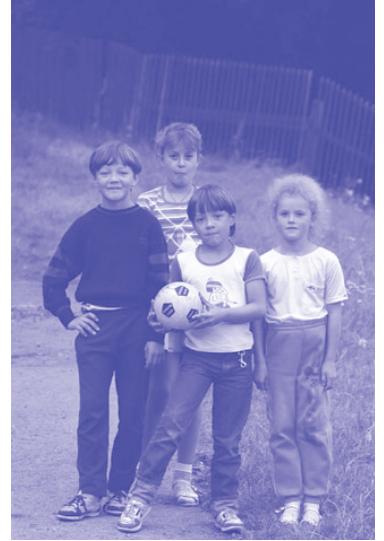


primer



national youth in care network

primer

*an issue and sensitivity awareness
report for caregivers and service
providers of youth in care*

*JORDAN ALDERMAN
RESEARCHER AND AUTHOR*

*national youth in care network
2003*

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author's note | 04

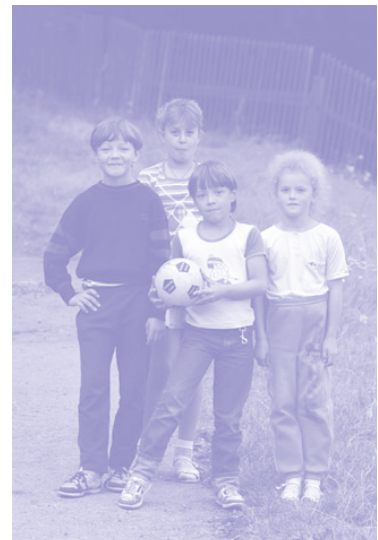
The process of writing this report has been an incredible journey. This journey began a mere two years ago when I packed my bags and headed to the National Youth In Care Network to work on "Primer". Just what was "Primer" and what was I getting myself into?

This project had been the desire of the staff at the National Youth In Care Network based on the critical demand by youth in and from care for a presentation that would enable current and prospective social workers insight into the actual "business" of living in care. Classrooms as a point of entry enable theory and discussion to occur but what about the real experiences, the real consequences of actions? Primer has been designed to complement "speak outs" by providing a model of disclosing experiences based on existing research and providing youth with the training and practice to talk openly with those in the helping professions regarding the "in-care" experience.

"Primer, an educational sensitivity and awareness presentation" is so much more than a presentation. The stories and experiences of youth in care have been captured throughout this document. The voices of current and past youth in care illustrate the incredible resilience and desire to survive, to make the system better and to educate all of those connected to the system.

The names of the contributors in this report have been changed to protect the identity of those who have shared with us their experiences. The stories are composites of many that we have heard over the years and represent an accurate portrayal of very poignant experiences for the youth involved.

Their courage and willingness to share their stories has changed my life forever.



05 | acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following people who were instrumental in the design, development and completion of this project.

First and foremost, all of the youth who participated in the survey, thank you for sharing your stories and experiences. Thank you for trusting us with your information.

I would like to thank all of the young people who have been trained in presenting "Primer". Thank you for your dedication, commitment and enthusiasm for the project.

I would like to thank the staff of the National Youth In Care Network for believing in this project, for proceeding despite difficulties with the project and for giving me a chance to work on behalf of the Network. Thanks so much to everyone for the countless revisions, late night chats, design and more revisions, guidance and of course patience throughout this process. I would like to especially recognize Lynda for your insight and management, Jade for your dedication and your fine-tuning, and Shelagh, for your recommendations and problem-solving skills, thank you so very much.

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Thank you to Holly Clark, our trusted editor.

I would like to extend a thank you to Susan Reid-MacNevin, my mentor and advisor from St. Thomas University for introducing me to the National Youth In Care Network and for her encouragement to move.

Thank you to the Board of the National Youth In Care Network for believing in, supporting and encouraging this project. Thank you to Lorena Pilgrim, Past President of the Board, for your insight and guidance.

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Without the contributions of the Laidlaw Foundation and the Ontario Trillium Foundation this project would have never been. Thank you very much for supporting this project.

To Violetta Ilkiw and Nathan Gilbert at the Laidlaw Foundation, thank you for personally and professionally encouraging this project. For the opportunities to discuss the project, the progress, the challenges and for providing us a venue to showcase the project to a wider audience, as well as your continued support for the project.

To my family and friends back home who supported me in moving to Ottawa and for the countless hours talking long distance.

To my roommates listening to me as I talked about ideas for hours and hours and hours (or at least pretending to!) thanks so much.

To all of those who have supported this project in big and small ways, thank you kindly.

Respectfully,

Jordan Ann Alderman

national youth in care network | 06

Still more reasons arose as to why a youth in care network is necessary. With the incredibly heavy workload facing most social workers it is inevitable that young people in care lose their individual "personhood". They become file numbers, pegs to be fitted into whatever slot the system dictates. What the young delegates finally decided upon was that nobody knows better than youth themselves. The best way to more fully understand young people in care is to invite their input, their feelings, and their concerns on being "in aid". There is often a wide chasm between what social workers and board members believe they are doing and what is actually happening. The best way to determine whether proper care and maintenance is being provided is to ask the people best equipped to know-the people receiving care.

Excerpt from "from the roots up" Brian Raychaba

WHO IS THE NATIONAL YOUTH IN CARE NETWORK?

The National Youth In Care Network is a national charitable organization completely driven by youth in care (14-24 years of age) across Canada. We are a "by youth, for youth" organization: all of our board members, staff (save one administrative staff) and members, are young people, aged 14-24, who are in or from government care. Government care includes the child welfare and protection systems, children's mental health systems, and young offender systems.

Since 1985 we have conducted research, produced publications, worked on policy issues, advised child welfare professionals, and supported the development of over 70 provincial and community level youth in care networks in Canada. We provide programming in the areas of networking, advocacy and education.

NETWORKING AND SUPPORT...

The NYICN supports networking on two major levels. First by supporting the growth of local and provincial youth in care networks (YICNs). Right now there are over 70 of these provincials and local networks across Canada. Part of networking is membership support, for both YICNs and youth in care. One way that the NYICN supports our members is by holding national training event and healing conferences.

The NYICN also produces resource manuals like the network connection, a manual created to assist youth in care in the creation and maintenance of their own YICNs.

The NYICN supports individual members. There is a regular newsletter, The Networker, which is written by and for youth. What's more is that members who do not have local support can count on the people at the NYICN to keep in touch by phone.

