Aging Out of Foster Care

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The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a significant developmental stage when foster youth age out of the child welfare system, they are at risk of having to transition without family support. This chapter applies the life course perspective to describe the theoretical and contextual foundation that explains the hardships foster youth experience when emancipated from the US child welfare system. Next, the theoretical basis for natural mentoring among foster youth is explored using the resiliency perspective to frame the discussion. Then, current research on natural mentoring among foster youth is reviewed. Implications are drawn for US child welfare practice, policy, and research with respect to how to improve outcomes for youth who age out of foster care through the cultivation of natural mentoring relationships. The chapter concludes with an examination of systems in place to support transitioning foster youth from England, Israel, and Australia.

Keywords: Foster care, aging-out, natural mentoring, emerging adulthood, transition to adulthood

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is considered a significant developmental stage in a young person’s growth, a time when special risks and opportunities exclusive to that period surface. Young adults reach the legal age for many privileges and responsibilities, leave home, enter the workforce and/or higher education, and form long-term romantic relationships (Masten et al., 2004). This transition period is also considered a critical juncture in the course of psychopathology and mental health (Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004). A successful transition to adulthood depends on adequate resources (Masten et al., 2004). Yet, vulnerable populations may not have access to such resources and are therefore at elevated risk for failing to negotiate this transition successfully. Youth who grow up amid the challenges of severe and ongoing adversity in their families and communities, including those who age out of foster care, are especially at risk for poor outcomes during this developmental stage.

During emerging adulthood, most youth receive family support to help them weather the difficulties associated with transitioning to independence (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994; Schoeni & Ross, 2004). When foster youth age out of the child welfare system, they confront the challenges associated with this developmental stage and are at risk of having to transition without family support. As a result, many former foster youth experience myriad negative long-term outcomes; they often lack a high school education, suffer difficulty with employment, rely on public assistance, endure spells of homelessness, engage in delinquency (at times resulting in incarceration), experience problems obtaining health care, and face unplanned parenthood (see Barth, 1990; Cook, 1994; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Perez, & Keller, 2007; Dworsky, 2005; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2003; 2005; Reilly, 2003). A caring adult who offers social support is normative for adolescent development and protective for youth across many risk conditions (Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 2001), including youth in foster care (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Courtney & Lyons, 2009). Natural mentoring can cultivate such relationships and is recognized as a promising approach for buffering foster youth...
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against poor life course outcomes (Ahrens, DuBois, Garrison, Spencer, Richardson, & Lozano, 2011). Natural mentors are naturally occurring important adults in a youth’s existing social network and can include teachers, extended family members, neighbors, coaches, and religious leaders (Hamilton et al., 2006).

This chapter proposes a conceptual framework that describes how the transitional period from late adolescence to early adulthood for former foster youth in the United States is characterized by not only the premature adoption of adult roles and responsibilities, but also often takes place without the required help and support available to same-age peers in the general population. The proposed conceptual framework also elucidates how supportive adult relationships in the form of natural mentoring can potentially buffer the developmental risks former foster youth face during this important developmental stage. Implications are drawn for US child welfare practice, policy, and research, with respect to how to improve outcomes for youth who age out of foster care through the cultivation of natural mentoring relationships. Finally, the chapter concludes with an examination of the systems in place to support foster youth transitioning to adulthood in England, Israel, and Australia.

Life Course Theory and Emerging Adulthood

The life course perspective is a way to understand how chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, and social change shape people’s lives from birth to death (Elder, 1998). This perspective has developed into a dominant theoretical paradigm for studying the transition to adulthood in the United States (Shanahan, 2000), which is the period between adolescence and adulthood, or the age period from the late teens to the mid-20s (Arnett, 2000). This transition period is now commonly referred to as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000) and is considered a distinct period demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity explorations. Emerging adulthood is defined by the special risks and opportunities that surface exclusive during that period. Young adults reach the legal age for many privileges and responsibilities, leave home, enter the workforce and/or higher education, and form long-term romantic relationships (Masten et al., 2004). Yet, for young people who emancipate from (i.e., age out of) child welfare, entry into emerging adulthood puts them out of sequence with prevailing institutional structures (Collins, 2001). These youth are typically on their own earlier than other young people their age due to the overall extension of youth as a life course phase over the past few decades (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLloyd, Rumbaut, & Settersen, 2004). That is, the transition to adulthood now typically lasts until the mid- to late 20s, largely due to economic and social policy factors that influence the likelihood that a young person will successfully transition to self-sufficiency, including housing costs, available job opportunities, and wage rates. Currently, there is no single definition for the age range that captures the emerging-adulthood stage, and some variability exists within the upper limit. For example, Furstenberg et al. consider the upper limit to be 24–26 years, whereas the Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood’s definition spans from 18 to 29 years (see www.ssea.org/index.htm).

A significant result of the extension of the time it takes to transition to adulthood is young people’s continued support from their families, primarily in the form of financial assistance. In the United States, nearly one-quarter of the entire cost of raising children has been estimated to occur after youth reach age 17, and nearly two-thirds of young adults in their early 20s receive economic help from parents, whereas about 40% still receive help in their late 20s (Schoeni & Ross, 2004). Moreover, about 40% of youth in their late teens and early 20s move back to their parents’ home at least once after leaving (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994). These young people are typically those for whom emerging adulthood is characterized by identity exploration together with relative freedom from normative adult responsibilities (Arnett, 2000). In fact, as a concept, emerging adulthood has been critiqued for only being relevant to advantaged youth who have the opportunities to explore their identities and futures. Arnett (2007) argues that for most young people, well-being actually improves during emerging adulthood.

For other young people, including youth who age out of foster care, well-being does not improve and usually deteriorates. This is largely due to how emerging adulthood is characterized by the premature adoption of adult roles and responsibilities for this population, including money management/consumer awareness (e.g., opening a checking or savings account, reading monthly bank statements), food management (e.g., fixing meals, shopping for a week’s menu, staying within a food budget), housing (e.g., understanding the concept of renting, completing a rental application), job seeking and maintenance skills (e.g., knowing what the minimum wage is, filling out a standard job application form, dressing for work appropriately, knowing legal rights as an employee), and interpersonal skills (e.g., responding to introductions and answering simple questions, asking for help). This
transition often takes place without the required help and support available to same-age peers in the general population (Jessor, 1993). Thus, this early entry into adulthood is an “off-time” transition, or a role change that occurs at an inopportune time (Hogan & Astone, 1986). The concept of emerging adulthood is a useful framework for understanding the hardships that foster youth experience when they emancipate and are forced to shoulder adult roles and responsibilities before many are prepared to do so. Today, reaching the age of majority is no longer predictive of the ability to live independently of parents, parental figures, or—for youth aging out of foster care—the state.

