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In search of connection: The foster youth and caregiver relationship

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Abstract

Placement instability is an ongoing challenge for the 125,000 foster youth aged 14 – 18 that are living in foster care, with youth living in approximately 3 placements before aging out of the system. Despite the importance caring adult relationships can play in promoting positive youth development and resiliency, there has been limited inquiry into the characteristics of the foster youth and caregiver relationship. The goal of this paper is to provide a descriptive account of the foster youth and caregiver relationship, and explore what qualities and experiences foster youth desire from their caregivers. Qualitative data were gathered from 9 focus groups. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis approaches. Foster youth, caregivers, and child welfare staff described relationships lacking in formative bonds and connection, where youth didn't "fit in", and chaotic homes marked by reactivity and judgment. Characteristics of supportive foster homes include a sense of belonging, structure, guidance, and consistency. This research underscores the important role positive relationships can play in foster youth's feelings of well-being and points to the need for foster parent training to include tangible strategies to develop stronger bonds.

Keywords

foster caregiving support; foster youth; bonding; connection

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1. Introduction

It is well known that placement stability is an enduring issue for the approximately 400,540 children that reside in out-of-home care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2012). Nationally, children and youth reside in an average of three placements before aging out of the child welfare system (Casey Family Programs, 2010). Havlicek (2011) has emphasized the importance of taking into account the varying contexts and factors that influence youth's transitions to adulthood, particularly their frequent placement disruptions. In general, length of stay in a foster home appears to be positively correlated with closer youth and foster caregiver relationships (Fox & Berrick, 2007; Zimmerman, 1982). Although positive relationships between foster youth and their caregivers is associated with youth's self-reported feelings of safety and well-being (Fox & Berrick, 2007), and bonding to caring and trusted adults is pivotal for optimal adolescent development (Ahrens, Richardson, Lozano, Fan, & DuBois, 2008; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010), there has been limited research on non-behaviorally challenged foster youth's relationships with caregivers. The following sections will provide a brief review of the literature on youth experiences in the child welfare system, the characteristics of supportive foster caregiver and youth relationships, and foster caregivers experiences serving as foster parents.

1.2. Youth "satisfaction" in foster family placements

Although many studies have found that youth feel content with their foster placements, this satisfaction does not always equate to a sense of belonging and warmth. Chapman, Wall, and Barth (2004) reported that 90% of foster children "like" their placements, with one third expressing a desire to be adopted by them; however, the majority still feel a connection to their biological parents, and 43% expressed a desire to live with them. Wald, Carlsmith, and Leiderman (1998) found that the majority of study participants reported positive relationships with their foster caregivers after residing with them for 2 years, however they did not regard them as sources of "emotional support" (p. 43). Similarly, Whiting and Lee's (2003) qualitative study concluded, "despite the challenges experienced by some of the children in their foster families, most of them described good experiences [with foster families]" (p. 292). However, Hedin, Höjer, and Brunnberg (2011) found that adolescents in traditional foster families (i.e., non kin or self-selected caregivers) do not express "a sense of feeling at home in the foster family" and have "uncertain" or "ambiguous" attitudes about their foster caregivers (Hedin et al., 2011). Samuels (2009) reported that foster youth experience "ambiguous loss" from multiple foster placement changes, and are constantly searching for a sense of "home." Additionally, Rauktis, Fusco, Cahalane, Kierston Bennet, and Reinhert (2011), portrayed foster homes as being "low in warmth and emotional connections" (p. 1231) and reported that youth in their sample wanted to be treated like "regular kids" (p. 1232). Singer, Berzin, and Hokanson (2013) found that most youth in their qualitative sample did not consider their foster parents to be part of their "inner support circle."

Barriers to building positive relationships can include: frequent placement disruptions, caregivers' stigmatized views of youth in their care, foster caregivers' challenges in connecting with youth living in "survival mode," caregivers' reactivity to developmentally appropriate behavior, and cultural disconnects between foster families and foster youth (Storer, Barkan, Sherman, Haggerty, & Mattos, 2012). Additionally, Samuels and Pryce (2008) found that when foster youth are approaching aging out of the foster care system they often take on the role of "survivalist self-reliance" and therefore may reject potential connections for fear that it may threaten their coveted sense of autonomy.

