

Lack of Quality Programs for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

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Lack of Quality Programs for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

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## Abstract

### Lack of Quality Programs for Youth Aging Out of the Foster Care System

Trinka Bankes

Under the Supervision of Dr. Michael Klemp-North

There are currently hundreds of thousands of children part of the foster care system in some way. Of these hundreds of thousands there are tens of thousands who are between the ages of seventeen and nineteen therefore are aging out or will soon be aging out. These youth are unprepared for what they will find when they are living on their own. These youth will be unprepared for a variety of reasons such as homelessness, education struggles, criminal justice issues, lack of health insurance including mental health treatment, and lack of positive adult role models. Many of them are needing to navigate various adult issues without the guidance of adults. Communities need to work together with these youth to ensure they are able to age out of the foster care system more successfully. The community commitment needs to start much earlier in the youth's foster care experience to ensure these youth are prepared for independent living. The lack of programming and commitment from all levels of government makes this issue very serious. These youth many times are already struggling because of past experiences of neglect, abuse, and mental illnesses. The need for effective programming should be of high importance in governments and communities. The needs of this population many times is not financial, it is simply being taught skills that will help them succeed. Words of encouragement is also high on the needs of these youth.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE i

TITLE PAGE ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT iii

ABSTRACT iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION .....1

    A. Statement of Problem.....1

    B. Methods of Approach.....2

    C. Assumptions of the Study.....3

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

    A. Introduction.....3

    B. Brain Development.....4

    C. The National Youth in Transition Database.....5

    D. Financial Self-Sufficiency.....7

    E. Educational Attainment.....8

    F. Connections with Adults.....10

    G. Experiences with Homelessness.....11

    H. High Risk Behaviors.....14

    I. Access to Health Insurance and Mental Illness Treatment.....17

    J. State and Federal Help.....22

    K. What Youth Want.....26

L. Conclusion.....	27
III. TYPES OF PROGRAMS AND ASSISTANCE	
A. Introduction.....	28
B. Types of Programs	
i. Mentoring Programs Benefits and Barriers.....	30
1. Connections to Independence.....	30
ii. Non Mentoring Programs.....	32
1. Marathon County Independent Living Program.....	33
C. Conclusion.....	34
IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	
A. Introduction.....	35
B. Social Learning Theory.....	35
C. Structural Strain Theory.....	36
D. Attachment Theory.....	36
E. Conclusion.....	37
V. RECOMMENDATIONS	
A. Introduction.....	37
B. Financial Self-Efficacy.....	38
C. Education.....	39
D. Housing.....	40
E. Health Insurance.....	40
F. Connections with Adults.....	41
G. Earlier Independent Living Skills.....	42

H. High Risk Behaviors.....	43
I. Conclusion.....	43
VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION.....	43
VII. REFERENCES.....	45

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Aging out of the foster care system is a term used when people talk about youth who are 18 years old and no longer able to be living in a foster home or some other type of county or state housing designed for youth who are under the age of 18. Some states are allowing youth to continue receiving assistance until the age of 21 but it depends on what the laws are for the various areas.

Research and statistics will support the fact that the high percentage of youth who age out of foster care turn to a life of crime and risky behaviors because there is a lack of programs to help prepare the youth to be productive members of society. A 2007 University of Chicago study found that youth who aged out of foster care were ten times more likely to be arrested than their peers of the same age, race and sex because of a lack of independent living skills and appropriate guidance (Krinsky, 2010).

With approximately 20,000 youth aging out of the foster care system each year the need for programs and tools to help the youth is extremely important. Half of the youth age out without a high school diploma. The youth also leave the foster home without a job therefore do not have the financial stability and housing. If the youth do have a job, their income is well below the poverty level. In addition, one-third to one-half of former foster care youth engage in risky behaviors which many times results in being arrested and/or jailed. Other risky behaviors many former foster youth report doing is substance abuse, being reported by 25%. Substance abuse and dependency disorders have been reported by 15%. Pregnancy or being a parent of a child has been reported in 40 to 60% of the former foster care youth (Stott, 2012).

The Affordable Care Act (January, 2014) has a provision that allows foster youth to be covered by Medicaid from their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday to the age of 26. However, with a large majority of youth having mental illnesses and lacking the knowledge of how to continue treatment plans that were set up and also the lack of resources for the youth to attend appointments the mental illnesses of many of the youth is being untreated or under treated. This lack of treatment is causing these youth to make risky choices and decisions that can lead to criminal behaviors (Sakai et al., 2014).

The simple fact is that the brain of a human which has experienced little to no trauma is not fully developed until the age of twenty-four or twenty-five. When trauma is experienced the development of the brain is delayed. With almost all foster youth experiencing some type of trauma the foster youth's brain most likely experiences delays in development and if the trauma is severe enough parts of the brain will never fully develop (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

### **Methods of Approach**

To determine the extent of how the lack of programming effects the criminal activity of youth aging out of the foster care system crime statistics will be researched. Comparing data from areas that have programs in place to help those youth with data from areas that do not have programs in place will determine what type of programming is most effective. Research will be done on various programs to determine if one type of program is better for the youth than another program by comparing the success rates of these programs. Examining to see what types of youth these programs are designed for to ensure that the program would be a good fit in the community. Determining if communities have the resources to implement a similar program will also be a criteria that will be researched. The following questions will be answered in my paper. Are there programs that are implemented while the youth are still in the foster home and are they

more or less effective than the programs that are implemented once the child is out of the home? What kind of training would be beneficial for the foster parents to take? If foster parents would be required to help with the transition would it be more beneficial because the information is coming from individuals they know and trust? What other interventions are utilized in successful programs?

### **Assumptions of the Study**

One common assumption to the studies would be the more youth are exposed to positive adults, the more prepared the youth will be when aging out. These positive adults need to be willing to work with these youth in ensuring the questions and concerns the youth have with navigating the adult world are answered. This population also needs assistance in the form of head starts and opportunities for the youth to succeed. Opportunities and head starts such as free or greatly reduced rent for an apartment in a safe and secure neighborhood, job training skills or job shadowing. The more opportunities they have the better chance for success.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

This section will give the reader an overview of the various areas of concerns for youth who are aging out of the foster care system. The areas of concern are the brain development of an individual who has experienced trauma, what the National Youth in Transition Database indicates are national concerns, financial self-sufficiency education attainment, the importance of having a positive adult role model, the risk of homelessness, the likelihood of this population choosing to participate in risky behaviors, the concern youth have in regards to health insurance coverage because of the high likelihood the youth has some type of mental illness they are

seeking assistance with in managing the condition, lastly the section looks at a study that was done asking youth what they feel is the biggest hurdle they are or did encounter.

There are approximately 542,000 youth nationally in foster care at any given time. Included in those numbers are 20,000 who are between the ages of 18 and 21 and therefore aging out of the foster care system. These 20,000 youth then face many obstacles the youth were not properly prepared for. These obstacles include: housing, lack of positive social and emotional supports, lack of finances and financial planning, health insurance issues, educational disadvantages, mental health issues including not having the prefrontal cortex of the brain fully developed, many times facing educational disadvantages and lastly not receiving the promised guidance from social workers (Stott, 2012).

