditional social support system foster youth require nontraditional supports to teach them independent living skills and guide them during the transition from youth to adulthood.

Individual states, counties, and agencies utilize unique programs to develop independent living skills among youth in foster care. The lack of standardized programs allows for diversity among programs and also creates variance in outcomes. By identifying similarities among effective programs a guideline for establishing independent living skill programs can be established. This will allow agencies to ensure their programs are developed and delivered in the most effective manner and also provide evidenced-based recommendations.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to identify attributes of successful programs for preparing youth in out of home placements for independent living. Youth aging out of the foster care system, residential facilities, and detention centers are at-risk for incarceration, homelessness, and poverty among other dismal outcomes (Hollander et al., 2007). This paper will focus on examining the programs and outcomes in the areas of education, employment, housing, physical and mental health, and social supports.

Many youth lack skills to provide them with sufficient education, employment, housing, and health care (Hollander et al., 2007). Youth in foster care are often provided training and

support in these areas of independent living skills yet many continue to have subpar outcomes after transitioning out of the system. This study serves to identify the skill deficits of youth aging out of the foster care system and examine the current services in place to address those skills. The study will also identify common components of successful programs and create a model of success to guide new and existing programs.

Method of Approach

The key areas of deficiency in independent living skills will be identified primarily through qualitative research derived from secondary sources. These sources include government data on youth aging out of foster care or detention centers gathered through the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) (2014). The data provided by the NYTD will provide self reported data from youth who are in out of home placements at age 17 and conducts a follow-up survey between ages 19-21 to assess the youth's preparedness and success at independent living. To supplement this data peer reviewed journal articles as well as data collected by other agencies will be used to examine previously determined gaps in independent living skill programs as well as data based statistics on youth during the transition phase. Program evaluation measures will be gathered from qualitative secondary sources including scholarly journals, textbooks, government reports, and agency websites.

Data will also be collected from scholarly journals to identify successful independent living skill programs. Multiple scholarly journal articles will be used to identify successful programs based on outcome measures. Commonalities among these programs will be used to create an ideal model of an independent living skills program.

Limitations

The first limitation of this paper is the availability of data sources. While several reliable sources provide data on youth that have aged out of the foster care system the information is limited. These sources cannot provide a complete picture of youth outcomes and most data obtained only provides results for the first several years after emancipation.

The second limitation arises when comparing independent living skill programs. The data provided through peer-reviewed journals is limited in this area. Due to the small sample sizes of some studies and supporting research it is hard to generalize some of the studies to a larger population.

The last limitation is the inability to examine cultural influences on independent living skill programs and outcomes. Most of the data collected to measure foster youth outcomes acknowledges differences in outcomes based on race. However, none of the research regarding independent living skill programs focuses on identifying the reasons for these differences and how programs structures and delivery may affect them.

II. Literature Review:

This following literature review is divided into four sections. The first section will define independent living skills for the purpose of this paper. Next, it will address the need for independent living skills programs for youth in foster care through supporting literature. It will then examine the connection between foster care placement and criminal activity. Lastly, the final section will present models of effective independent living skill programs.

Definition of ILS

The majority of independent living skill programs address one or more of the following areas: education, employment, housing, physical/mental health, and social skills. Each youth is unique in their life experiences and education and will possess a certain level of knowledge in each of the independent living skill areas. However, it is important that this knowledge is supplemented through independent living skill programs in order to ensure the best possible outcomes upon emancipation.

The purpose of independent living skill programs is to assist youth in achieving self-sufficiency. Merriam-Webster (2016) defines self-sufficiency as the ability to live or function without assistance from others. The key skills areas for self-sufficiency are housing, income, and access to healthcare. Other, more auxiliary needs, such as education, social skills, and financial management can impact how successful the individual is in life. Many of these skills are intertwined and can be difficult to teach in an educational setting. Most youth develop these skills through repeated exposure in the home setting. For youth in foster care the disruption to their living environment and lapse of education due to turmoil can impede their development of key life skills.

Need for ILS programs

Youth are placed in foster care when their parents or guardians are no longer able to provide them with adequate care (Fallesen, 2013). At this time social services takes over the role of providing the youth with adequate care. One component of that adequate care is ensuring that youth has a better outcome with social services involvement than they would have had if they had remained in their previous living situation. This goal is one that is not only hard to measure but also hard to obtain. In an effort to create the best possible outcomes for foster youth an emphasis on independent living skill programs has increased program offerings and placed an emphasis on defining effective programs.

Each year 20,000 youth age out of the foster care system (NGA, 2007). At which time these youth become autonomous members of society. In order for them to be successful adults they require the basic skills and education necessary to function on their own. In an effort to ensure all states are addressing issues of skill deficiency before emancipation all youth are administered tests to measure their ILS by age 16 (Nollan, Wolf, Ansell, Bums, Barr, Copeland, Padock, 2000). Once an assessment has been completed any areas of deficiency can then be rectified before emancipation.

Crime and foster care correlation

The successful transition of foster youth into adulthood not only affects the well being of the individual but society as a whole. Unsuccessful transitions result in high rates of public assistance use as well as increased criminal activity. Youth who have been placed in the foster care system at some point in their lives, regardless of their placement upon emancipation, are more likely to engage in criminal activity (Cusick, Havlicek, Courtney, 2012).

