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# Helping Youth Transition to Adulthood: Guidance for Foster Parents



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For teenagers who have been living in foster care, the transition to life outside of care presents many new and often daunting experiences. These young adults may face challenges as they search for affordable housing, pursue higher education or training, look for jobs, manage on tight budgets, take care of their health needs, and much more. As a foster parent, you can help youth in your care prepare for these challenges. This factsheet provides foster parents with guidance on how to help youth and emerging adults build a foundation for a successful transition to adult life outside of foster care. Given the need for youth to begin preparing for their transition long before they leave care, this factsheet can be helpful for foster parents of youth ages 16 to 21, and even younger.

## Background: The Transition to Adulthood

The transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency can be challenging for any young person. Living on one's own can be quite demanding—from paying for housing and other living expenses to navigating paperwork required for insurance or taxes to managing many new responsibilities. Today, many young people are dependent on their families for longer periods, often remaining or returning to live at home well into their 20s and receiving both emotional and financial support. Generally, youth who have experienced foster care do not have the same safety nets and support networks as others their age, and the transition challenges can be even greater.

“Transitioning is a time of change... The success foster youth find in transitioning out of care will greatly impact their future endeavors in every area of their lives. It will be a training ground that puts them steps ahead of their peers, who [may] never have an opportunity to grow like this.”  
— *Young adult formerly in foster care*

## Unique Challenges for Youth Exiting Foster Care

Youth in foster care face not only the typical developmental changes and new experiences common to their age, but also the dramatic change from being under the State's care to being on their own. This is particularly true for those youth who “age out” of child welfare<sup>1</sup> as they turn 18 (or the specified age for their State.<sup>2</sup>) The array of services and supports available to youth while in care—housing, food, medical care, and caseworker support—are gone. In addition, many of these youth are dealing with the long-term consequences of having been abused, neglected, and removed from their families.

<sup>1</sup> Approximately 26,000 youth emancipated from foster care in 2011 according to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). Find the most recent AFCARS statistics at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars>.

<sup>2</sup> Some States choose to provide foster care and support services to youth over age 18 under certain conditions typically related to the youth's education or employment status or medical needs. For more information on each State's policies, see <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/state-pages>.

Studies show that many youth who exit foster care have difficulties as they transition to adult life. They are more likely than their peers to drop out of school, be unemployed or homeless, experience health and mental health problems and not have health insurance, become teen parents, use illegal drugs, and have encounters with the criminal justice system (Howard & Berzin, 2011). One study (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010) examined a group of youth formerly in foster care and found that by age 23 or 24:

- Youth formerly in foster care were three times as likely as youth not in foster care to not have a high school diploma or GED and one-fifth as likely to have a college degree.
- Fewer than half of the youth formerly in care had a job, and those working often did not make living wages.
- Almost one quarter of youth formerly in care had experienced homelessness.
- Over 40 percent of males formerly in foster care reported contact with the criminal justice system.

These and similar findings from other studies suggest that youth are leaving foster care unprepared. They often lack important knowledge and skills for living on their own, essentials for securing and maintaining employment, and critical health and support services.

## Resilience and Protective Factors

While the numbers may create the impression that the odds are stacked against these youth, it is important to recognize that there are youth who can and do

leave care to become healthy, productive, and well-respected adults. Youth in care often develop remarkable resiliency. Despite adverse histories, they are able to adapt to their circumstances, develop healthy relationships, and demonstrate positive behaviors reflected in academic achievements and leadership roles (Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiatives, 2012). (To read real stories about what youth formerly in care accomplish, visit <http://www.fosterclub.com/real-story>.)

