

Independent Living Framework

A successful transition to adulthood is a challenge for any young person, let alone a foster child. In many states, that challenge becomes insurmountable when foster children are abruptly cut off from services or required to leave foster care at age 18 (or when they graduate from high school). These teenagers often face a troubled future--and everyday struggles--plagued by financial, emotional and logistical problems, including finding a place to live.

Very few young people are realistically capable of independent living at the age of 18. They all need guidance, support, advice, and a place to go for the holidays. They need to be part of a support system so they can take chances without the risk of losing everything or everyone. This is particularly true for foster children who often believe they can--or must--be on their own by the time they are 18. Early and open planning for developing life skills is an important part of reassuring foster children that services will be available to them beyond their 18th birthday, regardless of their state's regulations or practice.

The development of independent living skills begins with the first contact, regardless of the child's age. Transitional services focus on the older adolescent to provide an opportunity for those children to practice skills safely before becoming independent. It has become increasingly clear that these are the need to be addressed jointly. The process of acquiring these skills is one of trial and error, flights and falls. The development of independent living skills is often treated as a separate activity, involving classes and curriculum. But it is essential that independent living work is also an integral part of the child's and family's daily life.

National Trends

Every year 20,000 children age out of the foster care system. Prior to the last few years, there has been little attention paid to the thousands of children who "age out" of foster care each year. At the urging of a variety of private and public organizations that work with foster children, this has begun to change. The 1999 White House launch for proposed legislation that would double the amount of money available for services for children in transition was an important milestone for this change in priority. Subsequent legislation gained wide bipartisan support in Congress. Increased media attention to the issue, along with growing support among policy makers, civic leaders and the business community, has created strong momentum for effectively meeting the needs of the vulnerable children and helping them to become successful, independent adults.

Casey Family Services

The transition work of Casey Family Services is part of its overall efforts to help foster children become healthy self-sufficient adults. Casey Family Services helps foster children prepare for a successful transition and provides them with necessary support once they age out of the system. In most cases, the key elements of a

successful transition are completing school, making plans for the future, and finding an affordable place to live. Casey Family Services helps young adults make these and other critical short- and long-term decisions by providing a variety of services from tuition and housing assistance to counseling and training. Innovative practices to address the needs of foster children in transition include curricula, outdoor programs, individualized services, groups and mentoring. For example:

- The Wilderness Work Program in Maine and Camper Corps in Connecticut are outdoor adventure programs that help teens develop self-confidence and courage while learning to work with others. The skills they learn help them to plan and make a successful transition to adulthood.
- Preparing Adolescents for Young Adulthood is a popular program in Massachusetts and New Hampshire that includes everything from grocery shopping contests to meeting with former foster children to learn about their experiences.
- In Maine and Hartford, experts and alumni from Casey Family Service meet with foster teens and parents to help them develop and reach their career goals.
- In Vermont, a mentoring program complements the MAPS (McGill Action Planning) process that helps each child to make a plan for his or her short- and long-term goals.

Casey Family Services is also conducting extensive research to determine how Casey alumni from Connecticut, Vermont, and Maine have fared in their adult lives and what services have been most helpful to them. Early findings suggest that Casey alumni are more stable, productive, healthier and better educated than comparable groups of former foster children.

Principles of Practice

To be a constructive participant in community life, each individual needs to master skills for life-long living. Casey Family services works to promote the greatest degree of personal responsibility and interpersonal competency for each child who receives our services. We are committed to providing services that help each youngster develop the necessary components for self-directed living. We believe that all children need the opportunity to take responsibility for making decisions appropriate to their chronological and developmental age.

These principles guide our efforts:

1. Children have the right to be as independent and self-confident as possible. Our responsibility to assist them in that process begins with our first contact with them.
2. Children need a sense of hope, a belief that their futures are positive and the confidence that they can be successful.
3. Children need to have an awareness of, and connection to, their birth families.