Time spent in foster care increases one's dependency on welfare, likelihood of unemployment, rate of hospitalization, and decreased educational attainment compared to their peer group (Fallesen, 2013). Each of these circumstances is a contributing factor to criminal activity and many foster youth face them all. Youth who have been in foster care prior to emancipation face several challenges to creating a safe, stable, and successful life. When their environment becomes overwhelming and these challenges appear impassable they may turn to criminal activity as a means to secure income or social status.

Youth who are placed in foster care at the time of their emancipation, often referred to as aging out, report higher rates of arrest between the ages of 17 and 18 (Cusick, Havlicek, Courtney, 2012). Upon emancipation, generally at age 18, criminal behavior continues with 57% of males and 34% of females reporting arrests by age 19. These are significantly higher than the national arrest rates of 20% for males and 3% for females. Youth in foster care are also at significant risk for recidivism. This is why it is so important that programs are offered to youth in the foster care system to mitigate the risk for criminal activity and assist youth in becoming successful, self-sufficient adults.

Problems with Current Independent Living Skills Programs

Anywhere you go in the U.S. you will find some type of programming that addresses independent living skills for youth in foster care. Federal law mandates that these programs must be in existence, however, they leave the execution of these programs in the hands of the foster care managing agencies (Paul-Ward, 2009). Funding for independent living skills programs is often allotted from county or municipality budgets but can also be supplemented by grants and other unique funding sources. This means that in order to receive the necessary funding to

operate effective programs they must be able to show that they are providing a benefit to the community in proportion to the cost of the program. To do this, research has been conducted on many existing programs and has identified several ineffective practices being used.

Time Constraints

Over the past several decades, programs have changed in an attempt to bridge gaps in services and improve overall outcomes for youth. For many programs this meant targeting independent living skill programs at younger youth and reducing the age for existing programs or creating separate programs for younger youth. These programs attempt to circumvent issues such as criminal activity, homelessness, and social welfare dependency later in life by starting skills training earlier in life. However, we know that youth exiting the foster care system make an average of \$6,000 per year, most do not have a drivers license, and only 25 percent have the physical items necessary for establishing a household (Krinsky, 2010). Most of these youth are sent out into the world to be “adults” with little more than a garbage bag of belongings. Abruptly ending services for these youth at 18, or upon completing school, we are leaving them vulnerable and unsupported during the actual transition period.

Although these precautionary measures are taken to increase youth’s ability to function as a self-reliant adult they still fail to provide support in the most critical time of the transition. For most young adults support during the transition to adulthood comes from parents and family members. For youth with dysfunctional family relationships, or a lack of family involvement, structured relationships such as mentorships are often used to improve the youth’s relational permanency (Avery, 2011). The benefits of mentor relationships are positively correlated with the longevity of the relationship (Avery, 2011) making it important for youth to not only begin mentoring services as early as possible or continue them after aging out of care. Youth self-

identified the need to start services early or extend them to provide an adequate time period for the mentor to build trust and respect with the mentee before independent living skills can be addressed in the mentoring relationship (Osterling & Hines, 2006).

Voluntary programs

A variety of programs may be offered to youth to assist them in preparing for the transition to adulthood. Unfortunately, the youth who may benefit from the programming the most may be the least likely to receive services. Often program eligibility is limited to youth who are willing and active participants (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). It can be easy to see how youth in an out of home placement may be reluctant to engage in programs offered to them by the same agency that has placed them out of their homes.

Another reason programs are ineffective when they offer training to youth on a voluntary basis is that the youth may not feel that the training is relevant or necessary for them to have a successful future. Youth in general, often underestimate the benefit of these programs and are overly confident that they possess the necessary skills to live independently although they have not actually experience much independence while in foster care. Participating in classes that teach skills can also contribute to feelings of inadequacy and marginalization which many foster youth have already experienced during their time in the system (Paul-Ward, 2009).

Some agencies require mandatory participation in independent living skill programs. However, surveyed youth have reported that classes were offered on a sporadic schedule and the mandatory participation was not enforced (Paul-Ward, 2009). Many of the youth who participated in independent living skills class organized by the county did not feel that they were beneficial in any way.

Lack of application opportunities

Youth living in an out of home placement may reside in a foster home, with friends or relatives, in group homes, or youth detention centers. Each of these placements can be collectively referred to as “foster care.” However, the opportunities and experiences in each setting are vastly unique. Therefore, independent living skills programs need to address all aspects of teaching independent living skills and not create any assumptions that skills are being learned in an alternate environment, even if the youth is living in a home-like environment.

There are several barriers to teaching independent living skills to youth. First, the physical environment needed to allow the program participants to actually complete tasks they are learning. Schools generally have specialized classrooms that can be utilized for teaching cooking and other homemaking skills. Often these class spaces resemble a homelike environment. Foster care managing agencies that coordinate their own independent living skills programs are likely to operate in an office like setting and lack the specialized environment needed for skill application (Paul-Ward, 2009). Second, some independent living skills are also more difficult to teach in a classroom setting, such as money management, and require more of a trial and error process. Self-reported data showed that youth struggled to retain information that they did not deem relevant at the time of presentation. Paul-Ward (2009) found that youth that were interviewed stated they had received knowledge about bank accounts but since they did not actually have any accounts they did not feel the information was important.