Research and experience tells us that youth are more likely to succeed if they are exposed to protective factors—conditions that buffer risks and improve the likelihood of future positive outcomes (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). For example, a California study found that foster youth participating in campus support programs remain in college longer and graduate at higher rates than other students (California College Pathways, 2009). The development of resilience and protective factors among youth in care are strengthened through:

- Close relationships with caring adults, such as foster parents
- High expectations
- Opportunities for positive contributions and recognition through participation in youth advocacy, school activities, and community volunteer experiences (Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiatives, 2012)

## Adolescent Development and Changes in the Brain

As teenagers prepare for the challenges of adulthood, they are entering a period of tremendous growth and development. During this time, young people explore who they are and who they want to be. They advance new skills and take on new roles and responsibilities, while “testing the waters” for adulthood. Teenagers seek out independence, yet frequently dart back and forth between a wish to do things on their own and a desire for support and protection. All the while, hormones contribute to physical changes and powerful emotions, and the adolescent brain experiences a significant growth spurt.

When discussing teenage behavior, parents and caregivers often shrug and ask, “What were they thinking?” Science helps provide insight through a look at the adolescent brain (Friesema, 2012). The part of the teenager’s brain (the prefrontal cortex) that will later affect impulse control, planning, and critical thinking is still developing and does not connect quickly with the rest of the young person’s brain. Before the prefrontal cortex fully matures (typically in a youth’s mid-20s), the young person often relies on a lower area of the brain (the limbic system), which links actions more closely with emotions. As a result, we often observe impulsive behaviors among teens with little consideration of consequences (Chamberlain, 2009). At the same time, chemical changes in the brain (shifting

dopamine levels) prompt risk-taking behaviors.

For youth who have been abused or neglected, changes in brain development and impulsive and risk-taking behaviors may be even more pronounced because the limbic system—the brain’s first responder to dangerous situations and perceived threats—may have been especially active. Foster parents can recognize these tendencies, encourage youth to think before they act, and support healthy risk-taking activities that may result in valuable growth opportunities.

In addition, the adolescent brain is actively building and strengthening connections among brain cells (synapses). These connections help teens to more easily learn new information and acquire new skills. The brain operates, however, on a “use it or lose it” basis. As such, connections will grow stronger for skills and habits that are used, while those not used will eventually weaken (Chamberlain, 2009). This creates an important window of opportunity for using the teenage years effectively to help shape decision-making skills and other capacities that youth will need as adults (Freundlich, 2011).

For more information on adolescent brain development, see:

- *The Amazing Teen Brain: What Parents Need to Know*  
[http://www.instituteforsafefamilies.org/sites/default/files/isfFiles/The\\_Amazing\\_Teen\\_Brain.pdf](http://www.instituteforsafefamilies.org/sites/default/files/isfFiles/The_Amazing_Teen_Brain.pdf)
- *The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning From Foster Care*  
<http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/adolescent-brain%E2%80%94new-research-and-its-implications-young-people-transitioning-foster-care>
- *Supporting Brain Development in Traumatized Children and Youth*  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/braindevtrauma.cfm>
- *Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on Brain Development*  
[https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue\\_briefs/brain\\_development/index.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/brain_development/index.cfm)

## Laws and Programs to Support Transitioning Youth

Over the past two decades, several child welfare laws and programs have addressed the needs to support youth leaving care. There are two key pieces of Federal legislation:

- **The Foster Care Independence Act** of 1999 created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) and enables States to provide financial, housing, employment, education, and other support services that help prepare youth for the transition from foster care to living on their own.
- **The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act** (FCA) of 2008 allows States the option to extend foster care to older ages when youth meet certain education, training, or work requirements. FCA also supports older youth by requiring planning related to education stability, health-care coordination, and transition planning (see box below).

Each State develops and administers its own programs for supporting youth in and transitioning out of foster care. (For more information about Federal legislation and programs in your State, visit <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu>.)

## TRANSITION PLAN

During the 90-day period before a youth turns 18 or is scheduled to leave foster care, Federal law requires that the child welfare agency assist the youth in developing a personalized transition plan. The plan must address specific options related to housing, education, employment, health insurance, mentoring, and support services. To develop the plan, the youth's caseworker will meet with the youth as well as other trusted adults of the youth's choosing, which may include a foster parent.

