

# **Foster Care Program Needs Assessment: Results of the Foster Parent and Foster Youth Interview**

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Conducted on behalf of  
Casey Family Services of Bridgeport, CT

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## Executive Summary

Young adults entering the workforce in the Information Age will be at a disadvantage if they are not technologically literate. Studies tracking the 'digital divide' identify several demographic factors associated with less computer access and use, many of which are over represented among children and families involved with Child Welfare (e.g., low income, low parent educational achievement, Hispanic or African American ethnicity). Foster children's opportunities for computer access, formal skill building and individualized practice may be further complicated by residential instability, educational discontinuity and/or special educational curricula, challenging behavior in the community and unemployment.

Casey Family Services and the Annie E. Casey Foundation are interested in building technological literacy to support youth in transition from foster care to independent living. First, foster family capacity and needs must be assessed in order to select promising activities for a pilot intervention. Therefore, a series of interviews was conducted with foster parents and foster teens in Bridgeport. This report summarizes the findings from these interviews.

**Access:** In order to begin building technological literacy, computers must be available. Access to a home or school computer among these foster children is roughly on par with the general population. However, many of the foster families who have computers describe their equipment as broken or antiquated, unable to perform tasks necessary to building a strong foundation skill set (web navigation, writing, email).

- Most parents consider current access "inadequate" because of equipment absence or malfunction, or demands that exceed available computers.
- Children are not using other community computer resources. Availability of resources and potential community-based partners is unclear as few parents were aware of any other resources.
- In many cases, children emancipating from care or setting off for higher education either forgo access or overstretch the available resources upon exiting the home.

**Ability:** Using computers for a variety of tasks is a concrete indicator of skill development. Current use by foster children suggests that a significant proportion is not using computers regularly to develop technological literacy. While over half of the youth played games or worked on school tasks, 33% navigated the web looking for information and only 12% used email to communicate. More of the foster parents demonstrated technological skills, as indicated by current use to complete several common tasks.

- Most parents and youths surveyed felt that they could not yet do everything they wanted technologically.
- Desired skill development included web navigation and search, and general knowledge concerning hardware and Windows, as well as other capacities.

**Interest in Training:** What are the children and families looking for? Most of the children and parents felt good about how they have been learning about computers. Children tended to learn in school classes, from family members or friends, or on their own. Parents most often learned through work-related tasks or class work.

- Youthful preference for learning by doing, and the developmental tendency to be excited by content rather than learning 'for its own sake', reminds program developers to consider ways of increasing program appeal (e.g., a joint project on family history that requires email communication, web research, etc...).
- Any efforts to maximize program participation will have to address a range of barriers, such as competing demands, transportation, scheduling conflicts, distance and varying skill levels.
- Many youth lack opportunities for extensive exploration and practice because of limited computer access at home and school, as well as lack of instruction in a variety of skills.
- Many families described mentors whose involvement could extend the impact of any single agency activity, yet several families did not have someone.

**Next steps:**

- I. Distribute the report to steering committee.
- II. Develop additional information on needs of Family Connections participants through the extension of the Needs Assessment. The Family Connections practice staff will assist in continuing the data collection through outreach interviews with program participants.
- III. Develop additional information on resources and potential partners in the field, preferably with the involvement of a project coordinator;
- IV. Use results to begin designing a program that can target the primary needs identified including:
  - a. Families with no equipment or antiquated equipment;
  - b. Families with broken equipment or overextended equipment;
  - c. Older youth preparing to emancipate or relocate;

- V. Youth and parents' with few opportunities for practice and mentoring on computer use for more advanced tasks.

## **Summary of Foster Parent/Youth Needs Assessment Interviews**

### **Introduction: Child Welfare and the Digital Divide**

To give children growing up today the best chances to succeed, they must develop technological literacy. The establishment of a solid skill foundation in the tools of the Information Age, including basic fluency using computers for writing, calculating, communicating, and locating and recalling data, typically requires both formal and informal learning experiences coupled with opportunities for direct contact with computers and digital appliances. Access to functional computers with appropriate software is critical, as is the utilization of available opportunities to practice new skills and build confidence.

