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November/December 2014

Policies and Programs

Overview: Adolescent Independent Living Movement

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The sudden popular interest in older youths leaving foster care has created a temptation to believe that these young people, through participation in a single training program or similar effort, can progress through a complex set of adolescent life tasks at accelerated speed. Efforts to “fast forward” youths through a process, which takes less vulnerable adolescents years to complete, creates an expectation that few foster youths can meet. Effective independent living policies and programs create springboards, formed at the point of entry to foster care systems, from which youths can gain experiences that promote readiness for adulthood. We see a disproportionate number of black youths who have grown up in foster care and who have grown up in foster care and who have a discharge plan of independent living. Now the key principles to guide agency practices and foster parent training are to enhance the contribution of black foster parents in preparing foster adolescents to leave care. The black family with its tradition of

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Strengths of Black Foster Families

Foster Care Services

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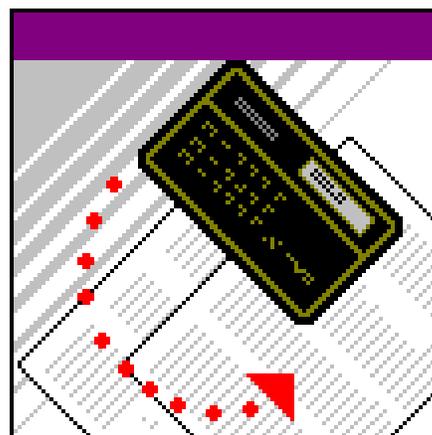
Foster care services have been target for child advocates and social reformers. The deficits of this and other components of the child welfare system have been acknowledged by key players at every level and by the general public. The services and programs that have evolved have been accused of taking neither a well-articulated, integrated direction and planning in consideration of families total needs, nor a purposeful course toward the achievement of clearly defined goals emphasizing the expressed value of family life.

Black Families

Black families and their children, who along with other minority groups are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, have been especially vulnerable to the effects of inadequate programs and services. The perspective that guided child welfare policy development in the past has emphasized self-reliance and individualism, thus failing to give sufficient influences on individual and

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valuing children emphasis on mutual help and capacity to cope with adversity is seen as the most appropriate setting for ensuring a young person's successful transition to adulthood.

Guidelines for Policy and Programs

Increased attention to the number of adolescents in foster care and their need to prepare for adulthood has resulted in a burgeoning of independent living programs. Currently several hundred agencies report the provision of services to help adolescents exit from out of home placement. This development has been spurred in part by the availability to the states of forty-five million dollars per year in federal money since 1985 under the "independent living initiative." Unfortunately, to date few efforts have been made to evaluate systematically the effectiveness of these services in preparing foster adolescents for competent adulthood. Evaluation studies should constitute a significant portion of the research agenda in child welfare. What has emerged from a number of studies of youths currently and formerly in and out of home care is a fairly clear picture of their various service needs. These findings building on the existing knowledge in child welfare and the experiences of administrators and practitioners in the field, suggest some policy and program responses to meeting these needs.

Use of a Youth Driven Approach

The need of young people in care should be the starting point for developing policies and programs. A youth driven approach is sensitive to the following aspects of achieving adulthood.

1. Individual developmental needs and strengths.
2. Attainment of both tangible and intangible skills.
3. Ethnicity and culture
4. Preparation for adulthood as a process

The implications of each of these aspects of a youth driven approach are considered below:

Individual Developmental Needs and Strengths

This aspect includes an understanding of and sensitivity to the developmental needs of all adolescents as well as those in foster care: recognition of the potential effect of the foster care experience on adolescents: program strategies to prevent, attend to or overcome any resulting deficits; and recognition that all adolescents in foster care experience grief and loss that they must be helped to manage. Assessing the developmental status of each young person in care and

basing a comprehensive case plan and services on his or her strengths and needs are of primary importance. Assessment of individual developmental needs and strengths should take in account that, of all the possible negative effects of foster care on development, none is more compelling than the grief and loss that seem to characterize the experience of every adolescent in foster care.