07 | *national youth in care network*

Advocacy....

For us, "advocacy" means creating opportunities for youth to have their say in decisions that affect their lives that are usually made by other people. This involves teaching strategies and providing opportunities for youth to be confident and equipped to participate in decisions regarding them.

We assist youth in care with the advocacy of their own rights through rights awareness training and through peer-assisted involvement in case management.

Through networking, we can create a "united voice." One way of presenting this united voice to the public is through media opportunities and presentations. The public needs to become aware of the issues that youth in care face in order for there to be pressure on decision-makers to change public policy and legislation so that it better addresses the issues of youth in care.

Education....

While being successful or unsuccessful in school does not always guarantee success or failure in life, most of the time success in life and success in school go hand in hand. Because of this link we are concerned with finding out the specific educational support needs of youth in care. The NYICN conducts research to find out how to better support youth in care to improve their chances of success, both in school and in life.

We also administer the Ken Dryden Scholarship, which covers up to 80% of the cost of post secondary tuition and fees to a maximum of \$3,000, renewable annually for selected youth in and from care.

Not only are we concerned with the education of youth in care, we are also concerned with the education of the care takers of youth in care such as social workers and foster parents. We believe that it takes the sharing of real stories to properly sensitize current and future caretakers to the issues that youth in care face. To this end, we create opportunities for youth in care to tell their stories to others. Through this dialogue we hope to give caretakers a better idea of the challenges facing youth in care.

The National Youth In Care Network exists to nourish the development of Youth In Care Networks across Canada, while helping our members find their voices and regain control over their lives through support, skill building, and healing opportunities. The NYICN also exists to voice the opinions and concerns of youth in and from care and promote the improvement of services provided to this group.



CHILD WELFARE STATISTICS

On any given day, there are over 76,000 young people in the care of child welfare authorities in Canada.

The most common reasons for going into care are abuse (physical, sexual, emotional) and neglect. Other reasons such as death or illness of parents, and serious emotional or mental health problems in a child are also reasons for being placed in care.

Child abuse and family violence impact on many areas of a young person's life. These include areas such as psychological, physical, behavioral, academic, sexual, interpersonal, self-perceptual, spiritual, and subsequent violence. The effects of child abuse can last a lifetime and greatly diminish a child's chances for optimum achievement in life.

09 | *primer project description*



Primer is a project that has been designed to teach social workers, those already working and those training to be in the field, how to be more sensitive to young people growing up in care.

The project is based on a survey of 50 young people in care from across Canada. The youth were asked to talk about three main issues they feel they face as young people in care. They were also asked to talk about what their "ideal" social worker looks like and how they can work with young people better.

Primer is a "speak-out" in that it brings together experts: young people in care join with social workers to talk about this distinct experience. Primer, however, differs from other "speak-outs" in some very important ways. Traditional speak-outs incorporate the whole story including why young people have come into care. Primer does not. In Primer we focus on the experience of being in care and how this experience could be better for the next group of youth in care. Primer also offers very concrete ways that social workers in the field and those who are in school can change the way they interact with young people to make the care experience more positive. Primer includes both positive and negative experiences with social workers, foster parents, group home staff and/or others connected to the child welfare system.

Hopefully, by presenting a balanced message about what works and what doesn't, Primer will help workers be more attentive to the needs of young people. Primer provides an opportunity to hear first hand about experiences in the child welfare system but it also provides comments, insights and common themes faced by young people all across Canada.

*In Primer we focus on the
experience of being in care
and how this experience could
be better for the next group
of youth in care.*

youth in care consultation

10



The INTRODUCTION

Through a series of consultations with our membership The National Youth In Care Network has developed a sensitivity and issues training presentation for prospective social workers. There are many different types of social workers in the field; youth in care encounter many within the contexts of social services, mental health systems, correctional systems and the educational systems. It is important for future social workers to remember that regardless of which system they are working, their greatest responsibility is to advocate for youth in care.

The National Youth In Care Network has a mandate to educate and advocate for the rights of youth in care. A priority for the National Youth In Care Network is providing avenues where youth in care are able to deliver their story. This is accomplished by promoting, encouraging and creating opportunities for speaking engagements for young people in care. Through discussion and the sharing of life-experience information, youth will be better able to influence their situations. Primer has been designed to assist young people on their road to independence and emancipation from care as well as to provide healing opportunities. In addition, Primer is intended to increase the number and quality of empathetic interactions between social service providers and young people in care. The unfortunate reality remains that until abuse and neglect are eradicated from the lives of young people and society as a whole, the system and those who work within need to be responsible for the children in its care.

The METHODOLOGY

The project team decided that a survey of youth in care from across Canada would unearth the issues youth in care are currently facing. The researchers asked a series of questions under the umbrella themes of:

- (1) issues facing youth in care,
- (2) qualities that a social worker must possess, and
- (3) systemic issues such as rights and abuses.

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The analysis of the information is qualitative and themes are drawn from the recurring comments of the young people who were interviewed.

Kim Snow, a child and youth care practitioner and researcher at Ryerson University, provided academic guidance. The survey questions were designed to obtain the greatest amount of information with the least amount of intrusion into the lives of the young people.

The LIMITATIONS

One of the difficulties in conducting the telephone interviews was directly correlated to the issue of transiency. Youth in care are frequently moved from placement to placement (for example from one foster or group home to another). These moves often occur with no warning to the young person, and under circumstances of crisis. Understandably, members often do not advise us of their change of address. Our membership contact data is in constant flux, and research staff have often found such information as telephone numbers to be out of date. To address this challenge, additional focus groups were conducted.

This study is not an extensive assessment of all the needs of youth in care, and does not address the specific needs of sub-populations. However, it does bring to light several key recurring themes; these have been presented in literature over the last thirty years as identified by academics as well as the experts: youth in care. The consultation with the membership was an opportunity to engage with youth in care members in dialogue and provide a positive way for youth to have a voice in an educational sensitivity and issues training program for prospective social workers.

The SURVEY

The survey respondents were members of the National Youth In Care Network. Youth In Care members are youth between the ages of 14 to 24 that are or have been in some form of government care.

Primer has been designed to assist young people on their road to independence and emancipation from care as well as to provide healing opportunities. In addition, Primer is intended to increase the number and quality of empathetic interactions between social service providers and young people in care.

youth in care consultation

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The RESULTS

There were five key recurring issues:

1. Moving
2. Leaving Care
3. Stigmatization
4. Voice
5. Emotional Healing

The following chart highlights the parallels between the respondents of the National Youth in Care Network Survey with our academic literature scan. Many of the youth respondents were not aware of the existing research and literature examining the challenges and struggles faced by youth in care which demonstrates the prevalence and persistence of the issues within the child welfare system.

