SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRANSITION FROM GOVERNMENT CARE

RESEARCH PROJECT

STAGE 1 REPORT

Prepared by:
Deborah Rutman , April Barlow
Carol Hubberstey, Daniela Alusik, Erinn Brown

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Project Overview and Objectives

This report presents our findings and reflections from Stage 1 of the "Supporting Young People's Transitions from Government Care" project. The overall goal of this 27-month project was to use a grass-roots and participatory process to identify and implement ways of improving young people's preparation for and experiences of leaving government care to live on their own. The project's objectives were to provide youth in/from government care with opportunities to:

- Voice their experiences of the transition from care process.

- Strengthen peer support through the sharing of their experiences and involvement in action planning and implementation.

- Develop and/or augment skills, including analytical and critical thinking, problem solving and consensus building, and writing.

- Work collaboratively to identify and implement strategies to support and improve young people's transition from government care.

- Educate the government and the community regarding strategies to support a healthy transition from government care.

In Stage 1, 20 youth participants recounted their stories of leaving care and identified their support needs; interviews were also conducted with a sample of 15 caregivers, government and community-based service providers.

Our focus in Stage 2 has been to pilot test and evaluate one of the strategies/ activities, identified through our Stage 1 research, aimed at promoting healthy transitions from care. As such, in Stage 2 we have offered a series of peer-supported, independent living skills and peer mentor training workshops to a group of eight youth in transition from care.

Findings and Conclusions

The findings presented in this report come primarily from our interviews with youth. In the Report, we organize our findings into four sub-sections:

1. Experiences in care;
2. Experiences leaving care;
3. Elements of supportive practice for social workers; and
4. Elements of supportive practice for foster parents.

Youth who have left care generally have limited or no contact with the people in the government care system who formed their social support network during their time in care. The 'system' as it is currently structured does not encourage or make room for ongoing relationships. Consequently, many youth with whom we spoke described feeling let down by the 'system' rather than being supported – a feeling that was characterized by a lack of ongoing connection with anyone of importance or significance in their lives. This is also in sharp contrast with the experiences of most youth who do not enter care, who typically do retain a relationship with family members as they grow older and move out on their own. These findings suggest that the most part government as parent is failing to live up to its responsibilities, and that youth are having difficulty making a successful transition to adulthood.

Findings from our research also indicated that youth needed and wanted ongoing emotional support during their transition from care. They wanted someone or some individuals who took an interest in their well being, their emotional health, physical comfort and material needs, and who could help them feel special, as well as help them to gain the necessary skills and confidence that could enable them to move toward adulthood. Moreover, the need for that emotional/social support did not diminish once they left care.

Another key finding from the research was the importance of providing youth with more opportunities to make decisions, problem-solve, and practice skills for independent living. Youth recommended that they be given more independent living skills training, more opportunities to have responsibility, and more support and counselling as means of improving their transition from foster care.

In sum. the results from this research project as well as the literature underscore the importance of viewing the *transition from care as a process* rather than as an event triggered by a person's 18th or 19th birthday. Furthermore, there is a strong need for individualized support and mechanisms to enable ongoing support for youth, especially support that extends beyond the age of majority and is geared towards helping them make a transition to adulthood. In particular they need access to resources that will make a difference such as education, employment and training programs. In addition, youth need

to have a range of support options available, including peer mentoring, as a way to help youth in and from care heal from past wounds and take on adult roles. Finally, youth need ongoing opportunities to practice and develop their decision-making and problem-solving skills and to practice a range of skills necessary for independent living.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, the following recommendations are offered:

Practice

1. That the elements of supportive practice as identified by youth be incorporated into the day to day practice of social workers, guardianship workers, child and youth care workers and others providing care for young people in government care. These elements are:
    *   consistency
    *   accessibility
    *   empathy
    *   working on the young person's behalf as an ally
    *   going above and beyond
    *   promoting self-confidence and self-esteem
    *   facilitating the transition process
    *   setting up services
    *   keeping the 'door' open

2. That the day to day practice of social workers, guardianship workers, foster parents and others, recognize that the preparation for the transition to adulthood and development of independent living skills is an ongoing process beginning when a child enters adolescence and continuing through to adulthood. Thus, the gradual acquisition of these skills needs to be incorporated into the plans for care..

3. In tracking of the developmental progress of children and youth that particular attention be paid to ensuring that there is adequate support to help them successfully meet developmental challenges.

