

Center  
for the  
Study  
of Social  
Policy

# EXPECTANT & YOUTH PARENTING IN FOSTER CARE



ADDRESSING THEIR  
DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS TO  
PROMOTE HEALTHY PARENT  
AND CHILD OUTCOMES

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# DOMAIN III:

## Identity Development



*Developmental Need 1: Forging a satisfying personal and parental identity and having experiences that enable one to feel like a “normal” adolescent*

**A**lthough an individual’s identity evolves over their lifespan, adolescence is typically the developmental period in which a youth’s sense of self transitions from an identity tied to their family, to one that is defined by friends, and finally, to an individualized, personal identity. An individual’s personal identity is his or her core sense of self. Specifically, it is “who I am” and “what defines me.” In efforts to forge their personal identity, adolescents need to have experiences that help them to reflect on and make initial decisions about their racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, sexual orientation and gender identities; discover and explore their strengths, interests, talents and abilities; shape their beliefs, values and character; develop realistic goals; and consider their future.

However, achieving a clear and satisfying sense of “who I am” may be challenging for expectant and parenting youth in foster care. For example, youth in foster care may have the challenge of developing their racial or ethnic identity outside of their biological family or even outside of their racial or ethnic group. “Without these anchors, many youth identify instead with the culture of foster care and feel forced to adapt and change who they are based on their living situation” (Casey Family Programs, 2010, p. 3-4).

In addition, expectant and parenting youth in foster care have the challenge of developing their personal identity in a context of past, and perhaps present, trauma. Thus, the services and supports they receive should help them define themselves beyond their trauma; that is, to understand

and really believe “I am not my trauma.” Expectant and parenting youth in foster care need services that help them to reduce any overwhelming emotions, heal from the trauma that can continue to impact their lives as well as their own parenting, make new meaning of their trauma history and current experiences, increase understanding of themselves and gain a greater sense of control over their lives (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012).

It is important for all expectant women to have a positive maternal identity. “Self-perceptions of parenting are important because how mothers perceive themselves and whom they can depend on may influence the type of parent they become” (DeVito, 2007, p. 17). Maternal identity is an ongoing process of becoming a mother in which the mother develops an attachment to the infant, acquires competence and confidence in her caregiving tasks and then comes to feel joy and pleasure in her role. Typically, the parental identity of young parents is perceived by adults as rather limited or negative. Parenting youth are often regarded as uncertain about their roles as parents, frustrated or overwhelmed by the demands of taking care of a child, irresponsible, uncaring or at-risk of making poor decisions that impact their own and their child’s life (Weed & Nicholson, 2015).

The difficulties of teenage parenthood, however, are not the whole story. The challenges of being a young parent are often accompanied by significant personal growth and satisfaction. Many young parents indicate that having a child motivated them to cease risky or antisocial behaviors



and lifestyles, and imbued their lives with a newfound sense of purpose, maturity, and responsibility. (Price-Robertson, 2010, p. 1)

Similarly, several studies that focused on the self-perceptions of adolescent mothers (Lesser, Koniak-Griffin, & Anderson, 1999; SmithBattle, 2000; Spear, 2001) found that some young mothers regarded motherhood in a positive way in that their child was someone to live for and care for. Motherhood provided hope for a better life for the mother and her child, and they looked to the future with optimism about their lives because their child was an incentive to do well. Furthermore, motherhood served as “a catalyst that anchors the self, fosters a sense of purpose and meaning, and provides a new sense of future” (Spear, 2001, p. 35).

Like most adolescents, expectant and parenting youth in foster care want to fit in with and have experiences like their peers. However, they may be faced with a double stigma—being a pregnant or parenting adolescent and being in foster care—that makes it hard for them to be accepted and to feel “normal” (The National Campaign, n.d.). For example, reports indicate many young mothers feel judged or experience hostility in their interactions with adults in educational, social service or healthcare settings (Price-Robertson, 2010). Similarly, Basca (2009) stated, “foster youth feel stigmatized for being part of the child welfare system and desperately seek to avoid being ‘found out’” (p. 13). Regarding the issue of normalcy, one youth in foster care stated:

*We should have the same opportunity to succeed academically as other students and receive the educational services we need. We change schools so many times that we often cannot graduate on time.*

*We rarely can attend football games, school dances or after-school tutoring programs. It is difficult to make friends and keep them because we move around so much.*

(The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, n.d., p. 8)

Thus, expectant and parenting youth in foster care need support and opportunities for normal adolescent experiences (The National Campaign, n.d.). New federal legislation, signed into law September 29, 2014, affirms this need for normalcy.

***The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (H.R.4980)***. . . . *requires states to support the healthy development of youth in care through implementing a “reasonable and prudent parent standard”. . . . This standard provides designated decision-makers with the latitude to make parental decisions that support the health, safety, and best interest of the child. These include involvement in extracurricular, cultural, enrichment, and social activities, including opportunities for safe risk-taking, like those typically made by parents of children who are not in foster care. Through this standard, the act intends to promote “normalcy”—the ability to engage in healthy and developmentally appropriate activities that promote well-being—for all youth in care.*

(CSSP, 2014b, p. 1)

## Developmental Need 2: Envisioning and exploring a positive future identity and the pathways to achieve it

One important change that occurs during the period of adolescence is the ability of youth to envision near and future “possible selves,” in addition to their current sense of self (Frazier & Hooker, 2006). “Possible selves represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Langford and Badeau (2013) stated that an important component of healthy development and well-being for youth in foster care is “feeling a sense of hopefulness, seeing opportunity in the future, and realizing success” (p. 18).

However, studies have found that for both youth in foster care and expectant and parenting youth, having a positive future identity and taking the steps to achieve future goals may be very challenging. For example, Rothenberg and Weissman (2002) found that expectant and parenting youth might experience feelings of hopelessness and helplessness because they cannot envision pursuing higher education or a career as being within their reach. DeVito (2010) concluded that even when adolescent mothers expressed awareness of the benefit of completing school or finding employment, “they did not describe any definite plans for the future. Instead, their focus was on the present, and the future still seemed far away from the demands of the new-parent role they were currently dealing with in their life” (p. 30). Love and colleagues (2005) found that, similar to youth not in foster care, expectant and parenting youth in foster care think about their future goals but they may still act on present impulses, such as having

unprotected sex without regard to the consequences.

Thus, expectant and parenting youth in foster care need opportunities to envision, explore and conscientiously work with purpose and optimism toward positive, attainable and meaningful future possibilities for themselves. Oyserman and Fryberg (2006) recommended two essential experiences to help youth reflect on and realize their future aspirations:

1. **Identifying both positive images of the selves they desire to become and negative images of the selves they wish to avoid becoming.** If the selves that youth want to strive for are not balanced by selves they are afraid of becoming, this “may mean that youth are more likely to act without taking into account possible negative consequences for a possible self. This oversight is likely to result in surprise and bewilderment when attempts to attain a positive possible self results in unforeseen negative consequences for the self” (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006, p. 4).
2. **Identifying specific action plans to achieve their expected selves and avoid becoming like their feared selves.** This can serve youths’ ability to self-regulate by focusing on goals, linking future aspirations with responsible present behaviors, and lessening the influence of distractions that could prevent reaching one’s goals.



***Parenting youth are often regarded as uncertain about their roles as parents, frustrated or overwhelmed by the demands of taking care of a child, irresponsible, uncaring or at-risk of making poor decisions that impact their own and their child’s life. The difficulties of teenage parenthood, however, are not the whole story.***





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