Comparison of Current Issues (Survey 2001) to Trends of Past Twenty-Five Years

YOUTH IN CARE SURVEY Primer, National Youth in Care Network, 2001	QUALITATIVE AND NARRATIVE RESEARCH Who Cares? Young People in Care Speak Out, 1977; To Be On Our Own, National Youth In Care Network, 1988; Report by the Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy, 1992; Pain...Lots of Pain, National Youth In Care Network, 1993; Voices From Within: Youth Speak Out, Advocacy Office, 1998
Moving	Transiency/Moving
Stigmatization	Stigma
Voice	Voice
Emotional Healing	Personal Relationships
After Care	Extended Care and Maintenance
Restraints (Physical and Chemical)	Systemic Abuse

There were five key issues that were consistently mentioned throughout the consultation process.

- 1. Moving*
- 2. Leaving Care*
- 3. Stigmatization*
- 4. Voice*
- 5. Emotional Healing*

13 | issues currently facing youth in care



Chapter Design:
Issue
Quotes
Personal Story
Implications
Recommendations

#1 MOVING/TRANSIENCY

Issue:

Frequently children are bounced from service to service, because they have multiple needs and the agency has a limited mandate...Some children move through all these three systems (corrections, child welfare, mental health) according to different professional diagnoses of their problems. Children are frequently adrift in the service system, particularly in foster or institutional care.

Marilyn Callahan (p. 37, To Be On Our Own)

The youth who participated in the consultation coined the term "placement bouncing" for this phenomenon of constant moving from group home to group home or foster home to foster home.

The detrimental effects of transiency can be seen in the lack of stable personal relationships and the inability to trust. Without a constant environment it is difficult to build stability in outside aspects of the youth's life. This detrimental effect is also obvious in the research related to school permanency and after care successes.

Each time a youth moves, he or she must readjust to a new foster family or group home setting. The move may also mean a readjustment to a new school or even a new school board. This can take away from the time and attention that they are able to focus on school, both academically and interpersonally.

(p. 5, Who Will Teach Me To Learn)

Placement breakdowns occur for a multitude of reasons. There are systemic issues such as mismatched placements, lack of emergency beds, and abuse within the care setting. There are personal reasons that placements break down such as emotional or behavioral problems and lack of support for foster parents and young people. This lack of stability affects their ability to feel safe and secure and develop personal attachments that may ward off emotional and behavioral problems over time. The cyclical nature of perceived rejection, acceptance and rejection affects a youth's ability to form secure attachments that would act as a protective factor for their overall well-being.

Quotes:

"I think that the amount of times that we are forced to move is an issue."

"I'd say too much moving around."

"Instead of dealing with problems, they ship us from group home to group home."

Elizabeth's Story:

Elizabeth was brought into care before the age of 5. Like so many other youth in care, she was relatively happy in her foster home. However, due to her tender age and the forming of attachments, she was moved abruptly to a new home during the night so as to avoid any undue upset. This is still a vivid memory for her and questions remain surrounding the move and the timing. As has been related to us in the past, moves like this take place quickly and without warning in order to alleviate prolonged negative emotional impact. Unfortunately, the memory of the moves is traumatic and long-lasting.

Implications:

The underlying principle is that stability is vitally important, and that being uprooted and displaced is discouraging and unhelpful. There is a need to feel safe and secure in an environment where there is care, respect and trust. If a move has to take place, youth would like to be included in the decision making process with time to prepare to be moved from one placement to the next. Having some preparation time can decrease the damaging effects of the move.

Youth should be moved as infrequently as possible. They should be moved to placements that have been assessed as appropriate for their personality and temperament. Social service providers need to work closely with youth to ensure that the placement is positive and in the best interests of the child. Not every placement is in the best interest of the child. It is the determination of the most appropriate moves that will most positively counteract the feelings of transiency and lack of permanency.

The recommendations are in some instances what practices are in effect according to the standards of individual child welfare agencies. However, the fact that they are recurrent concerns means more effort has to be made to maintain empathetic and informed interactions with the youth in care populations.

Recommendations:

1. Consult with youth regarding their placement options
2. Preplan visits with youth and placement option(s)
3. Show consideration and sensitivity for youth who have to be moved



15 | issues

#2 LIFE AFTER CARE

...after you leave care you have nobody to depend on, there is no college fund set up, you don't have someone to fall back on when you fuck up and you have no where to go.

Issue:

Transition age youth are those youth that are approaching or have passed the age of majority and must prepare for the transition to independence. Each province and territory has their own legislation governing the age range and benefits each young person can receive as well as their own rules regarding financial support for those who extend their care services for the purposes of achieving higher education. (See Child Welfare in Canada) Common terms around Canada for after care services include: extension of wardship, post guardianship services agreement, care and maintenance agreement, post majority services program, and extended care and maintenance (Child Welfare in Canada, Federal-Provincial Working Group on Child and Family Services Information).

The issues raised by the youth respondents in relation to "life-after care" center around financial and emotional support requirements.

A normally disruptive period in the lives of all young people is made even more disruptive for youth in the process of leaving care. All formal support networks are dismantled with termination of care: the result is added instability during a period of fast-paced changes. The young person must leave the group home or institution regardless of how long he/she has called it "home". Foster care is also terminated; the foster parents are no longer paid and the individual is very often asked, in fact expected, to leave as well. Without the financial assistance of children's aid society or social services, most foster parents are economically unable to maintain the fostered individual past the age of majority.

(p. 54, *To Be On Our Own*)

Youth who are at the age of majority without extended care and maintenance are symbolically and literally dumped out of the system. Many youth commented on their fears and anxieties over their futures with a lack of life skills and independence training. Also with a lack of financial and emotional support, the road can be long and winding. In fact, being able to make it through high school to be able to consider post-secondary education or training is extremely difficult. A more long-term plan of financial and emotional support is imperative. The educational needs of youth cannot be effectively separated from their personal and social needs. (p. 3, *Who Will Teach Me To Learn?*)

Quotes:

"A lot of issues. The main ones aren't to do with youth in care but what is going to happen to me after. So it is going to go-how am I going to make it, deal with this, without that support, without that extra well-being?"

"I'd have to say, transition period from leaving care. Another one is after you leave care you have nobody to depend on, there is no college fund set up, you don't have someone to fall back on when you fuck up and you have no where to go."

