

Helping Youth Transition to Adulthood: Guidance for Foster Parents

The transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency can be challenging for any young person. For teenagers who have been living in foster care, the transition to life outside of care can be daunting. Generally, youth who have experienced foster care do not have the same safety nets and support networks as others their age, and the transition challenges can be even greater.

As a foster parent, you can help youth in your care prepare for these challenges, but remember that the knowledge and skills they need cannot be learned at the last minute as they exit care. It is crucial for foster parents and other caring adults in youths' lives to begin supporting them through the transition process well before they leave care, beginning in adolescence or even earlier. This factsheet provides guidance on how you can help youth build a foundation for a successful transition to adult life outside of foster care. It describes the challenges youth face, how the adolescent brain affects them during this time, and Federal laws and programs as well as provides concrete ways you can partner with youth.

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Unique Challenges for Youth Exiting Foster Care

Youth in foster care face the typical developmental changes and new experiences common to their age, such as pursuing higher education or training, looking for jobs, and managing tight budgets. They also confront the dramatic adjustment to being on their own rather than under the State's care. This is particularly true for those youth who "age out"¹ of foster care as they turn 18 (or the specified age for their State²). They no longer have access to the array of services and supports provided by the child welfare agency, including caseworker support. In addition, many of these youth are dealing with the long-term consequences of having experienced abuse or neglect and being removed from their families.

Studies show that many youth who exit foster care have difficulties as they transition to adult life. They are more likely than their peers to be homeless or have housing instability (e.g., "couch surfing"), experience health and mental health problems, have drug and alcohol dependence, have encounters with the criminal justice system, earn less money, be unemployed, and not have a high school or postsecondary degree (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2014). They may lack important knowledge and skills for living on their own (e.g., maintaining a budget, cooking), securing and maintaining employment, and receiving critical health and support services.

Resilience and Protective Factors

It is important to recognize that many youth can and do leave care to become healthy and productive adults. Youth in care often have or develop remarkable resiliency—the ability to cope with or recover from adversity. Despite adverse histories, they are able to adapt to their circumstances, develop healthy relationships, and demonstrate positive behaviors. (To

¹ Approximately 21,000 youth emancipated from foster care in 2015 according to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). Find the most recent AFCARS statistics at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars>.

² Some States choose to provide foster care and support services to youth over age 18 under certain conditions, such as when youth are working toward educational or vocational goals or otherwise progressing toward independent living. For more information on each State's policies, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/extensionfc/>.

read stories about what youth formerly in care have accomplished, visit FosterClub at <https://www.fosterclub.com/blog/real-stories/>.)

Youth are more likely to succeed if they are exposed to protective factors—conditions that buffer risks (e.g., exposure to violence, living in poverty) and improve the likelihood of future positive outcomes. Examples of protective factors shown to be important for children in and aging out of foster care include self-regulation skills (being able to manage or control emotions and behaviors), relational skills (the ability to develop positive bonds and relationships), academic skills, and a positive school environment. You can help the children in your care develop or strengthen their resiliency with the following actions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], Child Welfare Information Gateway, & FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, 2016):

- Modeling a positive outlook
- Building their confidence
- Helping them build connections
- Encouraging goal setting
- Viewing challenges as learning opportunities
- Teaching self-care
- Providing opportunities to help others

For more information about protective factors, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/promoting/protectfactors/>.

Adolescent Development and Changes in the Brain

As teenagers prepare for the challenges of adulthood, they are entering a period of tremendous growth and development. During this time, young people explore who they are and who they want to be. They advance new skills and take on new roles and responsibilities while also "testing the waters" for adulthood. Teenagers seek out independence, yet frequently dart back and forth between a wish to do things on their own and a desire for support and protection. All the while, hormones contribute to physical changes and powerful emotions,

and the adolescent brain experiences a growth spurt. Remember that youth may appear physically mature but still not have fully developed brains, decision-making, or emotional control.

When discussing teenage behavior, parents and caregivers may shrug and ask, “What were they thinking?” The part of the teenager’s brain that affects impulse control, planning, and critical thinking (the prefrontal cortex) is still developing. That part of the brain doesn’t connect quickly with the rest of the young person’s brain. Before the prefrontal cortex fully matures (typically in a person’s mid-20s), the youth often relies on a lower area of the brain (the limbic system), which links actions more closely with emotions. As a result, we often observe impulsive behaviors among teens with little consideration of consequences. At the same time, chemical changes in the brain (shifting dopamine levels) prompt risk-taking behaviors, which are normal in teenagers.