Yet, not all youth are developing this mastery. National surveys of computer access and use identify a growing 'digital divide' isolating youth who are not "logging on" but instead lag behind in terms of computer availability, knowledge, attitudes, skills and use. Moreover, many of the factors marking those most at risk are highly concentrated among youth in the Child Welfare system. Research has noted youth from economically impoverished homes, as well as other groups over represented among foster children (e.g., African American children, Latino/Latina children) have significantly lower rates of access and computer use (e.g., McConnaughey, Lader, Chin & Everette, 1997). For instance, compared to 62% of all non-Hispanic White children, less than one quarter of the African American and Latino youth lived in homes with a computer during 1997 (Newburger, 1999). Similarly, youth who move between school placements, receive remedial education services, and/or demonstrate challenging behaviors may be less likely to benefit from Information Science curricula even if available in their schools.

The Pilot is an effort to see what is needed to help foster youth and foster families optimize supports for building technological literacy. Computer literacy and use among youth in the Child Welfare system is presently unknown. It is likely that among youth in care, just as in the general population, there are some who are building skills and others who are falling back. Beginning with a group of youth in long term and treatment foster care with Casey Family Services, this project aims to identify technology literacy needs and explore ways of addressing these needs. The results of this study will be used to identify suitable goals for the Bridgeport Technology Pilot project. This information will be combined with input from other key informants to help anticipate potential barriers to program success, as well as possible untapped resources in the form of computer hardware resources and/or other potential partners.

This report first describes the methods used to assess the technology needs of foster families in the Bridgeport division. Next, we provide a summary of the findings from foster parent and youth interviews, as well as a brief discussion of their implications for program development.

### **Needs Assessment Method**

**Data Collection:** An experienced independent interviewer conducted telephone interviews with foster parents and youth in their homes. Foster parents were asked to provide information regarding computer appliances in the home, household members' access to computers, frequency and purpose of current usage, and computer education to date. Additionally, respondents were asked about the likelihood of participating in a number of potential programs, and the factors that might obstruct or enhance their participation. Foster children age 12 and over were asked an overlapping set of questions to identify needs, facilitators, and obstacles from their perspective. Parent interviews took 25-35 minutes, though homes with many children required more time. Youth interviews were shorter, averaging 15 minutes each.

**Respondents:** Parents from 37 of 41 (90%) active foster homes in the Bridgeport division were interviewed. Most interviewees (84%) were foster mothers. The respondents' average age was 47.2 years. Since greater computer ownership and use is typically associated with parent education, income, and age of youth (Kominski & Newburger, 1999; Novack & Hoffman, 1998) it is important to note that this is a relatively well-educated group of working and middle class families. All of the heads of household had graduated from High School and 56% had completed at least some college coursework. Over two-thirds of the families reported household income greater than \$30,000 per year. About 56% of the foster families were African-American, 28% Caucasian, and the balance were Latino or biracial.

The foster parents reported on a total of 52 foster children. There were 25 foster children from the elementary grades, 12 in middle school, 14 in high school and 1 not currently enrolled. Most were in long-term foster care, though 25% were in treatment level care. The average age of the children was 11.8 years.

Interviews were also completed with 16 of 32 (50%) foster youths age 12 or older. The youth sample was 44% African-American, 31% Caucasian and the balance was either Latino or biracial. The average age was 15.0 years. Most youth were in long-term foster care but 4 (25%) were in treatment-level placements. The more modest completion rate reflects the less predictable youth schedules and the limited calling window.

Overall, the completed interviews provide good representation of the division foster care roster. There were no differences between respondents and non-respondents in terms of age, placement types, income range or ethnicity, though the extent to which nonrespondents may differ on computer use or attitudes is unknown. Given

the wider representation of division youth and families in the foster parent reports, these data are highlighted in the summary. General agreement between parent-reported and youth self-reported computer access and computer support reliance on parent-provided information, although there is a strong possibility that parent reports represent a modest underestimate of true access and use. <sup>1</sup>

## **Results**

The following sections summarize the results in terms of access to computers, current use, needs and preferences for further support of computer education. Note that some caution is warranted in interpreting the percentages reported: because of the relatively small numbers of families and youths in the sample, a change of only 1-2 respondents may dramatically shift the percentages.

