



# Programs for youths transitioning from foster care to independence<sup>1</sup>

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This information sheet describes some of the challenges faced by youths growing up in foster care when they transition from foster care to living on their own. It also describes some of the programs and services that have been implemented in North America to improve their opportunities for success.

## Introduction

The transition from adolescence to adulthood presents both opportunities and challenges for all youths. As youths approach adulthood, roles and responsibilities change and there are expectations that they will become more self-reliant, and work to advance their educational and occupational goals. Experiences during this time can have important implications for adulthood. Access to education and experiences that enhance life skills can build competence and confidence, and increase career options. The transition to adulthood can be facilitated by relationships with caring adults who provide youths with emotional support, guidance, and assistance in times of difficulty.

## Why is the transition to adulthood often more difficult for youths leaving care?

Wade and Dixon (2006) compare “extended” and “accelerated” transitions to adulthood.<sup>2</sup> During extended transitions, youths establish independence gradually and with the support of caregivers into adulthood. Material support such as financial assistance or providing a place to live gives youths the opportunity to pursue educational goals,

explore career options or work, and save money to help them make the move to independent living. Extended transitions have become common in the last few decades. Most youths remain at home into their 20s and frequently have the option of returning if difficulties are encountered.<sup>3</sup>

For some youths, however, life circumstances limit choices and compel them to assume adult responsibilities at an early age. When the transition to adulthood is accelerated, independence may need to be established before youths are able to attain the education, skills and life experience required to manage well on their own. Youths who grow up in foster care are more likely than youths who live with their families to have accelerated transitions to adulthood. Some older youths who leave foster care are reunited with their families, adopted, or move in with relatives. However, studies consistently find that the majority of the older youths who leave foster care become independent at 16 to 19 years of age because they have reached the age when they are no longer eligible<sup>4</sup> for child welfare services.<sup>5,6</sup> Youths who leave foster care because they have reached the age of majority are referred to as having “aged out” of the care of the child welfare system.

The transition to adulthood is influenced by experiences that youths have at various points in their lives: before entering care, while living in care, and immediately after leaving care. Children who grow up in foster care often come from troubled families and most have experienced abuse and/or neglect before they were placed in foster care.

Youths in foster care are more likely than their peers to have a range of problems, including learning and behavioural difficulties, emotional and physical health issues, and problems with substance abuse.<sup>7</sup> While in foster care, changes in foster homes can disrupt their relationships with caregivers and peers, and can result in school changes that hinder academic achievement. The experiences that youths in care have while growing up put them at greater risk for difficulties in adolescence and into adulthood.

Reduced opportunities for support once they leave care can add to the difficulties these youths face. For some youths, aging out of care means a loss of housing and less access to services and resources such as educational supports, coverage for medications, and counseling services. In addition, some youths who grow up in foster care do not establish supportive relationships that they can rely on into adulthood. Without these relationships, youths who age out of care may have little support in managing the challenges of early independence.

### **What difficulties do youths who age out of care encounter in the transition to independence?**

Research indicates that youths who age out of care encounter a number of challenges in the transition to adulthood. In the years after leaving care, they are more likely than their peers in the general population to experience under-employment, unemployment, homelessness or housing instability, get into trouble with the law, and have children at a young age.<sup>8,9,10</sup> For example, one study compared 603 youths aged 17 to 19 who had been out of care and on their own for about one year to a representative sample of 19 year olds who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.<sup>11</sup> Youths who aged out of care were twice as likely to report having insufficient money to pay the rent, mortgage, or utility bill, and were four times more likely to report being evicted in the prior year (i.e., since they left care).

Employment options for youths leaving care may be limited by lower levels of educational achievement and fewer opportunities to pursue educational goals. Compared to youths in the general population, youths who age out of care tend to score lower on standardized achievement tests, are less likely to graduate from high school, and are under-represented in post-secondary programs.<sup>12,13,14</sup> In addition, those who enroll in college programs are less likely to complete them.

