

Foster Care: When Normal Ain't Normal

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Young people in foster care often approach adulthood facing tremendous challenges. One that has gained increasing attention recently is the absence of many normal growing-up experiences enjoyed by other young people their age. The issue of “normalcy” in foster care refers to the opportunity to experience and participate in age and developmentally appropriate activities that promote healthy physical, mental, emotional, and social growth. For young people in foster care, participating in or even having the option to participate in typical youth activities and important milestones can be a challenge.

In a survey of nearly 500 youth who have experienced foster care in Iowa, 63% indicated facing at least one barrier to their participation in “normal” activities such as driver’s education, school dances, working a part-time job, or spending time with friends.

A major obstacle to living normally for youth in foster care is simply obtaining permission. This hurdle, that all adolescents must clear with their parents, becomes more convoluted when case workers, foster parents, biological parents, or the courts are involved. For youth living in a group home or shelter, the extra resources needed, staffing on a given day, and coordination of travel multiply the complexity of a typical milestone like attending prom.

Why are normal activities so important for young people?

Healthy Brain Development

Physiological changes that take place in the brain during adolescence are just as important as brain development during early childhood. Particularly, the growth takes place in the prefrontal cortex, the hub of decision making, impulse control, reasoning, and planning.¹ Structured learning experiences like driver’s education or sports teams give young people the chance to practice decision-making skills, set goals, and take risks in a safe environment while stimulating the prefrontal cortex. In addition, positive, routine experiences can help rewire the brain’s ability to regulate emotions and behavior, which is compromised when a child suffers abuse or is exposed to other traumatic events early in life.² Even unstructured activities, like spending time at a friend’s house, are important for a young person to experience while in foster care. Through these “normal” activities, young people develop a sense of self and a sense of their place in the world. As summarized by researchers at the University of Chicago Law School, *“We cannot expect youth to flourish as adults if they have not developed a sense of who they are – what matters to them, what they like to do, and how they see themselves.”*³

Living in a Family

Parents provide much assistance during childhood but begin to step back as youth seek more independence and freedom as they enter adolescence. The relationships that parents have with each other and other adults model to young people how to maintain healthy, supportive friendships. During adolescence, parents often act as gatekeeper, protecting their children from certain activities and experiences or

encouraging others. For young people in foster care, placement with a relative or in a foster family, rather than a congregate or institutional setting, is a more natural and safe context for this scaffolding of support to take place.

Positive Peer Relationships

Typical adolescent activities are an opportunity to establish permanent, healthy peer relationships. Relationships are a critical component of sustaining normalcy for youth and young adults, as many leave foster care with weakened or no ties to their parents and families. Youth living in a group home or shelter often face a revolving door of other youth and staff – making it nearly impossible to build a lasting relationship with someone else. Strong peer relationships are an important factor in the process of building an identity, which is critical during the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Young people gain a sense of who they are by trying out different roles or identities and observing the reactions of their peers to those behaviors.³ Through school clubs, churches, and other community based activities, youth simultaneously develop identity and construct a network of social capital – a source of support that can help to replace lost familial guidance.

What’s “Normal” for Youth in Foster Care?

To assess the extent young people in foster care are able to participate in age and developmentally-appropriate activities, the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa (YPII) surveyed 494 youth and young adults who are in or had been in foster care or other court-ordered, out-of-home placement. The short survey was conducted in October and November 2015 with young adults participating in Iowa’s Aftercare and Preparation for Adult Living Programs, as well as with members of AMP (Iowa’s Foster Care Youth Council) and YPII’s Youth Leadership Board, InSight. The average age of survey respondents was 18.5, with 96% between the ages of 14 and 21. Of all respondents, 54% were female and 46% were male.

The survey asked respondents to indicate their level of participation in 17 activities or experiences, with the answer options for each: “I was able to do this,” “I was not interested in doing this,” or “I could not do this while in placement.” **Table 1** shows the responses for each activity or experience, in original categories of *School Activities*, *Social Life*, and *Milestones*.

Table 1: Participation in “Normal” Activities

		I was able to do this	I was not interested in this	I could not do this	n
School Activities	Participated in sports, music, speech, or other extracurriculars.	57%	19%	24%	480
	Attended school sports games, music concerts, drama, etc.	64%	13%	24%	480
	Attended school dances.	50%	15%	35%	477
	Went on school field trips.	60%	11%	30%	476
Social Life	Rode with friends in their cars.	48%	5%	47%	478
	Had a cell phone.	47%	4%	49%	480
	Went to a friend’s house to hang out or sleep over.	44%	5%	52%	477
	Did things with friends like shopping, going to movies or out to eat.	56%	4%	40%	479
	Had access to the Internet/social media (FB, Twitter, etc).	55%	4%	42%	479
Milestones	Attended a church of my choice.	44%	29%	27%	476
	Got to spend time alone by myself.	76%	6%	18%	479
	Had a part-time job.	52%	12%	36%	477
	Earned an allowance.	45%	9%	46%	475
	Opened a bank account.	46%	13%	41%	478
	Got my hair cut/styled the way I wanted to.	73%	8%	19%	477
	Took driver’s education.	37%	17%	46%	473
	Drive by myself to school or other places.	24%	12%	64%	473

Type of Placement Makes a Big Difference

Further analysis of the survey results revealed significant differences in the ability to participate in normal activities based on the type of placement of the respondent. About half of the respondents indicated that they were placed in a family setting, either with a non-relative foster family (41%) or in kinship care with a relative (8.6%). Responses to the question of where respondents had spent most of their time while in placement are shown in **Table 2**.