### **Brain Development**

Mental Illness is a huge issue with youth aging out of foster care 20% of humans in the general population having some type of mental illness however, 40% of youth who have spent time in foster care have some type of mental illness. The need to understand how the brain develops is extremely important when looking at the behaviors that youth aging out of the foster care system exhibit and why (NAMI, 2017). The brains of youth who are aging out of foster care are not fully developed and have most likely been already negatively damaged due to the experiences the youth have exposed to. The normal brain development of a youth who has experienced minimal trauma is much different than the development of the brain of a youth who has experienced an abnormal amount of trauma. The prefrontal cortex of the brain is the last part of the brain to develop. This part of the brain is where the executive functioning of the brain occurs, this includes memory, impulse control, problem solving, and reasoning. This part of the brain is not fully developed until age twenty-four. When youth are exposed to trauma it causes

the brain to secrete higher levels of the glucocorticoid cortisol. When the brain receives higher doses of glucocorticoid it effects the memory processing and the executive functioning which includes the critical functions of learning (Morin, 2017). When the youth in this population are expected to make adult decisions at the age of eighteen the problem arises in that this is six years before a normal brain is even developed. In addition to the brains not being fully developed, they are having to make adult decisions many times without the guidance of responsible adults.

Agencies can help with a lot of areas of concern for those youth who age out, however, there is a lack of professional help for those youth who have suffered from interruptions in brain development. Effective counseling is extremely critical for those who have suffered trauma that has altered the brain development. The high rate of mental illness statistics makes it even more imperative that those who work with individuals aging out of the foster care system be educated on the effects of mental illness on the ability of the individual in which the service provider is caring for.

### **The National Youth in Transition Database**

Agencies were determining those aging out of the foster care system and were unsure of the exact reason. Federal agencies wanted to determine what the exact reason was why this population was not being more successful. Therefore, it was determined that there was a need to collect data regarding youth who are aging out of foster care. The national data base that is currently being used is called The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) is a federally mandated data collection reporting system. Agencies also use the NYTD to determine if the needs and struggles the agency is seeing is the same as other agencies. This also gives the agencies an opportunity to learn from other agencies what has worked and what areas still remain a struggle.

NYTD invites youth transitioning out of foster care to take a survey about experiences the youth have had in regards to foster care. Federal law requires every State to invite all youth who have turned 17 during the year of the survey to participate. The youth are again asked to participate in the survey when they turn 19 and also 21. If a state fails to comply with this mandate the state faces a penalty of 1-5% of the annual assistance the state receives from the Federal Government to fund programming designed for youth aging out of the system. The survey is uniform and consists of closed answered questions which are the same for all states (NYTD, 2016).

The latest results of the NYTD study were published in November, 2016 and these results were from youth who were 17 years old for the Federal Fiscal Year 2015. For this fiscal year there were 29,569 youth who were 17 and eligible to take the survey. There were 11,712 youth who were 19 and eligible to take the survey. The number of individuals who are eligible to take the survey because the individual is 21 is 11,675 (NYTD, 2016).

Survey Status	Age 17 (n=29,656)	Age 19 (n=17,712)	Age 21 (n=11,675)
Participated	53%	67%	60%
Youth Declined	11%	6%	5%
Parent Declined	1%	<1%	<1%
Incapacitated	2%	1%	1%
Incarcerated	2%	2%	3%
Runaway or missing	5%	<1%	<1%
Unable to locate or invite	17%	23%	27%

Death	<1%	<1%	<1%
Blank/Not Reported	<1%	1%	4%

**Financial Self-Sufficiency**

If youth do not have the financial means of supporting themselves and their families no amount of financial education will help the youth be financially self-sufficient. It is imperative that these youth are able to find sustainable employment or are able to receive financial assistance to help them succeed in paying for their basic needs.

In the NYTD survey the researchers were concerned with how many of the youth were never educated on money management either during a training or having a role model showing the youth the different aspects of money and being mentally comfortable with the various aspects of financial self-sufficiency.

The first outcome of the survey is financial self-sufficiency. To gauge where the participants were in terms of financial self-sufficiency the survey consisted of questions regarding obtaining skills necessary to enter the labor force, and how to find financial resources sufficient to meet the living expenses the youth acquires each month. The result of the 17 year old age group was over 29% of the individuals indicated having at least one job paid or unpaid. In comparing the results of the 19 and 21 year olds that responded were that 51% of the 19 year olds had some type of employment history and 65% in the 21 year old group reported having employment experience (NYTD, 2016).

By the age of 21, 40% reported receiving some type of financial assistance (Social Security, educational aid, or some other form of significant, periodic financial support) (NYTD, 2016).

The result of the question regarding if the youth has received any public assistance such as housing, food, or financial was 34% of the 19 year olds and 38% of the 21 year olds indicated that yes, the youth had received some type of public assistance since aging out of foster care (NYTD, 2016).

It is essential for youth to acquire the knowledge for them to become financial self-sufficient. If a youth is educated in how to handle money effectively, they have a better chance of being able to eliminate some of the challenges other youth who age out of foster care suffer with.

### **Educational Attainment**

The more education that an individual receives the more prepared the individual would be to make choices and have the skills necessary to have a career where the individual is able to comfortably meet the financial obligations of independent living.

The objective of the educational questions was to determine what level of education the youth had and at what age. The results of the 17 year old group was that 94% were enrolled in and attending some type of educational program. By the age of 19, 55% had received a high school diploma or GED. The number of youth who had acquired a high school diploma or GED increased to 67% by the time the youth were 21. There were also 5% who reported acquiring a vocational certificate or license, 3% indicated receiving an associates, bachelors or higher educational degree (NYTD, 2016).

At the age of 21, 23% reported not being enrolled in or attending an educational program nor employed full- or part-time (NYTD, 2016).

In research conducted by Robert M. Goerge and associates it was determined youth in foster care have higher rates of absenteeism and tardiness and are more likely than others to need special education services or need to repeat grades (George, et al., 1992). It has been determined that one reason youth in foster care struggle with education is due to the fact that when in foster care the youth many times transfers to several foster homes and this means switching schools. In a study done by Blome in 1997 when interviewing youth, it was determined that on average a youth in foster care will move schools three or more times (Blome, 1997). The frequency in moving causes problems in that sometimes records are not sent from previous schools, information from files may be missing, if a child has an IEP (individual education plan) it may or may not be forwarded and even if the records are forwarded, it may not be done immediately therefore the youth who has an IEP may be struggling in mainstream classroom because the youth is not receiving the accommodations that are addressed in the IEP. In addition, the youth may not be in a school long enough to determine that an IEP is needed (Zetlin et al., 2004). These educational difficulties will follow a youth through his or her school career and as a result give the youth a disadvantage when he or she is compared to a youth who has remained in the same school or moved with the help of biological parents who are fully aware of the child's academic, social, and behavioral history. It is estimated that 75% of foster youth are working behind grade level in school, approximately half do not finish high school, and only 15% go on to college or further education (Krinsky, 2010).

When an individual receives proper education the individual can be a successful member of a community. In order for this to happen the community needs to ensure that the individual is

given the same opportunities as other individuals. As addressed earlier this has been determined to be a struggle and an obstacle for youth in the foster care system and especially those who are aging out.

### **Connections with Adults**

The more people that a youth can come in contact with who are willing to give that youth positive support the more likely the youth will gain additional knowledge to help the youth become successful. Youth need to have the opportunity to be given opportunities to learn life skills, time management skills, and social and emotional skills from individuals through such things as job shadowing, mentoring, and support groups. The more time a youth spends with positive role models the less likely the youth will spend time with individuals who may not be making the right choices in life.