4. Children have unique strengths and skills that can be enhanced and built on as they acquire life-long skills.
5. Children need to develop sufficient concrete and intangible skills to participate productively in their community.
6. Children have the capacity to take an increasingly more active part in and responsibility for decisions that affect their future.
7. Children need to develop healthy value systems that allow them to participate constructively in community life.
8. Birth parents, foster parents and staff have unique skills, strengths and experiences that can become essential components in helping children acquire lifelong skills.
9. Birth parents, foster parents and staff must be prepared to support the child when opportunities arise that facilitate interdependence, self-esteem, and a sense of competence and responsibility.
10. It takes the whole community to support the development of a single child.

Program Components

The framework for our independent living programs combine several critical elements that will help every child. These components include assessment of existing skills, goal setting, service plans, employment, vocational training, college, community service and advisory boards for independent living.

Foremost among all these components is stability. Stability—in terms of placement, adult caretakers, educational services, relationships with adults and peers, a known community, and connection to the birth family—is essential for the safety, growth and development of a foster child. Without stability and some degree of predictability in a child’s life, he faces the nearly insurmountable task of learning, assessing and adapting to continually changing circumstances.

When a child’s placement, school, teacher, social worker, therapist or community changes repeatedly, the experience of loss and failure is repeated over and over again for that child. The child’s energies and attention become devoted to surviving in a new environment. The reasons for the change are often not clear to the child and he may develop an inherent sense of his own lack of worth or likeability. The development of close or long-term relationships is discouraged by these frequent disruptions (and the error is often compounded by labeling the child “attachment disordered”). Academic progress is stunted because of changing school curricula and gaps in school attendance. Special education needs are not met because of the disparity of criteria, programs and resources among different communities. Health care becomes sporadic despite the best efforts of foster parents and staff because of the difficulties in maintaining and transferring comprehensive health care records. And, worst of all, the child frequently moves farther and farther from his birth family so that maintaining any relationship with them becomes an overwhelming challenge.

The child's belief in and attention to the future become irrelevant and his expectations of his own self-worth, competence and ability to succeed gradually diminish and disappear. The child's view of what it means to be an adult becomes colored by fear and victimization, or grandiose ideas of power and control.

With adequate training, supervision and supports, foster families can assist even emotionally disturbed children to improve their social, emotional and psychological functioning, live successfully in a family, and participate meaningfully in community life. Casey Family Services asks our foster families to make a commitment to each child until that child leaves foster care. Once a child has begun to develop trust, form attachments, and show progress in a foster home, it is counterproductive to move the child to another home. In those relatively few cases where a change in placement becomes desirable or unavoidable, great care and attention are given to preparing and supporting the child and the foster families around the change. Many Casey children who change placements maintain close positive relationships with previous foster families. This stability of placement and relationships provides a firm foundation from which the child can move into a successful adulthood.

Assessment of Existing Skills

Life skills assessment provides a broad indicator of the child's readiness for self-directed living. This assessment also helps to focus a child's attention on an area of strength that he may not give much thought to. Every child is assessed for strengths and needs at intake and as a regular feature of service delivery. That initial assessment includes information about the child's current functioning and his current developmental stage. It also includes an evaluation of the child's ability to perform the age-appropriate skills necessary for independent living. For example, a latency age child might be assessed on money management skills by his ability to manage his allowance and an older adolescent on his ability to maintain a savings account.

A formal assessment of the child's progress in solidifying existing skills and acquiring new ones is included in every case review. Sources of information for this assessment include the informal evaluation and observations by the parents, foster parents, siblings and peers, as well as the formal observations of professional service providers.

A standardized assessment tool provides an objective measure of the child's progress. The Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist is the standardized measure currently used by all Casey divisions. Other assessment tools include those from Daniel Memorial Institute, Casey-Ansell, PAYA and Life Skills for Little Folks.