"Financial assistance with the extended care and trying to get through school and into some type of trade or profession. Like going to college, trying to figure out how you are going to get a job, what you are going to do after being in care."

"Pressure at 18 to leave care."

Ben's Story:

Ben had to leave his foster home. In the meantime he was trying to set up arrangements for extended care and maintenance. He traveled everyday to school, which took him an hour each way from the shelter that he was living in. He was unable to access extended care and maintenance support as well as financial assistance to set up an apartment because he did not have a permanent address. But you can't set up an apartment without rent and many landlords won't rent to youth who receive money from the child welfare system or to young people between the ages of 16-18. He then got a part-time job, continued his schooling but was repeatedly denied extended care and maintenance services because he was living in a shelter. How does he end the cycle of living in the shelter without assistance at 17?

Implications:

Youth in care feel like they are being pushed out the door even though they aren't prepared. Youth in care have mentioned a strong desire for emotional and financial support even after their care has ended. This is indicative of a prevailing problem for each province and territory and their respective benchmark aged youth that are expected to leave care.

Young people have also mentioned that their ability to make mistakes and discover their own strengths and weaknesses can be hampered by strict rules and regulations that look for reasons to have young people prematurely emancipated from care. The role of social workers, foster parents and others involved in that young person's life is to guide their development and assist them through the trials and tribulations of adolescence without the constant stress and worry about "being perfect".

Youth who are making progress - whether it is academic, professional or creative - should be supported. A broader outlook on measures of success should be created so that the academically privileged are not the only ones provided with opportunities. Rutter states:

"Our findings on the benefits stemming from positive school experiences (49) suggest that "tasks" should be interpreted very broadly in this connection to include such "accomplishment" as social success, the taking of positions of responsibility, and success in non-academic pursuits (sports, music, craftwork, etc.) as well as traditional successes in examination performance." (P. 328, Michael Rutter, Psychosocial Resilience)

Recommendations:

4. Start a financial plan to assist youth with their academic careers or long-term planning for the future, including assistance with the identification of and application for financial assistance plans like scholarships.
5. Help youth connect with positive supporters in the community as soon as they enter the child welfare system who will be there as they navigate their time in care and prepare to leave care.
6. Be vigilant of the skills and competencies of each individual youth and support them on whatever path they choose; demand excellence from the skills they possess and ensure opportunities to develop the skills necessary for independence.

Youth in care feel like they are being pushed out the door even though they aren't prepared...The role of social workers, foster parents and others involved in that young person's life is to guide their development and assist them through the trials and tribulations of adolescence without the constant stress and worry about "being perfect".

17 | issues

#3 STIGMA OF BEING A YOUTH IN CARE

Issue:

The stigma attached to being a youth in care is an overriding concern for youth in care. They have already faced the challenge of being forced to leave their home because their home lives are disruptive and unhealthy for a multitude of reasons. Unfortunately for youth in care, the next challenge they face is trying to fit back into a society that asks them; "What did you do?"

Another recurrent comment made by youth in care during this consultation and other forums is the negative portrayal of them in their case files. The files do not necessarily portray an accurate overall picture of them. The system as it stands records mostly negative behaviors and attitudes because its resources - time, finances, and people - are limited. However, the pictures presented in each case file are often skewed negatively as a result.

In addition, youth in care are further stigmatized by their inability, due to money issues or constraints of group home life, to participate in extracurricular activities, sleepovers and other activities many teens take for granted. This further marginalizes and separates youth in care from their peers.

Quotes:

"I think sometimes the stigma of being in care: it's hard, it takes a lot of work and effort and good people to support youth"

"The way the public looks at youth in care: the public has a lot of stereotypes, they don't understand youth in care."

"Public opinion: the public needs to know that a youth in care is not a bad person, but just someone who has had a hard life and social workers need to have enough time to get to know youth and what they are going through."

Marguerite's Story:

After several placements, Marguerite was placed in a "typical family" foster home. This foster home had a mom, a dad, two daughters and two dogs. The family was expressive and affectionate, something most teenagers shy away from anyway. She was constantly pressured to be part of the "family" and when she politely refused as she already had a family, she was labelled in her case file as attachment disorder without context.



Implications:

Social service providers need to be more aware of these, and other, underlying issues facing youth in care. There is a need to reach out to the broader community in an advocacy role to educate the public on the real issues facing youth in care. Through information and training sessions the situation for youth can be improved. The focus should be on increasing the sensitivity of the community for youth growing up in group homes and foster homes. This should be undertaken with the goal of diminishing the levels of stigmatization and stereotyping youth in care face in the community, in the schools and within the infrastructures of the child welfare system.

Attention to the content and details that are added to files should be scrutinized for balance and integrity. An overall accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of young people should be included instead of just a list of criminalized activities. A tool that has recently been developed by Kufeldt et al based on a model out of the UK would significantly improve record keeping capacities on the part of child welfare agencies. In the Canadian Looking After Children project, an assessment tool was developed based on seven dimensions of a child's developmental growth. The seven areas described by the Canadian Looking After Children project are health, education, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation, emotional and behavioral development and self-care skills. Agencies must work hard to incorporate all of these dimensions into an overall picture of the youth to increase record balance and integrity. The tool has the ability to direct the dialogue to focus on the capacities and assets of the youth while diminishing the importance of the institutional and administrative needs. The major component of the tool is the participation of youth in the process. This presents the opportunity to have a meaningful voice in the decisions that affect the young person's life. In addition, it draws in other members of the youth's environment and community such as their doctor, teacher, parent, or mentor. This increases outside support and reduces the effects of stereotyping within the community. (Who Will Teach Me To Learn, 2000)

Recommendations:

7. Social service providers should encourage the inclusion of positive qualities and achievements of youth in care in their files. This can be done by incorporating the assessment tools developed by the Looking After Children project (Kufeldt et al). At the very least recordings of achievements and successes should be included in agency case files; it should be standard policy.

8. Community outreach and education should take place. The community and others to be included in a youth's life should be encouraged to participate in accordance with the principles of the Looking After Children project.

9. Youth should be encouraged to participate in support groups run by and for youth to decrease their senses of isolation and stigmatization.

Attention to the content and details that are added to files should be scrutinized for balance and integrity...strengths and weaknesses.

19 | issues

IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO REMEMBER WHEN WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE #1: RESILIENCY

Young people are incredibly resilient; we can bounce back from almost anything with the right type of support. The most important thing to remember is not to give up on us, don't write us off now because we might be giving you flack, name a teenager who doesn't give their guardian flack.