Each of these barriers to teaching independent living skills is amplified when a youth is placed in an out of home placement where their daily routines are disrupted. Higher levels of care such as residential treatment facilities and detention centers are unable to replicate a homelike learning environment due to their nature or operations. Due to the need for high levels

of structure youth are unable to complete daily tasks that they may have been able to practice through application in a foster home or group home. Youth with issues of delinquency face more barriers than other demographics. They may be prohibited from seeking employment or participating in social events that will improve their independent living skills.

Effective Programs and Practices

There are many programs in existence that address the individual aspects of independent living skills for youth. Many states have sponsored their own unique programs while others have utilized standardized curriculum and community resources to meet the needs of their youth. The following section discusses several program aspects that have been identified as effective in developing independent living skills.

Mentoring Programs

Mentors are often utilized in independent living skill programs and have been shown to improve outcomes in several areas. Youth who receive mentoring services have more favorable health outcomes including reduced rates of STDs (Avery, 2011). Having a formal or informal mentor was also associated with higher rates of high school or GED attainment and decreased homelessness (Collins, Spencer, and Ward, 2010). Mentoring programs have also been shown to increase positive youth-adult relationships and improve mental health and relationship permanency skills.

Mentoring programs improve effectiveness over time and many benefits are negligible in programs lasting less than one year. For youth participating in a mentoring program lasting longer than one year a decrease in depression symptoms (Avery, 2011). While youth can benefit

significantly from the support provided by mentors these benefits can be mitigated if the mentoring relationship is short or unstable. Since many mentoring programs rely heavily on volunteers they can be unreliable and ultimately damage youth's social and emotional wellbeing. Positive outcomes increased with longevity of mentoring programs and many youth reported that their mentors, both formal and informal, did not become an important figure until two to three years after involvement (Collins, Spencer, and Ward, 2010).

Employment Programs

Youth in the foster care system are in need of supportive employment education and opportunities. Due to the turmoil and instability frequently attached to foster care placements it can be difficult for youth to actively engage in the workforce before emancipation. Foster youth often face high unemployment rates and those that do work make substantially less than their peers, making them likely to rely on public assistance and struggle to maintain stable housing (Henig, 2009).

Employment centers supported by the Workforce Investment Act are one resource to provide foster care youth with employability services and placement assistance. The program, which is funded on a federal level, allows youth to seek assistance in employability skills such as education assistance, tutoring, interview techniques, and job seeking support (Henig, 2009). The youth services include a variety of training opportunities as well as hands-on work experience and may participate in the program until they are 21 at which time they are able to transfer to adult services if they are still eligible.

Education Preparedness

Older youth in foster care often aspire to attend college but struggle to navigate the education planning process on their own. Financial aid is the main source of educational funding

for foster care youth who attend college (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, and Wyatt, 2005). A survey of former foster youth by Merdinger et al. (2005) also identified that youth felt unprepared for college and received little assistance in planning for college.

Programs such as TRIO and Upward Bound are federally funded and provide outreach and education for disadvantaged youth who seek post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). These programs actively engage in outreach to raise awareness of college preparation and financial assistance programs. TRIO does not provide unique services to youth in foster care however; they target low-income and first-generation college students, making most foster youth eligible for their services.

III. Theoretical Framework:

Theory Application

Why foster youth engage in more criminal behavior than their peers is a difficult question to answer. Research has indicated that youth who are involved in the foster care system at some point in their lives have high rates of arrests and involvement with the legal system (Cusick, Havlicek & Courtney, 2012). In order to examine how this disparity is formed we utilize existing criminological theories. The application of theories can give us a structural framework to examine how youth become predisposed to crime and what variables make youth in foster care more susceptible to criminal activity.

The application of criminological theory can assist in the development of programs to reduce criminal behavior. Theory can identify the driving factors that lead to this criminal behavior and can then be used to develop programming to address these factors. Foster youth are up to three times more likely to be arrested, convicted, and imprisoned compared to youth with social service's intervention who remain in the home (Doyle, 2008). This data shows a clear need to identify and understand the difference in foster care placement versus remaining in the home and how foster care can lead to exacerbated criminal behaviors.

The following criminological theories are both rooted in earlier classic theories that believe individuals commit crime not because they are biologically flawed but because they chose to do so out of their own free will (Bates & Swan, 2014). Each individual has the ability to choose whether or not to commit a crime however, their decisions are influenced by their personal experiences and environment. There is an obvious difference in the exercising of free will between those individuals who commit crimes and those who do not. Each is afforded the

same choice yet they make opposite decisions. Why? The following theories give us insight into why some individuals determine that they want or should commit a crime while others would never consider those actions to be rational.

Social Bonding Theory

Travis Hirschi first introduced social bonding theory in 1969 (Tibbetts & Hemmens, 2010). The basis of this theory examines how an individual's connection with their family, peers, and community impact their chances of criminal behavior. Hirschi proposed that when an individual has weakened links to society they are likely to exhibit delinquent behaviors (Cusick, Havlicek & Courtney, 2012).