While the law refers to a 90-day period, most youth will benefit from more time to prepare. To help youth work on their transition plans, the Foster Club offers an easy-to-use Transition Toolkit (<http://www.fosterclub.com/transition/article/transition-toolkit>). Also, Information Gateway offers *Working With Youth to Develop a Transition Plan*, a bulletin for workers at [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/transitional\\_plan.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/transitional_plan.cfm).

## The Critical Role of Foster Parents

As a foster parent, you are in a unique position to help youth in your care prepare for a successful future. You can support the development of the youth's transition plan, and you can aid in important skill-building activities that will improve the youth's ability to carry out his or her plan. In addition, you can encourage a young adult's growing independence and guide safe exploration of new experiences, while providing a cushion of support.

"Youth will need a lot of encouragement and 'wiggle room' when it comes to developing transition plans. Support them and don't shoot down every idea they have. Youth may need some guidance to figure out [their ideas] and find their niche."

— Young adult formerly in foster care

As a foster parent of a youth preparing to transition, you have several vital roles:

- Coach—listening, advising, and providing youth with opportunities to learn and practice new skills
- Advocate—learning about and fighting for the youth's rights as they relate to education, health and mental health care, court proceedings, and case practices

- Networker—helping to cultivate connections and supports for the youth (Zanghi, Detgen, Jordan, Ansell, & Kesler, 2003).

In addition, foster parents take on an invaluable position as caregivers that youth can identify as family.

“Knowing that there was someone in my life that I could call ‘Mom’ made all the difference in the world. I belonged to a family who loved me, cared about me, and wanted to support me in any task I wanted to accomplish.”

— *Young adult formerly in foster care*

## Tip Sheets on What You Can Do

To support transitioning youth, experts in the field of youth development recommend that foster parents and other adults in their lives:

- **Empower youth to make decisions.** Youth in foster care often have been left out of critical decisions about their lives. It's important to let the young person take charge of his or her own future, while you listen, guide, and support. During daily life, provide youth with frequent opportunities to make decisions and to learn from the consequences, positive and negative.
- **Communicate high expectations.** All too often, youth in care have heard more about their limitations than about what they can achieve. Send positive messages about future possibilities. Weave forward-looking comments into everyday conversation, for example referring to “when you go on to college...” or “when you start your own business...”
- **Start early.** Preparing for adulthood does not occur overnight. Don't wait until youth are nearing the date they leave foster care. Find ways to introduce important concepts to younger youth. For example, talk with a preteen about the value of saving for long-term goals.
- **Decrease control and increase youth responsibilities gradually.** While allowing youth in your care to make choices, be clear about boundaries. Involve youth in setting rules and establishing appropriate consequences related to their behavior. As your teen

shows readiness, allow him or her to learn and practice adult life skills with your support.

- **Recognize success.** Celebrate achievements and milestones on the path to adulthood.

“Keep in mind that youth need to go to parties, go on dates, and experience life as a teenager rather than being sheltered. When a kid goes to college and hasn't been exposed to ‘life,’ they don't know how to handle the freedom and can end up going a little crazy.”

— *Young adult formerly in foster care*

To further guide foster parents in assisting youth with their transition, the following sections provide more specific guidance and tips on topics related to self-sufficiency, including:

1. Building Supportive Relationships and Connections
2. Managing Money
3. Pursuing Educational and Vocational Opportunities
4. Finding and Maintaining Employment
5. Securing Housing
6. Maintaining Health and Wellness
7. Exploring Identity and Culture
8. Developing Additional Life Skills

For each area, information is provided on *Things to Know*, *Things You Can Do to Help*, and *Resources for More Information*.



## Helping Youth Transition Tip Sheet 1

# Building Supportive Relationships and Connections

Permanent, supportive relationships and connections are critical to a young adults' well-being.

### INTERDEPENDENT VS. INDEPENDENT LIVING

For many years, child welfare policies and programs emphasized the importance of preparing youth for independent living. The underlying concept was that, once out of care, youth would need to function on their own. Today, many in child welfare are talking about *interdependence* rather than independence. This shift recognizes that as young adults move forward, they need to develop and maintain supportive relationships that will help them achieve their goals.