It's important in this context to focus on what we are good at, what we do well and most importantly what we like to do. The things that you think are our weaknesses will work themselves out with help as long as what's positive in our life is being acknowledged. It is like a self-fulfilling prophecy, if you don't believe in us and encourage us, how are we going to believe in ourselves?

It is important to remember to measure our successes against ourselves, don't compare us to other people. What is a success for you may not be for somebody else. What is a success for me is different from a success for you. You cannot compare apples and oranges, and you can't compare people. Everybody is unique.

There are many different types of successes as well. Being able to secure a job and keep an apartment is a success for some people. Being able to pursue post-secondary education is a success for some people. Being able to travel the world and gain life experience is a success for some people. Getting up in the morning and making it through the day is a success for some people. Keeping a job for two months instead of a month is a success for some people.

The type of success does not matter; measuring us against our capabilities and strengths is of the utmost importance.

#4 VOICE

Issue:

"Any time you are without freedom of choice you are incarcerated." (p. 28, Through the Eyes of the Judged)

Youth in care feel that their voices are not being heard. The notion of having a voice and being heard is crucial to the development and empowerment of young people. There are different ways for youth in care to have a voice. The most critical and important way is to be allowed to provide input in the formation of their plan of care. The plan of care dictates the actions that will be undertaken in the "best interests of the child". According to the Canadian Looking After Children project mentioned in the previous section: "This plan maps out the school, the group home/foster home placement, who the social worker is, in essence, what happens to the life trajectory

of the young person. A major consideration in the design of the tool is the young person's level of comfort with the content. Youth in care have repeatedly reported the damaging effects of child welfare record-keeping practices, which tend to focus on negative events and perceived "behavioral problems". To help prevent this, youth in and from care must participate in the design of the record. When the record tool is actually being used, consensus must be reached by the conference participants about what can and cannot be entered into the record. This will allow the youth in care a significant voice in the discussion and resulting record-keeping." (Who Will Teach Me To Learn?)

Quotes:

"My voice being heard."

"Not being understood, not being listened to, the main issue is that when we have an issue and we call our social worker, it takes weeks for our worker to call back."

"Choice of social worker, you should be able to have some say in who is your guardian."

Phillip's Story:

Phillip had made a decision to turn his life around. As a young man he had been involved in the child welfare system as well as the young offender system. He then decided at a very young age that he did not want to be a part of these systems for the rest of his life. He was released from the juvenile institution and was living in a safe place. His grades improved and he became involved in school activities. He saved all of his certificates of recognition and achievement and demanded they be included in his child welfare file. He understood at a very young age the detrimental impact of a case file that is full of negative aspects of a young person's life.

Implications:

Voice in plan of care was one of the main issues most youth in care identified. Youth in care want to be heard. As taken from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 12 states: "children and youth have a right to express their views on anything that affects them and for their views to be listened to." Youth who are in the care of child welfare authorities are by law allowed to participate in their plan of care. However, according to CFSA standards the level of participation should be age appropriate for every client. By the time a youth is twelve years of age, they reach the milestone that they have the right to voice their opinions and be involved in the process.

A major source of youth empowerment includes youth being an integral part of the decision making process. Youth are the experts of their experiences and know what it is that they need. However, the ability to express this need may be suppressed; it is the responsibility of their primary caregiver to help make youth comfortable with this process. Social workers need to be aware of what questions they are asking and how they are asking those questions. Is it conducive to participatory actions? Social workers should encourage self-expression of thoughts and opinions. This is part of a healthy process that will lead to long term life skills such as problem solving and critical analysis. This is an essential component for young people who need to be taught how to make decisions for themselves appropriately so that a dependency on state care is not created.



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Recommendations:

10. Listen to youth, the "consumer", and work with them.
11. Encourage youth to share their opinions and provide input into their plans of care. Explain how and why decisions are made.
12. Help youth understand long-term implications of the "plan of care" as a life process and not merely a systemic process.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO REMEMBER WHEN WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE #2: EMPOWERMENT

The key to empowering young people in care is to listen to us. It is important to include our opinions and experiences into the decisions that affect our lives. It is equally important to allow us to make mistakes. Try to guide us in the right direction, support us if we make a mistake and allow us to try again. The ultimate tool in empowering young people is to work with us and not for us in our best interests. If people are working in our best interests without our input, how is it really in our best interest?

"Despite the best of intentions of any adult, empowerment cannot be bequeathed: it can only be nurtured, encouraged and promoted." (Raychaba, 1992)

Empowerment incorporates the principles of resiliency and overall well-being by allowing us to be in control of the decisions that affect our lives. This in turn helps us to grow independent of state systems and be more prepared for when we are truly on our own.

#5 EMOTIONAL HEALING

Issue:

Youth indicated that while they were taken from their homes and placed in pseudo families they were not given appropriate access to healing resources. The issues that they have to deal with such as serious physical, emotional and sexual abuse are not eradicated because they are removed from the home. Youth in foster care and group home settings suffer punitive sanctions and/or medical restraint due to behaviors that spring from feelings such as anger, grief, fear, frustration, loneliness, and low self-esteem. They are punished for acting up without an investigation as to why these behaviors are occurring. Youth are searching for services and resources to address emotional needs and these should be ready and available as soon as the youth asks for them, not waitlisted or pushed to the bottom of the pile. How do you tell someone his or her needs are not important at that time?

Quotes:

"Another issue for youth in care is stress management and anger management, and I don't know - but we go through a lot of mixed emotions and mixed feelings, and getting proper management of those feelings so we can grow up healthy, is an issue."

"I'd say, depression, loneliness and low-self-esteem and healing from...I'd say overcoming past experiences."

"I think that issues of dealing with abuse of different sorts with youth in care. There is not enough support offered for that."

"A child/youth's history before care and during care is not taken into consideration nearly enough. This can result in caretakers misinterpreting and misunderstand a youth/child's behavior. These caretakers are unlikely to understand certain emotional triggers. This could result in caretakers aggravating an already difficult situation."

"Transitions, new homes, placements, independence, etc.... Housing, for able youth and psychological well being. Although most young people do not realize that this is an issue until later in life, if it can be dealt with when they are young they would be better off than dealing with it later or not at all."