In addition past abuse, neglect, rejection, or loss may deplete a young person's psychosocial resources and undermine the development of skills needed for interdependence and independent sense of self. The universality of the experience of grief and loss among adolescents in foster care must be recognized and dealt with. Experiences of loss while in care must be minimized by fewer moves as much as regular contact with biological family members as possible and involvement of adolescents in making the essential attachment and connections to significant person's and groups needed for a secure future.

Attainment of both tangible and intangible Skills

These include "hand" (tangible) skills as well as "soft" (intangible) skills. Achievement of interdependence, the goal of services to adolescents in foster care, was identified as mastery of these skills to the extent that the young persons were self-sufficient, comfortable with themselves, satisfied with their connectedness to family, community and society. Services strategies that promote the attainment of both tangible and intangible skills include comprehensive skills assessment using the multiple opportunities for adolescents to develop both types of skills. It should be stressed that among the most important intangible skills are decision making, problem solving, self-control and the assumption of responsibility for their own actions. Now too often adolescents in foster care have been excluded from participation in important life decisions: other persons have been in control, stepping in and for example, finding a new placement when the old one breaks down. These teenagers have little opportunity for decision making and for predicting the consequences of decision options. For them "things just happen." The concept of empowerment provides a useful lens through which to view service strategies that are youth driven. This concept implies that adolescents play a central role in case planning and the review of their own progress in decisions about services to use as well in evaluating them, and more broadly as active participants in agency wide efforts as advisors, training consultants and even as mentors for younger adolescents in foster care.

PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

Agencies practice and foster parent training that enhances the contribution of foster parents to the preparation of black foster adolescents for competent adulthood need to have the following understanding:

1. First cares of unrelated children and informal adoption have been enduring traditions of black families, who view children as the collective concern of the community. These attributes can serve as assets in providing care for a wide range of children and youths
2. Interdependence and mutual supports, which are also characteristic of black families, can serve as models for the foster adolescent in the transition to successful adulthood, a transition complicated by the youth's minority group and foster care status.
3. Black foster parent's familiarity with negotiating the demands of two worlds and preparing their own children for successful functioning in these worlds, have enabled them to develop parenting skills that may be transferred to the fostering experience.

These guidelines derive from the experiences of a New York City child care agency in its implementation of a pilot project designed to improve services to black adolescents in care. The conceptual framework of the project was based on the premise that the family performs the essential function of preparing children for successful adulthood, underlying the assumptions that informed program practices acknowledged the strengths of the black family and the attributes that make it well suited to prepare the adolescent for interdependent community living.

In general, the project emphasized the partnership and collaboration between the agency and the foster parent. Innovative aspects of the project were its use of experienced foster parents in developing the program and a contractual placement model. Foster parents were viewed as an extension of the agency staff, acting as mentors and role models for the youths in their care rather than as substitute parents. The contractual placement agreement among the agency, the adolescent and the foster parent encouraged mutuality and further strengthened partnerships.

The project yielded principles and guidelines that are useful in program design and training of foster parents, particularly for work with black adolescents and families.

family functioning. This perspective has been reflected in foster care services that sought to rescue children from inadequate families, resulting in large numbers of black children being unnecessarily placed away from their own homes. These children were not always viewed as suitable candidates for adoption, nor did their families receive the kind of services that support their reunification. Consequently it is not surprising that permanent foster care became the reality for many of them and that we now see a disproportionate number of black youths who have grown up in care and who have a discharge plan of independent living.

Foster care has remained a service used primarily by poor, minority families whose problems are a result of poverty, compounded by the conditions of their environments. Therefore agencies need to equate their staff members with adequate knowledge about minority groups, their families, lifestyles and the relationship between family functioning and the social environment. Black foster care can be a valuable source of such knowledge to agencies and they are in a key position to advocate for services needed by youths approaching discharge from care in order to ensure that these services are provided in culturally sensitive ways.

Uniqueness of the Black Foster Family

The family is central to the life of every society and its best suited to perform the essential task of preparing children for successful adulthood. Perhaps the degree to which offspring are able to function as contributing members of adult society is an indirect measure of how well the family has carried out one of its fundamental purposes. Yet families cannot be understood separately from their environments and black families in America have historically functioned under the often dual burdens imposed by minority group and low economic status. The ecological perspective recognizes the influence that transactions with the larger systems of society have on individuals and families. It acknowledges the coping and adaptive capabilities of the individual and identifies the purpose of the helping process as focusing on those transactions, which by enhancing opportunities for growth and changes, promote an adaptive fit with the environment.