The survey wanted to determine if the various age groups felt there was at least one adult the youth felt comfortable enough with to ask questions, advice or just for emotional support. The results were that 93% at the age of 17 felt there was at least one adult that filled the need. The positive trend continued in that 89% of the 19-year-olds indicated there was an adult who the youth could rely on for various things. Lastly, 87% of the 21-year-olds indicated that there is at least one adult filling the need in the youth's life (NYTD, 2016).

Recently Northern Oklahoma Academic Tutoring Foundation held a banquet to honor the mentors who have made an impact on youth in the community. A former foster youth indicated; *“A mentor's job is not to save a child but to give the child seeds of hope so that they can save themselves.”* When mentoring is successful these youth take these “seeds” and continue to plant

them in others, including the youth's family. As a result of planting these seeds the youth will most likely become successful and productive members of the community (Willert, 2017).

Everyone has skills or knowledge that could benefit someone else, it just takes that person to be willing to share their knowledge with someone else to make the receiver of the knowledge successful.

### **Experiences with Homelessness**

If the youth does not have a place to call home and therefore is not getting proper rest this will set the youth up for failure in that it has been determined that if youth lack permanent and adequate housing it many times leads to negative outcomes. When the NYTD survey asked the 17-year-olds if the youth had ever experienced homelessness the result was 16% had experienced it some point in their lives. On the 19-year-old survey the question was if the youth had experienced homelessness in the last two years and 19% indicated that yes, the youth had experienced homelessness in the last two years keeping in mind that 80% of these youth were no longer in foster care. With 88% of the 21-year-old no longer in foster care 26% of these youth indicated that the youth had experienced homelessness in the past two years (NYTD, 2016).

There were 5,583 youth who had completed all three surveys 17, 19 and 21, of these youth 43% reported having had a homeless experience by age 21 (NYTD, 2016).

The need for affordable housing is a need that many communities struggle with. This need is a concern for youth who aged out the foster care system being that they are five to seven times more likely to suffer from homelessness than youth of the same age and therefore have the need for affordable housing. This many times is a result of these youth being unemployed or

underemployed causing the youth to not be able to pay the rent and other fees associated with housing.

Research done by The Children's Aid Society it was determined that 12-30% of youth who aged out struggle with homelessness for various reasons (The Children's Aid Society). In addition to the housing being not being affordable many times the affordable housing is located in areas that lack safety and security which is needed for a youth that has aged out of the foster care system and may be suffering from trauma that is triggered by feelings of not feeling safe and secure in their environment (Curry and Abrams, 2014). A result of a study indicated that 30% of the 600 youth interviewed who aged out and currently are under 25 reported having lived in an average of five different places since aging out. These results mirror the results of another study where 35% of the 100 youth who had aged out six months to three years prior to the study also reported having five or six different residences since aging out. When additional factors such as physical and learning disabilities, pregnancy, parental status, history of substance abuse, and diagnosed mental health issues are also present the statistics of homelessness are much higher (Curry and Abrams, 2014).

When comparing youth who age out to those without foster care history a statistic stands out. In 1960, 40% of the youth indicated living with a parent well into their 20's. This number increased to 50% when asked again in 2007. The youth who age out of foster care do not have a family component. These youth not only lack the housing and financial security the 50% have, but also do not have the feeling of safety and security that comes from being part of a family unit (Curry and Abrams, 2014).

Thom Reilly, with the help of graduate students from the University of Nevada conducted a study interviewing 100 youth who had aged out of the foster care system from the state of

Nevada at least six months prior. The question was asked was if the youth had ever been homeless since aging out and 36% indicated yes, the youth was homeless at least one night since aging out. Of these individuals who indicated being homeless 19% reported living on the streets and 18% reported living in a homeless shelter. The results of this study also indicated that 35% of the youth had moved an average of five times (Reilly, 2003).

A group called Voices and Visions of Youth in Transition also conducted a survey to determine what areas that youth aging out of foster care struggle with the most. The approach this group used was different in that one of the group's goal was to build a rapport with the youth. The way this group tried to develop a rapport was through consistent contact and follow-up. This contact and follow-up served two purposes, one it resulted in more honest and complete answers because the participants had a relationship with those interviewing. The other purpose was that by following the same participants the team could compare the answers from "participant A" through the years. This would be more accurate than just pooling a random group each time the group wanted to conduct the survey. The results of the group's housing question was that one out of five reported to be homeless at least one time during the five years. One factor that this study determined was that females were twice as more likely to be homeless than males. The participants indicated the factors that were difficult to overcome were housing not near public transportation, income to pay for housing, not being aware of what houses were available (not having an available housing listing), and not having the social support to find and retain the housing.

There are states that are aware of the need for services for youth aging out of foster care however, do not have the support of the voters to pass legislation to increase or implement programs to help the population. One example is the State of California; the state developed a

program called Transitional Housing Program for Emancipated Foster/Probation (THP-Plus). This program provides a structured home environment for former foster care youth, ages eighteen to twenty-four. There is support in the form of visits, counseling, independent living training, educational guidance, and employment advice. Currently this program only helps 167 of the 4,000 foster care youth that age out of foster care in the state per year. California tried to pass a bill that would appropriate \$10.6 million to expand the program which would still only accommodate 1,000 emancipated youth and the bill failed to pass (Atkinson, 2008).

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin a \$7.5 million dollar project was recently passed that would build a 40 unit apartment building and 10 of the rooms would be set aside for youth who aged out of the foster care system. The other 30 units will be available to those who are earning 60% less than the local median income. These 30 units may also prove to be extremely helpful to youth aging out of the foster care system, in that many times these youth continue to struggle with finding affordable housing. The requirements for the 10 apartments are the youth need to be enrolled in an educational facility or have a job. These youth are only able to stay in the apartment for one year. In addition to the apartment building, a grocery store as agreed to build across the street which would employ up to 80 individuals (Daykin, 2017).

Having adequate housing is extremely important for youth who are trying to succeed in life. If the youth are homeless the youth is unable to get the proper rest therefore will many times suffer from illnesses caused by lack of sleep.

### **High Risk Behaviors**

Many times youth who have grown up in the foster care system have been exposed many times to individuals making risky behaviors. Youth may witness these behaviors so frequently

that these youth begin to think that the behaviors are normal and begin to do the behaviors without realizing the risks involved in doing them.

The NYTD survey asked the participants if the youth participated in selected high risk behaviors in the past.

The question asked to the 17-year-old group was if the youth had ever participated in or been referred to substance abuse assessment or counseling. The result was 28% of the participants in the 17 age group indicated, yes the youth had been referred. The 19-year-old age group results indicated that 15% had been referred or received counseling for substance abuse in the last two years. The results of the 21-year-old group indicated that 10% had received a referral or the youth attended counseling for substance abuse (NYTD, 2016).

Incarceration and whether or not the individual had a history was another area of interest to the researchers. The results were that 37% of the 17-year-olds indicated, yes the youth did have a history of incarceration. When the 19-year-olds were asked if they had been incarcerated in the last two years the result was 24% of the youth reported being incarcerated in the last two years. Lastly, when the 21-year-olds reported incarceration history in the last two years, 20% indicated they had been incarcerated (NYTD, 2016).

