

Casey Family Services
Summary of Life Skills and Transitions Activities in Each Division
September 2003

Introduction

Casey Family Services, the direct services arm of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, has been providing foster care services for over twenty seven years. Casey divisions operate in the six New England states and in Baltimore, Maryland. In addition to its foster care program, Casey offers a broad range of services to support families and strengthen communities including: family resource centers, services for families affected by HIV/AIDS, intensive reunification services, post-adoption services, services to teen parents, family advocacy and support services, and family preservation services.

The agency's foster care program has primarily served those youngsters for whom reunification with birth families has been ruled out by the State, and whose permanent plan was not adoption at the time of their placement with Casey. While some of these children are eventually adopted, others need a stable foster family experience and ongoing support to make a successful transition from foster care to adulthood.

Over the years Casey has gained experience and knowledge about how to help youth acquire the life skills they will need in order to lead healthy and productive lives as young adults. In 1999 the agency completed a study of Casey youth alumni who had transitioned out of our foster care program. The youth transitioning from Casey foster care showed better outcomes in several key indicators compared with youth transitioning from more traditional types of programs. Seventy-three percent of the Casey alumni graduated from high school compared with sixty percent of foster children in comparable studies. A significantly higher percentage of Casey foster youth delayed parenting beyond age 23 than did foster children reported in other studies, and a significantly higher percentage of the Casey alumni were employed full or part time. Additionally a large majority of the alumni reported that they regularly interact with their neighbors and 15 percent volunteer in their communities.

The hallmark of Casey's work with foster youth has been individualized planning, based on a child's strengths and needs and teamwork with the youth, foster parents, birth parents and other team members to help the youth address problems and achieve goals. The agency has recently adopted the Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment as its standardized assessment tool. Results from the assessment will help guide the individualized planning and service delivery for each foster child and youth.

Life Skills Principles

The following eight principles are derived directly from existing practice.

1. Life Skills planning is central to effective service planning and successful transitions.

Goal-setting is central to effective practice for all youth with whom we have long-term relationships, and life skills goals are a key element of such practice.

2. Life Skills work requires comprehensive assessment of strengths and challenges.

Assessment defines both strengths and deficits, providing the foundation for goal-setting and the recognition, and even measurement – by youth, parents, and social workers -- of goal achievement.

3. Life Skills learning occurs best in a “Real World” context.

Families – birth families, foster families, relatives, and neighbors – are the primary vehicle for life skills learning; but groups, especially for adolescents, can effectively supplement what happens – or occasionally replace -- what does not happen at home. Practice – ideally out in the community -- makes perfect.

4. Youth Engagement – active involvement on multiple levels of youth being served -- is critical to effective long-term outcomes for those youth.

Empowering youth to shape their world means involving them in their case discussions, and in leadership groups that also improve Agency practice.

5. An assertive appreciation of diversity underlies effective LS&T work

Understanding the nuances and impact of diversity among different types of youth, families, communities, and even staff, enhances the quality of all CFS work, from basic service planning and related life skills planning, through the transition years.

6. Once a Casey youth, always a Casey connection

Life skills work and transition planning, begun early, teach “independence” but not disconnection from Casey. Long-term support promotes self-sufficiency, fosters new types of relationships, based on mutual benefit, and continues to nurture young adults, while educating the Agency.

7. Collaboration with community partners increases the capacity to foster positive, long-term outcomes for our youth.

Community partners bring additional expertise, and collaborative, multi-sector work is the real world – good life skills learning for staff, youth and parents.

8. Evaluation research drives long-term outcomes.

Evaluation reveals effective practice, and if built into program planning can help inform practice.

Division Programs and Activities

Each Division is responsible for assessing the life skills capability of their youth in care, developing goals with each child and youth to build life skills, and designing individualized strategies with each to achieve these goals. In addition to this case work, the CFS Divisions have developed many programs and activities to increase and enhance life skills of youth in care, including the following highlights:

Baltimore

1. Teen Mother Life Skills Work

Much of the work done with young mothers, the Division's original core population, addresses a variety of related issues (e.g., housing, child care, education/training/employment, health care, transportation, legal rights, and of course, enhancing self-esteem). Staff identify the life skills needs of each client and help them, individually and in groups, as part of case management, address those needs through practice and staff role-modeling.