1.3. Elements of foster youth and caregiver relationships

There is limited literature on the elements or characteristics that constitute supportive or caring foster youth and caregiver relationships. Foster children and youth have reported wanting adequate time for foster caregivers to "earn" their trust (Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010), to frequently take part in family activities, meaningful interactions (Brannen, Heptinstall, & Bhopal, 2000; O'Neill, 2004; Whiting & Lee Ill, 2003), and consistent rules, boundaries, and a sense of security (Brannen et al., 2000; O'Neill, 2004). Despite this research there are no in-depth and cohesive descriptions of the litany of characteristics that comprise supportive foster family relationships.

1.4. Foster caregivers challenges with foster parenting

The stress, anxiety, and challenges associated with foster caregiving (Cole & Eamon, 2007; Farmer, Lipscombe, & Moyers, 2005; Whenan, Oxlad, & Lushington, 2009; Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000) have been well documented in the literature. For instance, children and youth in foster care often come to placements with complex behavioral and mental health needs, multifaceted placement histories, developmental and cognitive delays, insecure attachments, and chronic health problems (Brown, Arnault, George, & Sintzel, 2009; Chamberlain et al., 2008; Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, & Litrownik, 1998; Coakley, Cuddeback, Buehler, & Cox, 2007; DeGarmo, Chamberlain, Leve, & Price, 2009; Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; Minnis, Everett, Pelosi, Dunn, & Knapp, 2006; Rauktis, Vides de Andrade, Doucette, McDonough, & Reinhart, 2005; Sawyer, Carbone, Searle, & Robinson, 2007; Shin, 2005; Whenan et al., 2009). Although Berrick and Skivenes (2012) described how the demands of foster caregiving often extend beyond those of "typical" parenting, research has found that foster caregivers may not be getting the training and support they need to meet the multidimensional needs of youth in their care (Dorsey et al., 2008). Providing effective training and support for foster caregivers is critical to address some of the significant challenges in the child welfare system, including facilitating greater placement stability (Cooley & Petren, 2011). For example, a study looking at foster caregivers' well-being, satisfaction, and intention to continue to provide out-of-home care found that training was predictive of foster caregiver well-being (Whenan et al., 2009). However, the content and breadth of training is important. While foster caregivers are mandated to attend training, there is great variability in the content of these trainings and a tacit assumption that foster parents are "temporary" caregivers (Dorsey et al., 2008; Stukes Chipangu & Bent-Goodley, 2004), and therefore there is potentially less emphasis on connecting with foster youth in authentic ways.

Although the importance of supportive connections has been well documented and there is evidence that foster parents are not getting the needed supports to fulfill their parenting responsibilities, there has been limited inquiry into the qualities or dynamics of the foster youth and caregiver relationship. The current literature focuses predominantly on foster youth's experiences, while overlooking the viewpoints of foster caregivers and child welfare staff. Therefore, the goal of this article is to describe the foster youth and caregiver relationship from a multitude of stakeholders (i.e., former foster youth, foster caregivers, and child welfare workers), and explore what specific qualities and experiences constitute supportive foster caregiver and youth relationships. The following research questions guided this research:

1.) How do former foster youth, child welfare workers, and caregivers describe the caregiver-foster youth relationship?
2.) What are the characteristics of supportive foster youth and caregiver relationships from the perspective of foster teens?

1.5. Theory

This study is guided by the theoretical frameworks of resiliency, bonding, and positive youth development. These frameworks consistently underscore the potential protective functions primary caregivers and positive adults can play in the lives of vulnerable youth. Resiliency can be understood as functioning in the face of adversity or situations of high stress (Herrenkohl, 2013; Klika & Herrenkohl, 2013; Masten, 2001). Rather than a static attribute, resiliency often involves an interaction between individual qualities such as sociability, self-esteem, and ego-resilience, and environmental conditions such as consistent and supportive adult mentors (Burt & Paysnick, 2012; Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, Bégin, & Bernard, 2007; Herrenkohl, 2013; Ungar, 2013). As Herrenkohl (2013) states, "studies of resilience show that supportive adult-child relationships, strong attachments bonds, and social support of a more general sort are all associated with children doing well in stressful situations" (p. 191). Further, Schofield (2001) underscores that "day-to-day" interactions in school and home environments play a critical role in promoting resiliency among children and youth who have been exposed to adverse childhood events, and Drapeau, et al. (2007) assert that developing a strong relationship with a "significant adult" can nurture resiliency.