### Things to Know

- Research and practice show that having ongoing support from at least one permanent, caring adult can make an enormous difference in the life of a vulnerable youth (Howard & Berzin, 2011).
- Youth who have been removed from their families, many of whom have been through multiple moves, have experienced significant loss. They often have not had the same opportunities as other youth to develop social skills and supportive, lasting relationships.

- After leaving foster care, many youth will reconnect with biological family members.

“When you are a young adult leaving care, you find you are often ill-prepared for adult life and do not have the networks to support you if an emergency occurs. For most young people, 18-24 are years when they take risks and figure out what career path they want to follow. Being a support for youth can allow them to transition into adulthood and give them a chance to explore opportunities, develop financial independence, and create healthy, lifelong relationships.”  
— *Young adult formerly in foster care*

### Things You Can Do to Help

- Ask youth to identify at least one reliable, caring adult in his or her life who can serve as a stable, ongoing connection and can provide support as the youth transitions to adulthood.
- When appropriate, support youth in exploring connections with his or her biological family members (siblings, parents, grandparents) and in maintaining healthy relationships with them.
- Encourage the youth's development of peer support networks through participation in group activities of youth with similar experiences (including

foster youth advocacy groups) or similar interests (sports, dance, cooking, business, other).

- Hold a conversation about what your family's long-term relationship with the youth will be after he or she leaves care (Think about the following—will you keep routine contact? offer invitations for Thanksgiving and other holidays? be available for emergency support?).

### Resources for More Information

- Child Welfare Information Gateway, Support Services for Youth in Transition: Community Connections and Supportive Relationships  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/independent/support/connections.cfm>
- Foster Care Alumni of America  
<http://www.fostercarealumni.org/community.htm>
- Foster Club, *Permanency Pact: Life-long, Kin-like Connections Between a Youth and a Supportive Adult*  
<http://www.fosterclub.com/transition/article/permanency-pact>

## Helping Youth Transition Tip Sheet 2

# Managing Money

Many young adults have little experience managing money and have much to learn about developing and sticking to a budget, paying bills and taxes, obtaining credit, and saving for the future.

### Things to Know

- After leaving foster care, alumni often struggle to make ends meet. One study found that by age 23 or 24, more than half of the young adults formerly in care had experienced financial hardships, including not having enough money to pay for food, rent, or utilities (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010).
- Young people often learn best about money management through first-hand experience.
- Youth who have experienced foster care are at high risk for identity theft. Identity theft occurs when someone has used another person's identifying information (name, Social Security number) for financial gain or fraud, such as opening a credit card account or inappropriately receiving a government benefit. Identity theft can damage a young adult's credit and make it more difficult to get a loan or rent an apartment. Caseworkers are required by law to request a credit check for every youth in care over age 16, determine if identity theft has occurred, and help resolve any errors.

"With regard to money, I was never told...that bills needed to be paid every month, and if I didn't pay my bills, my information and the money I owed would be sent to a collections agency, which would ruin my credit. Also, the agency could charge me more than I owed!"

— *Young adult formerly in foster care*  
(In *Things People Never Told Me, Pathways to Positive Futures*.)

To read more, see

<http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu>

### Things You Can Do to Help

- Refer youth to State Independent Living programs that provide structured opportunities for learning about money management and other life skills and sometimes may help with some living expenses (contact your State's Independent Living Coordinator; find contact information at <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/state-pages/coordinators>).
- Use everyday "teachable moments" to provide lessons about smart shopping, paying bills, and saving for long-term goals.
- Help youth open checking and savings accounts before they leave foster care.
- Ask youth to develop a budget that will outline estimated living expenses and expected income (including Federal or State financial support) after their transition from care.

- Work with youth and the youth's caseworker to ensure a clean credit history, and talk with youth about the importance of keeping identifying information and personal documents (Social Security card, birth certificate) in a private, secure place (for more information, see <http://www.ftc.gov/idtheft>).