The limbic system is the brain’s first responder to dangerous situations and perceived threats. For youth who have been abused or neglected, changes in brain development and impulsive and risk-taking behaviors may be even more pronounced because their limbic system may have been especially active. It’s important for you to be aware of these tendencies, encourage youth to think before they act, and support positive risk-taking activities (e.g., trying out for a sports team, learning a musical instrument) that may result in valuable growth opportunities.

In addition, the adolescent brain is actively building and strengthening connections among brain cells (synapses). These connections help teens to more easily learn new information and acquire new skills. The brain operates, however, on a “use it or lose it” basis. Connections will grow stronger for skills and habits that are used, while those not used may eventually weaken. This creates an important opportunity to use the teenage years effectively to help shape decision-making skills and other capacities that youth will need as adults.

For more information on adolescent brain development, see:

- *Supporting Brain Development in Traumatized Children and Youth* (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/braindevtrauma/>
- *Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on Brain Development* (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/brain-development/>
- *The Road to Adulthood: Aligning Child Welfare Practice With Adolescent Brain Development* (Annie E. Casey Foundation)
<http://www.aecf.org/resources/the-road-to-adulthood/>
- *The Amazing Teen Brain: What Parents Need to Know* (L. A. Chamberlain)
http://www.instituteforsafefamilies.org/sites/default/files/isfFiles/The_Amazing_Teen_Brain.pdf
- Brain Architecture [webpage] (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child)
<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

Federal Laws and Programs to Support Transitioning Youth

Over the past two decades, several Federal child welfare laws and programs have addressed what is needed to support youth leaving care, including the following:

- The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood³ (the Chafee program) and enables States to provide financial, housing, employment, education, and other support services to prepare youth for the transition from foster care to living on their own.
- The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 allows States the option to extend the age limit for foster care when youth meet certain education, training, or work requirements. It also supports older youth by requiring agencies to

³ This program was formerly known as the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.

engage in planning related to youth's educational stability, health-care coordination, and transition out of foster care.

- The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 requires agencies to consult with children in foster care aged 14 and older in the development of their case and transition plans. It also requires agencies to ensure that children aging out of foster care, unless in care for less than 6 months, receive a copy of their birth certificate, Social Security card, health insurance information, medical records, and a driver's license or equivalent State-issued identification card. Additionally, the law expanded the purpose of the Chafee program to include ensuring children who are likely to age out of foster care have regular, ongoing opportunities to engage in age or developmentally appropriate activities.
- The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), which was enacted in 2018 as part of P.L. 115–123, makes several changes to the Chafee program, including specifying that the program is available to youth who have experienced foster care at age 14 or older. FFPSA also permits States and Tribes to provide the Chafee program up to age 23 under certain circumstances. Lastly, FFPSA mandates that agencies must provide youth with official documentation that they were in foster care before they age out.

Each State has independent living coordinators who administer programs for supporting youth in and transitioning out of foster care. To find contact information for each State's program and the coordinators, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at https://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunctionsaction=rols:main.dspList&rolType=Custom&RS_ID=145. Before moving out of State, youth formerly in foster care should consult with their caseworker as well as the independent living agency in the other State to determine how the move may affect their eligibility for services or benefits.

Transition Plan

During the 90-day period before a youth turns 18 or is scheduled to leave foster care, Federal law requires that the child welfare agency assist the youth in developing a personalized transition plan. The plan must address specific options related to housing, education, employment, health insurance, a health-care proxy or power of attorney, mentoring, and support services. To develop the plan, the youth's caseworker meets with the youth and other trusted adults of the youth's choosing, which can include you as the youth's foster parent as well as the birth parents or other relatives.

While the law refers to a 90-day period, most youth will benefit from more time to prepare. To help youth work on their transition plans, Foster Club offers an easy-to-use *Transition Toolkit* (<http://store.fosterclub.com/transition-toolkit-download/>) to help youth plan their next steps. You can also refer to Information Gateway's *Working With Youth to Develop a Transition Plan*, a bulletin for workers, at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/transitional-plan/>.