Positive youth development frameworks, such as the social development model, have highlighted the important role trusting and caring adults play in buffering the adoption of high-risk behaviors, strengthening protective factors, and nurturing resiliency (Bernard, 1993; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Lerner et al., 2005; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003). The Search Institute (2010) identified caring adult relationships as a key "developmental asset" in promoting healthy transitions to adulthood. Specifically, the social development model hypothesizes that an individual's behavior will be prosocial or antisocial depending on the predominant behaviors, norms, and values held by those to whom the individual is connected, in this instance their family unit (Hawkins et al., 2008). In other words, this model presupposes that adolescents require specific age-appropriate supports such as opportunities for meaningful involvement and belonging, recognition for prosocial

behavior, and bonding to caring and trusted adults to nurture their healthy development including the prevention of high-risk behaviors.

2. Methods

2.1. Study context

The data presented in this paper were collected as a part of larger study to adapt a parenting program, *Staying Connected with Your Teen* (SCT), for families involved in the child welfare system. SCT is an evidence-based, prevention-focused parenting program that provides families with tools to support their adolescent children in avoiding high-risk behaviors. SCT is guided by the social development model and is based on evidence that strengthening family connections can result in reducing teens' initiation into substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and violence (Haggerty, Skinner, MacKenzie, & Catalano, 2007). For more information on SCT, including the barriers identified to adapting the program, see [blinded for review].

2.2. Data and sample

Sixty-three individuals participated in nine focus groups in two different Washington State Department of Social and Health Services regions: three with young adults ($n = 20$) aged 18 – 21 who had been placed in foster homes during their adolescence, three with foster parents/relative caregivers ($n = 16$), and three with Children's Administration (CA) staff ($n = 27$). Eligibility was defined as: young adults between 18 and 21 years of age that had lived with foster caregivers in their residences (i.e., not a group home or residential treatment facility) at some point during their adolescence. Their length of time in care was not solicited. The Caregiver sample could be foster care providers who had experience caring for adolescents whether related or not. We did not ask caregivers to distinguish on the demographic form their relationship to the adolescents they had cared for. (Therefore we have no way of knowing which percentages of the sample had experience caring for related adolescents and which were exclusively non-relative caregivers.) Although we acknowledge that kinship and non-relative foster caregivers may have different experiences caring for youth, this sample was constructed to answer a broader set of research questions than just those presented in this paper, thus we wanted our sample to be inclusive of the diversity of caregivers involved in the child welfare system. Lastly, CA staff participants had professional experience working with or supervising staff with adolescent caseloads.

The racial background of the sample is detailed in Table 1. Please note that participants could self-identify as having more than one racial or ethnic background. Significantly more women ($n = 55$) than men ($n = 8$) participated in this research. This gender disparity was particularly magnified for foster caregivers.

Recruitment for the caregiver and staff focus groups was done primarily through CA contacts, who were regional administrators. CA staff contacted potential caregivers, informed them about the study, and solicited their participation. The CA regional administrators notified their staff of the study, and allowed them to participate in the group during their work hours. Young adult participants were recruited primarily through community-based organizations that provide independent living support services for former

foster youth. All participants that met the selection requirements were permitted to attend the focus groups. Youth and caregiver participants received \$25 stipends for their participation, and CA staff received lunch during the groups (stipends were not permitted by CA since the groups occurred on work time). All study procedures were approved by the Washington State Institutional Review Board.