The consequences of off-time or disordered transitions have been linked to negative outcomes (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; Hogan, 1978). Off-time transitions that occur too early are considered to be a crisis because individuals who experience them are often less prepared compared to those who experience the same transitions “on time” (Cooney, Pedersen, Indelicato, & Palkovitz, 1993). Moreover, off-time transitions may restrict options, exacerbate environmental adversity, and strain coping and social support systems.

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth is a longitudinal study of older foster youth transitioning to adulthood, and data collected from 602 former foster youth from the most recent wave of the study were compared with a nationally representative sample (n = 1,488) from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). Using data from this study, Table 1 contains outcomes for older youth aged 23–24 who exited out of foster care compared to nonfoster youth of similar ages from the general population. The outcomes for the former foster youth were poorer in all areas as compared to their peers in the general population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Former Foster Youth</th>
<th>General Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completion of a 2-year, 4-year, or graduate degree</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently employed</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average employment income</td>
<td>$12,064</td>
<td>$20,349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received counseling services during the past year</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females married at the time of conception</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males who have ever been arrested</td>
<td>81.2%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted in last presidential election</td>
<td>44.3%</td>
<td>49.9%</td>
</tr>
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Emancipation or aging out of the child welfare system creates off-time transitions for many foster youth. Aging out occurs when youth legally emancipate from the child welfare system prior to or without ever being reunified with their birth family, without being adopted, or without achieving some other permanent placement, such as a guardianship arrangement. When this occurs, the child welfare system is typically considered to have failed to achieve permanency for the youth. Although 18 is typically considered the age of emancipation, today, some states allow youth to remain in foster care for several years following their 18th birthdays (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development, 2008). This extended jurisdiction is largely a result of the landmark Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351) of 2009, designed to connect and support relative caregivers, improve outcomes for children in foster care, provide for tribal foster care and adoption access, and improve incentives for adoption (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2010). States vary with respect to under what circumstance youth are eligible for extended jurisdiction after their 18th birthday; as of January 2013, there were 18 states with federally approved and reimbursable plans consistent with the Fostering Connections Act for extended jurisdiction (State Child Welfare Policy Database, 2013).
Prior research has shown that youth who remain in care beyond age 18 tend to fare better with respect to young adulthood outcomes (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). However, a more recent study in a state where youth can elect to stay in care until 21 found that in their sample many chose to emancipate prior to reaching 21 (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). Findings suggested that these youth exited before required due to frustrations with the system based on their perceptions of poor service provision. For these youth, it is possible that their experience of the transition to adulthood was not “off time” despite being out of sync with societal norms; however, additional research is needed to better bring to light this possibility and explore the nuances related to timing and circumstances implied by the McCoy et al. study.

During fiscal year (FY) 2012, 23,439 youth nationwide experienced the transition out of foster care when they emancipated from the child welfare system because they were no longer eligible to receive services. This represents 10% of the overall child welfare population that exited foster care during FY 2012 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Because of these early, off-time transitions, a bleak portrait emerges for many of them. Figure 1 depicts the “chain of adversity” (Gotlib & Wheaton, 1997, p. 11) that typically follows youth who emancipate from foster care. The diagram shows how this critical transition can lead to persistent difficulties and hardships even after many years have passed.

Resilience and Asset-Focused Strategies to Promote Positive Youth Development

Resilience is often defined as “the process of, capacity for or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p. 426). Resilience research points to three primary strategies for intervention with vulnerable youth, including asset-focused strategies, which seek to increase the amount or quality of resources available to youth that promote positive development (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). Assets are considered resources that enhance the likelihood of positive developmental outcomes independent of risk status (Yates & Masten, 2004), such as factors within an individual (e.g., coping skills), within social relationships (e.g., connections to competent and caring nonparental adults), and organizations (e.g., good schools).

Resilience research concerning vulnerable and at-risk youth suggests that a relationship with at least one supportive and caring adult who is not a parent leads to improved outcomes during the emerging adulthood period (e.g., Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 2001), especially among maltreated youth (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Lynch & Cichetti, 1992). These reports are often referred to as the “beating-the-odds” studies (Rhodes & Boburg, 2009). With little regard to location, time, or circumstances, the common element in the stories of at-risk youth who have beat the odds (e.g., Michael Oher, Manny Ramirez, Dave Thomas) is the presence of at least one adult—in addition to parents—who provides guidance and support. This type of relationship with a competent and caring adult has been confirmed as not only protective for at-risk youth (Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 2001), but also normative for healthy adolescent development (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002).

Mentoring, or a relationship that brings young people together with caring adults who offer guidance, support, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the young person (MENTOR/National...
Mentoring Partnership, 2004), is one mechanism for cultivating caring relationships between youth and nonparental adults. The belief that growth-fostering relationships promote psychological health and well-being (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Silver, & Surrey, 1991) guides the process of youth mentoring. A recent meta-analysis of mentoring research found support for the effectiveness of mentoring for improving youth’s behavioral, social, emotional, and academic outcomes (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). The authors concluded that, as an intervention, mentoring has the power to be both promotional and preventive.

Natural mentoring has emerged as one way to cultivate caring relationships between youth and adults, and it is as a promising approach for foster youth facing emancipation and the transition to adulthood (Ahrens et al., 2008). Theoretically and developmentally, natural mentoring may provide a better fit than other forms of mentoring, such as programmatic mentoring (e.g., Big Brothers/Big Sisters). Natural mentoring relationships form gradually and are therefore likely to be less pressured. The natural mentor is familiar to the youth, and, as a result, the youth is less likely to have difficulty trusting the adult and developing an enduring bond (Ahrens et al., 2008). Similarly, both the youth and the natural mentor are already in each other’s social networks and are likely to remain there. Consequently, the chances that the relationship will continue over time are better, and the likelihood of positive outcomes increases (Hamilton et al., 2006).