### **Are parents and youth concerned about being prepared for the use of high technology?**

Both parents and youth reported that computer education was important for the children. Importance was rated on a five-point scale, ranging from a 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely).

- Parent ratings averaged 4.3, falling between 'Very Important' and 'Extremely Important'. Youth assigned slightly lower ratings on average (mean=3.7).
- Foster parents were slightly less concerned about their own technology education, averaging 4.0.

A few foster parents considered computer education only slightly or somewhat important. Though the small number prevents a detailed detection of any patterns among these parents, a closer look suggests that parental or household factors commonly associated with lower parental interest, motivation or current capacity to facilitate computer education (e.g., less discretionary income, less education, less parental experience) play a negligible role. Instead, it appears that these parents felt that computer education needs are either already met, or are secondary to Casey's involvement with their children's welfare.

### **Do youth have access to computer equipment?**

Lack of access, one of the most concrete indicators of the digital divide, is a critical issue for a limited segment of Casey foster youth. Most youth surveyed have access at home and/or at school. Still, most foster parents feel that family members do not have enough access. The technology divide is most urgent for the youth and

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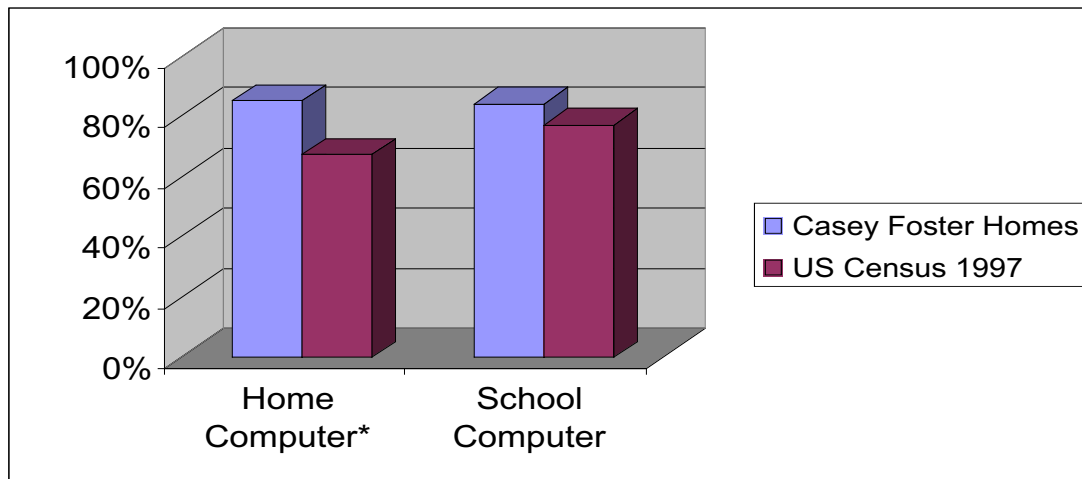
<sup>1</sup> Computer surveys are new. There is some evidence suggesting that youth report greater frequency of access and use than their parents. For more thorough discussion, see the National Conditions of Education Report, Note on Indicators (1998).

families in homes with no computer (15% of families). Several other families have obsolete or broken equipment inadequate for basic tasks. Even when homes have modern equipment, a third group of families with multiple sophisticated users noted access concerns in that their current needs outstrip the supply. For example, there may be several users for a single computer, thus severely limiting access for each individual. The needs of older youth moving out of the home pose another challenge as they frequently represent further division of the family computer resources. Foster parents related having to choose between sending youth off unprepared for college or giving up access for those remaining at home.

- Fully 85% of the 37 foster homes surveyed have at least one computer. However, a considerably smaller segment of foster children (63%) has consistent access to home computers because equipment is either broken or reserved for parent business.
- Approximately equal numbers of youth have access to computers in school as at home, though school access is likely higher since the parents of several other youth said they did not know about school access.
- Census statistics (1998) in Figure 1 provide reference points<sup>2</sup>, suggesting Casey youths' access appears roughly on par with nation-wide youth rates.