2.3. Procedures/data collection

The caregiver and CA staff focus groups occurred in CA regional offices because participants shared that those were the most convenient and familiar locations. The young adult focus groups occurred at community-based organizations frequented by former foster youth. Prior to the start of the focus groups, all participants completed a brief written survey to collect demographic data. The focus groups were all approximately 90 minutes in length. A similar but tailored semi-structured interview guide was used for each sub-population that participated in the focus groups. For example, each group started with a warm question. For the CA staff group the question read: What are the primary concerns that caregivers with a foster teen (13–17) have regarding their teen? For the caregiver group, the question read: “What are the concerns most foster parents with a foster teen (13–17) have regarding their teen.” In the former foster youth group the warm question read: “What are the most significant issues for foster youth who are in care between the ages of 13–17?” Other topics that were discussed in the focus groups were: strategies to augment and adapt SCT to make it relevant for foster families and supports and barriers that would encourage or discourage participation in the program. It is important to note that the interview guide was not designed to answer the specific research questions in this paper. The findings presented in this paper were unexpected and emerged inductively in the analysis process. All focus groups were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. The individual voices were not always discernable to the transcriptionists; therefore we will not be providing pseudonyms for each research participant in the results section.

2.4. Analysis

The researchers used a thematic content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which is a systematic way of categorizing complex textual data. In this process the researchers inductively identified codes to represent concepts within the data (Saldana, 2009). Coding was an iterative process that involved multiple rounds of coding. Initially, the analysis team, which was composed of four researchers, coded the first transcript independently. The investigators then came together to compare and discuss emergent codes. From this process the researchers collaboratively developed a codebook that was used to code all of the remaining transcripts. To solicit a diversity of interpretive viewpoints and strengthen the overall analysis of the data, the researchers continued to meet throughout the coding process to ensure congruence in coding and to discuss evolving patterns in the data.

After applying codes to all the transcripts, the researchers generated tables to compare codes within and across the focus groups (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). This process initially identified the primary themes within each focus group and then we determined which themes were relevant for each sub-population (i.e., foster youth, caregivers, etc.), although we intentionally noted divergent cases. The data presented for the second research

question regarding the characteristics of foster youth and caregiver relationships is an example of a within-group theme that primarily emerged for the youth participants. Since these aspects of the findings only emerged for the youth participants, they will be presented separately. Memos were utilized to support data analysis and facilitate intentional reflexivity. It was through this iterative process of coding, discussion, and writing that the research team collaboratively identified the key processes and prominent themes across all of the focus groups. All data were stored and organized using ATLAS.ti version 6.

Since reflexivity is an important benchmark of rigor in qualitative studies (Stige, Malterud, & Midtgarden, 2009), it is important to mention that the researchers responsible for data analysis all had personal and professional experiences that informed and contextualized the research findings. For instance, two of these researchers have significant direct practice experience in child welfare, including adolescent services at CA, and a third researcher worked for many years in community-based youth organizations, including working with foster youth. The data analysis team also included a fourth researcher who is a bachelor's-level social work researcher, so she could bring fresh perspectives to the analysis process.

3. Results

This first section describes the themes that emerged across the former foster youth, foster caregiver, and child welfare staff focus groups related to descriptions of the foster youth caregiver relationships. These themes include: lack of connection and bond, perceived lack of fit or mismatch, and chaotic home environments marked by judgment and reactivity. These findings have been summarized in Figure 1. The second section will present the specific elements of “connected” foster families from the perspective of foster youth, including a sense of belonging, genuine interest in their lives, structure/boundaries, and guidance preparing for the future. These themes emerged primarily for the former foster youth participants and not foster caregivers or CA staff.

3.1. Characteristics of the foster youth & caregiver relationship

3.1.1. Lacking in a connection and formative bond—Former foster youth, caregivers, and CA staff mainly depicted foster youth and caregiver relationships that lacked a genuine connection and bond. One youth participant, for instance, felt that her foster parents were just “getting paid to pretend to like” her. Another youth described how:

“They don’t even talk to you. They might say, ‘Hey,’ when you walk in the door and, ‘Bye,’ when you leave, and that’s it. And then if you do something they don’t like, then the only time they talk to you is when you do something wrong.”