### Resources for More Information

- Annie E. Casey Foundation and National Endowment for Financial Education, *Foster Youth Money Guides*  
<http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/PublicationsSeries/FosterYouthMoneyGuides.aspx>
- National Endowment for Financial Education, *Simple Steps to Raising a Money-Smart Child*  
<http://www.smartaboutmoney.org/Portals/0/ResourceCenter/RaisingAMoneySmartChild.pdf>
- National Resource Center for Youth Development, *E-update*, "Financial Capability for Transitioning and College Age Youth"  
<http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/eup-summer-2011-feature>

## Helping Youth Transition Tip Sheet 3

# Pursuing Educational and Vocational Opportunities

Educational achievement frequently opens the door for success in many aspects of later adult life. Benefits range from enhanced skills and self-confidence to increased earnings potential.

### Things to Know

- Many youth in foster care are not prepared for training or college after high school. While in care, frequent school changes and learning and behavioral difficulties may interfere with educational achievement. After leaving care, youth are further held back because they lack knowledge about educational opportunities, skills to navigate the enrollment processes, financing to pay for tuition and housing, and encouragement from the adults in their lives.
- Youth in and transitioning out of foster care may be eligible for financial support through:
  - Education Training Vouchers (ETVs) (see <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/etv>)
  - Tuition waivers in certain States that allow students to attend publicly funded colleges and vocational schools at no cost (see <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/etv/tuition-waiver>)
  - Federal and State financial aid—the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) can help determine

eligibility as an “independent student”<sup>1</sup> (<http://www.fafsa.gov>)

- Scholarships (see <http://www.fc2success.org/programs/scholarships-and-grants/> and <http://www.nfpainc.org/Default.aspx?pageId=1116723>)
- College is not for everyone. Other options might include certificate programs, vocational or technical training, or the military.

### Things You Can Do to Help

- Talk with youth about their educational goals, how their goals fit with their talents and job interests, possible barriers to achieving their goals, and next steps.
- Help youth organize school records and other important documents, such as transcripts, test scores, Individualized Education Plans (if any), and special recognition awards.
- Offer youth assistance in exploring various educational or vocational options (talking to school counselors, searching on the Internet, conducting campus visits together).
- Assist youth in identifying financial aid opportunities (scholarships, grants, student loans, work-study programs) and

<sup>1</sup> The College Cost Reduction Act expanded the definition of “independent student” to include youth who were in foster care. When a youth is considered an independent student, only the youth’s income (and not that of a parent or guardian) will be considered when determining financial aid. As such, independent students are typically eligible for the maximum amount of aid available.

in applying for financial assistance (for tips, see <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/ItsMyLife/Education.htm>).

- Support youth in preparing for required tests, completing applications, writing essays, and securing recommendations.
- Lend a hand as he or she adjusts to college life or a new program, help youth in identifying available support services, and assist him or her in finding a place to stay over school breaks.

“I was so moved to have my foster parents at my college graduation. They supported me in navigating my own path and [continue to] encourage me when I am figuring out a difficult work situation. Sharing their experiences has helped me build my career and pursue my education.”

— *Young adult formerly in foster care*

## Resources for More Information

- Casey Family Programs, *It's My Life: Postsecondary Education and Training Guide*  
<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/ItsMyLife/Education.htm>
- Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, *Postsecondary Education Resources for Youth in and Transitioning Out of the Child Welfare System*  
[http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/portals/0/dmx/2012/09/file\\_20120920\\_180036\\_nXuYAI\\_0.pdf](http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/portals/0/dmx/2012/09/file_20120920_180036_nXuYAI_0.pdf)
- National Center for Education Statistics, College Navigator  
<http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator>
- U.S. Department of Education, Resources for Parents  
<http://www.ed.gov/parents>

## Helping Youth Transition Tip Sheet 4

# Finding and Maintaining Employment

Getting and keeping a job is critical to a young adult's ability to achieve economic security. A job that fits with personal interests and talents also can contribute to greater life satisfaction.