Claire's Story:

Claire called the National Youth In Care Network to find out what she could do for her friend in a group home. Her friend was being kept in her room with loss of privileges because she refused to go see the therapist. Her choices were "go and talk to someone you don't want to talk to" or "stay in your room". This is not an appropriate way to introduce someone to therapy and healing. This has the potential to affect the way she feels about therapy for the rest of her life. This is probably not an isolated incident.

Implications:

Youth in care are a unique population of youth and depending on their situation and individual resiliency factors they will all need some type of guidance and help either from a trusted adult or professional. However, youth should not be pushed into therapy or be forced to share before they are ready. This is a population of young people who have trust issues with adults and have suffered from the loss of personal attachments. In the words of Paul Steinhauer: "These children have learned to keep adults at a distance through avoiding them emotionally, as if allowing themselves to care would ultimately lead to punishment, rejection and abandonment." There should be an over-riding goal of providing for the young person's wellbeing. Wellness varies over time and according to situations, as stated by Cicchetti, Toth, and Rogosch in *The Development of Psychological Wellness in Maltreated Children*: "Wellness constitutes what goes right in psychological development and adjustment. It is conceived as a dynamic condition. In the words of Cowen [1994], wellness "is not an etched in granite, immutable state." (p. 395, Cicchetti, Toth and Rogosch). Working with youth on improving their overall wellbeing will produce the most effective long-term positive results upon the life span of the young person. Social service providers need to work with young people to regain their trust and help them to understand that there are adults who wish to support them and guide them on their road to recovery in their own time. Social service providers need to maintain strong contact with the "child in their care" and help guide them to the appropriate resources when the time is right.



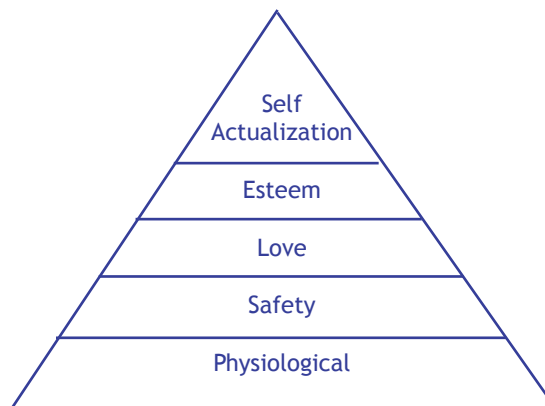
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Social service providers need to work with young people to regain their trust and help them to understand that there are adults who wish to support them and guide them on their road to recovery in their own time.

Recommendations:

13. Compile a list of all community resources a youth can connect with when they are ready to do so.
14. Compile a list of helping professionals a youth can contact when the time is right.
15. Provide consistent contact and encourage the development of personal attachments to repair damaged trust.
16. Don't give up on a youth who may reject help at this moment, everyone else has.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO REMEMBER WHEN WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE #3: MASLOW'S HIERARCHY



While most people are aware of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs it is important to illustrate how this relates to youth in care. The bottom of the needs scale includes the basic necessities of life such as safety and security. If you think about the incredible number of transitions a young person is forced to make while in care it is no wonder that his/her ability to move up and work on self-esteem, love and belonging is extremely difficult. If you are constantly worried about where you will be living, who will be helping to care for you, or if you will stay in the same school, or if you will have food and clothing there is not much room left to develop yourself and your sense of belonging in the world.

It is also hard to develop a true sense of self when you are constantly worried that if you make a mistake your access to services and supports will be cut off as soon as you reach the benchmark age in your respective province. It is like the province takes you in to look after you and tries to provide for you but if you mess up, you are out. There is no security in this arrangement, and that is a constant source of stress.

how social workers can help

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Youth were asked what specific changes their social service provider could make in order for them to alleviate the stresses of growing up in the care system. Youth were realistic in their comments, recognizing the work that is being done and acknowledging the difficulties of working within a bureaucratic system.

However, comments that may seem to be common sense to certain social service providers are not to others. This situation necessitates constant consultation with youth in care. These youth are the consistently neglected "consumers/children" in the crossfire. The following highlights systemic ways in which social service providers can assist youth in the care of the child welfare system.

LISTEN TO YOUTH

"Any issues? Well I don't even talk to my social worker, only a couple of times. They should get to know us better by visiting, stuff like that I guess."

"They should talk directly to you instead of through the foster parents, and come to see you every month or something."

"By talking to you and understanding what point of view you are coming at."

"Ask us what really could have made our experience better and don't be afraid to change."

"Listen to us and don't use our age against us, we are people with real ideas and opinions."

"Be easily accessible. Show the openness and willingness to communicate with us, these traits are important to help everyone understand big issues."

EMOTIONALLY SUPPORT YOUTH

"Social workers could help more by not giving up on us. They don't help after 21, they aren't in our life anymore; we need someone there for us, not just until a certain age, but until you feel the child is ready to go on their own."

"They have to be there for us, they can't be one of these there some days and not there others, going on vacation and not letting us know. They really have to keep communication open with us."

"Let us know our options for counselling, resources and help."

***Social workers could help more
by not giving up on us.***

"Try not to make a fucking issue out of everything that happens."

"Be there for their kids, that's all we need and want."

"Help connect young people with someone who will always be there. That will help in all areas."

ACKNOWLEDGE CASELOADS

"Don't take on too many caseloads...hire more social workers...do whatever it takes."

"They should screen the staff of homes better and keep track of when complaint forms are sent and received."

"Listen, do home studies, have focus groups, take us seriously, make complaint forms available, have more one on one time with workers."

"Safety: checking up on the family and seeing how youth like the foster home."

"Social workers could take some time to get to know each of us and not just rely on the files to tell the story."

Let us feel like people, not referring to us as subjects, and making it more of a personal note, rather than making us feel like we are just another caseload.

ADVOCATE FOR YOUTH

"They could try harder, instead of just asking and having their supervisor say no, they could try a lot harder than they actually do. Let us feel like people, not referring to us as subjects, and making it more of a personal note, rather than making us feel like we are just another caseload."

"Just really get on the Minister's back about all the budget cuts. They should cut the correct funds from the programs that aren't working. It's time to step up and work as a community, not just as individuals."

"We need honest, caring intentions, well-rounded education based ethics, philosophy. They should seek to improve the system from within, and listen to youth."

"Moving and keeping youth in the same area is a big issue, as is changing schools. Don't make them change schools, find a way to get the youth there. And stereotyping hurts us all; social workers could talk to the public about it."

"Lifestyle: make sure a youth is happy and likes where they are living. Public opinion can affect us greatly. Social workers can go on TV and tell the public that youth in care are just kids who don't live at home, they are not criminals. There should be more Social Workers, and they should try to understand where a youth is in their life so they can help more."