The feeling of distance was captured by another former foster youth who stated:

Nobody ever sat down and helped me with my homework when I got home from school. Nobody ever asked me, ‘What did you learn today?’ ‘What did you do today?’ You know, ‘Do you have homework?’ ‘You know, nobody made sure that I did anything for me.

Foster caregivers and children’s administration (CA) staff used language about bonding and connection to speak to a similar feeling of detachment present in many of the foster homes.

One foster caregiver stated, “There’s no bond... So, how do you explain or teach or direct and they just tell you it’s none of your business.” Similarly, a CA staff person related that:

A lot of our teens don’t have that general bond and connection. You know, this foster parent could be their fifteenth foster parent... I think a lot of them are going to be like, “Whatever. You’re just another one of my foster parents who are trying to tell me what to do.”

CA staff identified the role a lack of connection played in impeding potential relationship building and bonding, making it difficult for caregivers to feel like they had any influence over foster children in their care. It is important to note that this portrayal of distant family relationships was not shared by all of the participants. Two of the former foster youth, for example, shared that they had positive relationships with their foster caregivers where they participated in shared activities such as family game nights and preparing meals.

3.1.2. Not belonging or mismatch—Building on the previous theme, participants described a sense of perceived mismatch between teens and their foster families. For instance, some of the former foster youth felt like outsiders in their foster homes. As one former foster youth explained, “my biggest struggle... I really did not know anybody at all... And it was like me and my brother was like the ugly ducklings, like nobody was gonna speak with us.” Similarly, another young woman reported feeling judged and underscored that perceived feeling of mismatch:

So you’re being judged by them [foster families], and you don’t quite fit in there. They’re just thrown into a family that you’re supposed to love and they’re supposed to love you back. But you’re not theirs so they’re not gonna treat you the same as they treat their own.

A CA staff person corroborated this feeling of not fitting in by stating, “I think them feeling like they belong there is probably the biggest thing, too. You know, that they can belong and be part of that family.”

In a similar vein, CA staff described foster parents’ challenges with conflicting norms, expectations, and parenting styles between the environments that the youth came from and those in place in their foster homes. One CA staff person elaborated on this “mismatch” between youth and caregiver norms by stating:

One of the things I hear the most is...the home we put them in has a set of standards that are normal for their family... then we put these kids in here and they don’t really fit, the puzzle piece is different.

This sentiment was illustrated by a foster caregiver who detailed the challenge of integrating a teen with a different family background into their home. S/he states:

We have to explain to them why because Mom and Dad are doing drugs that it really isn’t acceptable. And you’ve got that added hurdle because they’ve been influenced... it’s already engrained in them, you know. I mean the damage is done.

This quote demonstrates how foster parents perceive foster youth as coming into their homes with fixed antisocial norms and behaviors that are at odds with their family values and norms.

3.1.3. Chaotic and stressful homes marked by perceived judgment and reactivity

—Although foster parents, CA workers, and former foster youth used different language to describe the general foster home environments, a common denominator among the majority of the participants was that home life was often stressful. While foster parents and CA staff portrayed homes consumed by stress, safety concerns, and hyper-vigilance, youth discussed how they internalized these concerns and often felt stigmatized and judged.

Foster caregivers reported chaotic home environments where safety was an ongoing concern. For instance, one foster caregiver recounted how her foster daughter was “tearing” her home apart with her regular outbursts and erratic behaviors. Another caregiver stated: “You have to almost lock everything up in your house because if they can find a pill they will take it you know or hair dyes or whatever you know without asking, there’s just no boundaries...” Caregivers voiced frequent concern about their personal safety, the safety of the other children in the home, and the foster teen’s individual safety. One foster caregiver, for instance, reported worrying about her “personal safety” and her foster teens’ “safety as well,” because of her engagement in high-risk behavior and sexual activity. Another caregiver detailed how her foster youth “ended up assaulting [her biological] daughter,” creating a feeling of ongoing tension. This fear is elaborated on by CA staff that some foster parents are anxious about foster youth negatively influencing their biological children with their undesirable behaviors, “I think I hear a lot that they’re worried about behaviors that this child coming into their home [has] and how that will affect their own kids.”