### Things to Know

- Many alumni of foster care live in vulnerable financial situations. Youth formerly in care exhibit high unemployment rates, and those who are employed often earn low wages.
- Experience helps. Young people in foster care who have worked before their 18th birthday are more likely to work after they transition out of care and tend to fare better in the workforce (Youth Transition Funders Foster Care Work Group, 2004).
- Many States participate in initiatives to support the employment and economic needs of youth transitioning out of care. (For more information in your State, contact your State Independent Living Coordinator; find contact information at <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/state-pages/coordinators>).

“I was never informed...what to do when I didn't have a diploma or GED when I needed to get a job, or even how much work is put into getting a job. Nor was I taught how to fill out an application, what to bring with me to a job interview, the cost to go job hunting...or even what to wear to an interview (especially when I don't always have nice clothes.)”

— *Young adult formerly in foster care*  
(In *Things People Never Told Me, Pathways to Positive Futures*.)

To read more, see

<http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu>

### Things You Can Do to Help

- Help youth identify interests and talents and see the connection to possible job choices.
- Assist youth in exploring various career paths by researching online, attending career fairs, speaking to a career counselor, or arranging a visit to a work site.
- Help youth understand and practice important processes for obtaining a job—developing a resume, finding job listings, completing applications, and interviewing (for example, hold mock interviews at home).
- Support youth in gaining firsthand experience through volunteer activities, job shadowing (following someone at a

workplace to watch a typical workday), technical classes that increase skills, internships and apprenticeships, or entry-level jobs.

- Promote networking by using personal, community, and business connections to help youth find mentors who can provide guidance and support in a specific interest area.
- Coach youth on how to keep a job and discuss employer expectations for things such as arriving on time, appropriate dress, and positive work attitudes.

### Resources for More Information

- Casey Family Programs, *It's My Life: Employment*  
<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/ItsMyLife/Employment.htm>
- Mapping Your Future, Explore Careers  
<http://mappingyourfuture.org/PlanYourCareer/>
- U. S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Career One Stop  
<http://www.careeronestop.org/StudentsandCareerAdvisors/StudentsandCareerAdvisors.aspx>



## Helping Youth Transition Tip Sheet 5

# Securing Housing

While many of their peers in the general population will still be living at home, most youth aging out of foster care must face the difficult challenge of finding stable and affordable housing.

### Things to Know

- Alumni of foster care often struggle with housing costs, tend to change living arrangements frequently, and are at increased risk for homelessness. One study found that one in five youth experienced homelessness within a year of leaving foster care (Pecora, et al., 2006).
- The Fostering Connections Act requires each youth's caseworker to address housing needs as part of a youth's transition plan. Various housing options may exist, such as transitional group homes, subsidized supportive housing, shared housing, host homes, school dormitories, or apartments.
- Funding for housing may be available from Federal funds (through Section 8, Family Unification Program, or public housing) or State child welfare funds (Chafee Foster Care Independent Living Program funds or Education Training Vouchers). The process for securing publicly funded housing can take considerable time and may involve wait lists.

"I was never told...about how to get help with housing, such as how to get approved, moving costs...everything that comes with moving into my own place, which I had to learn on my own. I didn't know how to set up utilities, I didn't know about different housing programs..."

— Young adult formerly in foster care  
(In *Things People Never Told Me*,  
*Pathways to Positive Futures*.)

To read more, see

<http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu>

### Things You Can Do to Help

- Help youth explore and assess housing options and available financing support (see information resources below).
- Support youth in identifying and looking at available housing and completing required applications.
- Talk to youth about responsibilities related to housing (providing a security deposit, paying rent, keeping the apartment clean, etc.) as well as tenant rights (the right to have repairs made, right to privacy, standard notice for rent increase).
- Ask youth to identify a backup plan in case housing arrangements fall through.