"Advocate for better quality of care to empower their "children" to do the same."

how social workers can help

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QUALITIES THAT MAKE A GOOD SOCIAL WORKER

The following reflect personal qualities that youth in care feel social service providers should possess. These are qualities that create the base for trusting and sustainable personal relationships. It must never be forgotten that social workers represent the parent, ultimately the government, and therefore should possess caring and nurturing personal qualities. It is not just a job; it is a role with an incredible amount of influence on the lives of the young people involved.

A Social Worker Should Be...

*Caring
Trustworthy
Attentive
Available
Real
Flexible
Knowledgeable*

It must never be forgotten that social workers represent the parent, ultimately the government, and therefore should possess caring and nurturing personal qualities. It is not just a job; it is a role with an incredible amount of influence on the lives of the young people involved.

"The dream social worker? Takes time to get to know you, like personally, someone who genuinely cares, I think this is very important, but someone who lets you express yourself freely and encourages you to express yourself freely."

"Caring, listens, is sympathetic and empathetic, willing to put child's best interests above others and experience. Has tangible experience with the actual system."

"Is supportive, it's important that a social worker doesn't do everything for you, but is there when you need them."

"Believes that children deserve to know why decisions are made for them and that children are allowed to be involved in decision making whenever possible."

"Trust is the biggest thing. You know if you say something they will not use it against you. Honesty: they let you know everything, and can be a friend, give you space and not always bug you."

"Someone who is there to shoot the shit, not only when you are in trouble or when something is going wrong, but also somebody you can call up and say 'lets go for coffee.' Not that they have to be there 24-7 to go for coffee, at 2 in the morning or anything, but somebody you can call up and say 'lets get together' for the hell of it."

"Communicate, listen to me, catch up on my life, take me shopping, spend time doing something I like doing. Be there when I need someone to talk to and please return my calls."

"Be understanding, supportive and someone you feel you can talk to without them jumping to conclusions and overreacting."

"Spend time with us: it's nice to talk about what is going on. Knowing that they are there when we need them, able to contact easily."

"They care about the child, they call every once in a while just to check up, and don't just have us call them when we need something; they call us, just to say hi and that kind of crap, just to be really friendly."

"They know what the kids are going through, they just don't go by the textbook, they go by how the kids are doing, and just being real, not being total textbook, to be kind."

"Have a good relationship, be someone you feel comfortable with, responds, calls you back if you want to talk with them and is caring, someone who isn't fake and really seems to care about you and what you are going through."

"They should have the ability to not be a machine. They have the ability to adapt to different situations. Not every child in care is in the same situation and they are all not the same. As an individual in care, I know that I am an individual and I am not one big group of the same people."

"A good social worker can adapt to that one individual and meet the needs of that person, as opposed to the needs of everybody."

"When I first went into care, I felt so lonely and like the only person I knew was my social worker, so, it just helps for them to call back even for that two minute conversation that you would probably have with them."

"They have to have experience, understanding of many concepts from several disciplines, (like political economy and psychology). It's a practice, not a profession and they have to care."

They care about the child, they call every once in a while just to check up, and don't just have us call them when we need something; they call us, just to say hi

REGARDING ABUSE WITHIN THE SYSTEM

"Many see the child welfare system as a safe haven for abused, neglected, and troubled children and youth. Fortunately, this is indeed the case for many youngsters. However, it is now also clear that for a substantial number of children and young people living under the supposedly benign care of the state, this same system serves as the setting for further violence, abuse, and victimization." (Pain...Lots of Pain, p. 68)

While recognizing that not all youth who grow up in care experience abuse within their placement, we must acknowledge that it does happen to an alarming number of youth. A system that is designed to protect young people can essentially help perpetuate the cycles of victimization, marginalization and criminalization.

There is a ritual of overmedicating to "cure" problems instead of dealing with underlying root causes. In November 2001, youth and adults were brought together at a national roundtable hosted by the National Youth In Care Network on institutional abuse. Their comments about the systemic use of drugs to deny thoughts, feelings, emotions and the ability to communicate were chilling. They were denied the normal emotional processes of dealing with family separation, abuse and neglect etc. Behaviors were viewed in isolation rather than as responses to abuse, neglect and separation.

Often youth were denied the holistic approach of working through their anger, grief and sense of loss as their behaviors were taken out of context and in isolation and therefore seen as a psycho-chemical problem requiring medical treatment instead of time and support to heal from a multitude of traumatic experiences. They were medicated into submission in order to follow the orders of the institution, and be less taxing. Many developed chemical dependencies due to a discrepancy in their ability to cope non-medically with their problems.



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Young people in care can experience further victimization while in care. Several indicated that foster parents and group homes that are in it for "the money" frequently give youth in care lower quality food and don't respect their rights as human beings.

"People always think that foster homes are really bad. I think it depends on the foster parent's motives. If they are in it just for the money or whatever (I don't know why you would be in it for the money), but I've heard of some terrible foster parents and it's really bad for the kids."

"We need adequate housing for kids in care. Group homes are not functional as an adolescent experience."

"One girl they had restrained had broken blood vessels all over her face from straining so hard and there was no cause, she wasn't being physical, it was the same two staff all the time."

"Youth in care get less, from nutritious food and nice clothing to being able to participate in extra-curricular activities."

"Group home life is hard; there are power struggles and abuse in all forms."

"I had kicked a door at my group home. The staff threw me against the wall with my arm behind my back and choked me. I also got a bruise on my face from the wall."

"I was a child in care; I was treated like an object. I was never consulted about the food I had to eat and where I lived."

FINAL MESSAGES FROM YOUTH TO YOU

"Don't judge us by what you read."

"It's not always (my) fault."

"Deal with children, don't work around them, it's their lives you're affecting the most."

"I would like to say that social workers should understand that youth in care are humans."

"Foster parents and social workers, ...it seems, they don't understand very well, they need to be educated on that."

"Identity: some youth in care have a really hard time knowing who they are because they are going through so much shit. Some people like myself and my friends grew up in care and we had a hard time figuring out where we came from. I think that is a big deal."

"The bad rep is a problem for sure, being put into foster homes without your input, you really do not have any choice, like you are treated like you are junk."

"Make sure that youth in foster homes know they are not alone in the world."

"It's about showing the world, it's not what we did - only that we are in foster care."



...the qualities that young people think a social worker should possess are the same qualities that they feel a primary caregiver should possess.

