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# Child Abuse & Neglect

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Full length article

## The predictors of perceived social support among former foster youth



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Foster youth  
Social support  
Developmental assets  
Social connections  
Closeness with relative  
Romantic relationship  
Mentoring  
Neighborhood connectedness

### ABSTRACT

Based on a 5-wave panel survey of 732 foster youth, the current study examined the respective relationships between foster youths' individual characteristics, youths' social connections with individuals and formal institutions, and the development of perceived social support across the transition to adulthood. Several youth characteristics – including self-reported delinquency and attachment insecurity – were found to be statistically significantly associated with perceived social support. Attachment insecurity also appeared to mediate the relationships between social support and several other youth-level characteristics, including prior placement disruptions and placement with relatives. Social connections with different types of individuals – including caregivers, relatives, natural mentors, and romantic partners – were found to be associated with additive increases in perceived social support. However, some types of connections (e.g., romantic partners, natural mentors) appeared to be associated with much larger increases in social support than other connections (e.g., school or employment). Collectively, the findings help inform agencies' efforts to bolster foster youths' social connections as they transition to adulthood.

### 1. Introduction

Research suggests that social support influences a number of important young-adult outcomes, including physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, and socioeconomic status and employment (Guan & Fuligni, 2015; Matthews, Stansfeld, & Power, 1999). However, unlike other youth, foster youths' ties to their families, peers, and communities may be severely attenuated by the experiences of maltreatment, removal from home, and disrupted foster care placements (Jones, 2014; Perry, 2006). Indeed, several studies have found that victims of maltreatment, and children who have been placed in substitute care, report lower levels of social support and fewer social connections in adulthood than other groups (Pepin & Banyard, 2006; Perry, 2006; Pitzer & Fingerma, 2010). Moreover, a growing body of work suggests that social support may mediate or moderate the impacts of maltreatment and substitute care on a variety of outcomes, including psychological and emotional functioning, self-esteem, and resilience (Babcock, Roseman, Green, & Ross, 2008; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Esposito & Clum, 2002; Horan & Widom, 2015; Jones, 2014; Pepin & Banyard, 2006; Runtz & Schallow, 1997; Salazar, Keller, & Courtney, 2011). For foster youth per se, studies have also suggested that supportive relationships with mentors, siblings, and parents are associated with human capital development, residential stability, lower levels of stress and depressed mood, reduced involvement in the criminal justice system, and resilience (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Jones, 2012; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Salazar, 2012). However, although several studies have found that many former foster youth report receiving social support from at least one adult (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love, & Vorhies, 2011; Reilly, 2003), findings

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suggest that the level of social support may not be sufficient to support youth during the transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2011; Salazar, 2012; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

In recognition of the importance of social support for foster youth making the transition to adulthood, federal and state child welfare policy has increasingly sought to encourage practices that help foster youth establish and maintain social connections. In general, these efforts have aligned with the tenets of the positive youth development perspective, which posits that youth development is a reflection of the interplay between youth's characteristics, including their social and emotional competencies, and the developmental assets available within youths' social ecologies, including connections with individuals and formal institutions (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011). Efforts within child welfare to promote these types of social connections have included opportunities to maintain relationships with family (e.g., family finding programs, placement with kin and siblings), develop relationships with non-parent adults (e.g., mentoring programs), and engage formal institutions (e.g., employment and education). To date, however, there have been few, if any, studies that have empirically examined the degree to which different types of social connections influence social support among foster youth across the transition to adulthood. Such an examination could help inform our understanding of the relative importance of different types of connections and, in turn, help to develop and prioritize policies, practices, and interventions for emancipating foster youth.

### 1.1. Youth characteristics and social support

Prior research suggests that a number of youth characteristics are associated with social support and social connections among the general population of youth. For example, studies have consistently found that females report higher social support than males (Matthews et al., 1999; Pepin & Banyard, 2006). Also, although few studies have examined the relationship between race, ethnicity and social support among young adults, recent research suggests that there are racial and ethnic differences in the frequency and type of interactions with family (Guan & Fuligni, 2015; Taylor, Chatters, Woodward, & Brown, 2013). Individuals who have experienced maltreatment, and those with insecure attachment styles, have been found to report lower social support than other individuals (Anders & Tucker, 2000; Florian, Mikulincer, & Bucholtz, 1995; Pepin & Banyard, 2006; Runtz & Schallow, 1997; Simpson, Rholes, Oriña, & Grich, 2002; Sirois, Millings, & Hirsch, 2016). Finally, higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors have been found to be related to lower levels of perceived social support among children and adolescents (Demaray & Malecki, 2002).

To date, only one study has examined the predictors of social support development among former foster youth (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2015). Using longitudinal data of foster youth ages 17–21, this study examined the respective associations between perceived social support and youth demographic characteristics, maltreatment and substitute care history, education and employment status, and behavioral health indicators. Unlike the findings from studies based on general-population samples, the only statistically significant relationship was a somewhat counterintuitive negative association between employment status and social support (Greeson et al., 2015).

### 1.2. Social connections and social support

Studies examining various social connections among the general population of adolescents and young adults have found that young adults receive social support from a number of different sources. For example, family members, such as parents, siblings, and extended family, have been found to be important sources of social support throughout the life course (Levitt, Silver, & Santos, 2007; Tsai, Telzer, & Fuligni, 2013; Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2012). Also, during adolescence and young adulthood per se, peers and romantic partners appear to serve as increasingly important sources of social support (Levitt, Weber, & Guacci, 1993; Meeus, Branje, van der Valk, & de Wied, 2007; Meier & Allen, 2009; Wrzus et al., 2012). Findings from studies of foster youth have been generally consistent with those based on general-population samples. Specifically, studies have found that individual connections such as those with formal supports (e.g., caseworkers and foster parents), immediate and extended family, and adult mentors, are important sources of support for foster youth (Collins et al., 2010; Jones, 2013; Munson & McMillen, 2009). Other studies have suggested that peers are also an important source of support for foster youth (Jones, 2013; Perry, 2006). Finally, findings from recent study (Perry, 2006) suggest that, unlike other youth, foster youth may require connections with multiple individuals in order to experience observable benefits.

## 2. Current study

The goal of the current study is to explore the interrelationships among foster youth's individual characteristics, youths' social connections with different types of individuals and formal institutions, and youths' perceived social support across the transition to adulthood. To this end, we examine several related questions. First, what are the relationships among youths' individual characteristics – including emotional competence and interpersonal histories – and perceived social support over the transition to adulthood? Second, to what degree are connections with different types of individuals and formal institutions associated with differences in perceived social support? Third, do these respective relationships change over the transition to adulthood? Based on prior work (described above; Wrzus et al., 2012), we anticipate that the relative importance of some types of relationships (e.g., romantic partners) may increase over this period, while the importance of other types of relationships (e.g., extended family) may decrease. Finally, to what degree do the respective relationships between different types of social connections and foster youth's perceived social support vary across different youth characteristics (i.e., subpopulations)? This question reflects the hypothesis that the influence of social connections on the developmental course of social support will be a reflection of the interplay between the nature of

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