Training

4. That there be increased training for social workers, guardianship workers, child   care workers and others providing care for young people, in how to facilitate and support the transition to adulthood.

5. That training for foster parents include strategies for ways they can play a larger role in helping youth develop toward adulthood, including strategies for optimizing decision-making and problem-solving skill acquisition.

6. That this training be hands on, experiential, and highlight elements of supportive practice

7. That training for foster parents highlight the elements of supportive practice as identified by youth including
    *   promotes a sense of belonging, being part of the family
    *   provides emotional support
    *   provides instrumental support
    *   facilitates youth's learning about culture and traditions
    *   provides youth with privacy, and with their own physical space
    *   provides independence
    *   allows youth to figure out own ways to learn and practice skills, and participate in decision making
    *   promotes youth's sense of self-confidence
    *   encourages/facilitates youth in maintaining a relationship, even after the youth has left care

Research

8. In order to address existing gaps in knowledge regarding former youth in care, that qualitative research grounded in the experiences of youth in/from care be carried out with an aim of developing a framework for exploring and assessing youth's readiness to leave care to live on their own.

9. That research identifying and critically examining the barriers to youth's engaging in positive, sustained relationships (with, for example, workers, peers, family and other community members) be undertaken, with an aim of identifying means to remove these barriers.

10. That research tracking young people's post-care experiences, life circumstances and outcomes be undertaken such that a sample or cohort of youth be followed over time.

11. That in examining outcomes for former youth in care, research focussing on youth's own perspectives and understandings of both successful outcomes and appropriate indicators of these outcomes be undertaken, in keeping with a youth-focussed approach to working with youth in care.

Policy

12. That the Ministry for Children and Families consider development of a transitional support position with responsibility for supporting young people's transition from care and to adulthood. This position could be located either in government or the community. The ability to initiate and undertake collaborative practice with youth, foster parents, guardianship workers, social workers, child and youth care workers, and various government and community services would be a key requirement of the transitional support position.

13. That the Ministry for Children and Families develop and support a variety of mechanisms through which youth who are leaving care can sustain ongoing relationships with supportive adults/mentors. Such mechanisms may include: peer mentoring; transitional support workers; and supports for foster parents wishing to engage in ongoing relationships with youth from care.

14. That the Ministry for Children and Families actively support multi-disciplinary and interagency collaborative practice to engage professionals from outside the child welfare system in responding to the full spectrum of issues facing transitioning youth, such as health and mental health issues, substance use treatment, and employment and educational needs.

15. That the criteria for selection of Ministry youth team workers include:
    - desire to work with youth
    - knowledge of adolescent development
    - ability to demonstrate supportive practice as per recommendation #1

16. That the Ministry for Children and Families consider reducing the caseload of youth teams so as to enable and encourage supportive practice as per recommendations # 1 and #2.

17. That funding for post majority services, especially those relating to education, be increased.

18. That continuity between youth services and adult services be strengthened such that a youth transitioning into adulthood would continue to receive financial, emotional and social supports past the age of majority.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents our findings and reflections from Stage 1 of the "Supporting Young People's Transitions from Government Care" project. The overall aim of this two-stage, 27 month project was to improve young people's experiences of leaving government care. For the purposes of this project and report, we are largely referring to youth who are in the process of making a transition from living in care to living on their own, and/or those youth who have already made the transition.

In Stage 1, youth participants recounted their stories of leaving care and identified their support needs; interviews were also conducted with caregivers, and government and community-based service providers.

Our focus in Stage 2 is to pilot test and evaluate one of the strategies/activities, identified through our Stage 1 research, aimed at promoting healthy transitions from care. A separate Stage 2 report will be available in the summer of 2001.

INTRODUCTION

MY EXPERIENCE IN CARE….

I remember moving into my first foster home. I was so excited. I knew that my life was going to change. I guess I didn't realize how bad it could become. Before everything went sour, there were a lot of positive changes in my life. I had a later curfew than I had ever had in my old controlling family structure, and I didn't have to deal with any abuse. No one really seemed to care about me.

At first all of this seemed really cool, but when school got out for summer vacation it really started to suck. I remember having to be out of the house at 9:30 every morning and not being allowed to return until at least 5:00. Sometimes my foster parent would decide that she wanted to go out for the evening, so then I had to leave again until she came home. I realized then that I no longer had a family. I really felt like my foster parent only wanted me in her home so she could make money off me. After summer vacation was over I decided to try another foster home. This new placement seemed way worse. My social worker reminded me that because I was only a 'Temporary Ward', I was able to move back in with my biological family if I wished, but I knew that living with them was just as bad. All of a sudden I felt really out of place. I didn't know where I belonged. I ended up dropping out of school and hitting the streets.