## Resources for More Information

- Casey Family Programs, *It's My Life: Housing*  
<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/ItsMyLife/Housing.htm>
- Foster Care Alumni of America, Housing Topics and Resources  
<http://www.fostercarealumni.org/resources/Housing.htm>
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Rental Assistance  
[http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/topics/rental\\_assistance](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/topics/rental_assistance)

## Helping Youth Transition Tip Sheet 6

# Maintaining Health and Wellness

Youth leaving foster care need to learn how to maintain good health habits, secure health insurance, and access needed health and mental health services.

### Things to Know

- Youth who have experienced abuse, neglect, and out-of-home care are at increased risk for health problems, chronic illnesses, and emotional/mental health issues. Studies find that more than half do not have health insurance and frequently do not receive services to meet their needs (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012).
- Youth in foster care are given psychotropic medications to manage their emotional and behavioral symptoms at much higher rates than youth in the general public (Leslie et al., 2011). Many youth have not been educated on the benefits and side-effects of these medications, helpful approaches other than medication, how to obtain prescriptions after leaving care, or how to safely discontinue the medication.
- The Fostering Connections Act requires each youth's caseworker to address health insurance and health care services as part of the youth's transition plan.
- Under the Affordable Care Act, beginning in 2014, youth transitioning out of foster care may be eligible for Medicaid coverage until age 26 (<http://www.healthcare.gov/law/index.html>).
- Youth who have been in foster care are more likely than youth in the general

population to become teen parents (Bilaver & Courtney, 2006).

"With regard to health care, I was never told... That health care was important! That getting checkups, utilizing therapy and mental health services, and getting advice and information from reliable sources, etc. was all beneficial for my self-care. I was also not told that I was eligible for [State medical insurance] or what it even was."

— Young adult formerly in foster care  
(In *Things People Never Told Me, Pathways to Positive Futures*.)

To read more, see

<http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu>

### Things You Can Do to Help

- Promote a healthy diet and healthy lifestyle and involve youth in meal preparation and physical exercise.
- Discuss critical health and mental health issues with youth while in care, including:
  - Positive ways for coping with stress and outlets for dealing with problems
  - Risks associated with substance use and abuse and the vulnerabilities if biological family members struggle with addiction issues

- Sexuality and healthy sexual decision-making (see *10 Tips for Foster Parents*, [http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/10TipsFoster\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/10TipsFoster_FINAL.pdf))
- Signs and symptoms of mental illnesses and the impact of life experiences and family histories of mental health problems on a young adult's mental health
- Safe use of medication and healthy alternatives (see *Making Healthy Choices: A Guide on Psychotropic Medications for Youth in Foster Care*, <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/learning-center/med-guide>)
- Explain the importance of health insurance, and work with the youth's caseworker to identify insurance options for after the youth leaves care (see <http://finder.healthcare.gov/>).
- Help youth understand when to seek medical attention and how to find low-cost health and mental health services through community health centers, student health centers, or other resources (see [https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/service\\_array/health/locators.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/service_array/health/locators.cfm)).
- Assist youth in gathering medical records that list past health-care provider names, major illnesses and conditions, medications taken, immunizations, and family medical history.

## Resources for More Information

- American Academy of Pediatrics, Healthy Foster Care America  
<http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/healthy-foster-care-america/Pages/default.aspx>
- American Academy of Pediatrics, Healthy Children: Teens  
<http://www.healthychildren.org/english/ages-stages/teen/Pages/default.aspx>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway, Health Services  
[https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/service\\_array/health](https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/service_array/health)

## Helping Youth Transition Tip Sheet 7

# Exploring Identity and Culture

The teenage years are an important period of self-discovery.

### Things to Know

- While most teens struggle with answering identity questions—such as “who am I?” and “where do I belong?”—these questions may be particularly difficult for youth who have been removed from their biological families.
- In addition to concrete independent living skills, youth who are transitioning out of care need support in building a positive sense of self and a deeper understanding of their identity. Identity may reflect racial and ethnic background, spirituality, sexual orientation, and values.
- It is often easier for youth to obtain their personal identification documents (Social Security card, birth certificate, etc.) before leaving care than afterwards.