How Foster Parents Can Help Youth Transition to Adulthood

As a foster parent, you are in a unique position to help youth in your care prepare for a successful future. You can support the development of the youth's transition plan, and you can aid in activities that build skills and knowledge that can improve the youth's ability to carry out his or her plan. In addition, you can encourage a young adult's growing independence and guide safe exploration of new experiences while also providing a cushion of support.

Foster parents have several vital roles in helping youth transition to adulthood (Zanghi, Detgen, Jordan, Ansell, & Kessler, 2003):

- **Coach:** Listen, advise, and provide youth with opportunities to learn and practice new skills
- **Advocate:** Learn about and support youth's rights as they relate to education, health and mental health care, court proceedings, and case practices
- **Networker:** Help cultivate supports for the youth
- **Facilitator of relationships:** Help establish lifelong connections for youth

This section describes concrete ways you can support youth in foster care to help them build positive relationships, manage money, pursue additional education, find a job, secure housing, maintain their health and wellness, and develop additional life skills.

The following are general suggestions for assisting youth in any of these areas:

- **Empower youth to make decisions.** Youth in foster care often have been left out of critical decisions about their lives. It's important to let the young person take charge of his or her own future while you listen, guide, and provide support. During daily life, provide youth with frequent opportunities to make decisions and learn from the consequences, both positive and negative.
- **Communicate high expectations.** All too often, youth in care have heard more about their limitations than about what they can achieve. Send positive messages about future possibilities. Weave forward-looking comments, such as "when you go on to college..." or "when you start your own business..." into everyday conversations.
- **Start early.** Preparing for adulthood does not occur overnight. Don't wait until youth are nearing the date they leave foster care. Find ways to introduce important concepts to younger youth. For example, talk with a preteen about the value of saving money for long-term goals.

- **Decrease control and increase youth responsibilities gradually.** While allowing youth in your care to make choices, be clear about boundaries. Involve youth in setting rules and establishing appropriate consequences related to their behavior. As your teen shows readiness, allow him or her to learn and practice adult life skills with your support.

Personal Documents

Foster parents can help youth in their care collect and organize personal documents, such as a Social Security card, birth certificate, citizenship papers (if born outside of the United States), child welfare agency documentation, State-issued photo I.D., voter registration card, and medical records. If you or the youth are in touch with the birth parents, they may be able to assist with this. You should talk with youth about the importance of keeping identifying information and personal documents in a private, secure place and ensure they understand that these documents may be required for future services or benefits.

Identity theft can damage a young adult's credit and make it more difficult to get a loan or rent an apartment. Although identity theft can happen to anyone, youth who are or were in foster care are especially vulnerable. Their personal information, including social security numbers, is often accessible to providers and others who work with the youth, and their files may not be maintained in a secure location (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). Foster parents can help explain the importance of youth keeping their personal information safe and how to combat identity theft. Child welfare agencies are required by law to request a credit check each year for every youth in care over age 14 determine if identity theft has occurred and help resolve any errors. For more information about identity theft, refer to <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/features/feature-0014-identity-theft> and <https://www.consumerfinance.gov/about-us/blog/how-to-protect-vulnerable-children-from-identity-theft/>.

- **Recognize success.** Celebrate youths' achievements and milestones on the path to adulthood (e.g., having a special dinner after the youth in your care obtains his driver's license, attending a graduation ceremony, providing praise).

The following resources provide information about how to support youth transition to adulthood in multiple areas:

- Foster Youth in Transition (Michigan Department of Health and Human Services)
<http://www.michigan.gov/fyit>
- Transition & Aging Out (Youth.gov)
<http://youth.gov/youth-topics/transition-age-youth>
- *Foster Care Transition Toolkit* (U.S. Department of Education)
<https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/foster-care/youth-transition-toolkit.pdf>
- Foster Coalition
<http://www.fostercoalition.com/>
- Life Skills Training/Support Materials (It's My Move)
http://www.itsmymove.org/training_resources_lifeskills.php
- Resources to Inspire Guide: Casey Life Skills (Casey Family Programs)
https://www.casey.org/media/CLS_ResourceGuides_ResourcestoInspire.docx

Building Supportive Relationships and Connections

Permanent, supportive relationships and connections are critical to a young adults' well-being.