During the time I was living on the streets I was using really hard drugs and I was making some really poor choices. I didn't return to my foster home for about 3 months. When I finally did return I became a 'Permanent Ward' and was introduced to my new social worker. Out of the two previous workers I had, this new worker seemed to really care. I told her how I felt about foster care and that I didn't want to be a part of it anymore. She decided to let me try a program called 'Independent Living', which means you live on your own. A week after doing this, I started to improve. I quit using drugs and returned to school.

It has been a year since I have been living independently, and I must say that I love it. I feel sad knowing that I will never have a family like I have always dreamed for, but in the same light, all I need is me!!

(Source: Victoria Youth In Care Network's newsletter "Reality". June 2000)

SECTION 1
Background & History

In 1997, youth from the Victoria Youth In Care Network (VYICN) met with researchers from the University of Victoria (UVic) to discuss the issues affecting youth leaving government care to live independently on their own. These initial meetings revealed that youth have a lot of concerns about the issues they face, and that these issues not only needed to be explored in further detail, but that there needed to be some formal and structured way of addressing them. In addition, for youth it was a priority that whatever was created was grassroots (initiated and driven by those affected) and participatory (involved other youth, and other community and government service providers throughout the process). Thus began the "Supporting Young People's Transitions from Government Care" Project.

Overview of Issues for Youth Leaving Government Care

For the past decade, the large majority of Canadian youth have stayed in their parents' homes past the age of majority (Martin & Palmer, 1997), and at the last census the average age for leaving home was in the mid-20s (Martin, 1996). This contrasts sharply with the reality for most youth in government care who lose the supports of their public "parents" the day they turn 19. Indeed, youth leaving government care are expected to establish their own households earlier than their peers who grow up living with their parents. While some youth in care live in their foster/group homes until they reach the age of majority, (Footnote 1) many move out on their own as young as 16 years old, although legally they may be still under the government's care (Footnote 2). These youth are asked to do more, sooner, and with fewer personal, social and material resources.

Youth who leave care at an early age typically experience a number of health problems due to their lack of resources, practical living skills and supportive relationships. Health issues associated with inadequate preparation for leaving care include: inadequate food/nutrition, unsafe shelter, substance misuse, violence, emotional/mental health problems, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, and difficulties in accessing health/dental services.

The transitional process of becoming independent becomes even more difficult for youth in foster care because of their experience of abuse and neglect, including the often neglectful parenting of the government care system (BC Task Force on Safeguards for Children and Youth in Foster or Group Home Care, 1997; Dumbrill,

Raychaba 1993; Victoria Sexually Exploited Youth Task Force Report, 1997). Many youth continue to cope with unresolved internal conflict and pain which makes it difficult for them to take on adult roles and responsibilities. Typically this leads to a lack of education and personal stability needed to find and keep employment (Martin, 1996), that in turn means that many youth "graduate" from the child welfare system to adult social assistance/welfare (Raychaba, 1993; Kingsley, 1996). Youth also tend to be involved frequently with the justice system and/or the mental health system after leaving care (Martin & Palmer, 1997). Furthermore, recent research has found that the mortality rate of youth leaving care, due to violence is significantly higher than is the rate among youth in the general population (Thompson, 1996).

From young people's perspective, healing from past wounds is important in order to enable them to achieve their goals as adults. These wounds don't suddenly heal once they turn 19. As such it is important that their transitions from care (Footnote 3) are viewed as a process that allows and enables them to continue to be supported by people who are important to them and who can encourage and promote their growth and development beyond the age of majority. Both Kingsley (1996) and Raychaba (1996) recommend peer support as one way to help youth in and from care heal from their past experiences and traumas.

In addition, a consistent theme in the literature is the desire expressed by youth to have a greater role in developing skills that will help them through their transition process. However, there is a striking gap in the available literature about any research documenting attempts to involve youth in the process of not only identifying but also implementing and evaluating strategies that will help them.

Footnote 1: The age of majority in BC is 19

Footnote 2: By youth in/from care we are referring to young people, generally between the ages of 14-24, who are either still "in" government care but will soon leave care (e.g. youth currently living in a group home, foster home, receiving home, home of a relative, or are living on their own), or youth who are "from" care, that is, who have recently left care. In speaking of "leaving care", we are including the transitional processes of preparing to leave care as well as living on one's own, and/or in a non-care environment.