Additionally, child welfare workers depicted foster caregivers who were overwhelmed and even consumed by the parenting responsibilities of caring for foster youth. The magnitude of these challenges was seen as hindering their ability to forge meaningful relationships. One child welfare worker stated that for foster caregivers the focus is “more around the negative behavior or the acting out or the attitude... that becomes kind of consuming and then I think it really becomes the relationship.” This stress translates into hyper-vigilant and reactive parenting behaviors, which can be a source of tension in the home and have the potential to overshadow the strengths of the teen. The following passage explicates:

Lots of [foster] parents with teenagers don’t relax, they don’t know how to relax and just let the child be a child and just listen to their ideas... I think the challenge in that would be, they don’t know how to relax, how to just let this child unfold in the midst of their family. If they would just kind of sit back and kind of let the child be a child or be a kid, and not worry so much I think it would go a lot smoother.

This hyper-vigilance exemplified by the foster caregivers was internalized by some of the foster youth as them having a personal deficit. They perceived that their foster caregivers viewed them as “problem child[ren],” or “kleptomaniac[s].” One participant articulated chronically feeling like if she “blinked wrong” her foster parent would call her caseworker, and another reported how his foster parents “called the cops because I was late and didn’t believe me where I was at.” This sentiment was echoed by another participant:

I feel that when you're in foster care, it's like you're not looked at so much as well—a human being. That's what I would say. I know that kinda sounds, like, exaggerated; but it's really not. You always feel, like, they have to keep, um, their eyes on you....

Foster parents spoke at length about their challenges foster parenting, especially underscoring the stress regarding their foster teen's myriad "problem behaviors." CA workers emphasized that caregivers often hyper-focus on these challenges and allowed them to "consume the relationship." This hyper-vigilance translated to the youth as feeling "judged all the time."

3.2. Elements of supportive foster homes

The youth participants identified the characteristics of "connected" foster homes: a sense of belonging, structure/normalcy, guidance/support preparing for the future, and someone to take a genuine interest in their lives. These findings have been summarized in Figure 2.

3.2.1. Sense of belonging and someone that shows a genuine interest in their lives—Above all, across all of the youth focus groups the participants detailed wanting to establish a sense of belonging where their foster families took an active interest in their lives. One youth provided the following advice for foster families:

Sit down and talk to them, let them become comfortable speaking to you when it doesn't have to do with, you know, "I'm hungry, can I eat? My clothes are dirty, can I wash?" You know, really sitting down and talking to your kids.

Beyond just focusing on behavioral issues and getting everyday needs met the youth participant emphasized that he wanted a genuine relationship or connection with his foster caregiver. Similarly, another participant stated that he desired "the actual support of a loving, caring parent, like going to basketball games and supporting them no matter what they do." Implicit in this statement is that youth desire caregivers to stay engaged unconditionally, even when challenges present themselves. The desire for youth to be treated like "regular kids" was reiterated powerfully by another participant in the same focus group, "Be a parent, you know what I'm saying. Don't just be a foster parent because you're getting a check and just going through the motions. Be an actual parent. Get to know the child."

3.2.2. Structure/boundaries—The youth participants described wanting their foster caregivers to establish consistency and structure in their lives. As one participant articulated, "Like if you were to just...sit down at the dinner table and eat dinner everyday together, it starts to build just a kind of sense of like a routine and a normalness in their life." Youth elaborated on how this sense of structure can be nurtured by having clear expectations and boundaries. Youth expressed how setting boundaries could be interpreted by youth as an indicator that foster parents are invested in their well-being. As one participant stated:

Even though we act out and we're bad-ass little kids, [it] doesn't mean that we don't want the good things and don't want boundaries... wanted to be disciplined...get grounded for the first time. I've never been grounded in my life,

and I wanted that. That's sad for a child to want to be in their room and be punished because that ain't never happened. I didn't even know what it felt like.

In this passage, the participant equated caring with the practice of appropriate discipline.

