

This chapter explores the benefits of engaging youth as resources in all levels of child welfare work. The respect inherent in this inclusion not only assists the development of a stronger bond between youth and staff, it also results in more effective policies, programs, and services.

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Using youth expertise at all levels: The essential resource for effective child welfare practice

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THE PAST TWO DECADES have seen remarkable advances in the manner in which youth are transitioned out of the foster care system. The most significant progress is in the way that the child welfare system relates to the youth it serves. This chapter provides a contextual framework for the advances in child welfare's preparation of youth for self-sufficiency and highlights the evidence and benefits of a significant cultural shift away from "doing for" toward "doing with" youth in foster care. The embracing of youth as partners, not only in individual case planning but also in the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies, programs, and services, has resulted in tremendous gains for the profession as well as the youth. This chapter illustrates those gains on both the micro and macro levels and suggests some critical ingredients that ensure that the expertise of youth is used appropriately and thoughtfully.

Advances in the independent living field

We have witnessed increased federal support for the provision of independent living and transitional services for youth through the passage in 1999 of the Foster Care Independence Act which established the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program,¹ the development of innovative transitional housing models,² a variety of excellent tools for the assessment and development of life skill competencies, and policies and protocols at the state and local levels that require the demonstration of efforts aimed at ensuring a successful transition. We have also seen more meaningful collaboration on the part of providers of independent living and transitional living services to youth. Opportunities for sharing best practices have increased with the convening of more frequent and larger conferences and organizations, such as the National Independent Living Association and the National Foster Care Coalition, and brought needed focus to the plight and needs of older youth who are exiting the foster care system. Awareness of the needs and concerns of foster children and youth has also been heightened by the annual National Foster Care Month campaign, conducted in May.³ All of these components combine to enhance the service delivery system for older youth, but perhaps no other component has affected the system itself more significantly than the manner in which that system relates to youth.

Positive youth development

The most significant advance in the field of independent living and transitional living services is embracing an approach to working with youth. That approach has been labeled differently as it has expanded and matured over many years. Initially included as part of a larger concept of youth empowerment, the embracing of youth as partners is an essential component of the concept currently referred to as positive youth development. Although the approach is widely endorsed and promoted within the child welfare community, it did not originate there. In the 1970s, the Department of

Health, Education and Welfare established the National Youth Development Bureau, which established state and regional bureaus across the United States. In the early 1990s, the DeWitt-Wallace Foundation funded projects throughout the country through character-building organizations such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Boy and Girl Scouts, and the National 4-H program, which promoted concepts of youth empowerment through the National Collaboration for Youth.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) joined the National Collaboration in 1992, becoming a DeWitt-Wallace grantee, and introduced the concept of positive youth development to the child welfare community. Through the positive youth development training curriculum and other materials, the Child Welfare League advanced the practice of including youth as partners in child welfare policy and practice. This philosophy has been widely accepted as best practice for working with youth in a variety of arenas and has been increasingly embraced within the child welfare community.

The Child Welfare League of America, in its 2005 Standards of Excellence for Transition, Independent Living and Self-Sufficiency Services (TILSS), established positive youth development philosophy as the foundation for TILSS services. It describes positive youth development programs as focused on the strengths and potential of youth rather than their problems or deficits and declares that TILSS programs and services should include (among other things) “structured and ongoing opportunities for youth to participate in leadership, decision-making, policy and program development, evaluation, and peer assistance.”⁴

In the 1980s, youth engagement was largely restricted to participation in youth advisory boards.⁵ These boards appeared on the child welfare landscape on many levels. State governments began developing youth advisory boards as part of their independent living programs. Unfortunately, while most states wanted a youth advisory board and appreciated the potential value such a group could offer to the agency, many states did not operationalize the boards in a manner to ensure their success.

Often these boards were poorly supported and understaffed by child welfare professionals who received little to no training on board or youth development and already felt burdened by a full cadre of responsibilities. Realistic arrangements for practical aspects such as the scheduling of and transportation of youth to board meetings and the provision of food at the meetings were not considered. Often there were inadequate budgets for the completion of projects that youth wanted to initiate and little advance guidance regarding what projects would be endorsed. Youth frequently felt like tokens instead of partners who were being used to their full potential. Many states had no clear process for the nomination or selection of youth to the board, resulting in selection by favoritism, and a perspective skewed by including only youth who had managed to do relatively well in the system. Other states attempted to mandate participation on the board or brought youth to meetings with little or no preparation. As a result, states often had difficulty maintaining their youth advisory boards and experienced frequent turnover and inertia.

Private agencies providing services to older youth also began developing youth advisory boards, often with similar results. Selection of board members was frequently done by staff rather than by peers, which led to boards that were not representative of the thoughts and feelings of the majority of youth in the programs. Again, training of staff and youth regarding board development was lacking, and the result often was frequent turnover of youth board members as well as staff facilitators and dramatically underused boards.