The propensity to engage in delinquent behavior is caused by the individual's lack of investment in social conventions. One no longer believes in the ideals held by society because they are not involved in the society to the same degree. Social bonds are a driving force that dictates how an individual acts. When one places value on their social bonds they create want to make someone proud, fit in with a group, or make others happy.

Without these social connections it can become easy to engage in behavior that is not socially acceptable. Social ties can include almost any level of social interaction; involvement in a club or group, work associations, or social status among peers. The more an individual engages in their community the more social ties they will create. Each of these ties provides a reason for an individual to avoid criminal behavior. The need to maintain these ties and avoid social ostracism is a strong crime deterrent. Alternately, youth without these social ties may engage in crime because they are not pressured to follow social norms for to maintain their social

bonds. They may even engage in criminal behavior as a retaliatory measure due to not being accepted by social circles.

Social bonding applied to foster youth

Foster youth experience unique, often negative, home environments and often struggle to establish and maintain healthy relationships with their parents, caregivers, peers, and community. Some lack positive adult influence entirely and the frequent changes associated with foster care living make it hard to establish trusting relationships with new adult figures. Examining the social lives of foster youth can provide insight into their criminal activity by applying Hirschi's social bonding theory.

As youth emerge into adulthood they become increasingly responsible for their own wellbeing. This can be a difficult time for any youth and foster youth often go through this transition with minimal social supports compared to other youth. Without strong social supports foster care youth lack the emotional and tangible support provided to many other youth through family connections (Jones, 2014). The lack of social connections also reduces the youth's sense of belonging during a critical transition time in their lives. The lack of tangible resources youth may be more likely to engage in crime for financial gain since they do not have supports to assist them in times of financial need.

Youth rely on the social bonds they have formed with others to provide guidance and support in times of stress. Processing stressful situations with a social support can help reduce stress by influencing the individual's perception of the stress (Jones, 2014). Foster youth who do not have strong relationships with their family or established relationships with other adult role models are left to manage the stress of independence on their own and can become overwhelmed. Decreased social bonds have also been shown to be negatively associated with

drug, tobacco, and alcohol use (Wray-Lake, Maggs, Johnston, Bachman, O'Malley and Schulenberg, 2012). This is not surprising given the level of stress and lack of social support foster youth face during the transition to adulthood.

The initial placement in foster care creates change and places strain on the existing social bonds the youth has in place. Changes in foster placements have also been shown to disrupt social network as well as increase stress (Jones, 2014). Coupled with the changes in living environments the youth will often undergo a change in schools, meaning severed peer relationships as well. Once a transition has been made a youth can begin to establish new social bonds with both their caregiver and peers however, the strength of these new relationships are dependent on several variable such as time and willingness of the youth.

The role of mentors can provide needed social stability for foster youth (Jones, 2014). Due to the lack of parental stability as well as the likelihood for multiple placements while in foster care youth can begin to devalue relationships with adults. Introducing mentors can provide a positive adult role model with which the youth can develop a trusting relationship (Williams, 2011). These relationships can serve to further the youth's social skills as well as influence their decision-making and provide a positive role model for the youth.

Another component of developing social ties is community involvement. Out of home placements can involve moving to new neighborhoods and losing the opportunity to engage in former recreational activities. These changes can leave foster youth feeling disenfranchised and unconnected to their community. Ensuring involvement in community events and organizations can benefit foster youth. Volunteering in their communities can also provide a sense of belonging and reduce criminal activity (Jones, 2014).

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory is based on the idea that criminal behaviors are learned and/or imitated. Social learning theory places a great amount of value on the environment and social connections of the individual in determining whether that individual will engage in criminal behaviors. In order to apply the social learning theory it is broken into four variables, associations, reinforcements, definitions, and modeling (Tibbetts & Hemmens, 2010).

The association variable states that if you associate with individuals who engage in criminal activity you will be more likely to engage in this activity as well. This is partly based off of the idea that your peer group will reward you for engaging in these behaviors. The other part is that the criminal behavior will become commonplace as you are repeatedly exposed to it. This association factor can be a substantial influence on criminal behavior in order to establish or maintain social acceptance. Reinforcements are the real or perceived rewards that come from engaging certain behaviors. Through interactions with others an individual learns social norms. This is the process by which the individual's definitions, beliefs and attitudes towards behaviors, are formed (Pratt, Cullen, Sellers, Winfree, Madensen, Daigle, Fearn and Gau, 2010). Lastly, modeling, sometime referred to as imitating, is the act of engaging in behaviors that have been observed from others. This explains why family background is one of the strongest indicators of future criminal behavior (Doyle, 2008). Exposure to criminal behavior in the home not only teaches the youth how to engage in the behavior but also gives them the sense that the behavior is acceptable and allows them to justify their own engagement in criminal activity.

Social learning applied to foster youth

Youth are placed out of the home for a variety of reasons. Some of the most common reasons are parental neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse (Williams,

2011). Each of these events creates a negative environment for youth and can also contribute to future criminal behaviors. Even when youth are on the receiving end of abuse and neglect they are still at-risk for imitating these behaviors in the future. Although the youth may, at the time, view these behaviors as negative as they experience stress in the future they may exhibit them as a means of coping. Especially if they have not been exposed to positive coping mechanisms.