In light of its potential for longevity, natural mentoring also holds the promise of being an alternative to legal permanence for older foster youth. It offers youth the opportunity to establish lifetime relationships with nurturing individuals who can provide the relationship with the stability needed to help foster youth successfully make the transition to adulthood (Maluccio & Fein, 1983).

Several studies have examined the impact of natural mentors on the lives of former foster youth. Ahrens and colleagues (2008) investigated whether youth in foster care with natural mentors during adolescence had improved young adult outcomes. Mentored participants were more likely to report favorable overall health and were less likely to have reported suicidal ideation, to have received a sexually transmitted infection, and to have hurt someone in a fight in the past year. Similarly, Munson and McMillen (2009) analyzed data from a longitudinal study of older youth transitioning from foster care in Missouri. Youth in long-term natural mentoring relationships were less likely to have been arrested at age 19 and reported fewer depression symptoms, less stress, and more satisfaction with life.

Courtney and Lyons (2009) used data from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth to examine whether natural mentoring relationships were associated with outcomes at age 21 for former foster youth making the transition to adulthood. Results showed that closeness to an adult mentor was associated with an increase in the estimated odds of having worked in the past year and a large reduction in the odds of recent homelessness. However, unlike the two previous studies, no association between having a natural mentor and delinquency outcomes was found.

These studies addressed the effectiveness of natural mentoring in improving outcomes for youth who age out of foster care. However, we know less about the processes and characteristics involved in effective youth–mentor relationships. Greason, Usher, and Grinstein-Weiss (2010) examined the association between natural mentor relationship characteristics and emerging adulthood outcomes in a normative sample of young adults and young adults identified as former foster youth. The roles fulfilled by the natural mentors of “like a parent,” “role model,” and providing “guidance/advice” were significantly associated with having increased income expectations and asset ownership (e.g., having a bank account) during emerging adulthood for both nonfoster and foster youth.

Qualitative studies suggest that certain characteristics of caring adults are important for a successful mentor relationship, including affiliation, attention, availability, authenticity, companionship, empathy, respect, and trust (e.g., Greason & Bowen, 2008; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010; Spencer, 2006). Several studies demonstrate that social support, or the psychological and informational resources available to individuals through their relationships with family, friends, communities, and professionals, is one of the primary ways that mentor relationships may protect at-risk youth (Greason & Bowen, 2008; Osterling & Hines, 2006). Because research on natural mentoring relationships is just emerging and the evidence base is just forming (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Behrendt, 2005), previous studies have not been sensitive to the possibility that positive outcomes of natural mentoring relationships may only become evident when certain relationship characteristics are considered (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Put simply, we know relatively little about what makes
natural mentoring work, for whom, and under what circumstances.

Previous studies have also not been sensitive to the issue of endogeneity, which arises when there is a correlation between the independent variable and the error term, or when the factors that are supposed to affect a particular outcome depend themselves on the outcome. Studies to date have reported associations between natural mentoring and positive psychosocial outcomes among older foster youth. However, these studies have not been able to say whether having a natural mentor leads to better outcomes or if having fewer psychosocial problems leads to successful natural mentoring relationships. New research is needed to better understand these associations.

There is also a dearth of research regarding those characteristics of foster youth that contribute to effective natural mentoring relationships, although Britner, Randall, and Ahrens (2013) discuss several theoretical frameworks and studies that may be useful in formulating appropriate research questions to further understand this area. Using Rhodes’s model of youth mentoring, which suggests that effective mentoring is connected to the presence of an emotional mentor–youth bond, they consider the impact of trauma and disrupted caregiver relationships on foster youth’s ability to form such bonds. In fact, in a qualitative study with 23 former foster youth, some youth reported difficulty in forming a bond with nonparental adults and connected these difficulties with past negative caregiver experiences (Ahrens et al., 2011). It is possible that youth with fewer trauma symptoms or more intact caregiver relationships may be more successful at establishing an emotional bond with a mentor, thus increasing the likelihood of associated positive outcomes.

Additional contributing factors to effective mentoring experiences for foster youth may include the youth’s history of placement stability and the current role of the youth’s family and peer network. Rhodes’s model supposes that relationship duration, which may be connected to placement stability, as well the presence of a more supportive social network for the youth are associated with more favorable mentoring experiences. Finally, Britner et al. (2013) discuss mentoring relationships in the context of the social exchange theory, which posits that human beings enter relationships in which the rewards outweigh the costs. With this understanding, mentoring relationships may be more effective for foster youth with greater social competencies and relational skills and fewer behavioral problems. Using these theories to understand the components of successful mentoring experiences, it may be useful for jurisdictions to prepare foster youth for such mentoring relationships by offering trauma-focused therapy and family-centered services at the onset of child welfare involvement.

Diehl, Howse, and Trivette (2011) asked 54 foster youth between the ages of 10 and 17 to rate their feelings toward mentoring on a 20-item, 4-point Likert scale in order to better understand associations between youth characteristics and their attitudes toward mentoring. They found that whites’ attitudes toward mentoring were more positive than those of African Americans, although there was no difference between youth of varying ages or gender. The number of youth assets positively predicted attitudes toward mentoring, although the number of risk factors did not. Finally, when youth reported higher feelings of control in their lives, they had less positive attitudes toward mentoring. Although this study provides useful information, it is limited by the small sample size and reliance on self-reported data rather than independent outcome measures. Rigorous research is needed to understand how specific youth characteristics, risk factors, and assets predict the presence of an effective mentoring relationship for foster youth.

