What Is Youth Conferencing?

“Young man, you have eyes just like your father.” “Sweetheart, you have a smile just like your mother.” Refrains such as these may be familiar to most of us, and we likely cannot imagine what it’s like to not have people in our lives who “knew us when” or remind us of those that we are connected to in one way or another. Family and emotional connections provide us with a sense of permanence, a sense of belonging, and connect us to our culture and our community. Unfortunately, there are large numbers of children and youth in the foster care system that have been separated from their family and other loving and caring adults, in effect severing opportunities to establish or reestablish those permanent connections.

A promising new framework known as Youth Conferencing helps youth “aging out” of foster care forge or renew effective and enduring connections with caring adults. The youth conferencing models presented here are all united by a common goal: to help youth garner the supportive resources necessary to prepare for life after foster care through the development of permanent connections that are independent of living arrangements, while establishing or reestablishing lasting relationships with those who love and care for them.

According to the federal Children’s Bureau, there are over 400,000 children residing in foster care, and 145,689 are between the ages of 12 and 17. Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS, 2009) indicates that nationally, 30,000 youth in foster care each year, “age out” of care without a connection to a family member or a network of supportive and caring adults. These youth make up a distinct population with a common need for tapping into resources that their families can offer such as establishing emotional and cultural connections and the unquantifiable gift of having a permanent “somebody” in their lives. Family members can also help youth establish sustainable connections to others who can support their transition into adulthood.

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1Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) FY 2009 data (October 1, 2008 through September 30, 2009).
Many child welfare systems have recognized the need to partner with youth in an attempt to meet these needs. As a result, a growing number of child welfare jurisdictions across the United States and Canada have begun implementing a variety of family conferencing and circle processes which are modeled after Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) and restorative practices. In a study conducted by the Northwest Institute for Children and Families, “Connected & Cared For” Family Group Conferencing for Youth in Group Care, several positive findings were identified that lend support to the use of youth conferencing to reduce length of stay in care, provide supports, and establish sustaining family connections. Sixty-eight percent of the children and youth involved in the study had been in out-of-home care longer than six months and many had a history of behavioral and mental health issues. A solid majority of the children involved in the study were also older than 10 at the time their meeting was held. Youth with these characteristics are often deemed difficult to place or thought to have limited family and “natural” supportive resources. However, the study showed that of the children who received a family group conference (FGC), over 90% were moved to a less restrictive placement; 86% of the families agreed to visit and provide transportation, respite, housing, financial and medical assistance; and 47% were placed with their family. What this study illuminates is that conferencing can have many sustained benefits in both establishing an emotionally supportive network of caring adults and in the youth transitional process.

For the purposes of this brief, “youth conferencing” is the general term used to describe a myriad of models being implemented as decision making forums for vulnerable youth. At the center, these models bring together the youth and caring adults, including maternal and paternal extended family, teachers, coaches, elders, neighbors, and foster parents to create solutions to make plans for the youth. It is an opportunity for family and those personally connected to the youth to engage in a process of relationship building as well as collaborative planning around key decisions.

Generally, youth conferencing is designed for youth over the age of fifteen who are, or soon will be, transitioning into more permanent living arrangements as they age out of the foster care system. However, youth conferencing models are being implemented at many other decision making points within the child welfare system, well before transition planning occurs. In fact, waiting to employ youth conferencing until the point of transition planning may result in missed opportunities to engage the family group at earlier junctures that could have created stability and built more permanent relationships for the youth. Child welfare agencies have come to recognize that no youth can truly live “independently” at age 18. As Loren Walker indicated about Hawaii’s youth conferencing model, E Makua Ana Youth Circles, “an emphasis is placed not on ‘independence’ but rather on ‘togetherness’ of the people the youth can seek out and rely upon now and in the future.” As such, an important part of preparation for youth conferences is helping the youth understand that everyone needs help and support during one time or another in their lives and relying upon others for guidance ultimately strengthens, rather than decreases, their ability to move responsibly into adulthood.