Social learning theory then indicates that the youth in foster care may be predisposed to criminal behavior before they are placed out of the home. While this is most likely the case there is still a need for the foster care system and responsible government agencies to provide services to mitigate these chances of criminal behavior. Intervention programs aimed towards at-risk youth have shown some success in reducing criminal behavior and can be beneficial to youth in foster care (Doyle, 2008).

In an attempt to meet the needs of youth in foster care agencies often involve them in service aimed towards at-risk youth. These services are often not specific to foster youth and involve a variety of youth that are defined in the at-risk population such as low income and those youth with prior criminal involvement. Through these programs youth in foster care are often introduced to delinquent youth (Cusick, Havlicek & Courtney, 2012). In what is seen as a positive service for foster youth it is also inadvertently exposing them to criminal influences.

Involvement in mainstream activities may be more beneficial for foster youth. Social learning theory proposes that youth can receive two types of benefits from involvement in structures peer activities. Through involvement in activities with positive peer influences they can learn positive social skills (Bates & Swan, 2014). The introduction of positive peer role models provides an opportunity for the youth to observe new methods of coping skills and social interactions that may challenge the negative ones they have previously observed. This approach

can also be utilized to introduce social norms that promote positive social and emotional development to the youth.

Conclusion

Theory application provides a guide for understanding why foster care youth engage in criminal activity. Both social bonding theory and social learning theory are able to provide a guide that explains why foster care youth are likely to engage in criminal activity as well as ways to prevent this activity. By examining the environmental influences through the structure of theory we can also identify the best measures to reduce crime.

Both social bonding theory and social learning theory can be applied inversely to develop programs that meet the needs of youth in foster care. Strengthening social bonds and providing opportunities for positive social learning can repair the negative effects caused by traumatic home environments and severed social bonds. These theories can be implemented into the programs offered to youth in foster care to prepare them for independence and give them the best possible chance at living a productive and crime free life.

IV. Independent Living Skill Program Models:

Programs exist in almost all areas of the United States to address skill deficits for youth transitioning into adulthood. The broad goal of all programs is to reduce skill deficits in youth that lead to failure during the transition into adulthood. Each ILS program, however, utilize a different approach to achieve this goal.

Programs for youth in out of home placements are often initiated by the county entity that oversees their placement. The county may employ their own developmental programs or may outsource them to private or non-profit agencies. Youth placed in group homes, residential treatment centers, or juvenile detention centers are often provided developmental programming as a part of their housing program. The type of funding and provider can direct the outcome goals of the program. Private and non-profit providers for example must compete for business and may strive to produce the best outcomes or provide the most inexpensive services. Each goal can impact how programs are developed. Regardless of the type of administrator there are several aspects of existing programs that have demonstrated promise in preparing youth for the transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency.

Establishing Social Connections

Social bonding plays an important role in assisting youth manage the transition into adulthood. As previously described in the theory section social bonding can describe the individual's involvement with several dimensions of their community. Social bonds can be encouraged through participation in school, team sports, religion, and personal relationships.

Many foster care programs encourage the involvement of parents, grandparents, and other social supports already present in the youth's life at the time of placement. Often the level

of family involvement is based on the youth's transition plans and is a component of their transitioning process. For youth who lack pre-established social connections they may be afforded opportunities to create a bond with an adult mentor who can provide them with social and emotional support as well as guidance.

The independent living skills program provided to youth in out of home placements in North Carolina, referred to as NC LINKS, incorporates mentors and other social support networks as a requirement of their program (NC Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The program also requires that the social support networks of youth in foster care be examined by their case workers to determine if there is a need for increased services in this area.

One mentoring program, Across Ages, provides an effective model of youth mentoring. The program has been deemed a model program by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Across Ages operates a structured mentoring program with several policies that may contribute to the program's success. The Across Ages program has demonstrated longer than average relationship durations, low volunteer turnover, and evidence of positive behavioral, academic, and psychosocial outcomes (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

The program at Across Ages matches volunteer mentors to at risk youth to improve outcomes and reduce criminal behaviors. The selection of both the volunteers and youth in the program is selective and both parties must meet the criteria established for participation. The mentoring relationship is developed through a structured approach unlike many other mentoring programs.

The youth that participate in Across Ages are between the ages of 9 and 13 upon entering the program (Across Ages, n.d.). Each youth is expected to participate in the mentoring program

for at least one year. The program targets youth who are economically disadvantaged, are experiencing school failure, exhibit problem behaviors in school, lack positive adult role models, engage in risky behaviors, lack opportunities for positive free-time activities in their communities, or are placed in kinship care (Across Ages, n.d.). Before being matched with a volunteer mentor the youth participate in training to prepare them for the program. Once the youth is matched with a mentor they begin meeting at least 2 hours per week to work on a social competence training curriculum and participate in community service activities. The program also involves the youth's family through monthly events where the youth, family members, and mentors can interact during positive recreational, social and sporting events (Across Ages, n.d.).

The mentors in the program must be 55 or older, undergo a pre-screening process, and commit to one year of participation per mentee. They are provided with 10 hours of training before they are matched with a youth and continue to receive ongoing training and support. Mentors are provided handbooks that outline the goals and steps of the program and they also participate in a weekly phone check-in with a program staff member (Across Ages, n.d.).