**Future Expectations: A Mechanism of Change?**

One way that supportive adult relationships, such as natural mentors, may positively influence foster youth’s emerging adulthood outcomes is through the encouragement of positive future expectations. Future expectations refer to the degree to which individuals have optimistic attitudes toward their future, including believing that good outcomes are achievable for them and feeling a high degree of control over their futures (Robbins & Bryan, 2004). Research suggests that mentors may affect youths’ perceptions of their futures (e.g., DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Hellenga, Aber, & Rhodes, 2003; Klaw, Fitzgerald, & Rhodes, 2003). This is an emerging line of inquiry related to the components of successful mentoring relationships, risk factors, and assets predict the presence of an effective mentoring relationship for foster youth.
potential of positive future expectations to serve as a protective factor for foster youth. Only two studies have addressed this question. One interviewed 350 adolescents in foster care to assess future expectations (Cabrera & Auslander, 2007). Results showed protective effects; positive future expectations were significantly associated with fewer sexual risk behaviors, fewer school behavioral problems, and safer attitudes, greater self-efficacy, and fewer risky intentions related to HIV beliefs and attitudes. In the second study, James, Montgomery, Leslie, and Zhang (2009) used data from the National Study of Child and Adolescent Wellbeing to examine sexually risky behavior among 877 maltreated youth over the course of 3 years. At baseline, 92% of the youth were 11–14 years old. Future expectations had a counterintuitive finding: youth with higher future expectations were more likely to have engaged in sex. Therefore, among foster youth, although there appears to be an association between the development of future orientation and improved outcomes, the direction of this association has not been empirically established.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

Rethinking Child Welfare Practice

Implications for practice with youth at risk for aging out of foster care include both incorporating natural mentoring into existing child welfare services and developing programs that provide opportunities for older foster youth to interact and naturally develop relationships with caring, nonparental adults. Some may consider the idea of a natural mentoring “practice approach” paradoxical. However, the crux of the definition of a “natural mentor” is that he or she is a caring adult in a youth’s preexisting social network that the youth him- or herself identifies (as compared to being matched in a program to a stranger). Therefore, to include practice designed to cultivate and facilitate the relationship between the youth and caring adult does not inherently omit the relationship from being “natural.” Natural mentoring could be incorporated into standard child welfare permanency planning and independent living practices within foster care agencies to increase opportunities and supports that will more fully prepare the youth for the challenges associated with the transition to adulthood.

One way this incorporation could be operationalized is through the strategies employed in Family Finding, a program model that provides child welfare professionals with techniques for identifying and engaging family members and other adults who care about a child placed in foster care (Campbell, 2010). Consistent with the goals of natural mentoring, a key aim of Family Finding is to help youth develop meaningful relationships with caring adults that will last a lifetime. Traditionally, the model has been employed to assist older youth with establishing both legal and emotional permanency, recognizing the importance of enduring, supportive nonparental adults in youth’s lives (Malm & Allen, 2011). There are six action stages within Family Finding, the first of which is the Discovery Stage. During this stage, workers are charged with identifying a minimum of 40 family members or important adults connected to the youth, and search efforts include reviewing the case record, conducting youth and family interviews, and utilizing Internet search engines. Next, during the Engagement Stage, workers reach out to as many of the family members and important adults as possible, encouraging their involvement in creating a plan to support the youth with enduring and permanent relationships. The Planning Stage involves a family meeting with all of the important adults who have been engaged through this process, and those present participate in the Decision-Making Stage, which is intended to solidify a permanent home and long-term relationships for the youth. The Evaluation Stage assesses the likelihood that the permanency plan will remain intact and includes a variety of questions surrounding the presence of supports and concurrent planning. Finally, the Follow-Up Stage ensures that an array of natural and informal supports is present to assist the youth and family following the intervention (Louisell, 2007).

The availability of rigorous, evidence-based research related to Family Finding is scant, although Child Trends recently published a study that used an experimental design with a random assignment of cases that received Family Finding at the onset of child protective services in San Francisco County, California (Malm, Allen, McLindon, & Vandivere, 2013). Over the course of 25 months, 239 participants were enrolled in the study; 116 received the intervention and 123 received services as usual. Although 57% of children in the treatment group were reunified as compared to only 47% in the control group, this finding was not statistically significant. However, children receiving Family Finding were significantly more likely to have a goal of reunification, although they were also more likely to reenter care after returning home. The researchers acknowledged that their study focused predominantly on legal permanency as opposed to emotional permanency and did not address the effects of increased supportive adults...
in youth’s lives.

Jurisdictions across the United States have conducted nonrandomized evaluations of Family Finding programming with results that indicate varying rates of success for the identification and establishment of permanent resources for foster youth (Children’s Defense Fund, 2010). The California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) utilized the Family Finding model, and a 2008 evaluation of 10 counties and 126 youth revealed that 76% of the participants established a permanent connection. Of these 76%, almost one-third were in the process of or had finalized a legal permanency, and the other two-thirds had established a permanent adult connection but did not achieve legal permanency. A subsequent 2010 CPYP evaluation included six sites and 110 youth, 71% of whom established a permanent connection. However, almost half (48%) of these youth achieved, or were in the process of achieving, legal permanency as compared to 52% with a permanent adult connection and no legal permanency. These studies indicate that many youth who participate in Family Finding programming achieve a permanent relationship with a caring nonparental adult similar to a natural mentor, although more research is needed to understand the nature and sustainability of these relationships (California Permanency for Youth Project, 2008; 2010).

Another way natural mentoring could be operationalized in child welfare settings is through novel intervention approaches designed to facilitate and support the development of growth-fostering relationships amongst older foster youth and natural mentors. Such interventions could be designed to teach child welfare professionals how to better serve older foster youth by focusing on relationship facilitation and development. Both the content and process of such interventions could be designed with hypotheses about the psychosocial conditions required to systematically modify targeted risk and protective mechanisms in mind (Snyder et al., 2006). Such interventions could use the natural mentoring relationship as the vehicle for teaching independent living skills, just as youth in the general population learn how to open a bank account, fix meals, ask for help, apply for a job, fill out a rental application, and the like from their parents/caregivers. Developmentally, an approach to teaching independent living skills that capitalizes on the emotional connection between the foster youth and his or her natural mentor is a better fit with how youth naturally learn such skills.

Other practice elements for child welfare professionals could include (a) an overview of adolescent/young adult development in order to set the stage for the relationship; (b) an overview of the concept of emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental stage; (c) a Family-Finding approach to assessing youth’s connections to caring adults, followed by locating these adults and engaging them about being a significant part of the youth’s life as a supportive adult; (d) supervision and support groups for the youth, the natural mentors, and the dyads; (e) activities designed to cultivate bonding and attachment between the youth and natural mentor (e.g., field trips, group activities); and (f) didactic training for the child welfare professionals and natural mentors pertaining to trauma and the concept of being “trauma-informed” when working with and serving youth in foster care. Incorporating practices such as those associated with Family Finding, as well as novel natural mentoring interventions within the permanency planning and independent living frameworks of child welfare, is consistent with the current thinking about the potential benefit of integrating mentoring into comprehensive programs and services designed to promote positive youth development (Kuperminc et al., 2005).

