Out-of-Home Care in California: Adolescents’ Perspectives

Instructional Guide (Chapter V)

This chapter provides findings from three focus groups conducted with adolescent foster youth in a cross-section of California counties. (Please refer to Appendix B for a description of the study methods.) Each focus group addressed nine questions designed to assess participants’ perspectives on their experiences of safety, family, permanence, and well-being while in care. Here, youth recount some of their experiences and make recommendations for improving the delivery of child welfare services.

Instructors are encouraged to use this chapter in a range of ways to suit their needs. Since this paper currently is not copyright protected, it may be copied and distributed to students for independent reading or classroom use. Questions are included at the end of the chapter to facilitate small or whole group discussions.

This chapter can be used to foster the following competencies for public child welfare work: 1.1, 1.9, 2.5, 2.12, 2.14, 2.15, 3.7, 3.9, 3.17, 3.19, 4.1, 4.7, and 6.4.
During the spring of 1999, the Center for Social Services Research conducted three focus groups in three San Francisco Bay Area counties with 32 adolescent foster youth, most of whom were still in out-of-home care. The purpose of this study was to acquire retrospective accounts from older youth of their experiences in out-of-home care and to compare these relatively abstract findings to information from our study with younger foster youth in care (see Chapter IV). Each focus group addressed nine questions. Taken together, these questions were designed to assess participants’ perspectives on four fundamental goals of the child welfare services system: protecting children from harm, supporting children’s families, promoting permanence, and fostering children’s well-being. Please refer to Appendix B for additional information on the study’s sample and design.

Themes

Brief, open-ended questions revealed a series of themes highlighting the issues of importance for adolescent foster youth. These themes are described below.

**What can caregivers and social workers do to help children feel a sense of belonging in their foster families?**

- **Recruit caring foster parents.** One common theme in all three focus groups was a skepticism that foster parents are “just doing it for the money” and “don’t really care” about the children in their care. One young man’s suggestion was echoed in the comments of others: “Social workers should ask foster parents what their motivation is. If it’s money, that’s not right.” Similarly, many youth mentioned that they felt welcomed when they first entered out-of-home care, but that their sense of belonging diminished over time: “Social workers and caregivers are nice and helpful in the beginning, but after one week they stop helping.” Another added, “We need foster parents who will stick it out with us and care for a long time.”

- **Show us that you care.** While many foster parents say to incoming foster children, “Make yourself at home,” a number of youth said that their caregivers didn’t behave in ways that made them feel supported. One young woman described how her caregiver said, “You’re my child, just like the kids I gave birth to” during private conversations, but then referred to her as “[her] foster kid” during conversations with family friends. This young woman added, “I lived with her for 14 years, but there were lots of times like that when I felt like I didn’t belong.” Another young woman said that she never felt like she belonged because her foster mother never said that she cared about her. Others described wanting...
their caregivers to “not just say that they care,” but to “prove it” by spending more time with them, listening non-judgmentally, asking questions about their lives, taking them places, and including them in family activities. One young man said that he feels like a “second class citizen” in his foster home. Similarly, one teen said that her former caregiver frequently told her, “I didn’t have to take you in,” and then threatened to “send [her] away.”

Treat all kids equally. A prevailing theme in the focus groups was that caregivers treat foster children and biological children differently. One young man reported that the foster children who live in his home are physically isolated: “In my foster home, foster kids are separate from everyone else. We can’t go into their area of the house.” The common perception that caregivers are “unfair” to foster children is reflected in the following statements: “They discipline me, but they don’t discipline their own kids;” “I do all the house chores; their kids don’t do anything except make their beds;” “My foster parent gives me my allowance in small parcels, but she lets her own kids get their allowance in whatever way they want;” and “If [the biological son] asks for a ride, he gets it, but if I want a ride, I have to take the bus with my own money.”