The Across Ages program has received multiple awards and recognitions for its work to improve youth outcomes. The program has been evaluated and has been able to demonstrate significant reductions in drug use, improved school behaviors and grades, improvement in attitudes towards school and future, and improved attitudes towards older adults as well as an improvement in well being (Across Ages, n.d.). The families of the youth also received benefits from the program including an increased participation in school activities, increased positive communication with the youth, increased positive family engagement, improved access to community resources, and an increase in their support network (Across Ages, n.d.). Overall, the

Across Ages program has been able to implement a model mentoring program to increase positive outcomes among youth and provide overall community improvements.

Caregiver Education

Life skills are often learned through repeated exposure. For most youth they learn simple skills such as making appointments, budgeting, and conflict resolution through watching their caregivers engage in these activities. For foster youth the relationship established with their caregiver does not often resemble that of a parent-child relationship. While the living structure may resemble a home in appearance the dynamics are often unique in a foster care relationship. In this context youth may miss out on many of the daily learning opportunities afforded to youth residing with their parents.

To assist youth in developing vital skills for adulthood the Ready, Set, Fly! Program focuses on the caregiver's role in teaching. The program focuses on educating caregivers on six skill areas daily living skills; housing, transportation and community resources, money management, self-care, social development, and work and study skills. The program is based on the premise that youth retain more information when they are engaged in hands-on activities and that parents and caregivers can teach them these skills through structured activities (Casey Family Programs, 2001). The program was developed with input from youth, parents, and foster parents.

By utilizing caregivers as instructors the program allows the material to be taught in a flexible manner. Caregivers can incorporate material when it fits into the youth's daily routine and at times that they youth may be more open to learning. This approach provides a significant advantage over a structured curriculum such as a classroom lesson in that the material is

presented when it is relevant and when the youth is most likely to retain it. The program assists caregivers in identifying “teachable moments” and then provides them with an age appropriate activities (Casey Family Programs, 2001). This approach also allows for the caregiver to continually assess the youth's skill level and gradually build skills based on the youth's ability.

Transitional Living

Transitional housing programs incorporate aspects of both supported living such as foster care and self-sufficiency. Several agencies have begun offering transitional housing units that youth can move to once they age out of their current foster placement. Typically, these housing options are comprised of apartment style units or a group home setting with minimal restrictions compared to group homes for youth. However, the Aspiranet program in California allows youth aging out of the foster care program to continue receiving support and services while living in a variety of settings. This flexibility allows youth to choose a housing environment that they feel comfortable living in.

Participants in the Aspiranet program can choose to live in a multifamily unit (similar to an apartment), a single family unit, or with a host unit (Aspiranet, 2016). The overall goal of the transitional housing program is to prevent homelessness among youth emancipating from the foster care system. However, the program does not only provide housing to address the issue of homelessness but they incorporate a multifaceted approach to improving self-reliance. Aspiranet's transitional living services focus on three significant areas of development; basic needs, emotional support and jobs and education (2016).

The basic needs required to create a homelike environment and stability are provided for the youth. These include financial needs for rent, security deposits, and

utilities (Aspiranet, 2016). Once a residence is secured the program works to find the youth household items such as furniture. Other basic needs covered in the program include transportation assistance and post-program housing assistance.

The second category of emotional support is provided through crisis counseling and case management. The program provides participants with a 24 hour crisis hotline as well as individual and group therapy (Aspiranet, 2016). Each of these programs help the participants manage the stress and improve their coping skills. Mentoring is also incorporated in the program which provides social support and guidance.

The final component of the transitional living program is to provide participants with job and educational support. Educational support is vital in preparing youth for self-sufficiency, especially youth who have spent time in foster care due to the tendency for educational deficiencies caused by placements (Jones, 2011). Aspiranet not only assists participants in obtaining a high school diploma or GED but they provide services to help prepare for college or vocational programs. The employment support component provides training as well as support for those participants seeking employment options.

The Aspiranet transitional living program is a positive model of transitional programming for youth exiting foster care who do not have another form of supported living arranged. The program not only provides stable housing and the financial resources needed for youth who do not have a family support system to assist them but they also incorporate much needed training and emotional support programs. Transitional living programs have been shown to reduce financial stressors, increase housing stability, and reduce criminal justice involvement (Jones, 2011) and should be examined as a component of all foster care programs.

V. Recommendations:

To say that there is any one ideal independent living skills program would be inaccurate. There are ideal outcomes of independent living skills programs that may be generalized to most of the population served and can be summed up by one word; self-sufficiency. Each youth's ability to be self-sufficient is based on a complex and unique set of variables.

There are some measurable outcomes that should be used by program providers to assess if the youth is receiving effective services to prepare them for self-sufficiency. These outcomes should include stable housing and employment, academic achievement (at minimal a GED or high school diploma), a social support network, and access to medical care (including mental health services). To achieve optimal outcomes there are several aspects of independent living skills programs that need to be implemented to prepare and assist youth through the transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency. By providing programs that support each of the identified outcomes of self-sufficiency youth can exit the foster care system with the best possible chance of become a healthy, productive adult and avoiding a future of criminal activity.

