



An examination of theory and promising practice for achieving permanency for teens before they age out of foster care

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ABSTRACT

In this paper research is presented that examines the efficacy of Independent Living (IL) services in preparing foster youth to live “independently”, and calls into question the appropriateness of an “independence” goal for youth aging out of foster care. The paper then reviews the emerging conceptualization of youth permanency in child welfare practice that focuses on lifelong connections to kin and fictive kin as requirements for permanency. The paper then reports on the success of a federally-funded demonstration project that served youth in residential treatment facilities and group homes in New York City aging out of care. It examines elements of the project model that were highly successful in achieving family-based permanency for a significant proportion of youth referred to the program and concludes that it is a promising practice model for the profession.

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1. Introduction

The majority of youth who age out of foster care face enormous challenges. Many leave care disconnected from supportive adults, services, and socioeconomic supports that would significantly increase their chances of becoming productive, self-sustaining adults (Metzger, 2006). Research indicates that youth who age out of foster care to “independent living” are more likely to experience homelessness, unemployment, unplanned pregnancy, legal system involvement, substance abuse, and lack even the basic health care services. They also are less likely to have a high school diploma, earn enough to support themselves, or participate in post-secondary education or training (Courtney, Dworsky, Ruth, Havlick & Bost, 2005). Foster care support, which provides housing, financial support, and a range of health, education and other needed services, typically ends when youth are developmentally unprepared to assume full adult roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, Independent Living (IL) programs have proven inadequate to prepare youth for “independence” in any meaningful way. Too many youth leave care unconnected to committed adults in their lives who could buffer the challenges they face and serve as safe havens in times of need.

Increasing policy, program, and practice attention are being devoted to developing new strategies to enhance the capacities of youth emancipating from foster care to achieve better outcomes. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and, most recently, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of

2008 have strengthened the mandate that each youth leave foster care with a permanent family through safe reunification with their parents, adoption, guardianship, or that they have “another planned permanent living arrangement” (Center for the Study of Law and Social Policy, 2008). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 provides several tools for prioritizing family connections. The bill gives states the option of extending financial supports to kin providers and older youth. It includes new mandates for notifying kin, analyzing the use of kin foster care, and explaining foster care benefits and requirements to kin (Kerman & Glasheen, 2009).

Until recently, however, the issue of permanence for youth has lacked sufficient attention in the child welfare community and misconceptions about the issue abound, including that people do not want to adopt teens, teens do not want to be adopted, and that placements of teens are unsuccessful (Louisell, 2009). Furthermore, despite the rapidly burgeoning research literature on youth leaving care, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to the reconnection of former foster youth with birth families and other kin in the post care period. The empirical findings are scattered and often hidden in studies examining outcomes for former foster youth and the evaluation of IL programs (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008). Moreover, there has been little or no attention paid to well-established theories of child development that shed serious doubt on the assumption of age 18 as the appropriate life-marker transition age for “adulthood” and launching foster youth into independence.

There is an abundance of research indicating that successful youth development is inextricably linked to relationships with the family of origin and other fictive kin that influence developmental trajectories and life changes in adulthood (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Cooney & Kurz,

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1996). Adolescents on the path to adulthood rely upon their families for myriad forms of support, support that is critically important to their development and future life outcomes. Reestablishing these family connection for teens before they exit out of foster care, no matter what age they are, is the strongest and most positive youth development program the child welfare system can offer, and it is imperative that child welfare professionals identify 'promising practice' service models that are effective at achieving this outcome for teens if the goals of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 are to be met.

In this paper research from developmental and socio-psychology on the transition into adulthood for the general U.S. population is examined. This research will indicate that the transition to adulthood is a gradual process for most adolescents, unrelated to a specific nominal age, and that true "adult" functioning in terms of cognitive, behavioral, and social maturity is not achieved for the majority of emerging adults until the third decade of life. Next research is examined from the child development literature on the critical role of social capital (parents, kin, social supports) in guiding and supporting youth during this transition to adulthood and the deleterious consequences for them when this support is absent. Then, turning the attention to the child welfare system, research is presented that examines the efficacy and adequacy of IL services in preparing youth to live "independently", and calls into question the appropriateness of an "independence" goal for any youth in care. The paper then reviews a new conceptualization of youth permanency that appears to be gaining greater currency within the profession, one that is reframing the concept of "permanency" for youth in care in terms of lifelong connections to kin and fictive kin. But, while this new philosophy is emerging, the paper notes that effective practice models for finding permanent parents for teens before they age out of care still lag behind changing conceptualizations. The Children's Bureau (Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)) views the development of these effective service models as critical to practice change within the profession and has made it a priority funding area for demonstration projects. This paper reports on the success of one such federally-funded demonstration project that serviced youth in residential treatment facilities and group homes in New York City. It examines elements of the project model that were highly successful in achieving family-based permanency for a significant proportion of youth referred to the program and concludes that it is a "promising practice" model for the profession.