Several youth also described home environments in which biological children “boss” foster children around. In some of these homes, caregivers reportedly assign biological children to be in charge. In other homes, biological children actively take on this authoritative role, with varying levels of parental knowledge. With frustration, one young man said, “My social worker knows about everything that’s going on between the kids in my house, but nothing’s done about it.” With probing, no participants were able to identify a specific instance when their social worker effectively intervened to lessen negative interactions between children in foster homes, but one teen offered a systems-level suggestion: “Natural kids need training, too. They should go to the foster parent training, or maybe they could have one of their own.”

How has your sense of what “family” means changed over time?

Consider “family” in its most inclusive sense. In seeming contrast to many participants’ perceptions that caregivers treat foster children and biological children differently, many youth also described how their understanding of family has become more inclusive over time. The majority stated that biological ties are not necessarily present in families: “Blood doesn’t make a family. Anyone can be a mother, but blood doesn’t make her a mom.”

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Instead, family includes “anyone who is always there for you.” One young man said that he refers to any parent that he’s ever had as a “mom” or “dad.” (He named one biological mother and four foster parents.) In a focus group with two non-related foster brothers, the two young men talked about being family for one another. One said, “Time isn’t an issue. You can know someone for just a short time and have them feel like family, or know someone for a really long time and never feel like they are family.”

Consistent with many of her peers’ perspectives, one young woman stated that her family includes both kin and non-kin: “My family? I love them! What words come to me? Mother, sister, aunties, nieces…family! My foster family is in my family, too.”

Consider family losses. Although most youth expressed feeling a sense of belonging within some sort of “family,” several youth focused on their losses, rather than their gains. One young woman said that she “[doesn’t] know what to think” when she hears the word, “family.” She “[doesn’t] trust the word.” She added, “My family disregards me like a piece of tissue.” One boy mentioned that he “[doesn’t] believe in family,” even though he recently developed closer relationships with his birth father and biological brother. He added, “I don’t have family. I only have friends. People who care for you and look after you are family. I don’t have anyone like that and never did.”

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What can social workers do to help children develop positive relationships with their birth families?

Talk respectfully about our birth parents. A number of participants said that social workers should convey more respect for birth parents during child-worker conversations: “Social workers always tell you about the bad things that your parents did.” This particular teen added, “Their criticisms make you not want to meet your parents.” Other teens described feeling upset when they visited their birth parents because they recalled their social workers’ negative comments.

Help us see our birth families. Many participants expressed wanting their social workers to take more responsibility for ensuring that foster youth see their birth families -- birth parents, biological siblings, and other relatives -- more regularly. Some said that they did not see their social worker for several months. During these absences, their social worker did not appear to make efforts to coordinate visits. One participant
commented, “Social workers don’t put any effort into making visitations happen.”

Another added, “Social workers don’t even think about scheduling [visits].” Some said that their social worker scheduled visits, but didn’t follow through with appointments responsibly. These youth complained that social workers often miss appointments, change appointments, don’t give youth adequate notice about appointments, don’t call promptly or at all, are late, and terminate visitations earlier than planned.

Participants were particularly frustrated with social workers’ reported failures in coordinating sibling visits. One participant said that the only way he could see his biological brother was by using his birth mother as an intermediary; he added that his social worker “didn’t do anything” to help him see his brother. A large number of participants recommended that social workers be given smaller caseloads, while youth be given more information about their social workers’ responsibilities, as well as some sort of grievance procedure.

Help us live with our biological siblings. Many participants expressed frustration that they were not included in critical decisions pertaining not only to themselves, but also their biological siblings. Some complained that they were not informed about their siblings’ court hearings, and others complained that they were never consulted. A large number of youth also voiced their desire to live with biological siblings in out-of-home care. Acknowledging that joint placements are not always possible, some youth argued that geographical proximity should be a top priority. Others told stories about being separated from siblings for weeks, months, and sometimes years: “If you split up families, kids get more upset. I haven’t seen my siblings in years. They’re lost and gone.”

One young woman said that she was separated from her biological sister and then placed in a home with caregivers who wanted to adopt her, but not her sister. She concluded, “I probably won’t see my sister again.”

What can social workers do to help children develop realistic ideas about who they will live with in the future and also feel a sense of security about their future?