Giving birth or fathering a child has been targeted as one of the top high risk behaviors that youth who are in foster care and those who age out participate in. Therefore, the survey asks the participants if the youth had given birth or fathered a child in the 17-year-old group 7% of the youth answered, yes the youth had given birth or fathered a child. In the 19-year-old group 12% indicated the youth had given birth or fathered a child in the last two years. While 25% of the

youth in the 21-year-old group reported giving birth or fathering a child in the last two years (NYTD, 2016).

Among the 5,583 participants who completed all three surveys 17, 19, and 21 year olds, 32% reported giving birth or fathering a child by the age of 21. Of those participants only 3% reported being married at the time of the child's birth (NYTD, 2016).

Youth who are in the foster care system many times are struggling to figure out where they fit in when it comes to community. Studies indicate that those individuals who have experienced neglect and abuse are 50% more likely to be involved in criminal activity (Krinsky, 2010).

It is estimated that 25% of youth who have aged out of the foster care system will be incarcerated within the first couple of years after being emancipated (Krinsky, 2010).

One issue that is unique to foster youth and affects about 33% of the foster youth population is these individuals have criminal charges that are labeled as "placement charges". These are charges that are brought against these youth while in a group home or foster home that were documented by law enforcement. These charges however, would have not been filed if the actions would have been done in a traditional biological family home because in a traditional family setting these misbehaviors are seen as normal teenage behaviors, however the behaviors are addressed differently in group and foster homes in that law enforcement is called to handle the misbehaviors (Krinsky, 2010).

A study done in Pennsylvania found that 90% of the youth who had five or more placements were also the ones that had juvenile justice charges (Krinsky, 2010).

In addition to emancipated youth being more likely to join a gang to fulfill the need for a “family” the youth are also many more times likely to remain incarcerated or on longer periods of probation supervision because of the lack of appropriate family members to be released to (Krinsky, 2010).

In a study conducted by Mark Courtney and his colleagues, youth were interviewed when the youth were seventeen and then again when the youth were nineteen. The results were that in those two years 28% were arrested, 12% were convicted of a crime, 19% spent time in detention, jail or prison (Courtney & Dworsky 2005).

There is a successful program in Staten Island in which youth are essentially given a second chance to prove he/she has learned his/her lesson from committing a crime. Youth in Staten Island who commit a crime for the first time have the case heard in peer court. All members of the courts are youth. The youth who are members of the peer court are responsible for completing a version of a bar exam. Another aspect that supporters indicate makes this program successful is that both the court individuals and the respondents are matched with mentors who make a commitment to the youth to be positive role models. Many of the mentors have affiliations with the court systems.

### **Access to Health Insurance and Mental Illness Treatment**

If a youth is going to be successful the youth needs to remain physically and mentally healthy. In order for the youth to remain physically and mentally healthy the youth needs to have health coverage. The survey asks the participants if the youth had health insurance coverage either Medicaid or another type of health coverage. The results of the question were 81% of the 17-year-olds indicated having some type of health insurance coverage. There were 6% of the 17-

year-olds who were unsure if the youth was covered by health insurance. When the 19-year-olds responded 71% indicated having Medicaid coverage and 15% indicated being covered by another health insurance. In the 21-year-old group, 70% of the youth indicated being covered by Medicaid and 12% were receiving health insurance elsewhere. When the youth who indicated having coverage with another company were asked if mental illness and prescription drugs were covered, 12% indicated being covered by mental health and 14% indicated prescription drugs were covered in the plan (NYTD, 2016).

The mental health of the youth who age out of foster care continue to be an issue in that the mental health of the youth does not automatically go away once the youth turns eighteen. In reality many times the severity of illness increases due to the fact there is increased stressors that the individual has to deal with such as finding a job, having a place to live, and having a positive social network.

In January, 2014 The Affordable Care Act (ACA) was enacted that had a provision that was designed to help youth aging out of foster care have health care in the form of Medicaid until the youth reached the age of twenty-six. The problem with ACA is the lack of availability of providers who not only accept Medicaid as a payment but are knowledgeable in the unique mental health issues of this population.

In a study that was conducted between March, 2010 and June, 2010 using youth between the ages of 18-27 who had aged out of foster care, who were engaged in community services that were providing traditional services assistance, had used mental health services while in foster care and then additionally used at least one mental health service (such as outpatient or inpatient services such as substance abuse program). This study was conducted by initially asking eleven opened ended questions with the option of asking appropriate probing questions to acquire

necessary further accurate detail on the question. The questions were associated with the topic of mental health and consisted of questions about the concern of mental health problems, the benefits and barriers to the availability of mental health treatment, when given the treatment options, were the clients able to be self-efficient in accessing these services. Question also were specific to the prescribed medications and the effectiveness of the medications. Specific barriers youth who age out of the foster care system were addressed to see what barriers were the most troublesome for these individuals. There were also questions that talked about the individual's readiness for the transition into independence. In addition, there was a fourteen item questionnaire that each participant was asked to complete that asked specifically about the youth's foster care placement and the youth's sociodemographic information (Sakai et al., 2014).

Table 1.	Focus Group Questions
General experiences	1. What has been your experience trying to get mental health services after aging out of foster care?
Perceived threat of mental health problems	2. What aspects of your mental health are you concerned about?
Domain Question/Probe	3. How important is it for you to obtain mental health services? Can you comment on medications specifically? How about therapy/counseling?
Perceived benefits of mental health treatments	4. Of the mental health services you have previously received, which aspects have been helpful? Which aspects have not been helpful?
Perceived barriers	5. Have there been times that you did not seek mental health care even though you might have needed it since aging out of foster care? If so, why? Describe the situation(s).
	6. What hassles or difficulties have you experienced trying to get mental health care since aging out of foster care?

Self-efficacy	<p>7. Do you feel confident getting the help you need for mental health problems? Which part of obtaining help do you feel the most comfortable with? The least comfortable with?</p> <p>8. How well do you understand your mental health issues?</p> <p>9. What people helped you understand your mental health issues? Has a health care or mental health provider explained your mental health issues in a way you can understand?</p>
Cues to action	<p>10. In the past, what has helped you obtain mental health care when you believed you needed it?</p> <p>11. What things would encourage you now to seek regular mental health services?</p>

The results of the interviews were that two-thirds were insured with Medicaid being the predominant type of insurance. When the participant receives mental health services one third of them are receiving care from private offices or community based agencies (Sakai et al., 2014).

A pattern was determined when the results were analyzed. The emancipated youth had a negative attitude regarding mental health professionals because the youth felt that while the youth were in foster care the youth were not given a choice as to whether or not they wanted help with the mental health issues. The youth expressed a feeling of being forced into mental health assistance. Therefore, when the youth aged out and had a choice the youth opted not to continue mental health treatment if with the help of financial assistance. These youth also had the attitude that a professional would not be able to help them because it was not a mental health issue, the youth felt the problems were because of the youth’s experiences therefore not mental. In addition to the feelings of being pushed into receiving treatment the youth expressed the lack of being

prepared as to how to adequately retain professional services. The youth indicated that when under child protective services the youth were not allowed to be part of the mental health treatment therefore, when the youth aged out the youth were unprepared as to how to find a professional(Sakai et al., 2014).