Footnote 3: Experiences of youth who move from government care back to living with their families are not included in this study. Many youth living in government care do eventually return home. The transition process and experience for them may be different than that which we have reported on.

Project Goal

The overall goal of this project was to use a grass-roots and participatory process to identify and implement ways of improving young people's preparation for and experiences of leaving government care to live on their own.

Project Objectives

➤ Provide youth in/from government care with opportunities to voice their experiences of the transition from care process.

➤ Provide youth in/from government care with opportunities to strengthen peer support through the sharing of their experiences and involvement in action planning and implementation.

➤ Through their participation in the project, provide youth in/from government care with opportunities for skills development, including analytical and critical thinking, problem solving and consensus building, and writing.

➤ Provide opportunities for youth, government and communities to work collaboratively to identify and implement strategies to support and improve young people's transition from government care.

➤ Provide opportunities for youth to educate the government and the community regarding strategies to support a healthy transition from government care.

A TIMELINE OF THE LIFE
OF A FORMER YOUTH IN CARE

1985	July	24	I phoned the police on my Dad.
1988	Sept.	1	Moved in with my Mom.
1989	July	9	Mom kicked me out so I spent the night with my Dad.
		10	Dad kicked me out and dropped me off at a friend's house.
		11	Went to check out Kiwanis Youth Shelter but that didn't work out so well so I stayed with my friend.
		13	Moved into Carey Rd. Receiving Home.
	Sept.	5	Start school at Colquitz.
		6	Ran away to move in with boyfriend.
		9	Broke up with boyfriend, stayed at another friend's house.
		30	Police showed up at my school looking for me.
	Oct..	4	Moved into foster home.
		14	Ran away from foster home and slept in Staff Room at work.
		15-16	Stayed at friend's house.
		17-18	Slept in two different parkades downtown.
		19	Got arrested, sent back to foster home.
	Nov.	18	Got high on drugs for first time.
		25	Ran away, stayed with a friend.
		27	Stayed at Kiwanis Youth Shelter.
		30	Officially came into care, still staying at Kiwanis.
	Dec.	7	Moved into Glasgow Receiving Home.
		12	Start at Warehouse School.
		13	Pled 'Guilty' in court..
		19	Moved into Selkirk Group Home.
1990	Jan.	12	Start at S.J.Willis Alternative School.
		15	Given 6 months of probation for theft under.
	April	2	Caught in Red Zone, breached probation.
	July	15	Breach suspended, probation order ends today.
1991	Oct..	23	Discharged from care.

(Source: Former Youth In Care)

SECTION 2
Project Methodology

Participatory Action Research

We selected participatory action research as the methodology for this project because of its congruence with the project's goals, value orientation and objectives. Participatory action research is more than a particular research design. It represents a philosophical approach that is rooted in social justice. Participatory action research rose to prominence in the 1970's in Third World countries as a tool for fighting oppression by involving people affected by an issue directly in the research design and process. The thinking and reflection of significant   researchers and writers in this field (eg: Friere, 1970) in turn influenced the thinking of researchers and academics in First World countries.

Participatory action research requires the active and meaningful involvement of the community that is "under investigation" in the design, implementation and actions of the study. Participatory action research starts with the people who wish to research their own lives; they are key to what takes place and it is their desire to improve social conditions that is paramount. People involved in participatory research "combine investigation, education and community action to create an empowering movement for personal and social transformation." (Potts, 1997). Theoretically in this type of research there are no "subjects" per se, no timelines and no attempt to eliminate bias as part of the research process. Other hallmarks of PAR include: organic and emergent research/action processes; development and application of critical analyses and "conscientization", leading to collective consciousness/power; and structural change as an ultimate goal (Potts, 1997; Maguire, 1987; Tandon, 1988).

In keeping with the intent of participatory action research principles, this project incorporated both a research and an action phase. Youth were involved in both aspects of the project. Our reflections associated with the experience of conducting a participatory project are contained in a different report.

Project Team

When the project commenced, the team was comprised of three adults: a UVic-based researcher; a community-based researcher; and the Coordinator of the VYICN, now technically considered a young adult because of her age (26). This initial team in turn recruited youth, community based service providers, and policy and front line staff from the Ministry for Children and Families to form a

Steering Committee for the project.

Youth from care were then recruited to join the project team; our budget enabled hiring three youth on a part time basis of up to 10 hours per week., to form an overall 6-member project team. One youth eventually left the project, and the team ultimately decided to keep the team complement at 5.

