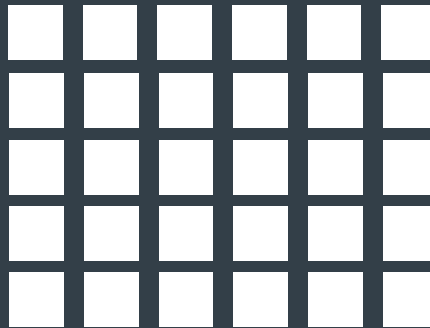


TYPS Sheet for Institutions Serving Youth in Foster Care
November 2018

In 2017, we interviewed **30 young adults** formerly in Texas foster care for the **Texas Youth Permanency Study (TYPS)**.



The majority of participants in our pilot study had significant lived experience in group home settings, residential treatment centers, and other congregate care institutions.

Recommendations from the TYPS Research Team:

Our primary finding is that no matter how youth leave foster care, relationships matter. Based on our findings, we have provided several recommendations for institutions and the people who work there to improve the way you engage youth living in these settings.

- 1** Even if you are only in the youth's life temporarily, authentically connect with the youth.
- 2** Maintain a healthy balance between structure and flexibility for youth.
- 3** Create an honest and authentic relationship with youth.



1

Even if you are only in the youth's life temporarily, authentically connect with the youth.

- Do not hesitate to have close relationships with youth
- Look towards the youth's future and work to promote a healthy transition to adulthood
- Address adversarial attitudes youth have with staff

You play a key role in shaping youth outcomes in both the short and long term. Staff might think that they shouldn't let a youth become too attached in an institutional setting since the placement is meant to be temporary. However, a healthy attachment and relationship with an adult help provide foundations for future relationships and they are critical for youth. In fact, forming strong relationships with residential staff was reported by youth in our study as a primary reason why they held a favorable view of institutions.

Youth in our study reported that authentic relationships are critical to ensuring positive well-being, promoting a sense of normalcy, and securing better outcomes as they transition to adulthood. There were several examples of residential staff who took a vested interest in youth's lives, which generated good experiences and forged strong relationships. The bottom line is that youth who feel respected will return that respect.

Unfortunately, many youth reported adversarial relationships with staff in institutional settings. Youth perception of their caregivers will greatly influence their behavior and impact their outcomes while living in foster care. We recommend addressing adversarial attitudes youth may hold through youth councils, house meetings and internal ombudsmen so that their voices are heard. We also recommend being honest about what the rules are and when you feel frustrated by the rules too.

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I remember when I met [the house parents] and I hit it off with them immediately. They were just really – [she] was really motherly and would teach us how to do things around the house and decorated the house nice and would come tuck us in at night and [he] was really full of energy. He would play with us outside. We'd play football all together as a household and teach us how to do things outside. It was just a lot of fun.

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[The house parents] actually bought a car for me to use and it was going to be mine had I actually stayed and graduated. I was paying the insurance. They would let me work. They kept up with my grades. I had to keep up with my grades and make sure I was passing. Like, they actually cared about how well I was doing and they wanted the best for me. I got to go to friend's houses. They trusted me, they bought me things, and not that that makes a big difference but I had lived in other foster homes where they wouldn't even buy me school clothes.

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I think the one thing that stood out to me the most, and the one thing that I realized is that just because you're in CPS does not mean you don't have a family. [In the institutional placement], all of the kids we were really, really tight knit. We'd take care of each other, and it was us versus the staff. Really, it's sad that it was like that. It was us versus the staff.

2

Maintain a healthy balance between structure and flexibility for youth.

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[The institutional placement was] very structural. Every day was the same. You wake up, you take a bath, you go and write how you're feeling, you eat, like, everything was very by some type of books because there was not really much time to just freelance and have fun and relax. Everything was like, now, okay now it's time for this, like a daycare. Now it's time for centers, okay, well now it's time for this. That's how it was.

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[T]he staff was really nice. They had a lot of activities there. They had a private school and the teachers were really nice. [...] I liked how they had a pool there. We would swim a lot and they had a little hair salon thing where they cut the girls' hair. Stuff like that.

- Promote age-appropriate developmental activities
- Be positive about friendships and relationships, including relationships with birth siblings
- Remember that youth will make mistakes and that learning through teachable moments are critical to youth development

Normalcy is simply the sense a youth has that he or she is 'normal.' Feeling normal in an institutional setting is hard. Institutional settings may find the push for normalcy to be a complicated challenge due to safety and other concerns. While not all institutional settings are heavily structured, the rigid structure found in some of these settings were viewed negatively by participants in the TYPS pilot. A lack of freedom was most often cited as the reason why some youth did not enjoy these placements.