Goal Setting

Each individual child needs to set his own goals for adulthood regardless of age. The child, and his adult caretakers, needs to be optimistic that the goals he has identified can be achieved and he needs to be empowered to achieve them.

The need to set personal goals can be reframed for the child as “What is your dream?” This “dream” terminology suggests that anything is possible, that there are people around him who are interested in him and his dreams, that they are willing to help him work toward his dream and that he just might be able to do it. The ongoing “dream” conversation between the child and adults takes place on two tracks: short-term and longterm.

Children of all ages can participate in the short-term conversation. Younger children, who have a limited sense of time, can practice setting and achieving small goals in a time frame that they can comprehend. Older children gain a sense of power and accomplishment in their everyday environment.

When a dream is identified, adults must be prepared to accept and support the child’s goal, no matter how pessimistic they are about his ability to achieve it. Rather than discourage the child or persuade him to identify a less demanding dream, break down the action steps needed to achieve it. “What will you need to get your dream?” “What’s the first thing that needs to happen? Can you do that by yourself? What information do you need? How can we get that information?”

Staff, foster parents and other adults need to be creative in supporting the child’s growth and development as he strives to accomplish his dreams. The child needs the opportunity to succeed even if that opportunity includes a significant risk of failure. Adults can help the child celebrate his successes, understand his failures, and “try, try again” in the face of disappointments.

The long-term conversation represents the “What do you want to be when you grow up?” question. Although young children may wish to be an astronaut or a garbage man, these wishes usually represent a momentary area of interest rather than a desire to actually work in that field. The long-term conversation begins in earnest when a child is 12 or 13 and becomes part of an ongoing dialogue between the child and his care-giving adults. It is important to recognize that the process of attaining goals is long and fraught with false starts and misdirection. The child’s goals, like dreams, change. Adults must be prepared to support the child’s experimentation and allow the child to make his own mistakes, take responsibility for them and move on.

Service Plans

Life skills goals, objectives and tasks are included in all children’s service plans. Every case review and service plan changes to reflect new objectives and tasks as the child progresses. The case review format includes a section on independent living that is geared to identifying the skills of children of all ages. Service plan objectives and tasks are updated at least every six months, regardless of the frequency of the case reviews. Children learn and change so rapidly that tasks devised six months ago are unlikely to be appropriate and helpful.

A section about life skills for all children is also part of the foster parent monthly report. Foster parents are asked to address the life skill goals identified in the service plan, to describe how they have implemented the tasks and describe the progress they have seen.

Older adolescents need to address transitional planning for independent living in their case reviews and service plans. The reviews and plans should include:

- the anticipated date/age of the child's discharge from services
- an assessment of the child's readiness to live on his own
- educational and/or vocational plans
- relationship with birth and foster families
- role of birth and foster families post discharge
- social and emotional needs
- the child's anticipated living arrangements
- estimated budget post discharge
- amounts and sources of income needed
- amounts and sources of resources and services needed

Employment

Casey provides children receiving our services with opportunities for both employment and learning job-related skills as early and as often as possible. This may include everything from cutting a neighbor's lawn to part-time employment. Each division has its own model or activity based on the jobs, relationships and resources within the community.

Any child who is employed or in a paid apprenticeship program must have an approved plan for how the money he earns will be used. In almost all cases, at least part of the money should be put in a savings account. The child should also assume increasing responsibility for paying part of his own incidental expenses from his earnings. Before the child begins his job search, these issues should be fully discussed so he has the opportunity to plan carefully.

Job fairs are a useful way of introducing a broad spectrum of employment options to a large number of young people. Many young people concentrate on the jobs they are familiar with and are unaware of other opportunities they could explore. Job fairs also provide an opportunity for peer networking. Parents, foster parents, and staff can find out about nearby job fairs and ensure that the child attends.