**Figure 1. Home and School Computer Access in Casey Foster Care and Nationwide**

\* Based on homes with children present.



- Despite the high proportion of foster homes with computers, many lack the equipment necessary to complete computer tasks that will provide a strong foundation for more advanced learning. For example, only 57% of all homes

<sup>2</sup> Surveys of computer availability and Internet use suggest that the trend toward greater access continues (Kominski & Newburger, 1999). Thus, the figures from 1998 probably provide a mild underestimate of current nationwide access figures. Census figures are provided only to illustrate some historical context.

reported having email. The top half of Table 1 lists a breakdown of the computer equipment in Casey foster homes, while the bottom half describes the software currently available in homes that have computers.

**Table 1. Computer equipment in Casey Foster Homes**

<b>EQUIPMENT</b>	<b>Number of homes</b>	<b>% of all homes</b>
Any Computer	31	84%
Desktop	29	78%
Laptop	7	18%
Printer	27	73%
Internet Connection	28	76%
Email Account(s)	21	57%

**Table 1. (continued) Computer Equipment in Casey Foster Homes**

<b>SOFTWARE</b>	<b>Number of homes</b>	<b>% of homes w/computers</b>
Word Processing	26	84%
Computer Games	18	58%
Art, Graphics, Drawing, Design	16	52%
Educational programs (e.g., reading, math)	15	48%
Home Finance	11	36%
Spreadsheets	11	36%

- Though several parents were not sure, about three-fourths of the home computers were described as PC- or Windows compatible. The corresponding figure for school computers was 40%, though half of the parents said they did not know.
- Even when present, home computers may not be able to support all the needed tasks. While 76% of the home computers were 0-3 years old, 14% were five or more years old. Additionally, three families reported that their computers were broken and two families reserved the computers primarily for parent related business.
- Another critical access issue concerns older youth launching to college or other independent settings. Several parents and youth expressed concerns about not being prepared without a computer to take to college or other independent living site.
- Projections for the next 5 years indicate an average of 4 youth per year turning 18, making pre-launching plans more immediate.

- Access for youth leaving care highlights issues of ownership. Older youth may need “to own their own” machines in order to make them portable, whereas ownership by younger children may be divisive and disruptive to family.

Computers are seen as available at home or school. Only a few parents reported having access to other computers in the community, and none described regular use elsewhere by their foster children. While a precise listing of all community resources is not available, this surprisingly low estimate probably reflects a lack of awareness about opportunities in the community (e.g., public library), and/or obstacles inhibiting use (e. g., lack of transportation, inopportune schedule), and/or a mismatch between resources and needs.

**Is this “enough” access?**

Consistent availability of computer equipment for lengthy periods of time may be vital to developing comfort, confidence and advanced skills. While school computers are available most often, these opportunities may not promote prolonged practice, individual exploration, and independent projects. Not surprisingly, therefore, parents perceive access problems, even when machines are in the home.

- Most youth have computers available in home and/or school, but they are not always available for extended independent work. When there are computers present, home computers are most often available for individual exploration. Table 2 lists parent estimates of availability in homes, schools, and other computers.

**Table 2. Frequency of Computer Availability at Home, School or Other Location.**

	Home	School	Other
Foster youth who have access to computers:			
Percent with access 2 or more days/week	67%	92%	0
Percent with access 2 or more hours/day	74%	25%	0

- Fully 56% of all foster parents felt that not every member had enough access to a computer. Looking only at homes with computers, over half of the foster parents (53%) still feel that the current arrangements provide for inadequate access. Other common issues mentioned include too many users (12 families), broken or obsolete equipment (4), and computers available primarily for parental work (2).

**Are youth developing their skills?**

Over time, using computers for a variety of tasks expands the skill foundation for technology literacy. Most Casey foster youth appear to be using computers with some regularity, most often for games and schoolwork, although the extent to which they are practicing intentional direct skill development is not clear from this data. Clearly, access does not guarantee skill development.