Prior to the establishment of child protective service agencies and systems, families found ways to address the needs of their children on their own, without professional aid or interference. Youth conferencing is a way to reestablish family as the central decision maker in partnership with the youth. It provides families an opportunity to come together as a unit to develop a transitional plan with the overarching purpose of providing support for the youth in whatever capacity that they jointly determine to be beneficial. Connecting a youth to those who know and care for them, and are able to support them in their goals, should be a part of the conferencing process. This increases the potential to generate the best possible outcomes for youth.

HOW DOES YOUTH CONFERENCING MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUTH?

Youth in foster care over the age of fifteen have unique needs. These needs are born out of their emotional development and include the needs to have a sense of personal power, responsibility and planning, and decision making, along with the concrete independent living skills needed to successfully transition to adulthood, including the need to learn how to budget, find a job, and other transitional living skills. Each of the models identified in this brief recognize that young people are the experts in their own lives. Additionally, it is also equally important to recognize that while young people need to be experts in their own lives, they also need to have their families involved in the decision making process. In the “Connected & Cared For” Family Group Conferencing for Youth in Group Care study, researchers found that children and youth that had a family group conference had their needs met relative to safety, kinship support, cultural connections, and less restrictive placement. This further supports the appeal for youth conferencing to have multiple purposes.

Even with many benefits of youth conferencing, there are hurdles and challenges to overcome to achieve successful outcomes. One of the challenges noted by all of those interviewed for this brief was the difficulty of fully engaging young people in the process. Scheduling and maintaining contact with youth can, at times, be difficult and, after years in foster care, many youth may become skeptical that the agency and this process will actually make a difference or that their voice will be heard. Understanding the developmental need for autonomy can help youth conferencing coordinators/facilitators as well as family members better engage and fully prepare youth for the conferencing process. Michael McClure with Washington County, PA’s Roots and Wings program states that their process “emphasizes the voice of the youth as essential to the life decisions being made.” This point is further demonstrated by the development of a Youth Advisory Board in Washington County which allows youth formerly involved with the system an opportunity to govern themselves and advise child welfare practitioners on how to build their knowledge and skill sets to support and assist other youth currently in care.

Texas’ youth conferencing model, Circles of Support, places specific emphases on education, employment, living arrangements, establishing a support network, and planning for personal needs for youth transitioning out of foster care. Coordinators/facilitators of this model work closely with child welfare caseworkers to determine which service providers should attend the conference in order to provide the youth with information on how to attain their educational and employment goals. Youth specialists – young people who have aged out of the system and are now paid employees of the department – serve as mentors and provide guidance as youth prepare for, and follow up on, plans developed as a result of Circles of Support. Fostering engagement, building sustainable supportive relationships, and listening with the intent to support the youth are the central components of a successful process.

**WHAT IS THE YOUTH CONFERENCING PROCESS?**

As stated previously, youth conferencing can cultivate an ongoing and permanent network of support for youth that fosters success in building connections and transitioning into adulthood. Who knows better how the youth can be best supported and by whom than the young person? For this reason it is essential that, just as family group conferencing\(^7\) is family led, youth have the opportunity to lead youth conferences. This practice positions the youth to take ownership for their life’s course or direction and to begin making decisions, with the assistance and guidance from caring adults.

**FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN A YOUTH LED PROCESS**

Given the need to support a youth led process as a guiding value in youth conferencing a number of questions could be raised about the involvement and role of the family. Who is considered “family”? What is my role as a family member? Do I have any decision making authority? What if I don’t trust the youth to make sound and responsible decisions? Often, as children and youth grow up, they are more connected to their friends or other adults than they may be to their own parents or guardians. A critical aspect of the coordinator/facilitator’s role in the youth conferencing process is to work with the youth to think broadly about who is considered “family” to include those that can provide guidance and support and to not be limited by narrower definitions of family. Coordinators/facilitators of youth conferences consider a broader definition of family based on the perspectives of all participants. The coordinator/facilitator preparing family members for a youth conference help them understand the need to balance a youth’s need for autonomy with the family’s role of providing input that will aid the youth in making reasonable and sound decisions. This would include helping the family understand a need to shift from judging negative behaviors of the youth to helping the youth identify his or her own strengths, as well as prompting family members to ask questions and listen to the youth rather than telling him or her what to do. Another important preparatory role of the coordinator/facilitator is to ensure that the family doesn’t centrally focus on past youth behaviors but also looks to future possibilities. This demonstrates value and respect for the knowledge and skills the youth has while aiding the family in providing effective guidance that reflects the youth’s developmental needs. These preparatory measures will facilitate family members’ active involvement in the youth led conference.

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\(^7\)Family group conferencing (FGC) is an inclusive, collaborative and informal process of gathering the “family group” to include immediate and extended family, friends and informal supports together with agency service providers to craft plans that safeguards children, young persons and adults involved in the child welfare system.
PHASES OF THE CONFERENCING PROCESS

Based on this general framework, the actual youth conference process may look quite different, but the general sequencing is consistent: pre-conference preparation; conference; and post-conference activities. The greatest variability then, occurs not across the phases of the conferencing but within them. To illustrate this variability, interviews were conducted with professionals across various jurisdictions in which they described their experiences in implementing these types of conferences.

Preparation: Identifying Connections

Olmsted County, MN uses the New Zealand family group conference (FGC) model, which they have adapted to use specifically with older youth in foster care. The youth works with the coordinator/facilitator to identify those who may have a significant role in their future, such as coaches, teachers, foster parents, and extended family members. Kelli DeCook with Family Services Rochester in Olmsted County states, “Often teenagers think they have “burned all their bridges,” but facilitators use genograms and ecomaps to highlight the number of connections the youth may have which also encourages the youth to be creative and think broadly and outside the box.” Washington County, PA’s Roots and Wings program helps youth build sustainable connections as the youth moves into adulthood using a number of techniques, including historical mobility mapping\(^8\) and quasi-family trees\(^9\).

Once people have been identified that the youth would like to invite, coordinator/facilitators are encouraged to talk openly with youth about any concerns they may have with potential attendees. The decision to send out an invitation will depend on the youth and their individual situation. For some, the youth conference can be an opportunity to re-establish a healthier relationship with their parents and extended family members; for others it may not.

Simcoe County, Ontario Canada has also adapted FGDM for youth who are building a permanent support system while preparing to exit from foster care. The coordinator/facilitator starts the process by meeting with the youth and their caseworker to learn more about the young person’s goals, strengths, and desire to reconnect with family. Most of these youth are “crown wards with access,” which means that they are not available for adoption and should have access to their maternal and paternal biological families. However, given that this access and connection may have been lost, many young people look on their own for their family. This conferencing model can help youth reconnect with their biological families in a supportive manner that helps them build a permanent network of support. In some cases, extended families may not have knowledge about their children living in foster care; and are therefore eager to reconnect and build relationships.

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8\(^{Historical mobility mapping}\) asks the youth to identify their first memory of their childhood. The youth is taken on a trip through their history, identifying where they lived and who was important to them.

9\(^{In the quasi-family tree strategy, relationships to the youth are identified and arrows are used to show connections between individuals where the type of relationship is indicated using different colors. For instance, the color red is often used to identify those that the youth loves and who love them in return.}\)

10\(^{Support persons are individuals within the family system or community that provide emotional support to a participant to ensure their needs are met and their voices are heard.}\)
In Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada’s youth conferencing model, preparation requires that facilitators meet with the youth to identify the most important people in their lives so that conference planning is conducted with his or her support network. The facilitator or support person works with the young person to set their goals and agenda for the conference, and meets with each invited guest individually to discuss the agenda and purpose of the conference. Guests are encouraged to come to the table with ideas about how the young person’s strengths, skills, and talents can be used to prepare for a positive transition from foster care and establish sustained connections for permanency.