Vocational Training

Not all young people have the desire or the ability to go to college. Many of them are anxious to be on their own and are interested in earning sufficient income do that. Like all young people, youth in foster care usually start out in entry level or

low skills jobs. Unfortunately, many of them remain in these low paying jobs and continue to struggle to meet expenses and accomplish their personal goals.

The Bridgeport Division uses the services of a career development counselor to help the child and adults identify potential careers that would maximize the child's strengths and interests. This assessment helps many kids narrow their focus to a specific area to investigate for training and education. Similar services may be available through high schools or community agencies.

Most trades and crafts have apprenticeship or intern programs that can lead to licensing or certification. Some have "junior apprentice" positions where the youth can learn more about the actual work and begin to develop some of the basic work skills required. Many have formal training programs that are a prerequisite to employment in that field. Casey Family Services provides financial support for post-high school vocational programs in the same way that we do for college education.

College

Many children in foster care decide to go to college very late in their high school career. This limits the availability of scholarships and loans as well as their choice of appropriate colleges. Parents, foster parents and staff need to encourage high school students to begin thinking seriously about college no later than the beginning of their junior year in high school by encouraging them to participate in college fairs and visit nearby colleges. Opportunities to expose younger students to colleges through field trips and other activities should also be pursued.

Parents, foster parents and staff need to learn the basics of college admissions and financial aid. It can be a complicated and confusing process even for experienced parents and it can be overwhelming and defeating for adolescents who try to do it on their own. Some school systems provide this information; adults need to review it to make sure it is current, comprehensive and applicable to youth in foster care.

Casey Family Services supplements the costs of college education with the expectation that the young adult will obtain as much financial assistance as possible through scholarships, grants, loans, and savings. However, many Casey kids graduate from college with very large debt loads because they have no parent who is available or responsible for any of their expenses. Repaying these loans can put tremendous pressure on young people starting out in life. While this is true of most college graduates, it is a special concern for young people who grew up in foster care who often have no safety network to turn to when the inevitable "crunch" hits.

Community Service

Preparing for adulthood involves much more than acquiring a set of self-care, social, employment and academic or vocational skills. Young adults become active, involved, contributing members of their community when they perform community service because of the values, experiences and principles these efforts instill. Every

child benefits from participating in community service that is commensurate with his age and ability.

Children in foster care receive special benefits from participating in volunteer activities. They have had little opportunity to be a caregiver and they often have unrealistic or inappropriate ideas about the role of a caregiver. Voluntary community service is an opportunity for a child to see himself as having something to give, as having innate skills and abilities that are valuable to other people, experiences that are hard to come by for many foster children. Community service also allows the child to gain or practice additional social skills that are necessary to live as part of a community. He can meet other youth from the larger community, begin to establish healthy social networks, learn the value and process of teamwork, work relatively independently, and experience success as a product of his own efforts—sometimes for the first time.

Community service is defined very broadly. It may include an annual community park clean-up, a once-a year Walk for Hunger, providing lawn care services for an elderly or incapacitated neighbor, volunteering at a nursing home or daycare center or animal shelter, coaching sports teams for younger children, participating in fund raising activities for local charities.

Advisory Boards for Independent Living

The purpose of advisory boards is to bring in new perspectives, additional information and resources, to empower youth and to advise on the planning and implementation of life skills activities. Adults and youth each need their own advisory boards. Although there can be some joint meetings of both boards, each needs to meet and plan separately. Both must reflect the diversity, attitudes and culture of each community.

The adult advisory board is comprised of representatives of staff, birth and foster parents, and members of the community, especially the school and business community who advise the division on the entire continuum of life skills services for all ages and act as a resource for information and connections to important parts of the community.

The Youth Advisory Board is composed of adolescents and young adults who are receiving or have received services from Casey Family Services. In addition to the purposes identified above, the Youth Advisory Board empowers youth by including them in the planning and implementation processes. The board also teaches them how to work as a group, how to identify goals and choose strategies, how to influence policies and activities and how to work cooperatively with authority systems to get their needs met.