Communicate Regularly. Almost all youth stated that social workers should communicate regularly about permanency-related decisions, regardless of the child’s age. Many youth said that they were not given enough notice about placement changes. One participant said that advance notice provided him with opportunities to say good-bye to friends. Another participant described a series of placement changes that he experienced. In each instance, he was told several weeks in advance that he would move, but then
was only given a few days notice of the actual move. “After a while,” he stated, “I just stopped telling people, like my friends from school, that I was moving away because I never really knew if I could count on what my social worker told me.”

“Be honest”. Many youth said that they’d rather hear disappointing, but honest news, than be “kept in the dark” about their futures. One young man described an occasion when he was prepared to move into a particular foster home, but then his social worker didn’t inform him about a last-minute placement change. Instead, “When I got in the car, my social worker started driving in the opposite direction from where my placement was supposed to be. I asked him, ‘Where are we going?’ He said that we were going to this one home that I had never heard of.”

A large number of participants said that they disliked having a social worker appear at their school to coordinate an unexpected placement change. For most, this practice is not only stigmatizing; as one teen said, “It’s more fuel for the fire” to distrust the foster care system.

Involves us in case planning. Almost all youth expressed a desire to be included more fully in decisions about their future. They want social workers to meet with them more regularly to discuss their options. Several participants emphasized the importance of youth involvement in case planning when reunification is a serious option: “Reunification shouldn’t be forced. We need a say.”

A large number of youth expressed court-related frustrations. They argued that youth receive little information about their case: “When there’s a court hearing, they should send the exact information to kids and parents. We get the date but nothing else.” Many participants suggested that foster youth be given a formal orientation on the court process, along with a personal mentor -- in some cases, a CASA worker -- to help guide them. A few participants argued that youth should receive all court reports so they can be fully informed about outcomes for themselves and their biological siblings.

Consider our identities in case planning. According to several participants, one reason to include youth in case planning is to avoid placement mismatches. Youth seemed particularly cognizant of the ways in which their identities strongly influence their ability to adapt to particular family environments: “I’m placed with a Chinese-speaking family. They always talk
Chinese. I never know if they’re talking about me;” “You also got to be careful about religion. My foster mother is Catholic, but they placed a Gothic girl in her home. You’ve got a conflict right there;” and “They moved me because of my sexuality. Nobody talked to me about how I felt.” In contrast, one young woman reported a positive experience: “I was bounced all over the place. Then they let me have a choice to match my racial identity. That really helped. I’m still in that home.”

Did you blame yourself in any way when you were removed from your birth family’s home? And, during your stay in care, did you think that your behavior made a difference in terms of placement decisions?

It’s not our fault. While the majority of youth participants stated that, as adolescents, they do not feel responsible for their removal from their birth parents’ homes, most participants said that they blamed themselves when they were younger. Youth were less clear on how this change in perception occurred. For example, considerable controversy surrounded our queries about the role of social workers in ameliorating possible self-blame. Some youth felt that social workers should not tell children about the circumstances surrounding their removal until a certain age, primarily to protect children from feeling overwhelmed by the details of their parents’ difficulties. In contrast, other youth reported feeling glad when adults gave them prompt, full explanations for the circumstances surrounding their removal. This information reportedly alleviated existing confusion and self-blame. A few participants commented that children independently develop appropriate perspectives: “No one needs to tell us that it’s not our fault.” This particular teen added that she thinks most children eventually learn the reasons underlying their removal and therefore “grow out” of blaming themselves.

On the whole, participants’ responses strongly indicated the value of adult intervention in correcting self-blaming perceptions and generally explaining the circumstances surrounding their removal. At the same time, implicit in many participants’ comments was an appeal to consider children’s unique circumstances in determining the manner and degree of explanation. One participant made an explicit comment to this effect: “Why don’t you just ask kids how much they want to know, and then go from there?”