Things to Know

- Research and practice show that having ongoing support from at least one permanent, caring adult can make an enormous difference in the life of a vulnerable youth (Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016).
- Youth in foster care often have not had the same opportunities as other youth to develop social skills and supportive, lasting relationships.

Interdependent vs. Independent Living

For many years, child welfare policies and programs emphasized the importance of preparing youth for independent living. The underlying concept was that, once out of care, youth would need to function on their own (i.e., be independent). Today, many child welfare professionals are talking about *interdependence* rather than *independence*. *Interdependence* promotes the idea that young adults benefit from developing and maintaining supportive relationships that will help them achieve their goals rather than only relying on themselves to achieve them.

Things You Can Do to Help

- Ask youth to identify at least one reliable, caring adult in their life (including you) who can serve as a stable, ongoing connection and can provide support as they transition to adulthood
- Where appropriate, support youth in exploring connections with their biological family members (e.g., siblings, parents, grandparents) and in maintaining healthy relationships with them
- Encourage youth's development of peer support networks through participation in group activities with youth having similar experiences (e.g., foster youth advocacy groups) or similar interests (e.g., sports, dance, cooking, business)
- Hold a conversation about what your family's long-term relationship with the youth will be after they leave care
 - Will you keep routine contact?
 - Will you offer invitations for Thanksgiving and other holidays?
 - Will you be available for emergency support?

Resources for More Information

- Support Services for Youth in Transition (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/independent/support/>
- State Youth Advocacy/Advisory Boards & Foster Care Alumni Associations (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
https://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunctionsaction=rols:main.dspList&rolType=Custom&RS_ID=160
- FosterClub
<https://www.fosterclub.com/>

Managing Money

Many young adults have little experience managing money and have much to learn about developing and sticking to a budget, paying bills and taxes, obtaining credit, and saving for the future.

Things to Know

- After leaving foster care, alumni often struggle to make ends meet. According to NYTD data, 38 percent of former foster youth were receiving public assistance at age 21 (HHS, Administration for Children and Families [ACF], Children’s Bureau, 2016). Another study found that by age 23 or 24, more than half of the young adults formerly in care had experienced financial hardships, including not having enough money to pay for food, rent, or utilities (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010).
- Since they often are without a financial support system, youth formerly in foster care often face significant negative consequences from poor financial choices or miscalculations and don’t have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes (Peters, Sherraden, & Kuchinski, 2016).
- Young people often learn best about money management through first-hand experience and observation or modeling.

Things You Can Do to Help

- Encourage youth to participate in State independent living or other programs that provide structured opportunities for learning about money management

- Use everyday “teachable moments” to provide lessons about budgeting, savings, debt, smart shopping, paying bills, and saving for long-term goals
- Help youth open and manage checking and savings accounts before they leave foster care
- Ask the youth to develop a budget that will outline estimated living expenses and expected income (including Federal or State financial support) after their transition from care
- Work with youth and their caseworker to ensure the youth have a clean credit history, know how to maintain a good credit score, and understand how to read a credit report
- Ensure youth know how to file taxes and how to maintain proper records
- Help youth determine if they are eligible for financial assistance or other community resources, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

Resources for More Information

- Money Management (Project LIFE)
<https://www.vaprojectlife.org/for-young-adults/money-management/>
- TheMint
<http://www.themint.org/>
- *A Financial Empowerment Toolkit for Youth and Young Adults in Foster Care* (National Resource Center for Youth Development)
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/financial-empowerment-toolkit>
- Consumer.gov
<https://www.consumer.gov/>
- *Youth and Credit: Protecting the Credit of Youth in Foster Care* (The Annie. E. Casey Foundation)
<http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-YouthAndCredit-2013.pdf>

Pursuing Educational and Vocational Training Opportunities

Educational achievement can help prepare youth for life success, with benefits ranging from enhanced skills and

self-confidence to increased earnings potential. However, many youth in foster care are not prepared for training or college after high school.