Hawaii’s E Makua Ana Youth Circles model is based on both the Emancipation Conference model developed in San Jose, California, and John Braithwaite’s Youth Development Circle originated in Australia. E Makua Ana Youth Circles borrows heavily from Insoo Kim Berg and Steve De Shazer’s solution-focused approach to guide each stage of their process. For example, after referral to E Makua Ana Youth Circles, the facilitator begins with a “surface assessment” of the youth to identify observed strengths demonstrated by the youth during the pre-meeting planning which can be highlighted during the youth circle. This “surface assessment” is to avoid focusing on a deeper assessment of issues that seek to answer “what is wrong” but instead answer “what is right” and highlight the value each youth brings to his or her life and the life of others. Youth are then approached about the opportunity to have a Circles process. If they decide that this is not what they want, their decision is respected, though this is a very rare occurrence. Once the youth agrees, in order for the Circle to move forward, there must be one additional person in attendance that is not a professional or service provider. During the pre-meeting stage, the youth is asked who they would like to invite and is the sole decider of who those persons are. If the youth doesn’t identify anyone beyond professionals, the facilitator probes further by questioning who the youth would call on in times of trouble or who they like to spend time with. The youth prepares by developing at least five goals to be discussed at the meeting and creating a list of invitees. The youth also prepares by identifying how the meeting will be opened up and what food they would like to serve.

As stated by DeCook of Olmsted County, MN and Darlene Sykes of Simcoe County Ontario, in order to support a youth led process, preparation will likely take longer than regular FGDM conferences because of the intense nature of the work that is needed with a young person who may be resistant or distrusting of the process. Simcoe County, Ontario facilitators usually meet with the youth 3 to 6 times during the pre-conference stage. There is also an emphasis on preparation for the youth’s support people as well to remind them that this meeting is about the youth and their future. This may be especially critical when bringing together foster and birth families who both may feel that only they know what is best for the youth. Each young person decides who to invite with the facilitator helping to identify a support system, which may include biological parents and relatives who have been absent during their time in foster care. The use of the tools described earlier such as genograms, ecomaps, and historical mobility mapping increase the number of invitations and result in a wider circle of attendees. Facilitators need to demonstrate perseverance and patience in helping the young person in locating and inviting connections to the conference.

More information about Solution-Focused Brief Therapy can be found at www.sfbta.org.
At the Youth Conference

In terms of structure, the youth conference can be facilitated in a variety of ways, based on the philosophies that undergird the conferencing model being implemented. However, there are certain features of the actual conference that should be included, regardless of model variation. These features are described below.

Across modalities, the youth and his or her family and support system should be provided an opportunity to lead introductions at the start of the meeting, if desired. The youth and family members should also be encouraged to infuse their culture in the form of beliefs, traditions and rituals into the conference. Although it is recommended that family culture be infused throughout the entire conferencing process, a special effort should be made to encourage incorporation of cultural traditions at the beginning of the meeting as it sets the stage of the youth and family “owning” the meeting, distinguishing it from system-driven meetings.

The information sharing stage is critical to plan development. The youth and his or her support system should be provided with clear and concise information by the child welfare agency that supports what they need to plan for as they move into private family time. Private family time is opportunity for the youth and his or her supports to meet on their own, without the statutory authorities and other non-family members present, to work through the information they have been given and to formulate a plan. There are some jurisdictions that do not include private family time either based on model or the wishes of the youth. It is the role of the coordinator/facilitator to gain a better understanding of the youth’s perception of the purpose for private family time and explore any resistance from the youth. Private family time positions the family group, particularly the youth, to lead the decision making process applying their knowledge and expertise in a way that is consistent with their culture and identity as a family. Explaining this to the youth may help clarify the purpose for having private family time and provide an opportunity to address specific concerns the youth has about included private family time in their meeting.