In addition to not understanding how to find a mental health professional, youth expressed concern that when the youth received a possible diagnosis or treatment plan the youth many times did not understand the course of treatment and did not have anyone to ask. When these youth felt this barrier they opted not to continue with mental health treatment to avoid embarrassment and failure. A few of the respondents indicated not having the skills to feel comfortable making appointments and the process of being prescribed and obtaining the medicines from the pharmacy that are needed for the youth's mental health issues. The youth indicated that many times the prescriptions are not automatically refilled and require an appointment. These youth are trying to make appointments to get the prescriptions refilled and having to wait for long periods of time therefore, going without the prescription until the youth can be seen. Some voiced concern additionally because the youth many times need to leave work in order to attend these appointments which is risking their employment status (Sakai et al., 2014).

Youth in the study also voiced concern that many times the youth were not properly informed of what medical assistance was available to them and how to retain and continue assistance. There were youth that indicated that they were not told that they had insurance coverage for a period of time after the youth left foster care. There were other youth needing assistance in applying for health insurance and the youth were refused assistance. Some indicated that they were not given the Medicaid insurance cards when leaving foster care therefore,

assumed the youth was no longer covered and in a few cases paid out of pocket for services causing the youth financial hardships (Sakai et al., 2014).

A large group of individuals interviewed voiced the logistical barrier of transportation to attend medical appointments. These youth are having to accept the assistance of those professionals who are on public transportation lines or also find reliable transportation on a continuous basis to attend appointments at agencies who are not on a public transportation line (Sakai et al., 2014).

Society needs to help youth aging out of foster care eliminate the barriers these youth are facing with obtaining health care. When a youth is mentally and physically unhealthy there is no way that the youth can be successful.

### **State and Federal Help**

Communities many times wants to and does try to help the best they can but it comes to a point where the state and federal government needs to help to make the programs and assistance successful.

In 1999 The Foster Care Independence Act gave the states an option which states call the “chafee” option which allows states to extend Medicare benefits for foster care youth to the age of twenty-one. The Federal Government however do not require states to extend Medicaid to those aging out of the other foster care system for an additional three years. Twenty-eight states did agree to extend health insurance to emancipated foster care youth in various forms. Some states allowed the youth’s care to continue without lapse of coverage without the youth doing anything. Other states required youth to apply with the understanding the coverage would also continue without lapse and then reapply each year to determine continuation of coverage until

the age of 21. Some states based continuation of coverage on income and other statuses. States have the option to eliminate or discontinue coverage for these emancipated youth unless it is determined that the youth has a disability, is pregnant, they are a parent and are extremely low income (Courtney & Dworsky 2005).

In 2008 Congress passed a provision called Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act ("Fostering Connections") and in October, 2010 states could take advantage of allowing youth to remain in foster care until the youth's twenty-first birthday and the state would receive federal funds to subsidize the cost of the youth remaining in care for those additional years (Weiland & Nelson, 2014). States however, are able to put provisions in place to ensure a higher success rate of successful independence when the youth reaches the age of twenty-one. The youth must meet one of these requirements for the state of Minnesota in order for the youth to remain in care past the age of eighteen are the youth needs to be completing high school or equivalent. The youth must be enrolled in college or a vocational program or the youth needs to be employed at least eighty hours per month. If the youth is unable to meet any of the above criteria and are deemed disabled then documentation from a medical professional is required (Weiland & Nelson, 2014).

In addition, the State of Minnesota requires its county social workers to educate and prepare these youth in this extended time to be more prepared when the youth reach the age of twenty-one.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (H.R. 6893) (the FCA or Fostering Connections Act), signed into law on October 7, 2008 as Public Law 110-351. The law took effect on October 1, 2010. This law provides federal funds states and counties so the agencies can extend child welfare services through the age of 21. With the enactment of this

legislation, it gives courts advocates, and child welfare professionals more opportunities to help support the youth in the community (Krinsky & Liebmann, 2011).

On April 16, 2010, child welfare professionals, leaders, judges, lawyers and advocates from around the country gathered at the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College of the City University of New York to discuss how to effectively seize upon the new opportunities created by the Fostering Connections Act and improve the plight of foster youth in transition. These professionals along with some current and former foster parents were broken into seven groups: Permanency for Older Youth, Courts and the Legal Process, Housing and Placement, Education and Employment, Health and Mental Health, Crossover Youth, Youth Engagement and Youth-Focused Systems, and State Implementation of the FCA. During this summit the professionals examined the topic assigned to their group. During the breakout session the requirement was to determine what the issues are for this topic and what the group's ideas were on how to help with the issues that are found in these topics (Krinsky & Liebmann, 2011).

On June 28, 2012 the Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) which has the goal of reducing the number of individuals who are uninsured (Sakai et al., 2014) Amy Dworsky and her associates conducted a study to ensure that the PPACA would not cause the vulnerable population of females who aged out of the foster care system to struggle in finding affordable care. The outcome of the study was the states are now required to insure those individuals who were at least eighteen years old when they aged out of care until the youth is twenty-six years of age. Dworsky's associates also determined that the PPACA required states to provide health insurance through Medicaid to those who have income below 133 percent of the federal poverty line which many times includes the majority of the youth who have aged out of the foster care system (Sakai et al., 2014).

Leaders from Silicon Valley, California recently decided to look into how the community can make a difference in the youth aging out of foster care. The leaders indicated the goal of the committee which is being developed is going to be how to make these youth an asset in the community and not a liability. The leaders are going to have a summit and currently there are four areas the group is going to be focusing on (Silicon Valley Children's Fund, 2017).

1. Prepare youth for college and careers. Currently in the community only half of the youth graduate high school and only 3% earn a bachelor's degree.
2. Improve access to technology. The leaders have determined youth who age out of foster care lack computers or access to the internet.
3. The leaders want to reform foster youth technology infrastructure. The leaders determined currently there is no way to easily determine who is doing what for the youth in terms of services and what needs are currently not being adequately met. The goal is to find a way to centralize the location of the information for accuracy and timeliness.
4. The leaders indicated there are rights youth have however, the group's concern is there are rights youth are not being made aware of that could help the youth become more successful. – Silicon Valley Children's Fund, 2017.

There is a bill in the State of Indiana which would make it easier for youth who are in the foster care system to get a driver's license. This in itself would enable the youth to be more available for more jobs. The youth would not have to rely on finding housing either near the youth's employment or the youth would need to ensure their housing and place of employment is on a bus line. This many times limits these youth and therefore reduces the success rate of independence. The bill that Indiana is proposing would allow youth between the ages of 16 and 18 the ability to obtain a driver's license easier. Currently the struggle is the need for an adult to

sign the BMC application forms and provide liability insurance. In addition this bill would waive the fees associated with getting a learner's permit and driver's license (Tristate, 2017).

### **What the Youth Want**

Even with all these programs the bottom line is none of these programs will be successful if the youth feel pushed or if the youth do not feel like their opinions matter. In Texas, focus groups were developed that included present and former foster youth, social workers, and foster parents. The three areas of concern were:

Lack of youth focused practice was an area of concern for the youth. Youth expressed many times during the focus groups that they did not have a voice in their future. The case plans were already decided on and submitted to the courts prior to the case plans being discussed with the youth. The youth also expressed concern with social workers in that when the youth's personal goals were determined the youth were not consulted and told to just sign them and begin working on the goals (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick & Painter, 2007).

Lack of communication was an issue that all parties expressed concern over. Youth indicated a lack of communication with foster parents and social workers. Foster parents expressed lack of communication with foster youth and also with social workers. Social workers indicated not being comfortable with the amount of communication with foster parents and foster youth. Foster youth and foster parents felt that the high turnover of social workers contributed to the lack of communication. Both the foster youth and foster parents felt the lack of communication on the part of the social worker caused both the parent and youth to miss out on opportunities that would benefit them. Youth were unaware of services that are available to them

while still in care and also what services would continue after the youth aged out of care (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick & Painter, 2007).