2. The Fatherhood Initiative

This initiative attempts to reach out to young fathers in a low-income neighborhood through a home based visiting model. A fatherhood coordinator and family support workers provide to young fathers a range of supports such as parenting education, job readiness, employment assistance, and counseling,

3. After-School Program for Siblings of Adolescent Parents

The goal of this program is to prevent early pregnancies/parenting for this high risk group. The curriculum includes sex education, but also incorporates a range of life skills activities to help youth increase self esteem and motivation to delay parenting. Successful members of the community are engaged to act as role models, and field trips made to various art, education and government facilities show youth the kinds of opportunities that are available to them both inside and outside of their community.

Bridgeport

1. Camper Corps

This camping and outdoor adventure weekend provides opportunities for youth to learn social interaction skills, increase self esteem, and learn specific life skills in areas such as employment readiness, job finding, job skills. Youth participate in two weekends per year, one of which also includes their foster parents. Group

meetings held between camping weekends help youth learn to apply the skills they gain in the camp experience to their everyday life.

2. Performing Arts Troupe

The Division assembles groups of 8-13 year-olds, to meet weekly to work in the areas of art, music and dancing. In 2001 a music video was developed, using a local, consulting performance artist.

Hartford

1. Life Skills Youth Groups

The Hartford Division has two youth groups: a long-standing one for high school age foster youth, and a new one for younger adolescent foster youth. The older group meets voluntarily on some Saturdays and some week nights for training on hard and soft life skill development. Meetings generally have a different life skill focus each time (e.g., building relationships, job seeking skills and job readiness, money management, community resources, housing, conflict resolution, communication and problem-solving skills, and sometimes just to “talk”).

The Division’s Life Skills Specialist regularly refines this curriculum and convinced the State Dept. of Children and Families to have the CFS Life Skills Curriculum – the framework for the Youth Groups -- approved as meeting DCF’s curriculum requirements for youth in care of the State and private agencies that contract with the State.

The younger group is even more activity based and developmentally suited to younger teens, and aims to strengthen relationships and group behaviors. During their initial year these youth are working with a local community based organization, Our Piece of the Pie, to build a real boat under the guidance of a master boat builder. Eventually, they will sell this boat.

2. School-to-Career Partnership

CFS-Hartford, in partnership with the State Department of Children and Families, has provided the leadership to create and supervise the Hartford site of the School-to-Career Partnership, funded by the Agency’s parent, the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This youth employment and case management project, now in its second year, is housed at the CBO, Our Piece of the Pie, and it serves Casey youth, State child welfare system youth, and other at-risk Hartford youth. To date, more than 150 youth have been placed at United Parcel Service and other employers. Many of those youth have moved on to other jobs or returned to school.

3. Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative

Building on the experience of the STC Partnership, CFS and the State Department of Children and Families are now in serious planning for a statewide version of the JCYOI nationwide model that is introducing “Opportunity Passports” and related new techniques to help youth and young adults transitioning out of child welfare systems. As with the STC Partnership, CFS is playing a lead role in this development.

Maine

1. Casey Transitional Team (CATT)

Composed of foster parents, staff, and Casey Alumni. CATT meetings assist “aging out” Casey youth to develop a plan, including a “contract” with Casey, for the next year. CATT meetings are held quarterly, and one-year follow-up meetings with “graduated” young adults are held to evaluate person’s status and determine needed additional assistance. Subjects discussed at CATT meetings include post-secondary education, employment, relationships, housing, and more. Before a youth has a CATT meeting, his or her social worker meets several times previously to prepare the youth for the meeting and to discuss who will attend.

2. Summer Wilderness Work Project

This 12 day outdoor “work and adventure challenge” is offered twice per summer to Casey youth in care from Maine and other Divisions. Now in its fifth year, the Wilderness Project takes youth into rural Maine, where they hike, canoe, camp, cook, swim, and climb. They also participate in paid community service work projects focused on trail building and maintenance and campsite improvement – with their performance evaluated each day and their pay related to performance.

3. School-to-Career Partnership

CFS-Maine, in partnership with the State Department of Human Services and the Muskie Institute of the University of Southern Maine, has provided the leadership to create and supervise the Maine version of the School-to-Career Partnership, funded by the Agency’s parent, the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This youth employment and case management project, now in its second year, is housed at the Muskie Institute that works closely with CFS and DHS to serve foster youth in a variety of ways. To date, more than 50 youth have been placed at United Parcel Service and other employers. Many of those youth have moved on to other jobs or returned to school.

4. Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative

CFS is working closely with the Muskie Institute and the Department of Human Services to create a Statewide version of the JCYOI model. Muskie has written the Planning Grant and will implement it, with CFS providing “quality control” in cooperation with JCYOI staff.

Massachusetts

1. Youth Advocacy

Since the Division has been open for 11 years, it has a “generation” of foster care Alumni in their twenties, and has identified those with the ability to provide leadership to younger foster youth through group activities. These include: Teen Talk, that regularly brings in Alumni to talk with younger youth in care, advocacy at local, state and national legislative levels for foster care issues, and participation in publicity efforts through radio, newspaper and television to heighten awareness of foster care issues and facilitate foster parent recruitment.

2. Life Skills Assessment and Planning

The Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment has been used selectively for more than two years in the Division. Because of the intensive case management and relationship building, staff is generally very aware of life skills needs and uses the ACLSA to complement that experience. All social work staff are now being trained to use this tool.

The Division works hard to place each youth into a developmentally appropriate educational and vocational track as part of service planning. For example, a youth who is capable of community college but not a four year will develop a plan that will include matching that youth with the best possible community college resource, advocating for special services if needed, assessing computer skills, assessing transportation needs, etc.

The Division’s Family Support Specialist has extensive experience in helping teens with life skills needs – for example, getting a driver’s license, getting jobs and job counseling, budgeting in goal directed ways, and learning the stages necessary to live independently in an apartment. He has also developed pre-vocational programs like “Casey Dollars” where youth do volunteer work or achieve in school for credits that can be used to buy items they want or convert into savings. This program has been very helpful to youth who have not yet developed the skills to succeed in the open job market.

New Hampshire

1. Teen and Caregiver groups

The New Hampshire Division has customized the State's life skills requirements ("PAYA") by creating both foster youth and foster parent groups. Parents can obtain their required training hours by attending these groups. Meeting on the same night each month, the parent group functions as a support group, and the teen group focuses on a combination of tangible and intangible life skills, with the youth members largely determining the subjects to be covered. Each participating youth gets paid \$5.50/hour while attending the group. The ACLSA has been used with both groups to stimulate discussions of needed life skills learning.

2. Teen Advisory Board

The membership of this three-year old group has been expanded to do a variety of activities, including 1) putting out a newsletter ("Today's dreams, Tomorrow's futures") that includes poetry, art work, photography, puzzles, advice, and more; and 2) developing a "Handbook for Teens in the Foster Care System," and 3) participating in various recreational activities. According to staff, the discussions about the Handbook "produced some amazing insights among our youth."

Rhode Island

1. Life Skills Groups

Various life skills groups are formed to meet the needs of the age profile of children and youth in care at any given time. The Division currently has a life skills group of 13-19 year-old girls and boys that explore issues selected by the youths (e.g., sexuality, relationships, family issues, communications, job finding, and college preparation) through a variety of educational and recreational activities. The "Skills Streaming Curriculum" provides the foundation for much of this group work.

2. School-to-Career Partnership

CFS-Rhode Island has provided the leadership – in partnership with the State Department of Youth and Families and several CBOs -- to create and supervise the STC Partnership, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and housed at CFS. Now in its second year, the Partnership serves Casey youth, State child welfare system youth, and other at-risk Rhode Island youth. Several Casey foster youth, and some state foster youth, worked with STAND Corporation to renovate the new CFS office in a Providence neighborhood.

Vermont

1. Casey Learning to Work Program

This 13 year-old program prepares younger adolescents, not ready for regular jobs, for the world of work through supported, supervised work internships. Casey works cooperatively with local businesses to create opportunities for young people to experience the responsibility and rewards of work. Expectations for punctuality, reliability and performance are all established by the business, and close supervision of the work of the Casey “intern” is provided. Casey asks that the business consider some stipend for the youth, and if necessary, Casey can supplement or assume the total cost of the stipend.