Show us how our behavior makes a difference. Most youth expressed a belief that their behavior strongly impacts placement decisions. Some said that their social workers helped them seriously consider the relationship between their behavior and their ability to remain in a particular placement. Others said that they learned “the hard way” and would have liked their social worker to be more explicit. One boy stated that he experienced a placement change
specifically because he was engaging regularly in illegal behaviors, but that he didn’t take responsibility for his actions until his social worker confronted him. A large number of youth also commented that their social workers typically “take the side” of foster parents in discussions about children’s behavior. In reference to these instances, some said that social workers should “try to understand what we’re going through,” while a few argued that social workers should “at least be honest” about the fact that they are going to align themselves with foster parents.

What can caregivers and social workers do to help foster children stay safe at home, during visits with birth parents, at school, and in their neighborhoods?

Do background checks on foster parents. Several foster youth discussed the necessity of background checks on caregivers and their homes. At a minimum, youth argued, these background checks should include an examination of prospective caregivers’ criminal records. Some said that these records should be made available to the public, along with evaluations written by youth who formerly lived in caregivers’ homes.

Make regular, unscheduled home visits. Foster youth repeatedly suggested that social workers make regular, unscheduled home visits so they can see “what truly goes on.” Their experiences are reflected in the following statements: “Don’t give them time to get their hair combed and make the beds;” “Whenever the social worker comes, the heater is on, the house is clean, my foster parents are dressed up, and there is food in the house. You should see what it is like most of the time! They should do unscheduled visits;” and, “Surprise visits, surprise visits, surprise visits! My foster mama had lasagna on the table and flowers in the house when the social worker came. We never got to have lasagna.”

Protect children’s confidentiality. Many youth said that they weren’t always honest with their social workers about seemingly unsafe situations because they either didn’t know about their confidentiality rights or, in cases when they were informed, they judged that their social workers would breach confidentiality. In both cases, youth perceived that their foster families’ acceptance of them was conditional; they feared various forms of retaliation. One young man explained that he never confided in his social worker about fights between children in his home: “I knew that that conversation would get right back to my foster mom, and I’d end up in big trouble from just about everybody in the house.” Others provided similar reasons to explain why they were reticent about their concerns – most notably, foster parents’ poor supervision of children in their home and misuse of county funds.

Finally, some youth said that social workers should not inform caregivers about their
desire to change placements until the last minute: “When I say, ‘I want to leave,’ your foster parents hold it against you. You lose privileges, and they treat you bad until you leave. Social workers shouldn’t tell your foster family that you’re leaving until the last minute.” On the other hand, it should be recalled that youth themselves want time to prepare for placement changes and say their good-byes. Clearly youth’s confidentiality concerns often reflected their unique past experiences and present circumstances.

Should children be placed with relatives in dangerous neighborhoods or with non-relatives in safe neighborhoods?

Place us with our families. The majority of participants stated that kin placements are preferable in most cases. Many spoke about the importance of maintaining close relationships with kin: “Being with relatives is better than being in any foster home. Kids should get to have a close relationship with their family.” Some challenged the notion that some neighborhoods are safer than others: “You can never tell what bad stuff can happen in a good neighborhood.” Others spoke about the relative importance of environments that feel safe, in contrast to environments that are “objectively” safe: “If you are in a safe neighborhood with non relatives, it could be cool physically, but not mentally. Kids feel safer with their people.”

A few participants said that placement decisions should be made on an individual basis with the child’s input and, in some cases, birth parents’ input, but the most resounding message was that living with kin creates a kind of “emotional safety.”

What can caregivers and social workers do to help children develop and meet positive goals for their future?

Be a friend. Participants described wanting social workers and caregivers to be their friends -- people who will listen, empathize, guide, and encourage. One young woman described a situation when her social worker clearly lacked empathy: “She said that she just got through reading my file. She said, ‘I don’t know why you’re here. You don’t have any bruises. Emotional abuse? Right now you’re a drain on the system. You’re wasting the system’s money. We’re going to push to get you out of here quick.’” This young woman added, “You know, emotional abuse is a serious thing. She didn’t see it. She really hurt my feelings.” A few teens suggested setting up a system so that children in out-of-home care can be assigned to social workers and caregivers who have gone through the system themselves: “People who have gone through the system truly understand what foster kids are going through. Why don’t we set up a way for them to be social workers and foster parents?”

