

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 V:

## Preparation for Parenthood and Self- Sufficiency



*Developmental Need 1: Completing high school or a high school equivalency program, completing college or vocational training, securing employment with a livable wage, building healthy life skills and learning to balance work and parental roles*

The federal Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 provides funds to states and tribes to help prepare current and former foster care youth in their transition to adulthood and assist them with the cost of postsecondary education. States and tribes are required to implement activities and programs to help youth in and transitioning out of foster care achieve self-sufficiency, such as help with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support and assured connections to caring adults (Children's Bureau, 2012). "Although the Chafee foster care independence program provides a range of services that could be expected to adequately prepare youth for the transition to adulthood, data have shown that only about two-fifths of eligible foster youth receive independent living services, with services varying significantly among the states" (Freundlich, 2009, p. 4).

For example, Courtney and et al. (2011) reported, "The outcomes of the Midwest Study participants at age 26 suggest that young people are aging out of foster care without the knowledge and skills they need to make it on their own" (p. 114). Similarly, nearly all of the studies of former foster youth reviewed by Courtney (2009) indicated that they face many challenges in achieving a successful transition to adulthood based on such indicators as education, financial independence, employment, income, and housing stability. Problems in any of these domains can affect success in other domains and overall. . These findings suggest that programs and services for expectant and parenting youth in foster care should address their parallel

roles as adolescents, young parents and youth in foster care as they work to become self-sufficient adults; in particular, providing guidance about:

- Completing school or a high school equivalency program
- Completing college or vocational training
- Securing safe, stable housing
- Finding high quality child care
- Connecting to a network of trusted and caring adults
- Connecting to supportive peers
- Receiving workforce preparation
- Assessing and building on one's strengths
- Acquiring life skills needed for independent living (e.g., budgeting)
- Pursuing job opportunities and securing employment with a livable wage
- Learning to balance work and parental roles
- Accessing adequate health and mental health care for themselves and their child
- Building knowledge about parenting and child development
- Receiving counseling about legal rights as a youth in foster care who is also a parent
- Healing from emotional trauma that could continue to impact their lives and their parenting

Despite the challenges that youth in foster care may



face, many are able to achieve success (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Several researchers (see Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Hauser, 1999; Osgood et al., 2010) suggest that vulnerable youth who make a healthy transition into adulthood tend to be those who:

- Take an active role in forging their future and their success

- Display resilience despite stress, adversity or trauma
- Are successful in school
- Have support and encouragement from others
- Display positive character traits such as self-confidence and persistence

## *Developmental Need 2: Understanding the importance of and learning how to be a competent and nurturing parent*

What parents do and how they treat their children is often a reflection of the way they were parented. Thus, it is very important for expectant and parenting youth in foster care to reflect on the impact of their experiences on their own development and their beliefs about children and parenting and consider that there may be more effective ways of guiding and responding to their children. Likewise, they should learn about child development and effective, age-appropriate parenting practices. One of the goals of many programs for expectant and parenting youth in foster care is to provide supports and resources aimed at building their parenting capabilities and fostering attachment between the young parent(s) and the child (see CSSP, 2014c). However:

*Many parenting classes are essentially a generic intervention aimed at delivering psychoeducational content to the average parent, and they do not account for the needs, skills, and challenges faced by many of the parents who are involved with the child welfare system. For example, many of these parents experience symptoms of trauma themselves. The extent to which trauma interferes with cognitive processing*

*and interpersonal interactions is well demonstrated, but it has not been considered in the development of parenting class materials.*

(Casey Family Programs, 2012, p. 8)

Thus, professionals who work with expectant and parenting youth in foster care need specialized training in areas such as:

- strategies for presenting information in a manner that it will resonate with these youth
- adolescent development, including adolescent brain development
- child development, including early brain development
- the dual developmental needs of adolescents and young children
- strategies to promote youths' transition to adulthood while parenting
- strategies to facilitate father involvement when it is feasible
- trauma-informed care

Helping youth to gain knowledge about child development and develop positive parenting skills is particularly important given the recent advances in the fields of neuroscience, pediatrics, and developmental psychology. Scientists in these fields (see Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2010; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010, 2012; Shonkoff, 2009) have provided evidence about the critical importance of parents and other adults understanding early brain development and the impact of trauma on early brain development; engaging in interactive experiences that promote social-emotional development and encourage the acquisition and use of language; and providing nurturing parenting behaviors that promote secure attachments in young children.

