

AGED OUT

How We're Failing Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care

Summary of findings and recommendations

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A young man with dark hair, wearing a dark hoodie, is looking through a chain-link fence. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some structural elements. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“

The most stressful thing I've ever had in my life is moving from being a teenager to an adult. People still treat you like a kid, but you have the responsibilities of an adult.”

— 20-year old male-presenting foster youth, San Francisco

Introduction



INTRODUCTION

Between fall 2019 and spring 2020, Think Of Us partnered with Bloom Works to better understand the transition process for youth aging out of foster care. “Aging out” is what happens when young people are still in the foster care system when they reach the age of majority or graduate from high school.

We talked with over 200 young people and staff during 92 interviews and workshops.

Here are some of the insights we gathered...

[Read the full report on thinkof-us.org](https://thinkof-us.org)

WHAT WE LEARNED

We identified 3 urgent themes for the child welfare system to address:

1. Healing and dealing with trauma
2. Centering youth in their preparedness
3. Helping youth build a supportive network



1.

Healing and dealing with trauma



1. HEALING AND DEALING WITH TRAUMA

What we heard

- 100% of foster youth have experienced trauma, either at home or as a result of being removed from their home
- Young people in the foster care system are more likely to experience additional trauma
- The system isn't set up to provide a stable, nurturing environment needed for healing
- Young people need opportunities to grieve and a clearer path to improving their emotional well-being
- The system relies too heavily on medicating the symptoms of trauma instead of addressing and healing the root causes — or preventing additional trauma



“

Being taken away from your family is always an enormous trauma.”

— Court appointed special advocate [PS-SF-IN-02]



“

I wish the system tapped into finding me long-term healthy relationships...Not being a pill-pushing system, but teaching me yoga, meditation.”

— Former foster youth [FFY-RM-IN-03]



“

My mom died of a heart attack...at 32. She had cancer before that. She was like sick, sick, really sick... After that my great-grandmother died, and my brother and sister were removed from my dad's house.”

— Foster youth [FY-SO-WS-01]



“

The only constant in the child welfare system is change.”

— Program staff [PS-NY-IN-16]

1. HEALING AND DEALING WITH TRAUMA

What we can do

- Intentionally introduce a shared vocabulary for talking about loss
- Provide diverse tools and methods for healing from trauma
- Cultivate a supportive, stable environment that young people can depend on
- Engage youth as the experts in their own healing
- Encourage young people to share their stories of trauma and healing

2.

Centering youth in their preparedness



2. CENTERING YOUTH IN THEIR PREPAREDNESS

What we heard

- The system doesn't do a good job laying out a clear timeline and path for youth aging out of care
- Young people's priorities for transitioning out of foster care are often different from the system's priorities
- These priorities can go unrecognized and unsupported, making it difficult for youth to prepare for adult life in other ways
- Youth in foster care have ambitions for the future, but they are left on their own to figure out how to make their goals a reality



“

It's like “the social worker has to do everything.” I think we should be training our young people to do some of this. And if they fail, they fail. Then it's: how can we help pick them back up?”

— Case manager [PS-SC-IN-02]

2. CENTERING YOUTH IN THEIR PREPAREDNESS

What we can do

- Define preparedness from the perspective of young people
- Set youth-centered goals for transition
- Help foster youth plan out how they'll meet these goals

3.

Helping youth build a supportive network



3. HELPING YOUTH BUILD A SUPPORTIVE NETWORK

What we heard

- The system's focus on directly meeting the needs of foster youth can block opportunities for other caring adults to step in
- Foster youth have unpaid, supportive people in their lives
- Staff are often unaware of these outside relationships
- Young people will intentionally protect people in their lives from the system

A grayscale background image showing a group of young people sitting around a table, engaged in a collaborative activity. They are looking at a large sheet of paper with diagrams or maps on it. The image is dimmed to allow the text to be the primary focus.

“

I don't think the system helps preserve relationships. A lot of time, youth come into the system with more relationships than they leave with.”

— Youth Transition Conference team [PS-HC-IN-08]



“

Part of intake is to ask young people to identify how many support people they have. On a good day it's three people. It's only after you know them and talk to them that you get to see the support people. “Hey, it sounds like that person might have been a support person!”

— Program manager [PS-SO-IN-04]

3. HELPING YOUTH BUILD A SUPPORTIVE NETWORK

What we can do

- Work with young people to map their support networks
- Explore options for youth to be placed with an adult in their support network
- Facilitate external relationships by identifying opportunities for supportive adults to be a helpful, caring presence in young people's lives

What's next?

- Share these findings to build a sense of urgency for addressing these issues
- Encourage legislators to allocate resources that will fill gaps and improve services
- If you work in child welfare — consider these recommendations as you develop and implement new programs
- If you're an expert in trauma treatment or research — recognize youth in foster care as a specific population in need of tailored, evidence-based interventions

We all have a role to play.

Contact [Sarah Sullivan](#) to learn more.

Thank you.

To all of the young people and staff who shared their experience and expertise — you inspire us to do better.

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