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### **What is being done to improve opportunities for youths aging out of care?**

Greater awareness of the difficulties that youths face when they age out of care has led to the development of programs to improve opportunities for success in the transition to adulthood. Several of these examples come from the United States, where amendments to the *Foster Care Independence Act* (FCIA) of 1999 (Public Law 106-169), and increased funding, have facilitated the expansion and enhancement of supports for youths in transition. Most of the programs and services for transitioning youths fall into three broad categories:

- better preparation for independent living,
- transitional services and supports, and
- supported transitional living programs.

### **Better preparation for independent living**

Many jurisdictions provide older youths in foster care with preparation for independent living. However, research has shown that the nature and extent of preparation varies considerably, and many youths are poorly prepared to manage on their own when they leave care. For example, one study found that despite receiving some assistance with independent living skills, approximately one-third of youths aging out of care reported feeling unprepared to obtain a job, manage money, or obtain housing.<sup>15</sup> Findings like these have led to renewed emphasis on teaching youths the skills they need to meet the challenges of living on their own.

Preparation for independent living typically begins when youths in foster care are between 12 and 16 years of age, depending upon the jurisdiction. Preparation often includes training to develop competency in a range of life skills, including searching for and obtaining jobs, managing money, obtaining housing, understanding rental/leasing agreements, and skills for daily living such as banking, meal planning, self-care, and work/study habits. Programs may also teach interpersonal communication skills, strategies for managing stress and leisure time, and

may also provide transition planning or counseling to help youths to identify pathways to achieving their goals. Training may be provided to foster parents so that they can work with youths to gradually increase independence while they are still in care. In some jurisdictions, specialized case workers or teams (e.g., Youth Transition Action Teams in California) focus on preparing older youths for the transition to independence.

## Transitional services and supports

Programs that provide transitional services and supports help youths to establish independence. These programs often serve at-risk youth, including youths who have aged out of care. They aim to help youths overcome barriers to education and employment and often facilitate access to services that help youths manage the challenges they face. Services can include employment counseling, resumé writing, job search and interview skills, academic upgrading, and preparation for post-secondary education. Many programs also provide assistance with basic needs such as meals and clothes, and help youths to access income and housing supports, recreational resources, and services for substance abuse and mental health issues.

Programs such as Living Independently for Tomorrow (L.I.F.T.), which is offered by the Haldimand and Norfolk Children's Aid Society (Ontario) provide a range of services and assign support workers to help youths transition to independence. In addition to teaching skills to find employment, some programs such as Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU) arrange placements or apprenticeships that provide youths with work experience. For example, the program in London, Ontario, offers opportunities to gain work experience in woodworking, recycling, or making gourmet preserves in businesses owned and operated by YOU.

In the United States, the United Parcel Service School-to-Career Partnership for Youth in Foster Care Program also provides youths with work experience. The UPS program started in Maryland, in partnership with the Maryland Department of Human Resources, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Living Classrooms Foundation, and has been extended to a number of states. The program provides youths who age out of care with part-time jobs, educational opportunities, and support services. Participants work part-time (15 to 25 hours per week) for an hourly wage, plus health benefits. Youths are shuttled to and from work, and counselors visit the worksite up to three times each week to check on them. UPS also reimburses youths for tuition at colleges or vocational training programs.

Programs that facilitate post-secondary education and training increase the options available to youths into adulthood. With the amendments to the FCIA, most states now have laws or policies that provide state-funded scholarships, tuition waivers or needs-based grants for post-secondary education to youth aging out of care. In Canada, recent changes to the *Canada Education Saving Act* enable child welfare agencies to open Registered Education Savings Plans (RESPs) on behalf of youths who have grown up in care. In addition, the Ontario government has recently introduced Access Grants to help cover tuition costs for youths and young adults who have been permanent wards of the province. These programs help to provide resources that youths need to pursue their educational goals once they leave care.

## Supported transitional living programs

Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) agreements are used in several Canadian jurisdictions (e.g., Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta) to extend support beyond the age of majority, typically up to the age of 20 or 21. Eligibility for ECM varies by jurisdiction but is often limited to youths who have been permanent wards and who are enrolled in school. An ECM agreement is a contract between a child and family service agency and a youth in care that specifies the types of supports that will be provided by the agency as well as the goals that the youth must be working towards to receive the extended support. Youths are typically provided with funds towards rent, food, and clothing and may also receive continued medical and dental coverage. Additional services may be provided to help youths transition to adulthood. These services vary by child and family service agency.