Unmet needs and permanent connections was the last area those in the focus group felt was a major concern. Youth felt that the foster parents should have been given training on how to follow up on the independent living skills the youth were attending. The youth indicated this being important in that in the independent living skills class many times the youth were given the information but were not able to actually do the skill or only given one opportunity to practice the skill. Foster parents expressed the lack of knowledge as to what to teach the youth to ensure that the training the parent provided did not conflict with what was taught in the independent living course. Foster parents indicated they were unaware of what services were available to youth when aging out of the system. Foster parents indicated in the training foster parents receive the parents are told not to develop a strong relationship with the youth to avoid the youth struggling with loss when removed from the home (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick & Painter, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

Even though all these areas are known to be areas of concerns there is a severe lack of programs and policies in effect to ensure these huddles are being addressed. There are programs that have mission statements that indicate the goal is to help youth struggling in these areas however, when the program is evaluated many times the outcomes do not many times equal a success.

### **III. PROGRAMS AND ASSISTANCE**

#### **Introduction**

In research, there are many programs where the mission statement is geared around ensuring youth who age out of foster care are successful. Many of the programs have similar procedures and plans regarding how the program will be successful. Those programs that have a mentoring component as part of the program are historically seeing more consistent successes when compared to programs where there are just activities for groups of individuals with one main advisor or program leader.

#### **Mentoring Program Benefits and Barriers**

Research results have determined mentor programs that have interventions and activities that sustain lengthy contacts between both the mentor and the youth seem to have better outcomes of success. If a match lasts longer than one year it has proven to have a more successful outcome than those matches that had longevity of less than one year. It was also determined that ongoing training and support for the mentors has shown to be connected to success. When a mentor was either trained or had experience on the uniqueness of foster care the match was shown to be more successful (Spencer et al. 2010).

The positive effects of mentoring are generally thought to be derived from the support and role modeling these relationships offer through three interrelated processes: (1) enhancing youth's social relationships and emotional well-being, (2) improving their cognitive skills through instruction and conversation, and (3) promoting positive identity development by serving as role models and advocates (Moodie & Fisher, 2009).

There are different types of mentoring programs each with its own successes and barriers. There are traditional mentoring programs similar to the Big Brothers Big Sisters Program with some additional training and requirements specific to the needs of transitioning foster care youth. There are also mentoring programs where the only contact is via text messages and emails. The last type is the mentoring down while the youth are living in transitional housing designed specifically for youth who aged out of foster care (Spencer et al 2010).

A successful mentoring program starts the mentoring relationship as early as possible so that when the youth ages out of foster care there is already a strong relationship that has been developed. Some mentoring programs start the relationship as early as ten and encourage each party to continue the relationship as long as possible. If face-to-face contact becomes unavailable for some reason the agency encourages the continuation of the relationship through phone (Spencer et al 2010).

A mentoring relationship that fails or has a negative outcome could be a result of various things such as one or both parties fail to remain in effective contact or communication. The mentor does not receive proper training on the uniqueness of the aspects of foster care. Without training the mentor is not prepared to handle some issues that might arise during the relationship (Spencer et al 2010).

A universal issue found in many of the researched programs was the agencies or programs struggled to find volunteers who were willing to commit to the length of commitment which is required in order for the program to be successful. These youth struggle with adults leaving after short periods of time (foster parents, social worker, counselors etc.) It is imperative that these youth have an adult for a long enough period of time where a positive trusting

relationship can be established to ensure that it lasts well past the end of the designed program and into a possible lifelong positive relationship (Tyler & Melander, 2010).

### **Connections to Independence**

Connections to Independence (C2i) started out in 2002 as a program of the Summit Academy OIC of Northern Minnesota. This program teaches low income individuals the skills the individual needed to get a career in construction or health care. In July, 2010 Connections to Independence was developed as a stand-alone non-profit. C2i was developed as an agency to work with emancipated foster care youth are coming back into the system through incarceration, homelessness, and having open child care protection cases (C2iyouth.org, 2016).

The goal of C2i is to better prepare youth for a successful transition to self-sufficiency and independent living. C2i breaks down the youth into three groups: 15 to 18, 18 to 21 and 21 to 24. Programming for youth takes place three days a week Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday (C2iyouth.org, 2016).

In the 15 to 18 year old group the participants start looking at what skills are needed for the youth to be successful when living independently. C2i helps the participant in this age group develop a healthy mind, body and spirit. When the youth enroll in the program the youth are assigned an Independent Living Skills Counselor who will be the point of contact for the youth until the youth ages out of the program at the age of 24. This relationship is necessary for the youth in that it provides the youth with a stable, dependable, trust based healthy relationship with an adult. These counselors work with the youth on the days that the youth are not participating in group activities at the C2i agency (C2iyouth.org, 2016).

C2i programming consists of speakers, activities and discussions consistent with ensuring the youth leave the program with a healthy mind, body, and spirit. Discussions and information regarding the core matters of housing, education, and financial matters are presented in a way that it remains positive and does not become overwhelming to the youth. In addition to the development of the core skills there are activities that help the youth work on their moral, social and personal development. These activities consist of exposing the youth to the arts, civic groups, and recreational activities (C2iyouth.org, 2016).

In the 18 to 21 age group or After Care Services (ACS). In addition to the health mind, body and spirit skills these youth learned in the prior program, the facilitators work with the youth more in depth in the topics of finding and maintaining a place of residence, applying and being successful in secondary education, and obtaining and sustaining employment. To ensure success in these objectives C2i has programming the agency follows to ensure youth are taught and appropriately mentored through the various steps of each objective. Youth attend monthly meetings where topics are discussed which have proven to be obstacles youth have struggled in the past with in being successful in independent living. These topics could include how to pay for and attend secondary education, dealing with mental health issues, and cooking and eating healthy with limited resources. Quarterly trainings are also part of this program and it allows youth to earn certificates to verify the youth has obtained the skills necessary to succeed in the area. The youth are able to earn certificates in Rent Wise. Skills achieved in the Rent Wise training include how and where to look for apartments, what questions to ask when viewing an apartment, what the landlords are looking for in a renter, and how to be a good renter are just a few topics covered in the training. C2i ensures youth have the necessary skills and tools to be successful when looking for and maintaining a job. C2i works with various corporations in the

area to allow youth to shadow the jobs the youth have interest in. These shadows and internships are unpaid however if the youth is successful in learning the skills during the observation time C2i will give the youth a stipend of appreciation. With the monthly meetings youth also become aware of the various community resources available to assist the youth if the need arises (C2iyouth.org, 2016).

C2i program designed for 21 to 24 year olds refreshes what the youth have learned in the two prior programs then additionally works with the youth by continuing the mentoring and monitoring the youth's successes and struggles to see where the youth may need additional guidance and training (C2iyouth.org, 2016).

C2i 2014 program evaluation indicated that 92% of the participants received high school diplomas or a GED and 60% of the youth also completed post-secondary or vocational programs. These numbers are much higher than the 54% nationally who receive a high school diploma or GED and 2% receive a post-secondary degree. C2i proudly reports that 69% of the participants are employed, this percentage is higher than the national average of 51% (C2iyouth.org, 2016).