Development of natural mentoring relationships could also be facilitated by programs that provide opportunities for older foster youth and nonparental adults to interact naturally.

This type of model has already been developed for at-risk adolescent mothers and has shown promising results. Healthy Start (Duggan et al., 2000) and the Nurse-Family Partnership (Olds, 2006) provide at-risk adolescent mothers with opportunities to connect with nonparental adults through frequent home visits made by nurses (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Existing programs for older foster youth, like those intended to teach independent living skills, could also invite important nonparental adults in foster youths’ lives to program meetings and activities. These programs could also involve adult community members who may be especially interested in connecting with and supporting older foster youth (e.g., former foster youth).

Although natural mentoring for foster youth makes sense theoretically and conceptually, there is the concern that the process could result in yet another failed relationship, particularly for those youth for whom building meaningful connections is difficult. Spencer, Collins, Ward, and Smashnaya (2010) describe the attachment-related difficulties that many youth in foster care face. A large proportion of older youth in foster care have significant maltreatment histories, which has been established as relating to insecure attachments, including mistrust of others and wariness...
in relationships (Price & Glad, 2003). Mentor abandonment is another way that these relationships can fail and is considered one of the primary reasons why mentoring relationships, in general, end. Concern about mentor abandonment extends to foster youth as well (Clayden & Stein, 2005). In light of both attachment-related difficulties and the risk of mentor abandonment, the way that natural mentors already exist in a youth’s social network further suggests that natural mentoring could be the best way to meet foster youth’s critical needs for supportive connections with caring, nonparental adults. Additionally, if embedded within child welfare services in particular, practice support may reduce natural mentor abandonment, for example, if training for the adults includes how to end the youth–natural mentor relationship in a healthy, potentially corrective way, if necessary and unavoidable. When handled properly, even the ending of a significant relationship, as with a natural mentor, can be a “corrective emotional experience” for those, like foster youth, who have experienced poor relationships with other significant adults, in particular their parents/caregivers. Such a scenario presents an opportunity for a natural mentor to model and demonstrate that it is possible to end relationships in a careful way that is not damaging (e.g., through open dialogue and with the presence of other supportive adults within the youth’s natural social network), and this positive experience has the potential to actually help a young person work through some of the pain and conflict associated with traumatic endings of past relationships (Olds, Kitman, Cole, & Robinson, 1997).

Natural mentoring is also an effective context for older youth to develop skills necessary to transition to adulthood because it is grounded in Relational-Cultural Theory (Munson & McMillen, 2009). This theory posits that development occurs through involvement in growth-fostering relationships that provide authenticity, engagement, and empowerment, which in turn promote psychological health and well-being (Jordan et al., 1991). Contradictory to this theory and evidence, the current prevailing approach to child welfare practice with older foster youth is Independent Living Programming. This programming has been developed based on the notion that by using a cognitive theory instructional model designed to teach older foster youth certain skills considered relevant to self-sufficiency, they will be ready to successfully transition to adulthood and live independently. In other words, this approach uses a classroom setting void of growth-fostering relationships, and it is therefore conceivable that natural mentoring relationships could provide a more effective context for teaching youth independent living skills by providing a caring adult who is able to model essential self-sufficiency skills. In turn, the youth could “learn by doing” and be afforded the support and guidance of the natural mentor through this developmental process. The association between having a natural mentor who is a role model and learning independent living–related skills has been established empirically by Greeson, Usher, and Grinstein-Weiss (2010) who found that having a natural mentor who served as a role model was associated with having a bank account in both former and nonfoster youth during the emerging-adulthood period.

**Strengthening Policy to Support Foster Youth During Emerging Adulthood**

Federal legislation providing support for mentoring of foster youth who age out of care exists (i.e., the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, P.L. 106-169), and bills have been introduced in Congress in recent years that would provide grants to states to encourage more mentoring programs to serve foster youth (e.g., Foster Care Mentoring Act of 2009). There is also state legislation enacted in both Iowa and Georgia as part of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act that requires these states to create opportunities for older foster youth to have a mentor (FosteringConnections.org, n.d.). However, there is little guidance with respect to how to develop and implement mentoring interventions for this population (Spencer et al., 2010). For example, natural mentoring seems to make more sense, both theoretically and developmentally, for foster youth as compared to other forms of mentoring, such as programmatic. Federal policy contains little information about such distinctions, yet the potential differences in youth outcomes are great.

Moreover, despite federal funds being available for mentoring programs, states must choose whether this is the best use of already limited funding for child welfare services. The issue therefore is determining what makes natural mentoring a more favorable potential policy approach to promoting positive emerging-adulthood outcomes for foster youth. Although more effectiveness research is needed, the current evidence base suggests that a caring, supportive, nonparental adult relationship that is consistent and long-lasting can achieve improved emerging adulthood outcomes for youth who age out foster care, as compared to the traditional approach to youth policy, which attempts to prevent specific problems or to correct problems that have already arisen (Spencer et al., 2010). The current evidence base for natural mentoring for foster youth thus provides a direction for building and strengthening one approach to ameliorating the negative outcomes associated with aging out of foster care.
A Research Agenda for the Future

Several types of research are needed to significantly advance the field of natural mentoring as it pertains to foster youth transitioning to adulthood. These include (1) effectiveness research using newly designed longitudinal surveys that sample children and families who have contact with the child welfare system; (2) intervention research with large, representative samples of foster youth that uses random assignment; (3) research to facilitate a more sophisticated understanding of the processes by which natural mentoring achieves positive outcomes; and (4) studies designed to better understand how to measure resilience as cultivated through supportive adult relationships. Each of these areas is described here.

Additional effectiveness research is needed to strengthen the evidence base for using natural mentoring as a means to smooth the transition to adulthood for youth who age out of foster care. This includes new longitudinal surveys on children and families who have contact with the child welfare system and that also contain prospective questions pertaining to supportive adult relationships, including natural mentors. Such surveys could be exclusive to child welfare (e.g., National Survey for Child and Adolescent Wellbeing). The normative population may also be surveyed (e.g., National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, aka Add Health), but with oversampling procedures built in to include enough former foster youth for a meaningful statistical analysis of this subgroup. For example, Greeson et al. (2010) used Add Health to examine the association between natural mentor relationship characteristics and outcomes during the emerging-adulthood period in both a normative sample of young adults and young adults identified as former foster youth. Youth were first asked about having a natural mentor, “Other than a parent/step-parent, has an adult made an important positive difference in your life at any time since you were 14 years old?” This question was then followed with, “How old were you when s/he first became important in your life?,” which permitted assessment of when the relationship started. Then, to gauge if/when the relationship ended, youth were asked, “How many years has the adult been important in your life?” (UNC Carolina Population Center, n.d.). Greeson and colleagues found that the relationships identified by the young adults had lasted between 8 and 10½ years, and, for nearly 100% of both groups, the relationship was still important to them.