The desire was to create a non-hierarchical team that had complementary strengths, skills, life experiences and experiences living in and leaving care. Equality in decision-making and input amongst all team members was the priority.

Youth Involvement

The project design emphasized a strong role for youth. Youth were envisioned as part of the Steering Committee, the project team, as research participants, and as their time and resources permitted, as volunteers. Those on the Steering Committee and those taking part in the research interviews were paid an honorarium; those on the project team were paid a salary. During Stage 1, primarily through their roles on the project team, youth have:

- prepared articles for youth-to-youth newsletters on different aspects of the project and the flyer for recruiting youth participants;
- taken leadership for revising the Interview Guide and Consent Form;
- taken initiative to participate in consultations with the Ministry for Children and Families to provide written feedback on MCF's Draft Practice Standards for Youth Services ;
- participated in the Federation of B.C. Youth in Care Network's conference on behalf of the project;
- participated in MCF's provincial consultations regarding policy and program planning to improve youth's transitions from care;
- conducted research interviews with youth and service providers;
- transcribed the interviews;
- collaboratively undertaken data analysis;
- taken leadership to develop an evaluation framework for our participatory research process and to facilitate the project team's "group evaluation" of Stage 1;
- taken leadership to plan Stage 2 of the project, including developing the peer mentoring training materials and workshop schedule, and designing participant recruitment flyers and circulating these to agencies and social workers;
- taken leadership to develop problem solving and conflict resolution mechanisms for Stage 2; and
- collaboratively drafted sections of our Stage 1 Report and other products.

WHAT OTHERS HAVE SAID:

"Children and youth living in government care must leave care when they turn nineteen, regardless of their personal situation. They cannot stay in foster homes and continue to receive services. As we all know, not everyone is ready to leave home at nineteen. As good parents we continue to support our children for the rest of our lives. Children and youth under care do not have this opportunity."

(Source: B.C. Child, Youth & Family Advocate's 1999 Annual Report)

Doing the Research: Data Collection and Analysis

Youth participants shared their stories of leaving care via in-depth, face to face interviews, which were carried out as guided conversations. We interviewed a diverse sample of 20 young people (age range 16-26), including 10 youth who had recently left care and two who anticipated leaving in the near future. Twelve of our participants were female; eight were male; two were Aboriginal or of mixed ancestry; and five were young parents. We also interviewed six youth-serving community based practitioners; three foster parents/caregivers, and six youth-serving Ministry for Children and Families workers in order to explore their experiences of engaging in supportive practice with youth in transition from care.

We almost always employed a team approach to data collection, whereby one of the youth researchers paired up with an adult member of the project team to conduct an interview. This facilitated learning and mentoring and also ensured that there was "back-up" support for the researchers, particularly if the interview resulted in disclosure of highly sensitive or emotionally charged information.

Interviewing, transcribing and data analysis occurred over the course of many months. The team elected to engage in data analysis as a collective activity, which involved: reading the transcripts numerous times; identifying and discussing the "units of meaning" and then key themes as a group; sorting, connecting and analyzing these themes into separate topic areas (e.g. "supportive practice for foster parents"); and identifying the implications of our findings for Stage 2 of the project (the   implementation of a "do-able" strategy), as well as for policy and practice.

WHAT OTHERS HAVE SAID:

"These youth expressed a lot of concern about leaving care, and most want to continue receiving support from the system…those in care seem to have difficulty saying what independence means to them or describing how they could achieve independence. Most feel they will remain dependent on the system and graduate to adult welfare, even though they feel the system keeps them isolated and stigmatized and fails to address the reason they came into care in the first place."

(Source: Finding Our Way. Report of the Youth Involvement Project to the Ministry for Children and Families. 1997)

IMAGINE LEAVING CARE…

Imagine, for a moment, that you are sixteen years old. Except picture yourself living in a group home. Life isn't so easy because you have to share pretty much everything, including your privacy, with a group of others. On top of that, you're still trying to deal with whatever the reason is that you ended up in a group home in the first place. At least the people you're living with have been through the same thing. Your foster parents cook you dinner every night too, and even take you shopping for clothes every so often. Maybe it's not like a real family like your friends have, but at least there's always someone there to talk to (and a warm meal on the table every night). Like it or not, this is your home.