Connections to Independence requires volunteers to commit to several years and with such a commitment the agency is seeing high success rates and positive feedback from the youth on how important it was to the youth to have a positive trusting relationship the youth could rely on in times of uncertainty (C2iyouth.org, 2016).

### **Programs without a mentoring component**

Research has determined programs which do not have a one-on-one mentoring component generally do not have as high of success rates for the participants only enrolled in this type of program (Tyler & Melander, 2010).

## **Marathon County Independent Living Program**

In an interview with Ms. Aidyn Laurynz who is the independent living coordinator with Marathon County, Wisconsin Social Services, Ms. Laurynz discussed what Marathon County does to ensure a better success rate for youth who are aging out of foster care in Marathon County. When a youth in care reaches his or her fifteenth birthday the independent living coordinator will meet with the youth and the foster parents to discuss what areas the youth needs help with. To get a better understanding, the independent living coordinator has the youth fill out a questionnaire asking the youth to identify how comfortable the youth is with various aspects of adult life. Things that are addressed are internet use and how comfortable the youth is looking for things on the internet. There are questions regarding the youth's comfort level of relationships and how to handle issues if they arise in relationships. The youth's comfort level of money management is assessed. The questionnaire contains questions to determine if the youth was aware of where to look for help with basic issues that they may encounter when living alone. The youth's comfort level with cooking and cleaning is evaluated. When the youth is done filling out the survey the social worker determines what areas the youth needs help with and then schedules either one on one time or group time depending on the subject matter that needs to be addressed. Marathon County also works with local housing developments to find housing for those youth needing housing. College tours are also part of the program if the youth is planning on attending college or advancing their education. Marathon County works closely with some local businesses to give youth opportunities to job shadow to help the youth determine if the career path the youth is interested in is what the youth really wants to do. Ms. Laurynz recently

finished compiling the numbers for 2016 and Marathon County had twelve youth who aged out of the foster care system.

The policy for Marathon County, Wisconsin is youth, unless adoption/guardianship/reunification occur, typically continue until a youth turns 18 or graduates from high school. If a youth has an IEP and is actively working to achieve a high school diploma, he/she may remain in care until 21. The county independent living coordinator remains involved until the order ends; the regional independent living coordinator takes over at that time and can assist the young person until he/she turns 21 (unless enrolled in college, in which case, 23) (Personal conversation with Aidyn Laurynz, January 30, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

There are benefits and downfalls in both the mentoring programs and the non-mentoring programs. What types of programs the communities and leaders decide to put time, effort and resources towards is essentially up to those individuals. The real issue however that was determined is there is a lack of commitment when making sure the various programs are successful. Communities what programming that includes mentoring however, the agencies struggle with finding individuals who are willing to give time and talent to the population. Communities what individuals to learn independent living skills however, do not want these individuals in the stores they shop at learning skills. They do not want apartment buildings built that are designed for low income and individuals who are just starting out because communities feel these apartments will attract youth who have a high likely of choosing high risk behaviors.

## **IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Introduction**

There are many theories that try to explain why some individuals struggle more than others when it comes to aging out of foster care and being successful. In this section there will be three theories discussed to help the reader understand why there are successes and failures when youth age out.

### **Social Learning theory**

Albert Bandura's Social learning theory combines cognitive learning theory which mean learning influenced by psychological factors and behavioral learning theory which means that an individual learns based on environmental stimuli. Mr. Bandura combined these two types of learning and developed learning requirements to be learned through observation or environment, one needs to remember or retain what is taught to them, the ability to reproduce or recite what is taught to them, and be motivated to learn and function in regards as to what is taught (Psychology Today, 2017).

Youth who are part of the foster care system many times have experiences with negative social learning experiences therefore these youth will continue teaching the next generation the negatives if the youth do not receive the proper interventions. Research indicates that 30% of youth who were abused will go on to abuse their children. Youth who are raised in homes where drugs and alcohol are abused have a high likelihood of being neglected therefore youth will suffer from developmental delays. Research indicates that 61% of youth entering the foster care system test positive for developmental delays compared to the general population having only 4-10% being diagnosed with developmental delays. These youth witness criminal behaviors on a routine basis therefore normalizing the behaviors to the point of the behavior not being negative or wrong (Psychology Today, 2017).

With the knowledge of social learning being such a portion of the makeup of the youth it is imperative to have programs that are successful in re-teaching youth in positive independent living skills.

### **Structural Strain Theory**

Robert Merton indicated society has a set of values and goals in order for an individual to be considered successful. There are people in society that do not have the ability to meet these values and goals in a legal and ethical way. Mr. Merton indicates society has become so competitive in nature the population has overlooked deviant behaviors if the goal is to make the individual be more successful in some way (Crossman, 2017). Society feels that when a youth reaches eighteen the individual should have the necessary skills to be a successful member of society. This however, is not the case with youth aging out of the foster care system. These youth were many times not given the proper education and guidance to be successful. This causes a social strain on these individuals and causes the youth to either not try therefore become homeless and unemployed. On the other hand, some youth try to achieve the goal of independence legally and if the youth fails in this goal many times the youth turn to illegal methods of achieving the goal in the form of criminal activity due to the stress of society. When the youth are enrolled in a mentoring program that has been proven successful, there are mentors who help the youth work through the strains and stressors of independent living to help the youth avoid the instinct to choose the life of crime.

### **Attachment Theory**

*Attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space* (McLeod, 2009). When a child has interruptions or never becomes successfully emotionally attached to an individual this causes a wide variety of behavioral issues.

When a child is successful in having a strong emotional bond with an individual the youth is able to explore the environment, develop other strong relationships, the youth is able to accept themselves in a more positive way. When a bond is either broken or never attained it causes the youth to develop mental health problems such as poor emotional and behavioral self-regulation, problems in development of the autonomous self and self-esteem. These individuals are more susceptible and many times have more negative outcomes to behavior altering traumas to the point of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (McLeod, 2009). Attachment is something that needs to start even before birth, programs in which the goal of pairing a youth with a positive role model helps with the behavioral issues for a youth who is lacking the bonds to be successful.

## **Conclusion**

Even though these theories are not concrete reasons why there are successes and failures in the population it does explain why these youth are having problems in the areas of concern detailed above. When those in the position of helping have a good understanding of why certain youth are able to grasp the adult life concepts without much guidance and other individuals struggle throughout the whole process never really understanding how the various adult concept work in public.

## **V. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Introduction**

After reviewing the research done by various scholars there are recommendations for each area of concern for youth aging out of the foster care system. One main recommendation is

the need to increase agencies and programs that have a mentoring component as how the agency or program are meeting the needs of the youth. In all research it has been determined that mentoring has noticeable benefits for the youth. Other recommendations are indicated in each of the obstacle's section of the paper below.

### **Financial Self-Efficacy**

In order for a youth aging out of foster care to obtain financial self-efficacy the youth needs to have a source of income. A source of income could be in a form of financial aid from the youth attending college. The youth could also have a job where the youth is making a wage enabling the youth to be able to pay for the youth's basic needs. To help the youth have some type of savings when the youth ages out, the foster agencies need to work with local businesses to develop a list of businesses willing to employ youth who are in the foster care system even prior to the youth aging out of the system.

To encourage businesses to employ former foster care youth, there is a proposed tax credit to those businesses who agree to employ using individuals from those demographics. Under the bipartisan Improving Employment Outcomes for Foster Youth Act (HR 5947, S 3409) would allow employers to receive annual tax credits for hiring former foster youth between the ages of 18 and 27 (Barr, 2016).