2. Emerging adulthood and home leaving

During the latter half of the 20th century and into the first decade of the 21st century, the transition to adulthood for U.S. teens has become longer, more complex, uncertain, and diverse (Arnett, 2007). The median age for completing school, marrying, and becoming a parent has steadily risen, and young adults well into their 20s continue to juggle work and school, live at home longer, and delay marriage and their own nuclear family formation. Although the median age at which adolescents first leave home is about 19 years, 40% of those who leave home for the first time between the ages of 18 and 24 return to live in their parental household at some time thereafter, although usually for only a temporary period. About 25% of children do not leave home for the first time until age 22 or later (Aquilino, 1996). Furthermore, the economic demands for, and returns to, education have increased relentlessly during the past four decades. In response, young people have delayed the assumption of adult roles until their education has been completed, and the data indicate a shrinking fraction of young people entering full-time work before their early twenties, and a growing number doing so only toward the end of their twenties (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005).

Arnett (2007) conceptualizes the transition from adolescence into adulthood as "emerging adulthood". He describes the period from (roughly) 18 to 25 as a period in the life course with certain common features, different in important ways from adolescence that precedes it and young adulthood that follows it. He describes this period as one in which progress toward independence is made rather than achieved. Arnett and Taber (1994) identify three developmental domains in which these transitions to adulthood take place: the cognitive domain, which is characterized by the development of adult reasoning that includes not only logical reasoning but also subjective feelings and personal experiences, a sense of responsibility to others, and interdependence within a larger society; the emotional domain, which is characterized by the development of autonomy from one's parents (not complete separation but mutuality and reciprocity as equal adults) and the ability to establish intimacy in adult relationships; and the behavioral domain, which is characterized by the establishment of firm impulse control and complying with social conventions.

Arnett and Tanner's (2006) conceptualization of emerging adulthood is backed up by empirical research. Work by Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, and Gordon (2003) highlights the gradual nature of the transition to adulthood. They found linear increases over time in the dimensions of independence in residential, financial, romantic, and parenting domains for both males and females, and the consolidation of adult status closer to the end of the third decade of life (late 20s) rather than the second (late teens). Other research has found that cognitive-emotional-behavioral development often continues in important ways during emerging adulthood, and that the period is one of especially heightened vulnerability resulting from disjunctions between the developing brain and behavioral/cognitive systems that mature along different timetables under the control of both common and independent biological processes (Steinberg, 2005).

Further research has found that even though adolescents may be able to show the same level of cognitive ability as adults in making decisions, they may make different decisions because they are more likely than adults to be affected by psychological factors, such as emotions of the moment and the desire to be accepted by peers. The evidence suggests that emerging adults experience difficulty maintaining balanced cognitive-emotional representations, especially if emotions are strongly activated, as when issues of security and survival are threatened (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Findings from studies by Greenberg, Schimel, Martens, Solomon, and Pyszczynski (2001), and Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon (1999) suggest that emerging adults continue to be easily swayed by their emotions, which distort thinking in self-serving and self-protective ways.

In terms of the ability to maintain healthy and balanced interpersonal relationships, research has found that higher levels of ego development (usually achieved during the later stages of emerging adulthood) are related to greater skill in negotiating needs for autonomy/relatedness and in balancing relationship dimensions in close peer and intimate relationships (Schultz & Selman, 1998). A study by Scharf, Maysseless, and Kivenson-Baron (2004) examined the association between attachment representations and successful coping with developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. These tasks included coping effectively with the home-leaving transition, advancing in the development of the capacity for mature intimacy in friendships and romantic relationships while maintaining close and autonomous relationships with parents, and developing a sense of efficacy and individuation. They found that although these developmental tasks begin to evolve before late adolescence, they are a more central and salient part of emerging adulthood functioning during the third decade of life (late 20s).

This evidence from developmental research cited above on young teen's transitions to adulthood, including their living arrangements, educational patterns, and entry into the work force indicates that few

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