Things to Know

- While in care, frequent school changes and learning and behavioral difficulties may interfere with educational achievement. By age 21, only 67 percent of former foster youth had received either a high school diploma or GED, as compared to 92 percent of their peers who were not in foster care (Denby, Gomez, & Reeves, 2017).
- After leaving care, youth may be further disadvantaged because they lack knowledge about educational opportunities and how to navigate the individualized education plan (IEP) process (if applicable), skills to navigate the enrollment processes, financing to pay for tuition and housing, or encouragement from the adults in their lives.
- College is not for everyone. Other options might include certificate programs, vocational or technical training, or the military.
- Youth in and transitioning out of foster care may be eligible for financial support through the following:
 - Educational and Training Vouchers program through the Chafee program, which can provide support for education and employment preparation for individuals ages 14–26 for up to 5 years (for more information, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/independent/support/vouchers/>)
 - Tuition waivers and assistance in certain States (for more information, refer to an overview by the Education Commission of the States at <https://www.ecs.org/ec-content/uploads/Tuition-Assistance-Programs-for-Foster-Youth-in-Postsecondary-Education.pdf>)
 - Federal financial aid (for more information, refer to the Federal Student Aid website at <http://www.fafsa.gov>)⁴

⁴ Youth are considered independent students for the purpose of Federal aid if they were in foster care at any time since they turned age 13. When a youth is considered an independent student, only the youth's income (and not that of a parent or guardian) will be considered when determining financial aid. As such, independent students are typically eligible for the maximum amount of aid available.

- Scholarships (for a partial list of available scholarships for youth in foster care, visit <http://www.fostercoalition.com/college-scholarships-foster-youth>)

Things You Can Do to Help

- Talk with youth about their educational and career goals, how their goals fit with their talents and interests, possible barriers to achieving their goals, and next steps
- Help youth determine if they are on the path to meet the prerequisites for their educational and career goals (e.g., completion of certain classes, taking specific tests, acquiring necessary skills)
- Help youth organize school records and other important documents, such as transcripts, test scores, IEPs (if any), and special recognition awards
- Offer youth assistance in exploring various educational or vocational options (e.g., talking to school counselors, conducting campus visits, determining which programs or apprenticeships are available in the community)
- Assist youth in identifying financial aid opportunities (e.g., scholarships, grants, student loans, work-study programs) and in applying for financial assistance
- Support youth in preparing for required tests, completing applications, writing essays, and securing recommendations
- Lend a hand as youth adjust to college life or a new program, help youth in identifying available support services, and assist them in finding a place to stay over school breaks

Resources for More Information

- *Postsecondary Education Resources for Youth in and Transitioning Out of the Child Welfare System* (American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, Education Law Center, and Juvenile Law Center) http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/portals/0/dmx/2012/09/file_20120920_180036_nXuYAI_0.pdf
- Foster Care to Success <http://www.fc2success.org/>
- National Postsecondary Support Map (Fostering Success Michigan) http://fosteringuccessmichigan.com/campus-support?utm_source=National+Postsecondary+Support+Map+Launch&utm_campaign=National+Po

Finding and Maintaining Employment

Getting and keeping a job is critical to a young adult's ability to achieve economic security. A job that fits with personal interests and talents also can contribute to greater life satisfaction.

Things to Know

- Many alumni of foster care live in vulnerable financial situations. Youth formerly in care have high unemployment rates, and those who are employed often earn low wages (Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2016).
- Experience helps. Young people in foster care who have worked before their 18th birthday may be more likely to find consistent and higher paying work after they transition out of care (Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014).
- Many States participate in initiatives to support the employment and economic needs of youth transitioning out of care. Contact your State's independent living coordinator for supports in your area.
- Centers for Independent Living provide services and supports for people with disabilities, including for education and employment, so they can live on their own in their communities.

Things You Can Do to Help

- Help youth identify interests and talents and how they connect to possible job choices
- Assist youth in exploring various career paths by encouraging and supporting them in conducting research, attending career fairs, speaking to a career counselor, or arranging a visit to a work site
- Help youth understand and practice important processes for obtaining a job, such as developing a resume, finding job listings, completing applications, and interviewing (e.g., hold mock interviews at home)
- Support youth in gaining firsthand experience through volunteer activities, job shadowing (i.e., following someone at a workplace to watch a typical workday), technical classes that increase skills, internships and apprenticeships, or entry-level jobs
- Promote networking by using your personal, community, and business connections to help youth find mentors who can provide guidance and support in a specific interest area
- Coach youth on how to keep a job and discuss employer expectations for issues such as arriving on time, appropriate dress, and positive work attitudes