There is also the need for new natural mentoring research with large, representative samples of youth in general and foster youth in particular in order to maximize sensitivity to relationship dynamics and generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, to test causal relationships between natural mentoring relationship characteristics and emerging-adulthood outcomes, future research should model these variables longitudinally or in repeated-measures control group designs. More specifically, intervention research that uses random assignment, to address the issue of endogeneity, is needed. Endogeneity is often described as having three sources: omitted variables, measurement error, and simultaneity. An independent variable $X_j$ is endogenous if it is correlated with $\varepsilon$. For example, one problem that could arise due to endogeneity would be establishing whether the difference in outcomes is due to mentoring or if youth who are better adjusted are more amenable to being mentored. If foster youth were randomly assigned to receive “services as usual” (i.e., independent living services) or a natural mentoring intervention, establishing causality would be determined by ascertaining whether natural mentoring and positive psychosocial outcomes during emerging adulthood are correlated.

Additionally, as interest in natural mentoring continues to grow, there will be a need for studies that facilitate a more sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms and processes by which natural mentoring achieves positive outcomes among both normative and at-risk samples of young adults. For example, is the encouragement of positive future expectations a mechanism of change for older foster youth? Describing exactly how growth-fostering relationships with caring adults buffer youth from negative outcomes and promote positive outcomes remains a challenge. Future research should probe beyond the question of whether natural mentors make a difference by asking how they make difference, for whom, and under what circumstances. Studies that utilize conceptual models that include indirect effects are needed for better understanding the role of natural mentoring in the lives of foster youth, which in turn can inform intervention development and testing.

In addition to effectiveness and mechanistic natural mentoring research, the field would benefit from better understanding how to measure resilience as cultivated through these supportive adult relationships, particularly in at-risk populations such as foster youth. Although multiple measures of resilience exist, whether and how they work for foster youth are not well understood. Only one dataset that has specifically focused on older foster youth also included multiple and diverse measures of resilience promoting and adaptive resources (i.e., McMillen’s Mental Health Service Use of Youth Leaving Foster Care, 2001–2003, also known as VOYAGES). VOYAGES involved 406
Aging Out of Foster Care

Missouri foster youth first interviewed at age 17. The original study explored changes in mental health service use as older youth leave foster care, as well as many additional parameters of the lives of older foster youth from their perspective (National Data Archive on Child Abuse & Neglect, 2012). The instruments from this study were used to measure youth’s views of people and events, dispositional optimism, spirituality, self-esteem, life satisfaction, perceived benefits from challenges, and helpful people and influential adults. New research is needed that uses the VOYAGES dataset (and any similar ones) and these constructs specifically to elucidate whether and how such measures of resilience promoting and adaptive resources work for the foster care population.

Like most research that addresses at-risk and vulnerable youth, the historical focus of child welfare research pertaining to youth who age out of foster care has largely concerned “what’s wrong” with the population, such as psychopathology, substance use/misuse, legal/criminal justice involvement, homelessness, nonmarital pregnancies and births, and delinquency/violence. Although it is important to initially establish the epidemiology of these types of problems in order to describe the population, a number of studies have accumulated, and, today, the unanimous consensus is that it is not typical for youth to emancipate from the child welfare system and function effectively on their own. As such, future research concerning this population would benefit from a new paradigm, one that employs a “positive psychology” framework and highlights the strengths and virtues that enable foster youth to not just survive, but thrive, including growth-fostering relationships with caring adults.

International Practice for Supporting Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

The United States is not unique in its challenges associated with supporting foster youth during their transition to adulthood. In their book, Young People’s Transitions from Care to Adulthood: International Research and Practice, Stein and Munro (2008) compare the systems designed to serve older foster youth aging out of care from 16 countries spanning across North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Australia. This book emerged out of a series of three international seminars from 2003 to 2006 and contains chapters authored by researchers from the 16 countries represented at the seminars. Stein and Munro (2008) presented the difficulty in conducting this international comparison, which included language and cultural differences, varying definitions and terminology, and the quality and quantity of data available in each country. SOS Children’s Villages (2010) expanded Stein and Munro’s study by examining the practices of 12 additional postcommunist countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In addition to the laws and policies that govern US practice (as previously discussed), this chapter also describes the systems of care and outcomes data for older foster youth transitioning to adulthood from England, Israel, and Australia.

England

Aging-out youth in England, known as “care leavers,” are guaranteed support and provision under the Children’s (Leaving Care) Act 2000, which enhances services previously mandated by the Children’s Act 1989 (Department for Education, UK, 2010). According to lawmakers, the 2000 Act is designed to promote the quality of care and support for aging-out youth to a level that the general population would expect from a “reasonable parent,” which makes England a model for the “corporate parent” philosophy. This Act also aims to ensure that services are tailored to meet individual needs as well as provide a second chance for youth who prematurely exit care.

There are three main target populations for whom the 2000 Act applies: eligible children, relevant children, and former relevant children. “Eligible children” are 16- and 17-year-old youth who formally receive child protective services, and the local governments are responsible for their housing and living expenses. Although all youth in England cease to be eligible children at age 18, youth may voluntarily leave care at the age of 16 or 17, at which time they are termed “relevant children” as long as they have been in care for at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday. If youth opt to remain in care until age 18, they become “former relevant children” on their 18th birthday, as do those who exited care at an earlier age. Relevant and former relevant children do not have a government-employed social worker, although they are guaranteed care leaver support until 21 years of age or beyond until their training or educational programs outlined in their pathway plans are completed. Additionally, the Care Leavers Regulations 2010 allow former relevant children who reject care-leaver services to reenroll if they enter, or want to enter, a training or educational program any time before their 25th birthday. Care leaver support, as outlined in the 2000 Act, constitutes an assessment of needed support that informs the youth’s individualized pathway plan, a personal advisor, and financial assistance (including a bursary and vacation accommodation) to enable the youth
to pursue training or further education.