Or is it? One day you come back from school to the news that your group home is being closed. The government has decided that it's better (ie. cheaper) idea to close your home and give you money instead. At first you're thrilled. Enough money to pay for rent and bills, and then some, just for being you. That's quite the allowance, and you didn't even have to do anything! You could finally buy the cool things you've always wanted! But then reality sinks in when you find out what the catch is. You're going to be totally on your own. And that means things you didn't think you'd have to worry about for a bunch of years. Like finding a place to live, for one thing. You quickly discover that if you want to live in a place that could even remotely pass for an apartment you need either credit or parents to co-sign (of which you have neither). Laundry? Food? Sure, you can handle putting together Kraft Dinner, but a real dinner?

The worst part of it is that you won't have anyone around. No one to give you a hug on those inevitable lousy days or help you out with that science project that's due the next morning. And you can't ask anyone how to get an orange juice stain out of your favourite white shirt! But you don't have a choice in the matter. Your home is closing and there isn't a thing you can do about it!

(Source: Victoria Youth In Care Network's newsletter "Reality". October 1999)

SECTION 3
Research Findings

Introduction

The findings presented in this report come primarily from our interviews with youth. Our interviews with service providers were generally highly congruent with the youth interviews.

We have organized our findings into four sub-sections:
1.   Experiences in care;
2.   Experiences leaving care;
3.   Elements of supportive practice for social workers; and
4.   Elements of supportive practice for foster parents.

In identifying these elements of supportive practice, wherever possible, we extracted themes from participants' discussion of their positive experiences living in and/or transitioning from care. At the same time, participants' stories of their negative experiences in care were highly useful in our analysis, in that they illustrated ways in which the absence of these – and other – elements of supportive practice gave rise to youth's unhappy or unhealthy experiences living in care.

1. Experiences in Care

Although our interviews focused on youth's experiences of leaving government care, many youth also shared their experiences of living in care, including the process by which they came into care. In view of our perspective that leaving care is a process rather than an event – a process that cannot be disconnected from youth's life in care – young people's stories of living in care provide an important context through which to consider their transitions into independence. While it is beyond the scope of this report to provide an extensive discussion of youth's experiences living in care, below we present those aspects of youth's experiences living in care that we believe are highly relevant to their process and experience of exiting care.

On Coming Into Care

Coming into care is always a difficult experience for youth, even if the process is a smooth one. Most of the youth we interviewed seemed to have a fairly smooth transition into care, and didn't have too much to say about it. However, there were

a few youth that described how difficult this experience was for them. For example, young people described having to fight to be taken into care, not being believed about their experiences, and having to demonstrate in a number of ways that they were serious about the need to be away from their home environment. Young people's struggles most often arose when they entered care at a later age - when the underlying causes of the conflict at home were perhaps less clear but most often described by the Ministry as "parent/teen conflict".

The Screams In The Dark

Out of the dark, quiet streets Comes screams of pain, terror, and The sounds of someone yelling For help.

No one goes towards the screams. Everyone's afraid.

The screams grow louder, oh does It sound like pain. The sound ever filters through me. It's making me go insane.

Now as a survivor of abuse, Please can someone stop and cut these ropes loose.

(Source: Victoria Youth In Care Network's newsletter "Reality" June 1999)

"I ran away like six times and they finally put me into care. I had to fight and fight and fight for it! I always went to welfare, and I just went and talked to people, people would talk to me and just say 'You don't need to be in care, you need to be at home'. And it's like, 'No I don't'...and they'd always send me home, always send me home, and I'd leave right away because I didn't feel safe so, why would they sent you back somewhere where you don't feel safe?"

Unfortunately, many of the youth with whom we spoke found it highly stressful and wearing to have to adjust to new sets of rules, being moved several times, and feeling like an outsider or a "case number". Their stories suggested that there was significant, albeit invisible work involved in getting their workers to like and appreciate them:

"I am so exhausted from being in care, I'm so exhausted. Try my best to do everything possible so they, they, they appreciate who I am and, you know, so they'd like me and I have to do things for them to enjoy me. "

Nevertheless, some of these youth expressed that even though many of their experiences in care were negative, they were still better off than if they stayed at home. Those who described having a positive experience seemed to feel quite lucky that they were in a safe home, had some reasonable structure, were treated better than before, and so forth. Some attributed their happiness to having a meaningful connection with their foster parents (for more information on this, please refer to the section in this report entitled 'Supportive Practice for Foster Parents').