This bill would essentially add former foster care youth to the Work Opportunity Tax Credit that already includes such groups as: veterans, former felons, and welfare participants and would allow businesses to earn up to \$2,400 per year for hiring former foster care youth (Barr, 2016)

## **Education**

Education is a vital part of a youth being successful. There needs to be improvements made to increase the time and accuracy of educational information given to schools when a foster youth transfers to a new school. Youth who are part of the foster care system many times have endured trauma and based on the amount of trauma and other negative factors the youth has a higher than normal rate of needing special education services. When a youth goes to a new school and his or her individual education plan (iep) is not immediately given to the new school this youth will be suffering because the youth is not being given the accommodations addressed in the IEP. With electronics being such a huge part of our nation, legislation needs to be made to enforce timely, accurate and complete educational records. These kids should not be further victimized by the school system because the school system is not accurately addressing the needs of the youth.

If a youth is being successful in a school not only academically but also socially, the youth should be given the option to remain in that school and accommodations should be made for transportation if at all possible. The less transitions involved, the less stress and trauma the youth will need to go through. When a foster youth starts a new school the youth should be assigned a mentor (counselor, teacher, another school employee) who interacts with the youth to ensure better transition. The school counselor also needs to make sure the youth is seen immediately by them to make a connection and ensure transitions go smoothly. Schools also need to have open communication with the foster parents to ensure the educational and social needs of the youth are being met at home and also at school.

There also needs to be more funders willing to work with local universities such as in New York where there are is a foundation who is donating money to colleges earmarked for

foster care youth to help them pay for college. The program is called CUNY's innovative Start/ASAP Foster Care Initiative. Initiatives like this one not only shows the foster care youth that people are willing to help the youth pay for college but it also shows the youth that there are people that believe the youth will be able to get a college degree (Barcella, L., 2017).

### **Housing**

Youth who age out of the foster care system many times struggle to find safe and affordable housing. There needs to be programs and agencies willing to work with building owners to have apartments available to these youth. These apartments can be furnished with all the necessary things an individual needs when they move out such as furniture, dishes, and appliances. These need to do with the agency on a regular basis to ensure the youth are working towards goals of education or employment. When the youth are successfully employed and have been able to save for emergencies and are able to make rent payments on a different apartment even if partial rent, then the youth would move out and another youth preparing to age out would move in. Every town has apartment buildings where all the apartments are not rented out therefore, offering these apartments to those aging out may prove successful.

When an individual has a safe place to live, the youth are able to focus on other areas of life. The youth can look for and maintain a job. The youth are able to have a sense of normalcy in that the youth are not having to live in shelters or rely on friends for a place to live.

### **Health Insurance**

Youth who age out of the foster care system experience many obstacles in regards to health insurance. The first recommendation would be that all youth aging out of the foster care system be covered until the age of twenty-six. This recommendation would be beneficial in that

it would be one less stressor for the youth to handle immediately after aging out of the system. Another recommendation would be that youth who age out are given a packet by the social worker that includes information regarding health insurance. The information that should be provided is the name and contact information for the insurance and when the current policy expires. What the youth needs to do to continue the health insurance coverage after the policy expires should also be included in the packet. This information should not only be written out in detail as a reference but the social worker should go over this with the youth to ensure the youth understands. What medical/psychological procedures are covered should also be included in an easily understandable form. A list of covered procedures and contact information for the youth to call to discuss coverage options for the procedures not on the list should also be included.

### **Connections with Adults**

Youth who age out of the foster care system many times struggle with having experiences with adults who make a positive impact on their lives and choices. The more positive role models these youth are able to experience the more chances these youth will start making positive choices when given the opportunity. Corporations should allow employees to use paid time off to spend a few hours a week with an individual in the foster care system. Even though foster parents many times are a positive role model in the lives of these youth, many times the foster parents are too close to the root of the trauma. With the foster parents being so close to the trauma the youth may find it difficult to open up about issues causing them stress.

Scott and Jacquie Flanagan of California saw there was a need for more services for youth aging out of the foster care system. They became aware of this unmet need after talking to a youth who had recently aged out of the system. After taking this youth in they decided to start a

mentoring program to work with youth in the surrounding area. To pay for the programming they opened two stores where the youth are required to work the various areas of the store and gain the skills that will make the youth employable. The article also indicated that along with these youth working in the store the Flannigan's have also hired volunteers who work with the youth both in social and employability skills. This increases the number of positive adults these youth have in their lives. This also helps the community in that these adult volunteers are able to make a difference for the youth who have aged out (Lauletta-Boshart, L, 2017).

### **Earlier Life Skills Training.**

One recommendation all agencies need to address is the fact that youth in foster care should be required to participate in learning life skills earlier in their lives. According to Focus on the Family, (2017), parents need to start giving children chores already at the age of two. Youth who are in households where there is little to no parent interaction this might not be happening. The earlier a child starts learning life skills and independent living skills the more embedded the skills become. Foster parents should also be required to document and report what types of skills are being modeled and encouraged in the home. These newly acquired skills can be addressed at the required monthly meeting between the social worker, parent and foster children. Charts indicating what chores and skills are appropriate for certain age groups can be readily available on the internet. As part of the agency there should be groups held each month where based on the age of the foster child the youth is assigned a group depending on age and the groups work through various issues and skills. This could be beneficial in that these youth will learn social, academic, and life skills the youth can continue improve on through the years of

being in the foster care system. These monthly classes will also give youth more opportunity to attach to positive role models in the community.

### **High Risk Behaviors**

In addition to youth learning basic independent living skills when working with mentors and other adults who are positive role models for these youth, youth who have individuals who are positive role models will be less likely to participate in risky behaviors. The program Connections to Change is an example of how mentoring changes the lives of youth who have struggled in finding positive role models in the youth's lives. The success is these youth do not need to look for places to fit in these youth are already fitting in interacting with the mentor and also doing group activities at agencies where other youth are in similar situations.

### **Conclusion**

Even though there is no program that will be successful for every youth who ages out of foster care, there are programs that have statistics that prove that the agency is making a positive difference in the lives of youth. The problem arises when there is not enough programs in not enough areas to ensure the number of youth being positively served is large enough.

Communities need to step forward and do what they can to make a difference in the lives of these youth.

## **VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, youth who are aging out of the foster care system is not a centralized problem. All over the United States communities are struggling to determine how to best help youth who

have already aged out and are struggling with the various aspects of independent living or are nearing the age that the youth is needing to leave the current residence. There are several programs that are seeing success but each of these agencies are also dealing with obstacles causing a large number of youth to not be successful. Even though a universal program might be beneficial, the most successful programs have been those with dedicated mentors. In addition to programs with a mentoring component another component needs to be that all foster care youth receive extensive counseling as soon as the youth are placed out of the biological home. Even though some youth seem quite resilient, all youth can and do benefit from some type of mental health treatment. This treatment should be a covered expense for all youth and young adults. The federal government needs to ensure there is a fund to cover these expenses for this demographic for as long as mental health treatment is needed and not being covered by another health insurance plan the youth may be enrolled in.

Large corporations should encourage employees who would be a good fit to volunteer to be mentors and be able to receive some type of benefit from the corporation to compensate the employee for the number of hours the employee commits to the program. It has been determined the programs who find the most success are those programs with a required active commitment for over a year.

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