Prior to the youth's exit from care, the local authority responsible for providing child protective services must conduct an assessment of the youth's needs, including the areas of health, education, training, employment, emotional development, identity, family and social relationships, independent living skills, finances, and housing. The goal of this assessment is to determine what supports and services the youth requires in these areas to be successful (both while in care and upon discharge). Additionally, this assessment informs the youth's pathway plan, which is a legal contract between the youth and the local authority specifying the services, supports, and financial assistance that will be provided. The pathway plan is a "live document," meaning that it is reviewed and updated every 6 months, and, ideally, this process is youth-driven with the support of a personal advisor.

Personal advisors are appointed to support youth who have left formal care, and they act as the youth's liaison with the local authority. The role of the personal advisor is similar to that of a mentor, and there is an emphasis on cultivating a relationship through which life skills can be taught. Additional expectations for the personal advisors include maintaining regular contact with the youth, visiting bimonthly in the youth's residence, and participating in the semiannual pathway plan reviews. Personal advisors are not government employees, although they should possess or be working toward a professional qualification. Youth may request a specific advisor with whom they have a prior relationship, and, in this way, the United Kingdom is well situated to employ the use of natural mentors in a structured context for their aging-out foster youth.

In the fall of 2011, Ofsted's UK Office for the Children's Rights Director (OCRD) conducted widespread surveys, voting sessions, and discussion groups with 308 older youth who had exited or were preparing to leave care. Sixty-one percent of the youth who participated in the voting sessions (n = 125) felt that their lives had been made better as a result of entering care, and the presence of adult relationships was a prevalent theme discussed in the findings. In fact, many care leavers identified the support from their foster parents and workers as the best thing about receiving care through the UK's child protective services. Conversely, almost half of the youth respondents felt that they were made to leave care too early (46%) or were prepared poorly or very poorly for independence (49%). Twenty-one of 72 young people reported that the worst aspect of entering care was the loss of contact with family and friends. Furthermore, young people suggested that the local authorities pay more attention to the emotional impact of leaving care. Youth experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation upon exiting, and one youth stated, "You should never go from being with people to 'Oh my God, I'm completely on my own.'" Youth also responded that in addition to more money, practical help, and important documents, they wished they would have had someone to contact or talk to upon leaving care. Sadly, only 42% of aging-out youth reported the presence of a personal advisor when they left care (n = 126).

In addition to the qualitative data captured from the OCRD, the UK's Department for Education, UK (2012) collects statistics and outcomes data related to care leavers. In 2012, there were approximately 10,000 care leavers in England, which represents a 22% increase since 2007. More than half of the youth placed in congregate care settings chose to leave care at age 16 or 17 as compared to only 37% of youth placed in foster home settings. Data showed that youth who exited care at an older age were more likely to enroll and remain in educational programs, and 40% of youth who exited care after their 18th birthday were enrolled in an educational setting at age 19, as compared to only 26% of youth who exited care at age 16. Consistent with data in the United States, youth exiting foster care have poorer outcomes overall as compared to their peers in the general population. In 2011, 35% of 19-year-olds leaving care were not enrolled in education or training, as compared to only 15% not enrolled in the general population. Although the UK's Children's Act 2000 and 2010 Regulations contain several progressive components, work is needed to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

In addition to government data and evaluations, there is a body of peer-reviewed literature examining the UK's care leaver system and the impact of the Children's Act 2000 (Stein, 2006). Broad (2005) surveyed professionals from 52 governmental and provider agencies 3 years after implementation and found that although there was slow progress and wide practice variation between boroughs, many staff perceived that there were improvements based on the legislation. Two British studies both looked at data collected from interviews with 106 care leavers and their case workers at 3 months and 12–15 months postdischarge (Dixon, 2008; Wade & Dixon, 2006). Using responses from the General Health Questionnaire, which is a validated tool, results indicated that youth with emotional, behavioral, and mental health difficulties were more likely to have poorer outcomes related to housing and employment. Likewise, youth who had strong friendship networks were more likely to feel content and have
better life skills and social skills. Finally, findings supported the belief that it is beneficial for youth to delay their transition to adulthood. Simon (2008) conducted an interesting study in which she compared outcomes for 80 British care leavers with 50 disadvantaged youth with no foster care history. Her study revealed that the care leavers, or former foster youth, actually had better housing-related outcomes than their disadvantaged peers. The care leavers had fewer crisis transitions and experienced less homelessness than their counterparts, and the care leavers attributed their relative successes to having access to better services and the presence of a supportive social network.

Israel

Victims of child abuse and neglect in Israel receive support and care primarily through the use of residential facilities. Of the 8,750 children and youth placed in out-of-home settings, 80% reside in congregate care settings, and roughly 225–250 of those youth age out of care each year. Once youth reach the age of 18, the Israeli government is no longer responsible for their care, and they are considered adults. Presently, there are no formal laws or policies mandating government care for youth who have aged out of the child welfare system, although the Ministry of Welfare is considering programs and services that may help address the needs for this population in the future. At this time, youth in Israel are expected to assume all adult responsibilities at the age of 18 (Refaeli, Benbenishty, & Eliel-Gev, 2013).

Refaeli, Benbenishty, and Eliel-Gev (2013) conducted a recent study to better understand youth readiness for independent living on their exit from child welfare care in Israel. The study examined staff assessments from a cohort of 197 older youth on the verge of leaving residential care. In addition to utilizing their standardized assessment tool, which is completed annually for all children receiving residential care, the staff completed a questionnaire specifically designed to collect data on youth in their final year of placement. The questionnaire included items related to the presence and quality of social supports, readiness for independent living, and youth needs.

Assessment data revealed that about half of the youth’s mothers were considered to be positive supports, as compared to slightly more than one-third of the youth’s fathers. Extended families were assessed as supportive in 42% of the cases, and supports outside the biological family were only present in 29% of the cases. There was a significant correlation between the number of supportive relationships and the youth’s readiness for independent living and need for help.