3.2.3. Guidance preparing for the future—Youth also voiced the need for their foster parents to “direct them to positive resources” and support their educational attainment, especially because of the challenges they will face once they age out of the foster care system. The consensus was that many foster parents aren't aware of the community resources available for foster youth after exiting the child welfare system. Additionally, a handful of participants perceived that their foster parents didn't care about their educational attainment such as whether they completed their homework or attended school. As one participant underscored:

I had trouble getting there [school] and then, I guess my foster parents at the time didn't really push me too hard... maybe because...I'm not their family so they didn't really push me because they didn't care too much.

Another important theme is that the youth participants articulated wanting their foster parents to mentor them in everyday life skills and navigating social systems, rather than simply doing it for them. As one participant illustrated:

Because like in foster homes a lot of stuff is kind of done for you... so when you turn 18 you're not too sure what to do for yourself because you've been crippled for so long by the system... So you might not know how to make your own doctor's appointments..., because they're kind of made for you... Then when you're 18 you're just pushed out there. So kind of helping the kids get the skills for what they need.

4. Discussion

Placement instability and adverse foster youth outcomes remain considerable challenges in the child welfare system. The overarching theme from this study is that genuine relationships between foster caregivers and youth are a critical factor in youth's overall feelings of well-being. We join Havlicek (2011) in emphasizing the importance of critically examining the nuanced contexts that influence youth's transitions to adulthood; in this instance, the quality and substance of youth's relationships with foster caregivers. Consistent with positive youth development and resiliency perspectives, former foster youth in our sample detailed the vital role these connections can play in avoiding high-risk behavior, developing future goals, and moving beyond “survival mode,” and foster caregivers explicated how more meaningful bonds can strengthen their parenting practices. The following sections will elaborate on our findings regarding the substance of foster caregiver and youth relationships, discuss the need to bolster support for foster parents, and unpack the multiple dimension of connection.

4.1. Relationships lacking in nurturance and meaningful connection

Across the focus groups, youth, caregivers, and child welfare staff depicted foster caregiver and youth relationships that were lacking in bonding and connection. Similar to Rauktis et

al.'s (2011), Wald et al.'s (1998) and Hedin, et al.'s (2011) former foster youth reported feeling like outsiders, where the full breadth of their emotional needs went unmet and they felt stigmatized for the variance in family norms, and for simply being "foster kids." These findings augment the existing literature by including perspectives of caregivers who articulate how this lack of connection and bond not only impacts fosters youths' feelings of belonging and self-worth, but also impairs their ability to parent the youth in their care. These perspectives were complemented by those of child welfare staff who explained how this perceived "lack of fit" between caregivers and foster youth is a source of tension and disharmony in the foster home. This research points to the important role nurturing positive connections can play as a determinant of placement stability and ultimately supporting wellbeing and more positive outcomes for youth post emancipation from the child welfare system.

4.2. Bolstering supports for foster caregivers: Emphasizing relationship building

Foster caregivers in our study mirrored many of the challenges chronicled in the child welfare literature. Similar to findings in Cole and Eamon (2007), Farmer et al. (2005), Whenan et al. (2009), and Wilson et al. (2000), caregivers exhibited signs of significant stress. Our study expands these findings by describing how this stress potentially minimizes the ability to provide strengths-based parenting and results in highly reactive, hyper-vigilant, and inflexible parenting approaches that resulted in the youth feeling judged and stigmatized. Further, our results indicate that stress mediates and potentially suppresses caregivers' capacity to forge meaningful relationships with youth in their care. It is not surprising that due to the breadth of the complex concerns and challenges detailed by the foster caregivers, they have little reserve to proactively focus on building a positive bond and relationship with the youth in their care. In this sense, the foster caregivers' stress and reactivity could be interpreted as precluding the development of formative bonds between caregivers and youth.

Additionally, foster caregivers' lack of emphasis on relationship building with teens could be a reflection of the lack of relationship-focused training and support for caregivers in their preparation to be licensed as foster parents. As such, caregiver-youth relationships play a secondary role to the elements of caregiving emphasized in their training: safety, administrative regulations, etc. Clearly, this research underscores the importance of providing adequate training for prospective foster parents on forging meaningful relationships with youth, strategies to encourage youth integration into family life, and supporting youth as they navigate complex social and educational systems.