Guide us through a goal-setting process. Several youth talked about positive experiences
when adults -- social workers, in particular -- helped them establish goals for their future. “The way to start,” said one young woman, “is to find out what you like to do and also what you’re good at.” From there, caregivers and social workers can help youth identify goals. One youth added, “Social workers should never tell you that your hopes are too high.”

Several participants cautioned: “You should help us, but don’t tell us what to do. Let us make mistakes so we can learn from them.” Instead, caregivers and social workers should guide youth through a planning process, similar to one described by this young woman: “My social worker set up possibilities for me. She asked me what I want to do, helped me write down goals, gave me feedback on what’s realistic, and then pushed me.”

Provision instrumental support. Most participants expressed their interest in information on how to achieve their goals, rather than advice. Several youth said that their social workers helped them see pathways from education to employment in particular fields. Others were appreciative that their social workers referred them to tutoring programs, after-school programs, summer camps, mentoring programs (e.g. Big Brothers/Big Sisters), programs to assist emancipating youth (i.e. Independent Living Skills Programs), vocational schools, and advocacy groups (e.g. California Youth Connection). However, some youth said that simple referrals are insufficient without guidance on how to access them: “My social worker gave me information about a program, but then she didn’t help me sign up for it. Also, the place didn’t offer any transportation. I had no way of getting there.”

How can social workers help promote children’s overall well-being?

Make sure money is spent on us. The prevailing response to this very general question was that money matters: “They need to help us with money, not just caring. What do they do with the money?” Several youth raised questions about misuse of county-given funds and suggested that social workers closely track how foster parents spend money (e.g. by mandating a formal review of receipts). A few participants complained that their caregivers did not provide basic necessities such as heat and sufficient food. Two young men who live in the same home said that they get sick “more than anyone [they] know” because their caregiver never turns the heat on. More commonly, youth complained that they needed money to support less basic, but strongly felt needs: money for clothes; money to buy phone
cards for calling their families; and transportation money. One young woman said, “I had to go by myself to the county to ask for money to help pay for my prom dress. My foster mother didn’t care. My social worker didn’t care either. No one else helped me. These things are important.”

Conclusion

The 32 adolescent youth included in this study spoke candidly about the most salient aspects of their out-of-home care experience. They were forthcoming in their critiques of social workers, caregivers, and the child welfare system as a whole. Youth were most vocal about their need for adults to treat them with overall respect, to include them in case planning decisions, to be accountable for their respective responsibilities, and to provide them with support in a myriad of ways. Many of their recommendations constitute practice tips for social workers and child welfare administrators (see Chapter VI). Finally, in spite of their critiques, youth regularly communicated a perception that the child welfare system is genuinely striving to act on their behalf. This sentiment was aptly expressed by one participant: “Social workers, foster parents, and attorneys don’t get enough appreciation. They deserve more gratitude.” Like her, most youths’ concerns focused on how they could work with representatives of the child welfare system, while advocating for necessary changes.
Questions for Discussion

1. Some children are maltreated in kinship, foster, and group care, in spite of licensing requirements, training, spot-checks, and other procedures. What else could be instituted at the policy, administrative, or practice level to keep children safe from harm in out-of-home care?

2. Relative to children in non-kin care, children in kin care are more likely to live in public housing, poorer neighborhoods, neighborhoods with higher levels of community violence, and homes with less educated caregivers. Do these factors influence placement decisions? Should they? Can the child welfare profession do anything to mitigate the differences between children’s experiences in kin and non-kin care? How?

3. Many children in foster care do not feel that they “belong” in their new family. What else can child welfare workers do to promote children’s integration into their new caregiving environments – particularly when children will not be staying long?

4. Definitions of “family” grow wider and more complex as American society moves into the 21st century. What role should the social work profession play in promoting the acceptance of these broad definitions, and how might children living in out-of-home care benefit from child welfare workers’ involvement in this arena?