Financial education and experience

A lack of experience and knowledge of financial management as well as the social skills necessary to address financial issues leads to failed attempts at self sufficiency. Youth need the opportunity to learn how to use a bank account and manage a budget in order to maintain self-sufficiency. Taking a financial fitness course can give them direction on how to handle money but without real life experience they may have a hard time implementing the financial skills they've been taught. As the youth in Paul-Ward's survey's (2009) stated, the introduction of finance education without a lack of application fails to produce financial skills in the

participants. Therefore, a financial education program is not only essential to preparing youth to be financially responsible but the program needs to provide a real-life approach to handling finances and incorporate an application component.

One of the best real-life applications of money management is for youth to actually earn money and manage a budget. However, youth in out of home placements are cared for financially by the placing agency there is generally minimal emphasis on establishing financial responsibility. The exposure to financial aspects can vary greatly based on the youth's placement while youth in a traditional home environment are often given gradual financial responsibilities by parents or guardians. Youth living out of the home may also be restricted from working due to previous criminal behaviors. All of these concerns make it difficult for youth to earn and manage finances.

For youth in a living environment that allows one on one opportunities with the caregiver the Ready, Set, Fly! Model can be applied to financial education (Casey Family Programs, 2001). Caregivers can be educated on how to work with youth to teach them the necessary skills to manage money, create a budget, and manage a household. This model gives caregivers the knowledge of what skills need and ideas on how to act as the educator during everyday activities. By allowing the skills to be applied during normal daily activities the youth is also allowed to learn a skill repeatedly and understand how it can be applied outside of a classroom setting.

Employability training

All youth can benefit from learning employability skills before they enter the workforce. By learning basic skill such as organization, time management, and effective communication youth can improve their chances of obtaining steady employment and reaching financial self-

sufficiency. Youth in out of home placements are subjected to several environmental influences that can interfere with learning these employability skills through traditional means.

Work experience prior to transition

To provide youth in out of home placements the best possible chance at achieving financial stability through employment they should participate in work experience opportunities while they are still in care. Research on youth with physical disabilities has shown that they are more likely to sustain employment if they are employed for 12 months or more before transitioning (McDonnall & O'Mally, 2012). Youth in foster placements are disadvantaged when entering the workforce and may benefit from similar programming. Although they may not suffer from a physical disability they may have emotional challenges, stressful home environments, and an overall instability in their lives that can interfere with training and provide unavoidable distractions.

Career training programs

There are two suggested methods for assisting youth in developing their career interests and defining a future plan. The first suggested method is to pair each youth with a career coach to assist them in exploring career options that meet their interests. By giving the youth one on one attention the coach can help them identify their strengths and weaknesses as well as their interests.

This one on one career planning can, ideally, be addressed through a mentor. Youth who participate in a mentoring program for 2 years or more before transitioning out of foster care have improved chances of achieving a high school diploma (Jones, 2014). The encouragement and support provided by a mentor can amplify educational outcomes if the mentor is actively involved in the education and career planning process. Matching a youth with a mentor that has

the knowledge or experience in a career field that interests the youth can help encourage them to pursue their interests. However, any mentor can assist the youth in exploring career options and helping them realize what careers are available to them and how to achieve them. Youth can be deterred from pursuing a career which they are unfamiliar with even if they are interested and/or talented in the field. They need encouragement in order to feel empowered to pursue career options that may not be traditional to their families or their culture.

Mentoring programs

Social support systems

Social supports provide valuable guidance and emotional support during the time of transition. To ensure that foster youth have the best possible chance of completing a successful transition into self-sufficiency they need established social support networks that remain in place through the completion of this transition. The majority of youth are placed in the foster care due to parental neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or psychological abuse (Williams, 2011). Each of these traumatic events can deteriorate the youth's trust and reliance for the adults in their lives. Youth who have experienced parental neglect comprise 67% of out of home placements (Williams, 2011). The impact of trauma and neglect create a significant need for positive role models to influence foster youth during their transition into adulthood.

Permanency plans can often change during a youth's time in foster care and the most effective manner if implementing a mentoring program for foster youth is to extend this service to all youth when they are placed out of the home. Youth may enter the foster care system as a short term solution to behaviors or unsafe home environments, however; delaying the implementation of mentoring services diminishes its effectiveness. Maximum benefits are

derived from mentorships if the relationship is two years or longer (Jones, 2014). Therefore, an emphasis on establishing mentorships with all youth at the time of entrance to the foster care system will allow more youth to reach the full potential of the program.

The Across Ages program (n.d.) was proven effective and deemed a model program receiving multiple awards. This model incorporated the longevity proven to provide positive outcomes but also utilized an atypical demographic for its mentors. While many mentoring programs look towards young adults to act as role models for the youth the Across Ages appears to lean more towards a parent or grandparent figure to provide guidance. This aspect may be why the program is more effective than other programs that operate with similar timeframes. It is highly suggested that this model be applied in more programs to determine if the success rates can be duplicated.