A number of supported transitional living programs have been developed in the United States. These programs provide youths who have left care with a stable place to live and a range of transitional services to enable them to make the transition to full independence more gradually and with support. Like ECMs, some programs limit eligibility to youth who are enrolled in school and/or working. Some programs require that youths complete a life skills training program before they are eligible for housing. Others offer life skills training while youths live in transitional housing. Examples of supported transitional living programs are:

- Lighthouse Youth Services and Independent Living Program (Ohio),
- Community Transition Services Center (Texas),
- Community Housing Assistance Program (Connecticut),

- First Place for Youth (California),
- Living Independently for Tomorrow (LIFT- Virginia), and
- Bridges to Independence (California).

Although these programs vary, their key features include:

- **Transitional housing support.** Programs provide funds for room and board, or may provide apartments in residences or scattered throughout the community. Depending on the program and the youths' goals for independence, youths can receive support for one year or for several years. Some programs extend support to the age of 23 for youths who are enrolled in post-secondary education. Many programs provide funds for utilities, telephone, transportation, food and/or a monthly living allowance.
- **Transitional services and supports.** Programs include a range of services and supports that build readiness for independence while youth are receiving transitional housing supports. Most programs offer employment assistance, educational/vocational counseling, and help in attaining a high school diploma and enrolling in college. Programs may also include access to other forms of counseling, advocacy and/or peer support. Some programs require youths to place part of their income in savings so that they have money available when they leave (e.g., Bridges to Independence Program, Community Housing Assistance Program).

## Other supports

Youths in foster care need ongoing supportive relationships. Although there is little research on the effects of mentoring, some studies suggest that youths in foster care benefit from positive role models and supportive relationships with adults who help them find pathways to their goals.<sup>16</sup> One study found that older youths in foster care are less likely than youths in the general population to say that they had a mentoring relationship with a non-parental adult that made a positive difference in their lives, however, those youths in care who did have mentors had better self-esteem, education, and health outcomes in late adolescence and early adulthood than those who did not.<sup>17</sup> Programs that cultivate or support mentoring relationships between caring adults and youths in care can assist youths in finding emotional support and opportunities for advice, guidance, and instrumental support. These relationships can develop naturally between the youths and adults in their social network such as uncles, aunts,

coaches, friends' parents, or professionals such as teachers or social workers. Alternatively, they may be facilitated through volunteer programs such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters, or through transitional support programs (e.g., First Place for Youth, California). More research is needed on how best to cultivate and support meaningful relationships for youth who grow up in care.

## Summary

Many youths who age out of foster care become independent at an early age and face multiple challenges including housing instability, difficulty finding employment, and limited opportunities for education. They often face these challenges without the support of caring adults to provide guidance, advice, and assistance in times of difficulty, and without the necessary life skills or resources to succeed on their own. A number of programs have been developed to help youths with the transition to adulthood. Preparation for independent living aims to help youths learn the skills they will need once they leave care. Services and supports provided to youths once they leave care help them to access resources and overcome barriers to education and employment. Supported independent living provides youths with a place to live and services to help them make the transition to full independence gradually and with support. Programs that improve preparation for, and transitions to, adulthood have the potential to provide youths with a greater range of options. However, there is little research on the extent to which current initiatives improve outcomes for youths leaving care.<sup>18</sup> More research is needed to identify programs that are effective in helping youths who age out of care find pathways that lead to success in adulthood.

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- 1 This information sheet was peer reviewed by experts in the field of child welfare. Special thanks to Daniel Moore, Executive Director of Family and Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington County, for his helpful comments and suggestions.
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  - 3 Stein, M. (2006). Research review: Young people leaving care. *Child and Family Social Work*, 11, 273–279.
  - 4 For more information about Canadian provincial/territorial differences in the age of independence after living in foster care, see <http://www.cecw-cepb.ca/files/file/en/FASDTransitions67E.pdf>.
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