With the encouragement of their foster parents, this mutual support aspect of the black experience also emerged in the relationships among the youths who participated in and had support from black families and supports. Mutual aid and supports were also in evidence in the foster parent adolescent training groups, particularly in helping the youths to cope with fears about living on their own. Such an activity may seem common place, however many black foster youths have had few such experiences without the support of black foster parents and cultural supports. Because of this lack as well as fears of rejection, they often do not avail themselves of the services needed for living successfully on their own. At a practical level, this activity supported the development of another important life skill, being an effective adult.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

To gain competence in the many dimensions of adulthood, adolescents in foster care need a wide range of supports. These are generally provided by organizations that specialize in recreation, education, health and mental health care, employment and job development, housing, religion and the provision of personal social services..

IN CONCLUSION

We have discussed delineated guidelines for policymakers and administrators seeking to develop programs for adolescents in foster care. To meet the needs of these young people society's most vulnerable adolescents as they prepare for the challenges of adulthood. Programs must be guided by three key principles:

1. An understanding of and accounting for the factors associated with the experience of foster care placement.
2. The need of adolescents in care as the starting point for program development.
3. The centrality of the roles of foster parents in helping these adolescents to achieve competence.

Ethnicity and culture

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Cultural heritage is an integral part of self-identity; learning about cultural values and the ability to convey them to the next generation are an adult responsibility common to all ethnic groups. Moreover, preparation for adulthood is itself determined by ethnicity, as discussed. Policies and programs aimed at helping adolescents in foster care to prepare for interdependence must first recognize cultural differences and their importance to these adolescences. Second, the valuing of culture must be expressed systematically. This approach is essential given the high proportion of children of color in out of home placements. The following are components of programs that address culture and ethnicity:

1. Placing adolescents in foster families whose ethnicity is the same as that of the young person
2. Mobilizing resources of the foster families through training and other supports.
3. Hiring and training child welfare workers from among the ethnic groups served.
4. Develop supports for youth in the community for example: working with a black church congregation on a mentor program.
5. Ensuring that all agency staff members have opportunities to become ethnically competent, that is aware of their own culture and its effect on viewing others, i.e. being open to understanding other cultures. Having the ability to use cultural resources effectively.

QUOTES

The family, we were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together.

Erma Bombeck

If you feel like there's something out there that you're supposed to be doing, if you have a passion for it, then stop wishing and just do it.

Wanda Sykes

If we listened to our intellect, we'd never have a love affair. We'd never have a friendship. We'd never go into business, because we'd be cynical. Well, that's nonsense. You've got to jump off cliffs all the time and build your wings on the way down.

Ray Badbury

IN CONCLUSION

Preparation for emancipation and interdependence is a lifelong process. Families provide for children with in a nurturing supportive environment, the experiences that further a developing and incremental competence and mastery of life skills, within a complex social environment the transition to adult status has become increasingly difficult for all adolescents. For black foster adolescents this process is further complicated by their minority group as well as their foster care status. So service delivery strategies should therefore address those issues that create additional stressors for this group of young people.

Child welfare policies have traditionally developed with and absence of sensitivity to the special needs of minority group children. There is however the potential for developing, within the new concept of preparation for interdependency programs that capitalize on the strengths inherent in the black foster family and community. These can serve as natural resources for ensuring the adolescents successful transition to community living.

Black families have a long tradition of valuing children, because children are viewed as the responsibility of the collective community, these families show a proclivity of the care of unrelated children and the informal adoption of children. In mediating the demands of the larger society, black families have also developed coping, adaptive responses that place value on extended family and kinship ties, mutual support, self-help and interdependency. These attributes can serve as assets for promoting in the adolescent approaching discharge from foster care the development of an orientation to adult life that recognizes its interdependent nature and the need for connectedness to a vast network of relationships and institutions within the immediate and the larger community.

Agencies charged with the care of black foster children must develop policies and practices designed to enhance these assets and to use them for the fullest benefit of young people and their communities.

Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family: Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.