Extended services past transition

Mass amounts of time and resources are devoted to preparing youth for the transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency. However, research has demonstrated that youth, even those who are never placed out of the home, are reliant on their family until later in life and do not become self-sufficient at the age of eighteen. Often young adults are financially dependent if they pursue a higher education and most young adults do not achieve financial independence until age 26 (Krinsky, 2010). For youth aging out of the foster care system this places them at a disadvantage and creates barriers to continuing their education.

Extended case management

Offering services to youth past the age of transition is beneficial in making sure they are connected with resources in times of need. Extended case management services can assist youth

in identifying their needs and matching them with community resources. It can also provide youth with more time to work on achieving self-sufficiency and gradually increasing personal responsibilities in a safe and structured environment.

The federal government's research on youth who transition from foster care to self-sufficiency shows that youth are lacking in education, employment, and financial and housing stability if they age out of foster care before age 19 (Children's Bureau, 2014a). Extending the educational services and support available to youth who have not aged out of the foster care system may allow them to increase graduation rates and improve employment options for former foster youth. By age 19 only a little over half of former foster youth have achieved a GED or high school diploma (Children's Bureau, 2014a). This means these youth are more than likely not in school between the ages of 18-19 or are not receiving the supportive services they require for success. Extending the role of the social worker or case manager can provide youth with support and guidance during their transition to self-sufficiency that may increase their ability to remain in school during this time.

Extended Foster Care

Another service that can significantly improve educational outcomes for youth is extending foster care eligibility to the age of 21. Some states have already increased foster care eligibility to the age of 21 and have seen positive outcomes. Youth in foster care until age 21 are more likely to achieve a high school diploma or GED and continue on to postsecondary education (Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, Pollack, 2009).

Transitional living programs provide an ideal model of extended foster care services. Extending the foster care age while allowing youth to move into a more independent living situation creates a stable, positive environment for youth to gradually increase their

responsibility and independence while having access to support services. All of the training and preparation that is done while a youth is still residing in out of home care means little to their outcomes if the youth struggles applying the skills they've been taught. Youth with familial support often extend the age of transition to accommodate for the learning and adjustment period that comes with reaching adulthood (Jones, 2014).

Learning and implementing skills is a process and not a onetime task. Transitional living arrangements allow the youth to take on the personal responsibilities required of an adult while still providing them the support and shelter of an out of home placement. These programs should allow the youth their own personal space, preferably an apartment style residence, but include ample supervision and case management.

Transitional living case managers fulfill the role traditionally occupied by a supportive parent. They can ensure that the youth is maintaining a safe and cleanly home environment, has access to food and healthcare, and established a stable employment history. Case managers are one of the key components of the transitional living model and set it apart from a simple subsidized housing model.

Case managers should provide the participants with emotional support, guidance, and accountability during the transition period. Life transitions are a hard and stressful time and a case manager can provide a stable, supportive figure for the youth to rely on when they need someone to provide guidance. This guidance can be emotional support and someone to talk to when they become overwhelmed or providing practical advice and helping develop critical thinking skills. The final role of the case manager is to provide oversight while the youth works towards developing the necessary skills for self-sufficiency.

The case manager should be involved in developing a unique plan that identifies the areas of development for the youth and provides a plan for improvement before they leave the program. The Aspiranet program (2016) provides youth with a graduated rent program which allows them time to reach full financial independence. This model allows youth to increase their financial independence at a pace that fits them and can be applied to other responsibilities. The entire transitional living program can operate on a graduated scale of responsibility so the youth is near full self reliance when they transition out of the program. A graduated system of responsibility will allow the youth to make small transitions at a time, focus on one area of improvement, and allow time for feedback and adjustments during the process.

VI. Summary and Conclusion:

The process of placing youth in out of home care is a traumatic but often necessary one. A large responsibility is placed upon social workers to make decisions that place youth in an environment that is safe for both them and the community. When this results in placing youth in foster care it becomes the government's responsibility to ensure that these youth are provided for so they can achieve the best possible outcomes.

Public policies create safeguards for how youth are treated while in out of home placements and mandate that youth are provided some form of independent living skills programming. Programming for independent living skills is determined by the agency providing the services and can vary greatly in both frequency and content. Most of the programming in place fails to achieve the desired outcomes as youth who are placed in foster care continue to fall behind their peers in academic achieving, employment, financial outcomes, and housing stability. Many of these outcomes can be improved by applying evidence-based programs for all youth in foster care.

Youth have shown promising benefits from the involvement of mentors and need a strong support system to help them during the transition from youth to adulthood. The Aspiranet model has shown promising results in improving overall outcomes for youth and can serve as a model for future programs. Several studies have also shown that youth can learn more during independent living skills programs if the programs provide a hands-on learning approach and keep materials relevant and appropriate to the youth's skill level. Skills can be taught by caregivers using the Ready, Set, Fly! Model or the use of a mentor; both approaches allow for skill development through real life learning opportunities which may allow for better knowledge retention.

Overall, the development of independent living skills programs requires a system of approaches that encompass all aspects of self-sufficiency. Even one missing component of self-sufficiency can result in a youth failing to become self-sufficient and increasing their likelihood of criminal behaviors. Programs can be difficult to develop and take time and resources however, the cost to the community can be insignificant compared to the benefits it receives by having healthier, more productive youth that successfully transition from foster care to self-sufficiency and adulthood.

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