"It was pretty good. For me it was a healing experience. A lot of people might argue differently, but not me. It was probably the first time there was real structure and freedom in my life, rather than a makeshift structure. I learned a lot about myself in that time. 'Course, I was fairly lucky in my placement. I ended up living with a ... very understanding and supportive person. I may of made a lot of wrong mistakes, but I learned from them. And I personally believe I am a better person because of it. It was just nice to be able to make mistakes and then deal with them on my own."

On Changing Placements

All of the young people interviewed had experienced moving from foster home to foster home or group home or emergency shelter. Youth expressed frustration and concern about not knowing how long they were going to be living somewhere. Regardless of how the change in placement came about, the end result was often the same for youth - they felt confused, rejected, angry and frustrated by the lack of consistency and stability that resulted from the frequent change in living arrangements. Youth told us they needed a sense of permanence, somewhere where they could feel that they belonged. They also needed more predictability, control and input into decision making on these issues:

> "I was only going to be there for three months, and from three months it turned into two years."

> "I was passed around a lot due to some of the families got sick, financial problems, too many kids of their own....I was always trying to fit in somewhere. I got a lot of rejection. People just saying 'Move on, go to another group home, go to another foster home'. That's pretty brutal."

Similarly, youth had a variety of comments about the length of stay in placements: some youth felt that they were being moved from home to home too quickly; others felt that their time in a placement was too long, since they wanted to go on Independent Living as soon as possible.

On Abuse In Care

It seems hard to imagine how a child or youth can be taken away from their parents to be protected and then experience abuse while in foster care. A number of youth described various kinds of abuse they experienced with their foster parents. These youth stressed the importance of having people believe them when they say they are being abused, as well as the need for thorough screening for potential foster parents.

> "I got physically abused. I got beat up by my foster parents. Sometimes I felt like suing them...I think she resented me...She used to spank me so hard I'd bleed...(My foster dad), broke two of my ribs. He didn't even apologize for it. I wish he would have. Oh well. That's the shit you go through in child care.....I ran away...(The cops) took me all the way back to the reserve and to the foster home, back to the same place and to the same abusive woman."

"I went through 3 to 4 group homes before I ended up in a foster home over a year later... You're not guaranteed anything when you're in care. Especially about where you live."

(Source: Youth Research Participant)

On Seeing Counsellors For Help

Only some of the youth whom we interviewed saw counsellors while in care. Youth's experiences with their counsellors varied; however, their sense of whether the experience was positive and useful seemed to depend on the kind of relationship and connection they had made with their counsellors. Some felt they had a real connection, and that their counsellors were really supportive and helpful. Others felt that they couldn't trust their counsellors to respect their feelings or to keep things confidential. Youth told us that there needs to be a good match between youth and counsellors, and that social workers need to listen to youth when they say that they want a different counsellor.

> "I have a counsellor and I tell her my problems but she, uh, sometimes goes against me with it. It gets me frustrated and then I cry because no one's really helping me. She listens and then judges what I say....People in care are supposed to help these kids, and help me!"

> "I mean, like, they did get me like a Child Care Worker, but I kept telling her (social worker) I didn't like her, I didn't connect with the woman. 'Well there's nothing else. That's what you get, that's what we have.'

On Culture

Some youth felt very strongly about their need for a connection with their culture, and that this had not been adequately addressed while they were in care.

> "Despite my adoptive parents working with Native people I felt that they didn't really emphasize my own connection with that culture...I was looking for a sense of belonging which I felt was taken away from me....(After visiting natural mom on the reserve) I left because I didn't like it, I felt like I didn't fit in at all and I felt torn apart because of that."

On Running Away and Going A.W.O.L.(Absent With Out Leave)

Running away seems to be a common experience of youth in care. Youth described running away for a variety of reasons - to express dissatisfaction with their placement, to find their birth family, to have some freedom from being in care, etc. Most often, running away was an expression of unhappiness with where they were living.

> "I got sick of being in child care, I ran away so many times....It was always worth it though, because emotionally I always felt better afterwards. Always felt good - I was grounded, but still, I was happy"

"I AWOL'd lots as a kid because I always wanted to live with a real family. Maybe 20 times between the ages of 13 and 16."

On Siblings

All youth who had siblings in care experienced a separation from them. Their perspective on this was that the government did not do enough to try to keep their families together. Siblings were often placed in separate foster homes, and neither social   workers nor counsellors made any real or ongoing effort to facilitate visits or any other way of continuing their relationship. They experienced this as a deep loss and thought this would affect them forever.