Youth who had positive experiences in institutional settings described how staff were able to incorporate normal childhood activities during their stay. We encourage you to explore similar opportunities to bring a sense of normalcy into youth's lives by scheduling regular activities and outings for youth to have fun, experience social development, and strengthen relationships.

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I was in a couple of girl's homes and it was just okay. It wasn't too bad but most of the placements I lived in were like I didn't really have a whole lot of freedom to do things like most youth do or most normal children. That was always a big thing for me, wanting to do normal activities like go spend the night with friends and I just didn't get to have all that. So, I lived in group home type settings and all these things were required to be able to go and hang out with the friends, or whatever. I just didn't have those privileges.

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Having and spending time with friends is important to people. Positive peer relationships can offer a natural type of support that is necessary to youth development. We recommend that you consider allowing youth to continue existing friendships and support them in establishing new ones. It is important that staff are positive about relationships so that youth feel comfortable talking about those relationships. It is understandable that many youth would prefer to spend time with their friends outside of your setting. Unsupervised visits and activities youth might want to engage in may make some staff nervous, however they are important to self-determination and allow for youth to exercise proper decision-making.

In addition to relationships with peers, youth may have strong ties with their birth families or want strong ties. Once youth turn 18, most return to their birth families. Stay positive about the youth's birth family without trying to put a positive spin on everything. You want to avoid statements like "Don't you want to be better than your parents?" or "I just know your mom is doing everything she can to get you back." Instead, focus on what the youth likes about his/her parent and listen to any stories they tell about their parents.

3

Create an honest and authentic relationship with youth.

- Explain procedures and norms to help with transitions
- Allow youth time to open up about their experience
- Think about the context of behaviors before assigning consequences

Youth may understandably feel anxious when moving into a new environment, but you can facilitate a smoother transition for youth by preparing them on what they may experience when living in an institutional setting. We know that some youth who live in these settings may have severe behavioral challenges. Participants in the TYPS pilot reported feeling unprepared for behaviors they witnessed in other children. Their unsupported transition left them with largely unfavorable opinions about life in the setting, which led to poor experiences.

Educating youth about the behavioral challenges of other youth and encouraging them to speak with staff, therapists, and other adults about things they may witness will be beneficial to both you and the youth. Based on our study, very few people had a seamless transition into a new institutional placement. Explaining routines, especially important events like group therapy, are necessary to maximize effectiveness and compliance. Group therapy in particular is an effective strategy to help youth heal from trauma, but newcomers should not be rushed in to sharing intimate details of their experiences too rapidly as it may be harmful to them. Allotting a reasonable amount of time for youth to adjust to their new environment and educating youth about life in your setting will benefit the youth and leave a greater first impression.

Finally, it is critical to remember that adolescence is characterized by trying out new identities, pushing boundaries and seeking independence from adults. For foster youth, these developmental tasks are impacted by trauma they have experienced. When looking at youth mistakes or errors in judgement from an adult perspective, try to place the youth behaviors in the context of past trauma and where they are developmentally. Before consequences are given, seek to understand.

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It was one of my first times being [in an institutional setting], that whole time period just in foster care around all these kids, chaos. You got people fighting, you got people running away, pulling safeties [...] then you have people self-harming, you have people trying to commit suicide, all those things [...] It was chaos moving into more chaos with unfamiliar territory, so it brought a whole new level of here I am in chaos and I have no one listening to my voice. I have no one to turn to who I can trust. I don't know anyone. Everyone is against me. That's what it felt like.