### Things You Can Do to Help

- Help youth create a lifebook or video of his or her personal history, key events, and names and photos (if available) of family members and other important people (for more information on lifebooks, see [https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt\\_parenting/lifebooks.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/lifebooks.cfm)).
- Support youth in building an understanding of his or her cultural, ethnic, and spiritual background and connect youth with cultural activities

(for more information on transracial parenting, see <http://www.ifapa.org/pdf/docs/TransracialParenting.pdf>).

- Expose youth to experiences and interests that will build self-confidence.
- Help youth to collect and safely organize important personal documents, many of which may be required for future services, such as a Social Security card (see <http://www.ssa.gov>), birth certificate, citizenship papers (if born outside of the United States), child welfare agency documentation, State-issued photo I.D., and voter registration card.

### Resources for More Information

- Casey Family Services, *Knowing Who You Are Curriculum*  
<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Initiatives/KnowingWhoYouAre/default.htm>
- Information Gateway, Support Services for Youth in Transition: Identity Formation  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/independent/support/identity.cfm>

## Helping Youth Transition Tip Sheet 8

### Developing Additional Life Skills

In addition to the core areas discussed above, youth need to build their know-how on a wide range of daily living skills—from effective communication to housekeeping to transportation.

#### Things to Know

- Youth need guidance and practice to learn various aspects of home life, such as preparing meals, doing laundry, grocery shopping, house cleaning, making simple repairs, etc.
- Youth learn from surrounding role models about effective communication, good manners, and other areas important to personal and professional interactions.
- Lack of transportation can be a barrier for a young adult to hold a job and access community services. Rules related to learning to drive and obtaining a license while in care vary from State to State (see, <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/state-pages/>)

“When it came to resources, I was never informed...how to cook for healthy eating or how to cook in general, what to buy when grocery shopping, what to eat to be healthy, or how to stock a pantry. I was never told to go to the grocery store not only when I’m craving something.”

— *Young adult formerly in foster care*  
(In *Things People Never Told Me, Pathways to Positive Futures.*

To read more, see  
<http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu>)

#### Things You Can Do to Help

- Involve youth routinely in household activities and chores.
- Discuss expectations for adult behavior, and model such behavior.
- Talk with youth about transportation options, including public transportation and owning a car, and the related costs and benefits for each option.
- Have youth test their life skills and knowledge through Independent Living assessments, such as the Casey Life Skills Assessment ([http://caseylifeskills.force.com/clsa\\_learn\\_youth](http://caseylifeskills.force.com/clsa_learn_youth)).
- Help youth identify leisure activities that are safe, healthy, and easily accessible.

#### Resources for More Information

- Casey Family Programs, Ready, Set, Fly! A Parent’s Guide to Teaching Life Skills  
<http://www.casey.org/cls/resourceguides/subdocs/ReadySetFly.pdf>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway, Support Services for Youth in Transition: Life Skills  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/independent/support/lifeskills.cfm>
- University of Minnesota, The Youthhood  
<http://www.youthhood.org/index.asp>

## Conclusion

The journey to adulthood for a youth leaving foster care can be both exciting and frightening. As a foster parent, you can help youth in your care be better prepared to take advantage of available opportunities and overcome likely challenges as a young adult. Trying to complete all the tasks noted in this factsheet at once would be overwhelming. So, start early in working with the youth in your care, gradually introduce concepts to build self-sufficiency, and provide ample opportunities for youth to forge their own path. Talk with youth about prioritizing what needs to get done first. Working together with the youth, the youth's caseworker, and other caring adults in the youth's life, you can help build a strong foundation for a thriving future.

“The most important thing to remember is to be patient. Going out into the world as a young person is scary, especially as a foster child. During the transition, teach them, guide them, and last but not least, support them as much as you can, because they will need you by their side.”

— *Young adult formerly in foster care*

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