Resources for More Information

- CareerOneStop (U.S. Department of Labor) <https://www.careeronestop.org/GetMyFuture/default.aspx?frd=true>
- MyFuture.com <http://www.myfuture.com/>
- Employment (Youth.gov) <http://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-employment>
- Centers for Independent Living (HHS, Administration for Community Living) <https://www.acl.gov/programs/aging-and-disability-networks/centers-independent-living>
- Foster Youth Internship Program <http://www.ccaainstitute.org/programs/view/foster-youth-internship-about>

Securing Housing

While many of their peers in the general population will still be living at home or receiving financial support for housing from their families, most youth aging out of foster care must face the difficult challenge of finding stable and affordable housing on their own.

Things to Know

- Foster care alumni may struggle with housing costs and frequent changes in living arrangements. They are also at increased risk for homelessness, with NYTD data showing 26 percent of the young people surveyed had been homeless at least once within the past 2 years (HHS, ACF, Children’s Bureau, 2016).⁵
- The Fostering Connections Act requires each youth’s caseworker to address housing needs as part of the transition plan. You can work with the caseworker to explore various options, such as transitional group homes, subsidized supportive housing, shared housing, host homes, school dormitories, or apartments.
- Funding for housing may be available from a variety of Federal, State, and local initiatives, such as the U.S. Housing and Urban Development’s Section 8 program and Family Unification Program, independent living programs, and the Education and Training Vouchers program. The process for securing publicly funded housing can take considerable time and may involve long wait lists.

Things You Can Do To Help

- Help youth explore and assess housing options (including location, cost, utilities, and living with roommates), as well as available financial support, and help them conduct their search
- Support youth in completing required applications
- Talk to youth about responsibilities related to housing (e.g., providing a security deposit, paying rent on time, keeping the apartment clean) as well as tenant rights (e.g., right to have repairs made, right to privacy, standard notice for rent increase)

⁵ Of the young people responding to this item, 88 percent had left foster care, and 12 percent were still in care.

- Help youth develop a backup plan in case housing arrangements fall through

Resources for More Information

- Rental Assistance (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development)
https://www.hud.gov/topics/rental_assistance
- Family Unification Program (FUP) (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development)
https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/family
- How to Find an Apartment (Michigan Department of Health and Human Services)
<http://www.michigan.gov/fyit/0,4585,7-240-44293-160440--,00.html>

Maintaining Health and Wellness

Youth leaving foster care should learn how to maintain good physical and mental health habits, including accessing needed services, and how to secure health insurance.

Things to Know

- Children in foster care are much more likely than other children to be exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACES), such as parental substance use, parental incarceration, or violence exposure (Turney & Wildeman, 2017). ACEs exposure can increase the risk of future physical, mental, and dental health problems (HHS, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018).
- Almost one-third of children and youth in foster care have one or more disabilities, which can have implications for the medical, mental health, and other care they require (Slayter, 2016).
- Youth formerly in foster care have several paths to Medicaid eligibility (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015a):
 - Under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), youth formerly in foster care are eligible for their State’s full Medicaid coverage.
 - The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 authorizes States to provide Medicaid to certain youth who age out of foster care.

- Under the ACA, States have the option to provide Medicaid coverage for eligible adults, including former foster youth, if they meet certain income requirements.
- Children in foster care are given psychotropic medications to manage their emotional and behavioral symptoms at higher rates than youth in the general public (Barnett et al., 2014). Many youth have not been educated on the benefits and side-effects of these medications, helpful approaches other than medication, how to obtain prescriptions after leaving care, or how to safely discontinue the medication, if needed.
- The Fostering Connections Act requires caseworkers to address health insurance and health care services as part of the youth's transition plan.
- Youth aging out of foster care are at risk for food insecurity (i.e., the inability to access adequate food), which can greatly affect their health and mental health (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2016).
- Help youth understand when to seek medical attention and how to find affordable health and mental health services through community health centers, student health centers, or other resources
- Work with youth to identify doctors and dentists nearby who see adult patients (in cases where the youth is still seeing pediatric practitioners)
- Assist youth in gathering medical records that list past health-care provider names, major illnesses, disabilities or conditions, medications taken, immunizations, and family medical history
- Help youth determine if they are eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (sometimes referred to as food stamps)