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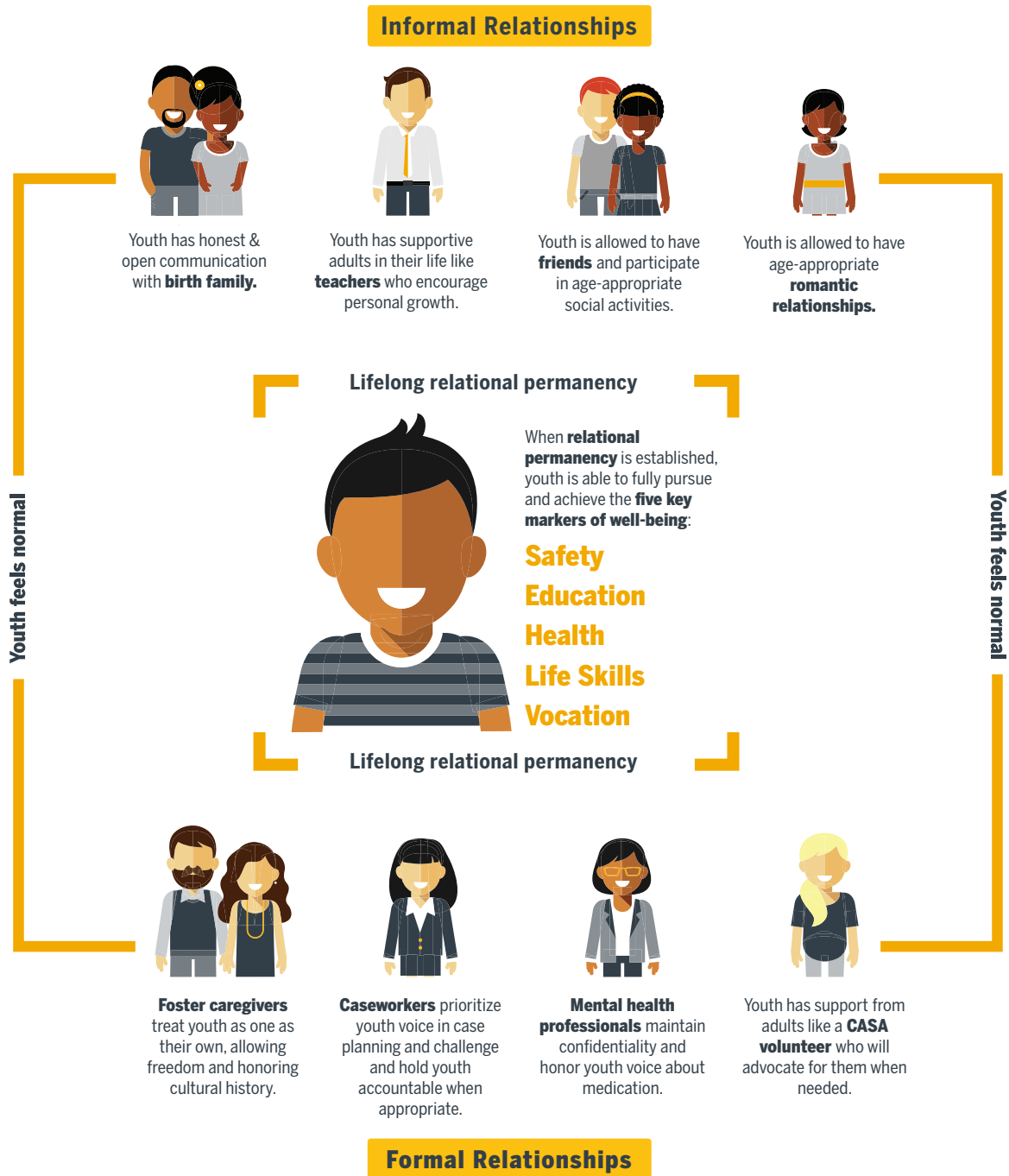
I mean my first day here, I was dropped off by my caseworker, I was stuck on a bed, and I was told that group is in an hour. I sat on my bed. I just sat there, and then finally a therapist comes in, says, "Hey, let's go to group." I sit on a couch in the corner. Everybody goes around and says their name, their favorite color and a rule. Then they come to me and I just started crying, and they just stared at me. I've never been in a place like this besides mental hospitals. So I don't have much to compare it to.

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Authentic Relationships Matter Most

Based on the 2017 TYPS pilot study, we believe through **informal** and **formal** relationships youth can begin to feel normal which creates **relational permanency**.



About TYPS

The Texas Youth Permanency Study builds evidence to better understand the realities of former foster youth entering young adulthood. In doing so, we are finding new ways of understanding permanency that will create foundations for youth to thrive in young adulthood regardless of how they leave foster care. In our pilot study, we interviewed 30 former foster youth in 2017 and released the pilot study report in March 2018. The purpose of this pilot study was to: 1) gather preliminary information around our conceptualizations of legal, relational and physical permanence; and 2) test our survey and interview protocols. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, The University of Texas at Austin (protocol #2016-10-0140). Sponsored by the Reissa Foundation and The Simmons Foundation.