At the conclusion of private family time, the youth should be given an opportunity to present the plan to the service providers (including his or her caseworker) so that resources and supports can be identified to help the youth and the family implement the plan. Service providers should be careful to listen for resource needs and methods to support the youth and family in carrying out the plan rather than dissecting the plan to make it a better fit for the “system”. Plan presentation is the precursor to the next stage of the conferencing process, which is identifying specific actions to follow-up and follow through on what is needed to carry out the plan.

No matter the model, the conference framework should encourage youth to take a leadership role in their own planning, recognizing that they do indeed have supportive adults who will be available as permanent resources in their life. In addition, the conference allows the youth to set and achieve attainable goals that address his or her needs. It provides supportive adults with the opportunity to play specific roles in the youth’s life. Rather than just saying they will “be there” for the young person, adults can identify what they can do to provide concrete and emotional support.
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The youth conferencing models presented here are all united by a common goal: to help youth garner the supportive resources necessary to prepare for life after foster care through the development of permanent connections that are independent of living arrangements, while establishing or reestablishing lasting relationships with those who love and care for them. These processes build on the philosophy that young people and their family groups have the expertise and wisdom to lead decisions, with the support of professionals, who bring different but necessary expertise to the decision making process. These processes are also trying to move beyond the notion of developing “independent living skills” by providing an opportunity for young people to use their family to help and support them in attaining their goals. However, as with most practice improvement initiatives, system change occurs at varying degrees.

Youth conferencing processes have not developed without struggles. One challenge is identifying family members, supports and resources to bring to the table for youth. Another is that casework staff often express skepticism about parent and extended family member involvement because of a history of neglect, abuse or mental health challenges that have brought the youth into the system, which may, in turn, lead to greater reliance on the professionals to develop plans and make decisions for and about the youth. However, stories of successful conferences with extended family members have served, in some instances to counteract the impulse to revert to an approach that excludes the extended family system. Roots and Wings has attempted to address this challenge by reframing the message from the past to the present by considering the positive changes the parent has made which may create opportunities for safe reconnections with family members. Unfortunately, not all conferences are free of this negative history. This increases the need for facilitators/coordinators to encourage the development of a pre-meeting plan, when family dynamics suggest, to deal with situations such as a family member not showing up or disruptive behaviors and attitudes. These types of issues can be difficult for youth to experience; therefore, normalizing the feelings this process may bring up for the young person, family members and service providers is critical to successful preparation and moving forward with the meeting. Agencies committing to a youth driven process must be able to provide the resources, in time and skilled personnel, to effectively work through this resistance and skepticism.

As noted earlier, young people in foster care are unique, yet they are not. They have many of the same needs of young people that have never been in care, however, they have suffered the absence of uninterrupted sustaining connections with their family and other caring adults. Several of the processes described here identified fully engaging young people as a challenge. After years in foster care, these young people are skeptical that this conferencing process will actually make a difference and that they will actually be heard. To effectively meet the needs of this population, best practices would indicate a need for systems and coordinators/facilitators to practice persistence and patience, moving forward with the knowledge that every young person has people who care about them and want to support them now and in the future. What sets youth led conferencing apart from other types of conferencing processes for foster youth is the central role the youth is granted in the decision making process with the support from individuals he or she is emotionally connected to.
To date, there is limited evaluation data on youth conferencing processes. Specifically, the “Connected & Cared For” Family Group Conferencing for Youth in Group Care study from Washington State provides some evidence of the effectiveness of conferencing with disconnected youth deemed high-risk. Currently, the George Hull Centre is evaluating the effectiveness of their youth conferences in Ontario, but no data are available yet. These and other studies will be critical to shaping the replication of conference and circle processes to promote ongoing and permanent connections between young persons and caring adults.

The motivational driver for youth conferencing implementation and practice is to significantly and positively impact the lives of youth transitioning out of foster care. It presents an opportunity to advance the development of the youth in a positive way and to have his or her family come together to help plan and provide guidance and support as they move into adulthood. One of the best possible outcomes is the youth having their family in his or her corner as they endure life’s pressures and experience life’s joys - not alone but connected.

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