According to these scientists, the foundation for intellectual, social, emotional and moral development is determined by the nature of the young child's experiences that shape early brain development. Early experiences shape the processes that determine whether children's brains will have a strong or weak foundation for later learning, memory, logical reasoning, executive functioning, self-regulation, expressing emotions, socialization and behavior control (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2010; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004a, 2004b; Shonkoff, 2009). Early experiences prepare the developing brain to function optimally when they include proper nutrition, regularly scheduled periods of sleep, physical activity and consistently promote warm, nurturing and responsive caregiving.

Such experiences promote the development of a secure attachment between the child and the parent; that is, a close, loving and enduring emotional bond between an infant and a parent that is essential for healthy development (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2010). Young children with a secure attachment develop a sense of trust, feel safe, gain self-confidence and

are able to explore their environments because they learn that they have a person who will help and protect them. "Early, secure attachments contribute to the growth of a broad range of competencies, including a love of learning, a comfortable sense of oneself, positive social skills, multiple successful relationships at later ages, and a sophisticated understanding of emotions, commitment, morality, and other aspects of human relationships" (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004a, p. 1).

In contrast, early brain development is compromised when there is a lack of adequate nutrition, physical activity, appropriate sensory stimulation, exposure to language and many words, warm and responsive child-adult interactions or social-emotional developmental experiences.

Hawley (2000) reported, "Infants and children who are rarely spoken to, who are exposed to few toys, and who have little opportunity to explore and experiment with their environment may fail to fully develop the neural connections and pathways that facilitate later learning" (p. 3). In addition, parental care that is inconsistent, unresponsive, hostile or rejecting gives rise to an insecure attachment. Young children with an insecure attachment display fear, distrust, anxiety or distress and are at risk for long-term adverse effects on brain development including developmental delays, cognitive impairments, conduct problems, psychopathology; and relationship challenges (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Shonkoff, 2009). Understanding the nature and importance of early brain development enables young parents to know what children need most to thrive and succeed in school and in life. These needs are specifically, "nurturing, responsive, reliable, and trusting relationships; regular, predictable, and consistent routines; interactive language experiences; a physically and emotionally safe environment; and opportunities to explore and to learn by doing" (CSSP, 2013d, para. 6).

### *Developmental Need 3: Being aware of one's rights as an expectant and parenting youth in general, and those of youth in foster care, if one is in care*

In addressing the legal status, rights, and responsibilities of adolescents involved in the child welfare system, Katz (2006) stated:

*Teenage parents have most of the same rights and responsibilities as parents of any age. All parents, even when they are under age eighteen, have a constitutional right to the care and custody of their children and the right to make important legal*

*decisions about their children. . . . (But) due to their status as minors, meeting the obligation to provide for and protect their child is sometimes difficult for teenage parents. On the one hand, teen parents' rights are limited in a variety of different ways, simply because of their status as children in the eyes of the law. . . . In other contexts, however, teenagers are treated as fully mature adults, who are competent to make decisions,*



*accountable for their choices and entitled to no special accommodations.* (pp. 537-538)

For expectant and parenting youth in foster care, knowing their legal rights is an important part of gaining a sense of control over their lives, being active participants in the decision-making process that affects their lives and the lives of their children, and using their voice to advocate for themselves and their children (Harrison, 2015). Although specific legislation may vary from state to state (see Benjamin et al., 2006), in general, there are numerous laws, policies and regulations relevant to expectant and parenting youth, regarding such matters as:

- a pregnant student's right to education and required school attendance
- establishing paternity

- eligibility for publically funded child care
- minors' rights to make health care decision about their child
- custody
- unmarried parents' rights to visitation
- eligibility for public assistance.

In addition, there are laws, policies and regulations relevant to expectant and parenting youth in foster care regarding access to health care, confidentiality of care, the right of an adolescent mother in foster care to have a placement with her child and the rights of fathers in foster care (Benjamin et al., 2006).