4.3. Unpacking connection

Former foster youth in our study identified the critical constructs associated with "connected" foster families. Consistent with the literature on positive youth development and resiliency, the youth identified the importance of belonging, structure, consistency and guidance from their foster parents. Similar to the work of Brannen et al. (2000), O'Neill (2004), and Whiting and Lee (2003), the former foster youth emphasized the importance of authentic inclusion, everyday family interactions, and for their foster parents to "care enough" to set boundaries and consequences for their behavior. Similar to Samuel's (2009)

study, the youth in our sample demonstrated self-reliant attitudes; however, they underscored the important role caregivers can play in promoting their resiliency and facilitating their successful transition to adulthood. This research sheds light on the informative and exciting theoretical contributions Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks and constructs can play in contextualizing and potentially improving foster youth's outcomes both within care and after aging out of the system. The multifaceted characteristics of "connected" foster youth and caregiver relationships that build on PYD and resiliency frameworks provide a promising foundation for further empirical investigation.

5. Limitations

There are several study limitations worth noting. First, it is important to mention that the youth participants in our study were recruited from a community-based organization that supports former foster youth who are successfully transitioning to adulthood. Since they are utilizing these important community-based services, one may assume that they feel disconnected from family support structures. Therefore, the findings in this study may not be generalizable to all youth involved in the child welfare system. Second, all of the foster youth participants had already aged out of the system, and we were asking them to retrospectively reflect on their experiences while in care. There could be challenges with memory and/or recall as a result of this lapse of time. Third, we did not solicit information on the former youth's length in care or the age they were in care. Fourth, we did not ask our caregivers to specify what type of provider they were (i.e., relative caregiver, foster parent, adoptive parent, etc.). These findings are therefore more transferable to the broader caregiver population, rather than one particular sub-group, and may mask important differences that exist in subgroups of foster caregivers. Fifth, although reasonable efforts were made to recruit male participants, significantly more women constituted the focus group samples, therefore these findings may be more germane to female-identified foster caregivers, former foster youth, and child welfare staff.

6. Conclusion

This study is a critical first step in highlighting the fundamental importance foster caregiver and youth relationships play in youth's well-being and caregiver parenting approaches. It is imperative for foster caregivers and child welfare staff to emphasize the importance of developing a trusted and supportive relationship between caregivers and foster youth and the critical role that relationship can play in supporting foster youth resiliency and thriving. This research points to the need for foster caregivers to have additional training, support, and resources to implement strategies to focus attention on relationship building. They should also be provided tools for problem solving and establishing family norms, rules, and consequences, and strengths-based parenting strategies in order to positively engage youth in family life. Admittedly, the circumstances and complexity of the foster youths' involvement with the child welfare system may make developing a close and healthy bond more challenging. Yet, because of the unique vulnerability of foster youth, it is all the more important for caregivers to establish structure, norms, a sense of belonging, and a mutual investment in the relationship between the foster youth and their caregiver, as well as the

foster family. Clearly, additional opportunities and training are needed to support foster families collectively in forging mutually respecting, reciprocal, genuine, and cooperative relationships. This important foundation has the potential to promote the resiliency that is critically important to youths' healthy development. It is likely that these steps can also contribute to greater placement stability, minimize caregiver burnout, and encourage foster youth's positive development and avoidance of high-risk behavior.

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Highlights

- Foster youth and caregivers relationships lack trust, connection and compatibility.
- Characteristics of supportive foster homes include: genuine interest, guidance, and belonging
- Stronger foster youth and caregiver connection can support youth well being
- Caregivers need training on managing stress and forging authentic bonds with youth

Figure 1.
Characteristics of Foster Youth and Caregiver Relationship

Figure 2.
Elements of Supportive Foster Parent/Teen Relationship Building

Table 1

Participant Sample Demographics Per Focus Group Population

	Focus Groups	Female	Male	African American	White	Latino/Hispanic	AI-AN	Asian American	Other
CA staff	3	22	5	3	21	0	1	1	1
Foster youth	3	18	2	9	5	3	0	0	6
Foster caregivers	3	15	1	5	10	0	1	0	0
Total	9	55	8	17	36	3	2	1	7