2. Casey Companions

Casey companions, used since 1989, are asked to give individualized attention to a Casey child or youth. Companions are independent contractors, or “mentors,” who have the time and energy to devote individualized attention to a Casey child or youth. They are interviewed by staff and foster parents, pass criminal records checks, and are paid for their services. Casey companions range in age from older adolescents to retirees. Casey Alumni or Casey youth in independent living have also offered invaluable service as Companions for younger Casey kids. Individual social workers sometimes pursue companions who are already known to a child or youth through natural connections with their biological or foster family.

3. Goal-Setting

MAPS (“Making Action Plans”) was created at McGill University in Canada to aid in the development of Individual Education Plans (IEP) for children in need of services. MAP was adapted by Casey as a structured conversation among a team of people including the youth, the youth’s families (birth, adoptive, foster, extended), friends, and professionals whom the child chooses. The information expressed through the process leads to a vision of what the youth hopes and dreams for as well as ideas for ways to realize those dreams. After completing the MAP, the team follows additional steps to help ensure that the plan can be successful, including setting time for a review of the plan with the team.

Foster parents have commented that the MAPS process takes some of the pressure off them in providing a “reality check” to youth in transition. The plan generated also helps define what the youth needs from the foster parents in order to achieve his or her goals. Youth feel “listened to” and “heard” by the people they’ve invited to the MAP. Even the shyest of youth find their voice when the process highlights their strengths and challenges.

4. Foster Parents as Landlords

Some transitioning older teens are placed temporarily with foster families that create a contract with the young person to act as landlords, enforcing the types of rules and procedures that a youth could expect in apartment living – practicing living in the community.

5. Transitional housing

Casey-Vermont is part of The Upper Valley Consortium for Transitional Housing that received a Federal grant to renovate 20 rental units that became available in 2003. Casey youth leaving foster care have access to several units. CFS was a prominent member of this coalition created to increase the supply of housing suitable for foster youth in transition into the community.

Agency-Wide Programs and Activities

1. Youth Conferences: More than 80 CFS foster youth and 8 Casey Alumni came together in June for a weekend of fun and life skills learning at Casey's 2003 Youth Conference. The heart of the event, planned by a youth-centered Steering Committee, was a "real world" simulation called "Success City," organized by staff from the National Resource Center for Youth Services (NRCYS) at the Univ. of Oklahoma, and based on their widely-acclaimed "Emancipation Station."

Participating youth worked their way through "stations" staffed by Casey personnel and Alumni, where they received their photo IDs, opened bank accounts, rented apartments, bought insurance, took care of "babies," and generally attempted to cope with the kinds of challenges they will face as they move out into the community. As one tired young lady juggled multiple demands, carrying her baby and shopping bag, she exclaimed, "I'm never going to have a baby."

The Eight Alumni, from all Casey's regions, participated in an Alumni Panel, planned and facilitated by an "Alumni Coordinator." They also served as guides, role-models, and mentors, and led discussions in several workshops, including "Telling Your Story," Sexual Responsibility, and Career Choices.

2. Youth Conference Follow-Up: In the fall of 2003, the Youth Conference Steering Committee, including several Alumni, will be reconvened to brainstorm how both groups – working both together and separately – could be formalized to provide ongoing support for the Agency.
3. Real World Fairs: At least three CFS Divisions – Baltimore, and Hartford and Bridgeport together – are planning to replicate a similar simulation model in 2004, the "Real World Fair," developed by Independent Living Resources Inc., from

Durham, NC. Both events will be co-sponsored by additional agencies, public and private. In Connecticut, the two CFS Divisions are working closely with the State's child welfare agency, The Department of Children and Families, to plan a statewide event that will serve both Casey and DCF youth, and longer-term serve as the organizing principle for a new life skills curriculum.

4. Use of the Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment: Casey's Management Team has approved use of the ACLSA by all social workers in all eight Divisions by the beginning of 2004. While many social workers have been using it voluntarily and are thus conversant in it, training in its use will be provided in the fall of 2003 by members of the Life Skills Work Group and Administrative staff.
5. Financial support for youth transitioning into post-secondary education and the community: During 2002, the Agency surveyed all Divisions to look at the nature and level of support for youth in care who have transitioned to college or into the broader community. The results have since become an accepted set of guidelines for the entire Agency and have stimulated a more formal discussion of "what's appropriate," including how long to stay "connected," and how best to accomplish those goals.