Not surprising, the results of the study showed that most youth getting ready to exit care had low or moderate skills in the areas identified as necessary for successful independent living (e.g., avoidance of risky behaviors, health, interpersonal relationships, housing, etc.), and almost a quarter of the youth needed help in every domain on the assessment. Ninety-one percent of youth were assessed as having moderate/low coping skills with emotional difficulties, and only 16% of youth were assessed as possessing the high skill level necessary to attend college or university. About half of all youth received special education services, and 40% were reported to have behavioral problems in school. Furthermore, youth with behavioral problems in school were less ready for independent living and demonstrated need in all of the life domains contained in the assessment. In addition to educational struggles, fewer than one-third of the youth possessed the skills necessary to enroll in Israeli military service, which is an opportunity for older youth to integrate into a normative experience with their peers from the general population. This study demonstrates the need for legislative action in Israel to ensure that aging-out youth are supported beyond the age of 18 to promote a successful transition to adulthood.

Australia

Unlike Israel, most youth (roughly 94%) who receive child protective services in Australia are placed in family-based kinship or foster homes, with slightly more children in kinship care. Point in time data from June 30, 2012, reveals that there were 39,621 children and youth in out-of-home placement (7.7 per 1,000 children), representing a 27% increase from 2008. Furthermore, from 2011 to 2012, there were 3,034 youth aged 15–17 discharged from out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013). These discharge data include youth who reunified with their biological family, remained in their kinship or foster homes without payment, or emancipated. Australian governments do not track care leaver data, and so the breakdown of these types of discharges is not available (Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2011).
The life course and the resilience perspectives offer a rich potential for both how to conceptualize aging-out and through the age of 25 (McDowall, 2009). Victoria, for instance, provides mentoring, postcare support, and flexible funding for youth exiting care, but not all states and territories have such provisions. Several scholars and advocacy groups have called for the implementation of effective national care leaver legislation, although this may prove challenging because, historically, Australia has sought to reduce federal spending for social welfare programs and has relied heavily on the work of private organizations (Cashmore & Mendes, 2008).

Although Australia does not possess federal care leaver legislation, all of its states and territories endorsed the 2009 National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009–2020, which provides uniform benchmark standards of practice for the states’ child welfare departments (Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services, & Indigenous Affairs, 2009). A key tenet of the Framework is a nationally recognized practice for out-of-home care that includes a standard for transition from care (TFC) planning. TFC plans must occur when the youth reaches the age of 15 and should be youth-driven, including an assessment and plan for the youth’s housing, education, employment, finances, social relationships, health, life skills, culture, and legal status.

In addition to the national requirement for TFC plans, the Australian federal government offers a Transition to Independence Allowance (TILA), which is a one-time payment of up to $1,500 for all youth who plan to imminently leave care or who have exited care within the past 2 years. Youth must apply for TILA after their 15th birthday but prior to their 26th birthday and be subject to one or more risk factors for unsuccessful exit from care (Tila.org, n.d.). The moneys are not directly distributed to the youth, but rather they are given to the Referring Organization in the form of reimbursement for items necessary for the youth’s successful transition to independence (e.g., moving expenses, start-up household items, transportation or books required to begin an educational program, etc.).

Australian care leaver outcomes and supports have been studied by several researchers and organizations including the CREATE Foundation, which exists to advocate for children and youth in out-of-home child welfare placements in Australia. In 2009, the Foundation surveyed 471 Australian older youth, 196 of whom had already left care. The study found that only 35% of those surveyed had completed their 12th year of school, and of those who left school while in care, 20% did so due to expulsion. Additionally, half of the surveyed youth reported that they had to leave their placement at the age of 18, and 40% stated that they did not have a housing arrangement following their exit from care. A little more than one-third of the youth experienced homelessness within their first year of leaving care for an average of 1 month. Twenty-nine percent of the youth who participated in this study were unemployed, and 70% received some sort of government financial assistance, with more than half completely reliant on this income (McDowall, 2009). Finally, only 36% of youth reported having any knowledge of a Leaving Care Plan, and this number actually decreased to 32% following a 2011 survey designed to evaluate a national campaign targeted at increasing youth awareness of TFC planning. The 2011 survey also revealed that 42% of the 17-year-olds included in the sample had never heard of Australia’s TILA (McDowall, 2011).

A longitudinal study conducted by Cashmore, Paxman, and Townsend (2007) examined educational and employment outcomes for former foster youth 4–5 years after their exit from care. Findings showed that these former foster youth were less likely to be enrolled in an educational program or employed, and, of those employed, many were poorly paid in low-skill jobs. Additionally, more than half of the young women in the study were mothers. Although the care leavers were less likely to have completed secondary school, those who finished grade 12 had better outcomes related to both education and employment. At the 2013 Australian Out-of-Home Care Summit, care leaver advocate and researcher Philip Mendes from Monash University charged local and federal government officials and lawmakers with adopting a corporate parenting philosophy with a national leaving care framework and centralized database, as well as a holistic support system available for foster youth transitioning to adulthood through the age of 25 (Mendes, 2013).

Conclusion

The life course and the resilience perspectives offer a rich potential for both how to conceptualize aging-out and...
emerging-adulthood experiences for foster youth and possible ways to intervene with the goal of easing the often tumultuous transition experience. Viewing the emancipation of foster youth within the context of emerging adulthood and an “off-time” transition provides a framework for better understanding the hardships they experience when required to shoulder adult roles and responsibilities prematurely and without the support typically afforded their same-age peers. The resilience perspective provides a framework for considering potential intervention points or the processes that underlie resilience that mediate positive youth development outcomes. One of these processes or adaptational systems is healthy attachment relationships (Masten, 2001); for example, a relationship with a caring, nonparental adult. When the basic adaptational systems, like having healthy attachment relationships, are operating well, resilience can be expected (Yates, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2003; Yates & Masten, 2004). As such, helping older foster youth cultivate natural mentor relationships is potentially an effective strategy for promoting resilience and smoothing the often rough road of emerging adulthood for youth who age out of foster care.

References


US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children,


Notes:

(1) Child welfare professionals are typically very aware of the traumatic events that bring a youth to their attention. However, they may be far less aware of a youth’s complete trauma history and the connection between his or her history and the youth’s current behavior or emotional response to stressors (Taylor & Siegfried, 2005). The role played by traumatic stress in a foster youth’s behavioral or emotional problems is often overlooked, and, when recognized, many communities lack appropriate service providers who are skilled in evidence-based treatment for traumatic stress (Ko et al., 2008).

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