Beyond youth advisory boards

We have moved far beyond the approach of isolating youth feedback into limited and narrow youth advisory boards that allow the input of only a few hand-selected youth. Increasingly, care is being taken to ensure that youth advisory boards are representative of the diversity of youth in care. The composition of the board is critical, and care must be taken to ensure that the recruiting process results in a board that reflects the demographics of the youth served by the

agency in terms of culture, gender, mix of urban and rural experiences, and experience with the range of programs and services offered by the agency, including shelters, foster homes, group homes, residential treatment, adoption, and juvenile correctional facilities. Nomination and selection criteria should be established to ensure that youth are endorsed by their peers. Care should also be taken to ensure that the thoughts and ideas of the larger group of youth are reflected in the projects and activities of the board. This has successfully been accomplished by conducting youth board-led focus groups and surveys and placing suggestion boxes in places where youth have access, which are collected and responded to by the youth advisory board.⁶

Also essential to a successful youth advisory board is access to decision makers within and outside the agency. Commissioners and key leaders of public and private child welfare agencies should meet regularly with the boards to elicit feedback from the youth on issues and initiatives and to hear from the youth concerns and suggestions.

As state and private child welfare agencies have gained experience with the development and support of youth advisory boards, the roles of the boards have been greatly broadened, and many successful boards have evolved that are truly representative of youth-driven organizations. They have been active in legislative advocacy on state and national levels and have successfully lobbied for the passage of major reforms and initiatives, including legislation that provides tuition assistance and tuition waivers to many higher education institutions.

Coordinated efforts of youth-led organizations are credited with contributing greatly to the passage of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program in 1999. The California Youth Connection (CYC) is a premier example of an organization that is truly youth driven.⁷ Established in 1988, the CYC is organized into local chapters throughout the state and has made great strides to network with California's foster youth. In addition to holding annual statewide conferences for foster youth, CYC has been active in legislative advocacy and has been holding an annual "Day at the Capitol" since 1993, when youth tour the capitol, meet with key legislators and their staff, and hold a press conference highlighting the concerns

of foster youth. In 2000, CYC successfully advocated for legislation that requires the participation of foster youth in the development of child welfare policy and identifies CYC as the vehicle for that input. The organization has established such credibility that in California, it is now considered standard operating procedure, whenever there are child welfare reform efforts or planning activities, to reserve a place at the table for CYC representatives.

The practice of using youth as partners has resulted in numerous benefits to youth, the adults who work with youth, and the systems that provide services and develop policies. Increased voluntary program participation, decreased resistance, improved communication, and improved relationships between youth and social service staff are among the positive results being demonstrated through stronger partnerships. Developing meaningful ways for youthful consumer voices to be integrated into individual casework as well as into the development, implementation, and evaluation of services helps to ensure that services are appropriately designed and implemented and that resistance is minimized.

The business community has been using consumer feedback in the design and marketing of products for decades, conducting focus groups, surveys, and other measures to predict and respond to customer preferences and market trends. The social service industry in general, including child welfare, has historically maintained full control and responsibility for the design of services. This approach has led to a back-end, or trial-and-error, method of service delivery and program development, adjusting and revising program models after the fact as they prove ineffective or underused. Older youth in the child welfare system often refuse to comply with case plans that do not reflect their desires and are hesitant to participate in programs that they had no part in selecting. Historically, professionals have responded with attaching the label of “resistant” to these youth, in effect, blaming the youth for their reluctance to participate in a system in which they had no voice. This adds one more label to youth who have frequently accumulated several negative labels by the time they reach adolescence. This continuation of negative labeling is in direct opposition to a positive youth development, or strength-based, approach.

More effective than the trial-and-error method of program development is the meaningful inclusion of youth in the front end of service design, at both the micro and macro levels.

Including youth at the micro level of service design

On the micro level, youth are more actively being engaged in the development of their case plans. Best practice demands that youth are true partners in the development of the plans from their outset rather than the earlier practice of having social caseworkers write the plans and then asking youth to sign off on them, with little or no input. The Foster Care Independence Act mandates youth participation in the development of their transition plans. An essential component to engaging youth as partners in the case planning process is to ensure that they are available to attend all case planning reviews, court hearings, and meetings where decisions are being made. This involves practical considerations such as scheduling meetings at times and locations accessible to youth. The business hours of most child welfare agencies do not easily accommodate meetings that are scheduled around youth's school and work responsibilities. This conflict places youth in the difficult position of having to choose between fulfilling educational and employment responsibilities, sharing personal information regarding their status as a foster child to get the time out of school or time off from work, or missing meetings where important decisions regarding their life will be made without their input or presence. For older youth transitioning to economic self-sufficiency, unpaid hours taken out of work can sabotage fragile budgets and jeopardize employment.