Resources for More Information

- Ages & Stages: Teens (American Academy of Pediatrics)
<http://www.healthychildren.org/english/ages-stages/teen/Pages/default.aspx>
 - Health Services (Information Gateway)
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/service-array/health/>
 - *Making Healthy Choices: A Guide on Psychotropic Medications for Youth in Foster Care* (HHS, Children's Bureau)
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/makinghealthychoices/>
 - HealthCare.gov
<https://www.healthcare.gov/>
 - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Pre-Screening Eligibility Tool (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service)
<https://www.snap-step1.usda.gov/fns/>
- Things You Can Do to Help**
- Promote a healthy diet and lifestyle and involve youth in meal preparation and physical exercise
 - Encourage youth to explore positive ways to reduce stress, including yoga, meditation, and exercise
 - Discuss critical health and mental health issues with youth while they are in care, including the following:
 - Positive ways for coping with stress and outlets for dealing with problems
 - Risks associated with substance use and abuse and the vulnerabilities if biological family members struggled with addiction issues
 - Sexuality and healthy sexual decision-making
 - Signs and symptoms of mental illnesses and the impact of life experiences and family histories of mental health problems on a young adult's mental health
 - Safe use of medication and healthy alternatives
 - Explain the importance of health insurance and work with the youth's caseworker to identify insurance options for after the youth leaves care

Developing Additional Life Skills

In addition to the core areas previously discussed, youth need to build their know-how on a variety of daily living skills, ranging from effective communication to housekeeping.

Things to Know

- Youth need guidance and practice to learn various aspects of home life, such as preparing meals, doing laundry, grocery shopping, house cleaning, making simple repairs, etc.
- Youth learn from their role models and other adults in their lives about effective communication, good manners, and other areas important to personal and professional interactions.
- Lack of transportation can be a barrier for a young adult to hold a job and access community services. Rules related to learning to drive and obtaining a license while in care vary from State to State.

Things You Can Do to Help

- Involve youth in household activities and chores
- Discuss expectations for adult behavior and model such behavior
- Talk with youth about transportation options, including public transportation and owning a car, and the related costs and benefits for each option
- Have youth test their life skills and knowledge through independent living assessments, such as the Casey Life Skills assessment (http://caseylifeskills.force.com/clsa_learn_youth)
- Help youth identify leisure activities that are safe, healthy, and easily accessible
- Help youth participate in activities normally experienced by their peers (e.g., dating, after-school activities, sleepovers)

Resources for More Information

- Support Services for Youth in Transition: Life Skills (Child Welfare Information Gateway) <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/independent/support/lifeskills/>
- “12 Basic Life Skills Every Kid Should Know by High School” (*Parenting* magazine) <http://www.parenting.com/child/child-development/12-basic-life-skills-every-kid-should-know-high-school>
- “Life Skills for Teens” (*Your Teen* magazine) <https://yourteenmag.com/family-life/top-10-move-out-skills>

National Youth in Transition Database Survey

To better understand the outcomes and needs of youth who are transitioning out of foster care and those who already have, the Children’s Bureau established the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). These youth may be asked to participate in the NYTD survey, which collects information about their experiences in various areas, such as financial stability, education, housing, and health insurance. The request to participate may come from a caseworker, a researcher, or someone else affiliated with the initiative. The Federal government, State and local governments, and others use the data to better understand the needs of this population so they can develop and sustain services to support them. Please encourage youth in your care to participate in the NYTD survey so their voices can be heard.

For more information from a youth perspective about participating in the survey, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RmlsaGQ7dw>.

For more additional information about NYTD, visit <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/reporting-systems/nytd>.

Conclusion

The journey to adulthood for a youth leaving foster care can be both exciting and frightening. As a foster parent, you can help youth in your care be better prepared to take advantage of available opportunities and overcome likely challenges as a young adult. Trying to complete all the tasks noted in this factsheet at once would be overwhelming. So, start working with the youth in your care early, gradually introduce concepts to build self-sufficiency, and provide ample opportunities for youth to forge their own path. Talk with youth about prioritizing what needs to be accomplished first. By working together with the youth, the youth's caseworker, and other caring adults in the youth's life, you can help build a strong foundation for a thriving future.

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