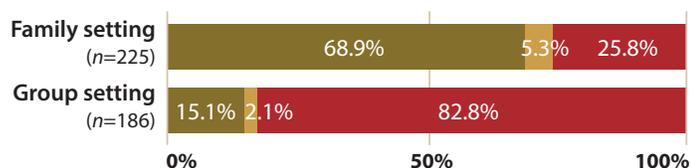
Table 2: Placement Type of Survey Respondents

Family foster home	41%	Relative foster home (Kinship care)	8.6%
Group home	34.4%	Supervised Apt. Living (SAL)	4%
Shelter	8.1%	State Training School	6.4%

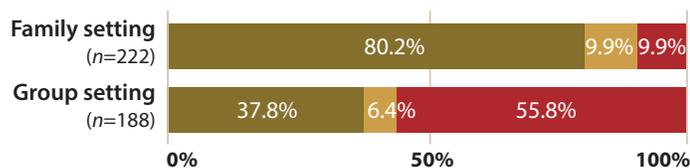
Not surprisingly, participation in normal activities is least inhibited in family setting (foster family and kinship) placements compared to group setting (group home and shelter) placements. The graphs below show these differences on a sample of activities from the survey.

■ I was able to do this ■ I was not interested in this ■ I could not do this

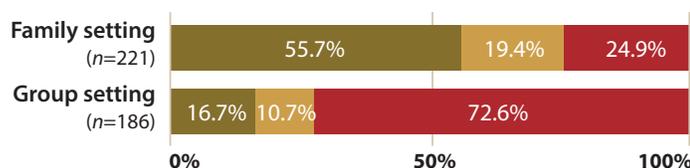
Went to a friend's house to hang out or sleep over



Went on school field trips



Took driver's education



What Gets in the Way?

Young people's perceptions of the barriers to their participation in normal activities are also informative. The barrier most often identified by survey respondents was "the rules of the placement I was in", with 58% of those surveyed identifying it as preventing them from being involved in normal activities. In some instances, rules are valid and put in place by some agency or person with authority. However, in some cases it may be that the youth perceived a barrier as a mandated "rule"; foster parents might be concerned about the liability of an activity and simply say no, or group care staff might not have time to drive each youth to their activities and simply say no. Other barriers identified by all survey respondents were cost (22%), transportation (21%), and getting permission (22%).

Just as the type of placement made a difference in the ability of a young person to engage in normal activities, it also has a noticeable effect on the perceived barriers to participation. Although the ability to participate in activities is higher, barriers are just as present for youth in foster families as in other types of placement. The fewest obstacles lie in the path of youth living in a kinship care arrangement. Nearly 42% of these youth said nothing was a barrier to normal activities.

Supporting Normalcy for Youth

It is now widely understood that young people between ages 14 and 25 must take on distinct social and developmental tasks to become healthy, connected, and productive adults. Young people who are removed from these tasks, or prevented from taking them on, have greater difficulty achieving success in school, work and life.

As the importance of participation in normal activities is increasingly recognized and valued, steps can be taken to ensure that youth in foster care are able to have a more normal life while in placement. By reducing the use of group care, states can significantly improve normalcy.

The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, signed into law by President Obama in September 2014, includes provisions that promote more normal and healthy experiences for young people in foster care.

The law requires states to develop a **reasonable and prudent parent standard** for decisions made by a foster parent or a

designated official for a child care institution. For many youth in foster care, activities like sports or sleepovers require the permission of the state and time to process a request. The reasonable and prudent parent standard should empower the foster parent or caregiver designated official of a child to make parental decisions – without additional permission and unreasonable fear of liability – that maintain the safety, well-being, and best interest of that child while encouraging participation in normal activities.

As Iowa moves to comply with the normalcy provisions of the federal Strengthening Families Act, a comprehensive approach to implementation is needed and should include, at a minimum, the following state policy changes:

1. Establish in state law a right for youth in care to engage in age or developmentally-appropriate activities regardless of placement type. Codify in law the definitions of “reasonable and prudent parent standard,” “age or developmentally appropriate activities,” and “caregiver”.
2. Address barriers to participation, including cost, transportation, permission, and liability issues. Clarify in law explicit liability protection for caregivers and private entities exercising the reasonable and prudent parent standard.
3. Require that the juvenile court make findings at all review hearings of engagement in normal activities and how barriers are being handled.

Endnotes

Juvenile Law Center, Promoting Normalcy for Children and Youth in Foster Care (May 2015) available at:

http://jlc.org/sites/default/files/publication_pdfs/JLC-NormalcyGuide-2015FINAL.pdf

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning from Foster Care (2011) available at:

http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Adolescent%20Brain_prepress_proof%5B1%5D.pdf

University of Chicago Law School, From Foster Care to Adulthood: University of Chicago Law School Foster Care Project’s Protocol for Reform (2008) available at:

<http://webcast-law.uchicago.edu/pdfs/fostercareprotocol.pdf>

About the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa:

Founded in 2000, [Youth Policy Institute of Iowa \(YPII\)](#) specializes in policies and programs for youth who have experienced foster care – especially those who are transitioning to adulthood. As a leading non-profit, intermediary organization, YPII partners with a wide variety of local, state, and national organizations to develop and promote policy, evaluate programming, and expand services that make a difference in the lives of youth. Whenever possible, YPII involves young people in change efforts to learn from their unique, real-life experiences.

YPII provides coordination, quality assurance, and evaluation activities for the [Iowa Aftercare Services Network \(IASN\)](#) and is the lead agency in Iowa for the [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#).