- Almost every foster youth had used a computer at some point in their lives (98%).
- Over half of Casey foster youth are playing games and working on schoolwork on computers.
- Parents’ use provides some insight into their potential as mentors. Over half of the parents used computers for web navigation, word processing, and email.

**Figure 2. Children and Foster Parents currently use computers for a variety of tasks.**

	<b>Foster Children (N=52)</b>	<b>Foster Parents (N=37)</b>
Games	69%	46%
School Work	67%	19%
Educational Programs.	46%	22%
Web Navigation	33%	54%
Art	27%	24%
Word processing	21%	54%
e-mail	12%	57%
Shopping	4%	27%
Chat Rooms	2%	13%
Paid Work	2%	68%

- Many parents indicated that they did not know how often their foster child actually was using the computer in school or at home. Among youth whose parents knew, weekly or more frequent use was reported at home and school for 81% and 80%, respectively. The actual percentage may be lower, as parents may not know because computers are not extensively integrated into curricula.

**How are youth and parents learning about computers? What else would parents and youth like to learn?**

Katz and Aspden (1997) found that the three most common ways of being introduced to the Internet were through friends and family, learning at work, and teaching oneself (Katz & Aspden, 1997). The least common introduction was through a formal class.

- All of the interviewed youth and some of the foster parents mentioned learning about some aspect(s) of computing as part of school coursework. Foster children also frequently mentioned learning from foster family members (i.e., parents, older sibs) or friends. The majority of parents described learning, often through teaching themselves, while trying to complete tasks at work. Echoing this emphasis on experiential learning, a number of the youth described 'figuring it out' through watching others and simply trying to tackle a new game, task or assignment.
- There is a clear acknowledgement that technology skill development needs to continue. Fully 82% of the foster parents felt that they and their children could not do everything they would like to do. In contrast, youth respondents were more confident (and/or less ambitious), as 68% felt they *could* do everything they wanted to do. This difference may stem from not being fully aware of all the possibilities.
- Those who described desires for further skill development most often mentioned:
  - Internet use: navigation basics, search skills; safety and parental monitoring.
  - General computer knowledge: use of hardware, Windows.
  - Parents interested in help learning finance and spreadsheets; while children more interested in typing and email.
- 80% of both parents and foster youth thought that there were possible mentors for learning outside of school. Most often, they mentioned the foster parents or older siblings in the family. Some parents and youth also mentioned other family members and friends.

Most parents and youth felt that their ways of learning had worked well, though both groups described desires for further learning. Especially for new users, the absence of mentor support can severely hamper effective and efficient independent learning.

**Which of the potential program models appealed most to youth and families?**

Foster parents and youth used a 4-point scale to rate the likelihood that they would participate in a variety of potential programs (0=Not at all; 1=A little; 2=Somewhat; and 3=Very much). Parents and youth expressed greatest interest in programs that would help families and/or youth purchase equipment and establish a Casey Intranet. There was also considerable interest in classes for parents and youth, though there were sizable portions of youth who did not expect to utilize such classes.

- According to both parents and youth, the most appealing program would be financial assistance to assemble the 'correct equipment.' Even so, 17% of the parents said that they had a little or no interest.
- In addition to classes, an idea for a Casey Intranet captured a lot of interest, and in fact few respondents reported low interest. Figure 3 indicates parent and adolescent informants' interest in each of the prototypes.
- Plans for a resource room and a lending program garnered the least widespread interest.

**Figure 3. Foster Parent and Youth Interest in potential programs.**

Potential Program	Parent Report (N=37)		Youth Self-Report(N=16)	
	Mean Rating	% Low Interest <sup>3</sup>	Mean Rating	% Low Interest
Resource Room	1.6	39%	1.2	50%
Lending/ Borrowing Computers	1.2	58%	1.4	38%
Computer purchase grants	2.4	17%	2.4	6%
Casey Intranet	2.4	11%	2.2	13%
Youth Class	2.4	14%	1.8	38%
Parent Class	1.9	22%	--	--
Joint Class	2.0	17%	1.3	56%

**What were the obstacles that youth and families anticipated?**

- Both foster parents and youth expressed several concerns that could limit their participation in the range of programs described. The inconvenience of traveling to the office presented problems in some families. However, the

<sup>3</sup> “Low Interest” includes all respondents who said they were “Not at all” or only “ a little” likely to participate in a potential program component.

most common concerns focused on time restraints, busy schedules and conflicts with other demands. Parents of younger children mentioned needs for childcare.

