

Intervention to improve foster families' lack of trust, connectedness

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The key ingredients for a successful foster family aren't complicated, said former foster youths in a new study. Most adolescents in foster care simply need a stable home life that provides a sense of belonging, love and someone who shows a genuine interest in their lives.

But the new study, by researchers at the University of Washington, also revealed that the most common challenges in foster families included overwhelmed foster parents and a lack of trust between caregivers and foster children.

"The biggest problem is the lack of connection. They don't trust each other," said Heather Storer, a doctoral student in the UW's School of Social Work who is lead author of the paper.

No shared history, what the researchers call a foundational bond, is partly to blame for the lack of trust. "With biological children, parents can say 'I remember when I brought you home from the hospital and all these dreams and wishes and goals I had for your life,'" Storer said. "Foster parents have good intentions, but they need better training on how to nurture relationships with their foster children."

The paper, to be published in an upcoming issue of *Children and Youth Services Review*, investigated whether foster families could benefit from a program designed to keep non-foster teens from drugs and other risky behaviors by strengthening family functioning.

The program, "Staying Connected with Your Teen," is a 10-week self-guided curriculum developed for families with eighth graders.

Researchers at the Social Development Research Group, an affiliate of the UW School of Social Work, have found that in non-foster families the program improved family connectedness and reduced adolescent drug use, early initiation into [sexual practices](#) and violent behaviors.

"'Staying Connected' helps parents talk about their hopes and expectations for the child and acknowledge the strengths the child brings to the family," Storer said. "Young people need opportunities for involvement in the family as well as recognition for their involvement."

But the program needed to be adapted to meet the specific challenges in foster families. As a first step, the researchers convened focus groups consisting of foster parents and relative caregivers, former foster youth aged 18-21 and state child welfare workers.

From these meetings, the researchers learned:

- Former foster youths felt "no bond" with their foster parents or the relationship felt "fake," like the parents were "getting paid to pretend to like me."
- Foster parents had a tendency to stigmatize the youth in their care. For instance, they feared that foster youths' "negative behaviors" would "taint" the home and "rub off" on their biological children.
- Foster children felt excluded from the family and treated differently than biological children. "I don't want to feel like the outside kid," one former foster youth recalled.
- Foster parents lack parenting resources and need more specific parenting skills. "Many foster parents couldn't tell the difference between normal teenage 'pushing your buttons' types of behaviors

and troubled adolescent behavior due to past life traumas," Storer said.

- Some foster youth felt that their foster parents lacked cultural awareness.
- Foster youth said that casual family activities, like ice cream outings and regular game nights, can help foster youth feel more connected to the family.

The researchers also learned that since [risky behaviors](#) often emerge earlier for foster youth, that the program would need to target a younger age group to prevent these behaviors before they begin. For instance, one former foster youth told the researchers how by age 13 – about grade eight – she started running away from foster homes and supporting herself through prostitution and selling drugs.

The researchers modified the 'Staying Connected' curriculum to include a series of 51 exercises that foster families can use to strengthen family relationships. They are now recruiting foster families to test the adapted 'Staying Connected' program with a randomized control trial.

Provided by University of Washington

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