COMPARISON BETWEEN SUPPORTIVE PRACTICE BY SOCIAL WORKERS AND COMPONENTS THAT ASSIST WITH HEALTHY ATTACHMENTS TO PRIMARY CAREGIVERS.

The following section highlights the importance of the relationship between a social worker and a young person in care. This relationship is crucial to the overall well-being of a young person in care. The research shows that the qualities that young people think a social worker should possess are the same qualities that they feel a primary caregiver should possess. This is important because young people do not distinguish between their social worker and their primary caregiver. The social worker is often the biggest constant human support youth have.

QUALITIES OF SOCIAL WORKER Supporting Young People's Transition from Government Care, 2001	QUALITIES OF PRIMARY CAREGIVERS Voices From Within: Youth Speak Out, 1998
Consistency	Consistent Caring
Accessibility	Unconditional Acceptance
Empathy	Physical, Functional, Nurturing, Emotional Responsiveness
Advocacy - Working With and On Behalf Of Young Person	Community and Interaction
Going Above and Beyond	Commitment, Mutual Trust
Promoting Self-Confidence and Esteem	Promotion of Self-Esteem

What youth are asking for is to be treated as individuals. To have others see them as individuals and know that they are not bad people or unworthy of love and support just because their families have broken down. Young people in care face a series of risks to their overall well-being over their life span. It has been documented that they face significant health risks, educational risks, developmental risks, and attachment difficulties. It is the duty of those who are their (caregivers) to give their children the best possible chances for survival and thriving.

Who Will Teach Me To Learn, 2001.

Only constant vigilance will keep agencies alert to the impact of any policy, no matter how well intentioned, on its children. Systems are imperfect, and some children will inevitably be the victims of neglect. Some will become increasingly marginalized despite the efforts of caseworkers that attempt to keep a family intact. Social workers themselves vary in capabilities, knowledge, and dedication. Further, funding is limited and decisions affecting the best interests of a child are made with social, emotional, and monetary considerations in counterbalance. The commitment of Children's Aid Societies is to protect the essentially helpless children in their care, who have no reliable, caring person dedicated to their journey to maturity. The task is awesome. The question remains, how best to carry it out.

Flint, Partridge, and Stark, 1996.

the empowerment approach

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The National Youth In Care Network undertook this project with the objective of creating awareness to increase the empathetic and sensitive interactions between social services providers and youth in care.

We are individuals, and we have our own experiences and to truly empower us means to understand and listen to our experience and treat us as individuals. We learn differently, we experience life differently and we internalize events in different ways. By working with us and not for us, solutions that make sense for our lives will be possible.

Through the membership consultation the National Youth In Care Network devised a series of Actions that could be practiced as a "person" oriented approach to working in social services. The Actions are also realistic to the policies and procedures in individual ministries and agencies.

ACTION ONE - LISTEN

Social services providers need to heed the basic tenet of youth empowerment, which is to allow youth to be participants in the decisions that affect their lives, "doing with" instead of "doing for".

ACTION TWO - FORM A RELATIONSHIP

Create a relationship with the young person. The power of personal relationships is a strong protective factor. Go for coffee, shopping or to a movie. Get to know the youth. They are a person who may be scared, lonely, hurt and justifiably angry, take the time to understand where they are coming from.

ACTION THREE - INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY

Meaningful community partnerships between social service departments and the wider community would enable youth growing up in care to become involved in extracurricular activities such as sports, art and music. Community partnerships could help engage youth who otherwise could not afford it on the budget of the government. This would also help to establish a support network outside of an agency that would provide for youth what the government cannot.

ACTION FOUR - GIVE POSITIVE FEEDBACK

According to the Looking After Children Project (Kufeldt et al.) it is important to include other information such as interests, hobbies, achievements, supports into a case file and not just behavioral problems or crisis. It is important to make a concerted effort to include positive feedback in as many forms as possible. Provide space for positive observations.

ACTION FIVE - ADVOCATE

Make sure youth know and understand their rights and responsibilities as a youth in care. Make sure you fight for their rights. A balance has to be struck between protocol and policies and what is truly in the best interests of youth in care.

We are individuals, and we have our own experiences, and to truly empower us means to understand and listen to our experience and treat us as individuals. We learn differently, we experience life differently and we internalize events different in ways. By working with us and not for us, solutions that make sense for our lives will be possible.

31 | *conclusion*



From this presentation we would like you to take with you the message that young people deserve to be included in the decision making process. Many of the difficulties associated with growing up in care could be changed if people started listening to those who know - youth in care.

It is important to remember to work with young people and not for them on their behalf. We need to be included.

Being a social worker is technically a 9-5 job. However, if you truly care about people, you can't just shut that off at night. It is important to develop a support network with your colleagues so that you are better able to help the young people in your care. They are your responsibility, your children. When you go home at night to your home, what are young people in your care experiencing?

summary of recommendations | 32

1. Consult with youth regarding their placement options.
2. Preplan visits with youth and placement option(s).
3. Show consideration and sensitivity for youth who have been moved.
4. Start a financial plan to assist youth with their academic careers or long-term planning for the future, including assistance with the identification of and application for financial assistance plans like scholarships.
5. Help youth connect with positive supporters in the community as soon as they enter the child welfare system who will be there as they navigate their time in care and prepare to leave care.
6. Be vigilant of the skills and competencies of each individual youth and support them on whatever path they choose; demand excellence from the skills they possess and ensure opportunities to develop the skills necessary for independence.
7. Social service providers should encourage the inclusion of positive qualities and achievements of youth in care in their files. This can be done by incorporating the assessment tools developed by the Looking After Children project (Kufeldt et al). At the very least recordings of achievements and successes should be included in agency case files; it should be standard policy.
8. Community outreach and education should take place. The community and others to be included in a youth's life should be encouraged to participate in accordance with the principles of the Looking After Children project.
9. Youth should be encouraged to participate in support groups run by and for youth to decrease their senses of isolation and stigmatization.
10. Listen to youth, the "consumer", and work with them.
11. Encourage youth to share their opinions and provide input into their plans of care. Explain how and why decisions are made.
12. Help youth understand long-term implications of the "plan of care" as a life process and not merely a systemic process.
13. Compile a list of all community resources a youth can connect with when they are ready to do so.
14. Compile a list of helping professionals a youth can contact when the time is right.
15. Provide consistent contact and encourage the development of personal attachments to repair damaged trust.
16. Don't give up on a youth who may reject help at this moment, everyone else has.