- Of course, lack of motivation represents another obstacle. Few families were very interested in all potential programs. The desired curricula for classes was quite diverse, and many predicated their participation on the availability of training experiences specific to their needs. For some topics, it is likely that actual activity may more closely resemble a mentored tutorial rather than a full class due to limited student participation. Finding training topics with broad appeal that are appropriate to multiple skill levels would be essential to creating well attended classes.
- Programs involving expensive equipment raise the specter of property breakage and conflict over control and ownership. Some families unequipped or under-equipped expressed reservations due to potential liability for breakage and/or fears that the youth may destroy the computer.

### **What else might help?**

Technical assistance for supporting use of current equipment, and for accessing the best and most appropriate available software, was described as a potential facilitator. For example, several parents with computers thought that they would benefit from having a technical assistant available to help repair their current equipment. Importantly, the respondents often added that the technical assistance needed to be 'user-friendly' and convenient.

## **Summary and Recommendations**

The findings and implications assembled here reflect the Needs Assessment data, as well as preliminary discussion of the data with the Pilot Project Steering Committee.

Although the bulk of the foster youths surveyed do not appear to be stranded on the far side of the digital divide, limited access, narrow use and ongoing learning needs require additional supports to maximize technology literacy development. While many foster homes and schools provide Casey foster children with access to computers and instruction in their use, access and instruction may not be optimal.

- Efforts to address these access needs will require support for the (a) purchase of new equipment; (b) assessment of existing resources to determine whether updating or repair, is indicated, or whether purchase of new equipment is preferable; and (c) exploration of the resources available in school and the community.
- Parents and youth expressed greatest interest in programs that would enable them to purchase, equip and maintain home computers. Two types of support may be needed: (1) older youth exiting care may be assisted in purchasing their own computers; (2) younger children in care should have access to computers owned and controlled by their parents. Either way, the program should clearly articulate Casey's expectations and policies, anticipating the potential for divisiveness and disruption.
- Formal classes had less broad appeal, as most of the interested respondents noted that they would participate only if the classes were relevant to their needs. Although there was some overlap in interests, diverse skill levels and learning goals, as well as a range of other identified obstacles, may handicap efforts to assemble a group.
- The least widespread support was voiced for programs emphasizing a division based resource room and a computer lending system. However, a resource center based effort might be more attractive to geographically concentrated and economically impoverished families. Data regarding the needs and interests of Bridgeport Family Connections participants will help explore this possibility.

Foster children seldom use computers outside of their homes and schools.

- Its not clear whether this is a reflection of limited opportunities, unaddressed barriers to access, a lack of awareness or a misfit between needs and community resources. As the full pilot program team is assembled, an informal community resource scan may be useful to identify potential partners and avoid service redundancy. For example, schools may represent potential partners with existing equipment that could be made available to families in their neighborhoods. While many youth report learning on their

own, efficient and effective skill development is promoted through the use of mentors. Fortunately, most parents and youth felt that they knew of someone (often the foster parents or siblings) who could mentor.

- These natural mentors may be potential assets for any program that relies on independent work. Support for these natural mentors may be needed given the strain placed on these relationships at times.
- Extra outreach support and instruction may be needed for the least computer savvy or interested foster parents.

Research on Child Welfare and Technology Education provides little guidance for describing the technology needs of youth in care, or for developing programs to advance technology literacy. This survey of the needs of a small group of foster youth suggests that even relatively stable foster children may have considerable needs.

- Children in family-based services and those in short-term foster care may have different needs. Further examination of the needs of other Casey families may illuminate additional service needs, and/or obstacles to consider in designing programs. Surveying the families in Family Connections is a good first step.
- Further examination of the birth children will help intervention planners anticipate both intended and unforeseen impact of introducing new resources in families with birth and foster children present

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