Another recent development in the delivery of child welfare services has advanced the practice of youth partnership. Many states have extended services to youth beyond the age of eighteen, often including young adults up to age twenty-one. Some states continue eligibility beyond age twenty-one to students attending full-time higher educational or vocational training programs. Given that the legal emancipation age in most states remains eighteen, expanding services beyond that is done on a voluntary basis. This phenomenon

has resulted in the development of services that must be delivered in a manner appealing to voluntary consumers. Youth who, when they were under age eighteen, were legally mandated to comply with services, suddenly at age eighteen are empowered to either reject services and become independent or accept services. For these older youth to want to continue to participate in child welfare services, the services must be designed and delivered in ways that are beneficial and respectful. The services developed for this age group are being designed to meet important needs in a consumer-friendly manner. Aftercare services are also being developed that do not require older youth to remain on full-time child welfare caseloads to be able to access needed services.

Including youth at the macro level of planning

Youth are increasingly being asked to participate in system-level reform and initiatives. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Families, Children's Bureau, uses foster youth in the evaluation of child welfare services during its child and family service reviews. The Child Welfare League of America includes foster youth and alumni in all of its committees and work groups, and it has several former foster care youth serving on its board of directors. Youth are developing and reviewing curriculum used to train child welfare professionals and foster parents and are being used to conduct preservice and in-service training sessions. Youth in foster care are reviewing policies and providing feedback on program proposals and grant applications.

Youth are providing workshops and conducting keynote presentations at local and national conferences. One innovative national organization, FosterClub, provides leadership development to an elite group of current and former foster youth who have been selected through a nomination and application process to participate in a program called the Foster Club All Stars.⁸ These young adults, aged eighteen through twenty-two, participate in a rigorous summer internship during which they develop their leadership

and public speaking skills. They then apply those skills throughout the year, providing workshops, keynote addresses, panel facilitation, and managing youth conferences across the country.⁹

Other national organizations working within the child welfare field have established positions on their boards of directors specifically designated for current and former foster youth. One of the first such organizations was the National Independent Living Association, which established that policy in its by-laws in 1995.¹⁰ The by-laws of the National Foster Care Coalition, established in 2005, also reserve positions on its board of directors for the voice of foster youth and alumni.¹¹ A new national organization, Foster Care Alumni of America, established in 2005, is committed to transforming foster care policy and practice by linking and organizing the foster care alumni community. Most members of the board of directors are foster care alumni.

Cautions and challenges

The child welfare system still has much work to do as it develops more and better ways to fully use youth expertise. Careful consideration must be given to ensure that mutual benefits are derived and that youth are not taken advantage of while being engaged in system reforms. Since older youth are appropriately concerned with securing their own futures, child welfare professionals who wish to use their time must consider the impact on the youth's education and employment goals. Compensation should be provided to youth who are participating in activities designed to improve the child welfare system. They should be treated as young consultants and provided emotional support, career advancement opportunities, and monetary compensation. It is also important not to overrely on particular youth who need to focus on establishing their own self-sufficiency plans. Youth often have charitable inclinations and genuinely want to help to improve the child welfare system, but they should not be expected, or even encouraged, to make sacrifices that will jeopardize their own security. It is the responsibility of child welfare professionals to ensure that youth are utilized without being used.

Transportation must be provided when appropriate and arrangements made so that youth do not have to pay for travel and other expenses and then wait for lengthy reimbursement processes. If youth are expected to travel to conferences or distant meetings, responsible and appropriate arrangements should be made for someone to meet or accompany them.

Another frequently cited obstacle is appropriate concern about confidentiality. States and agencies need to develop clear guidelines regarding youth being photographed and telling their stories to the public. Many states use alumni or youth over the age of majority to overcome this obstacle.

Conclusion

The depth and breadth of youth involvement in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of child welfare services is destined to expand as increasing numbers of government and private agencies experience the benefits of having meaningful and genuine partnerships with youth. The honesty and clarity that youthful voices provide have made a significant impact on child welfare in general and especially on the field of independent living and transitional living. Future generations of children and youth as well as child welfare professionals owe much to the contributions of the youth who have come before them.

Notes

1. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program was established in Title I of the Foster Care Independence Act (P.L.106–169). Retrieved February 7, 2005, from <http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/publaw/106pub.html>. Pub.L.106–169 (H.R. 3443).

2. Kroner, M. J. (1999). *Housing options for independent living programs: Youth work resources*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

3. Casey Family Programs. (2005). *It's my life: Housing, a guide for transition services from Casey Family Programs*. Seattle, WA: Author.

4. Child Welfare League of America. (2005). *Standards of excellence for transition, independent living, and self-sufficiency services*. Washington, DC: Author.

5. Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2003, February). *Policy matters: Setting and measuring benchmarks for state policies, engaging youth in positive and productive roles: Recommendations for state policy*. Washington, DC: Author.

6. Crowe, K. M. (2001). Utilizing youth at all levels. *Common Ground*, 17(1).
7. Scott, P., Sanchez, R., & Grice, M. (N.d.). *A summary of foster youth recommendations from California Youth Connection Conferences*. Unpublished manuscript.
8. www.fosterclub.org, a Web site for supportive adults.
9. www.fyi3.com. This is the Web site for youth transitioning from foster care.
10. www.NILA.org.
11. www.NFCC.org.

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