

LIFE SKILLS, LIFE SUCCESS

LEARNING IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

PERSPECTIVES

By David Johnston, Senior Program Associate for Life Skills, Casey Family Services



A key part of the work done by youth in Casey Family Services' care—with help from workers and foster families—involves developing the basic coping skills they need to succeed as adults. One of the challenges facing their social workers has always been integrating life skills learning with overall service planning, balancing short-term needs against long-term competency-building and doing it in a way that captures and sustains youths' interests.

Staff in the organization's New Hampshire Division has developed an engaging life skills curriculum that includes a workbook and exercises that span two years. The workbook combines Casey-developed materials and activities with the TRAILS curriculum that the State of New Hampshire utilizes. At Casey, all 13- and 14-year-old foster youth are taking part in the training, and, this year, for the first time, two youth in post-adoption services have joined.

The youth meet on eight or nine school holidays over the year. The first year's sessions focus on relationships, friends, sexuality, hygiene, emotional health, exercise and nutrition, and use a variety of interactive and educational materials and exercises. The second year draws from the state's required TRAILS curriculum, which focuses on areas that include financial literacy, safety, careers, job finding, transportation and apartment hunting.

Social worker Jennifer McAllister and Family Support Specialist Patty Martin lead each session, sometimes calling upon other

staff members for assistance and sometimes drawing upon resource people in the community. Simple "pre" and "post" tests are used for each day's unit. Field trips to the library, state agencies, Job Corps offices, Planned Parenthood sites, police departments, colleges and local businesses help to enrich the experience and broaden the youths' understanding of community resources.

All materials used over the two years are kept in a three-ring binder called "The Life

LIFE SKILLS TRAINING NOW IS PART OF THE FOSTER PARENT PRE-SERVICE CURRICULUM, AND ALL PARENTS LEARN ABOUT THE ANSELL CASEY LIFE SKILLS ASSESSMENT.

Skills Workbook" that each youth takes away from the training. The workbook starts off empty and then accumulates life skills products, including the results of the Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment (required by Casey Family Services), related life skills goals, evidence of increased competency, completed exercises from the curriculum and more.

Each participating youth is eligible to receive "pay" of up to \$5.50/hour while attending the group. Actual pay is determined by each youth's behavior "so that participation feels like a real job experi-

ence," according to McAllister. Each youth completes a time sheet for every session and must notify Casey if he or she is going to be late or miss a session. Each person must make up any missed work and must dress appropriately for "the job environment." Yet it's not all work and no play; the group has fun, and "there's a lot of bonding and mutual support that takes place over the two years," she adds.

Foster parent involvement in life skills learning can be a challenge. For this two-year program, foster parents sign a contract with their foster youth, provide transportation ("often a respite day for them," according to Martin) and learn about the group's activities through regular emails from the Casey staff. Life skills training now is part of the foster parent pre-service curriculum, and all parents learn about the Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment. An orientation to the TRAILS curriculum is additional training offered to parents.

The growth in skills and maturity is obvious in the youth who go through the program, and enhanced competency should begin to show up in subsequent administrations of the assessment. Many of these youth "graduate" to the division's Teen Board, and some get involved in mentoring the younger youth in the TRAILS group.

To learn more about the workbook and curriculum being used in New Hampshire, contact David Johnston at djohnston@caseyfamilyservices.org.