"We were all separated...that was the stupid thing to do. ...If they would have (kept us together) we would be a frickin' family right now....I got a broken heart because of the social workers and everybody, they separated us, and that's what made it worse. ... But I wish, if we could turn the clock all the way back that we would live in the same home as a family and still love each other. But now we're all separated."

F.O.S.T.E.R.
C.A.R.E.

Family
Others
Sadness
Terrified
Ending
Rules

Children
Anxious
Realization
Exciting

(Source: Victoria Youth In Care Network's newsletter "Reality". June 1999)

2. Experiences Leaving Care

Reflections on Leaving Care: Issues Facing Youth

There was considerable diversity in participants' experiences of leaving care and their reflections on the transition process. While some said that "it was a smooth transition", for others the experience of leaving care and being on their own was "a shock". Many participants expressed ambivalence or had multiple, conflicting feelings about leaving care. For some youth, being on their own meant finally having opportunities to catch up on the fun that they felt they had had to forego in their childhood or living in care; at the same time, being on their own meant that, when it came time to "settle down" to deal with "life's choices" and the realities of day to day living, there might not be anyone to help them. Overall, participants seemed to express competing desires and needs in relation to being on their own, and they often seemed at a crossroads, with few if any people to assist them sort through the confusion. In participants' words:

> "I'm still in shock. There's nothing there any more. I have to do stuff on my own, and that's kind of a reality check."

> "It's exciting to be on my own. It's like, finally I'm off, on my own. But I'm not ready for the real world. I haven't really settled down to think about life's choices yet. I'm having too much fun, fun that I missing having when I was in foster care."

Participants spoke of a number of issues that they faced in their transition from care, including: making ends meet; education; relationships; dealing with anger and conflict; transience; being alone/loneliness.

Perhaps the most pressing issue discussed was the need for adequate income. Many participants spoke of wanting to avoid or get off welfare; however, youth who had not managed to secure a job prior to leaving care often felt they had no other choice, given their immediate need for a means to pay rent and living expenses, and the absence of any other form of income or family support. Young people's lack of skills and very limited job opportunities also created significant barriers to employment, and budgeting difficulties contributed to participants' struggles to make ends meet.

> "I should have set myself up with a job when I left care, because now I'm screwed for my rent. I'm looking at welfare. And I don't like that. I'd rather be working."

In addition, a number of participants spoke of what they perceived to be the Ministry's expectation that youth leaving care would "graduate" onto income assistance, almost as a matter of course. One participant spoke of her experience being "bounced around" multiple systems (e.g. MCF and income assistance offices), with each system apparently fobbing off responsibility for supporting her because she left care "early" and sought underage income assistance.

"I was given information about the nearest welfare office. That's about it."

"They bounced me from Human Resources, the welfare office, to MCF. And every time I would go back to an office they would be like, 'I'm sorry, we cannot help you.' And then I would go to the welfare office and they'd say, 'This is not our problem. You're under age.' "

With regard to education, a number of participants spoke of their interest in returning to school to finish or continue their education. However, participants also pointed out the financial barriers to pursuing their education and the difficulties they experienced trying to go to school while living on their own and having to support themselves. In these circumstances, youth felt quite at odds with their peers, and their social estrangement likely exacerbated their difficulties at school:

"I am worrying about where my food is coming from and my hydro bill and bus fare and school supplies, and getting irritated by all the kids that I was going to school with, because most of them don't even think about that kind of shit."

While the Ministry for Children and Families does have a post-majority program that pays for up to 24 months of a youth's tuition and living expenses for youth who are between 19 and 24 years of age (entitled Services to Former Permanent Youth in Care, or SPY), as its name implies the program is only open to former permanent wards; thus former temporary or voluntary wards, who comprise a significant number of the youth in care in BC, are ineligible for program support. In addition, limited funding allocated to each region means that the demand for the SPY program generally far exceeds its availability. Some participants were struck by what they perceived as a lack of support and encouragement from the system for them to further their education.

"I have to go see my old social worker this week to go and sign some papers, but she's basically told me that there are no guarantees for it (the SPY program). I can go sign the contracts, and she said if the money's there I can go on it. But if it's not there, then too bad."

Youth also spoke about their difficulties maintaining healthy relationships. Many attributed their anger and struggles in relationships to the trauma, abuse, interpersonal conflicts and displacement they experienced at home and/or in care. Youth felt that until and unless there was personal healing, their healthy development, success in living with roommates and partners, and capacity to successfully take on school and employment would be severely compromised.

> "I have a lot of anger from that place (foster home). And sometimes talking about it I get really mad and I'll start shaking 'cause I get so mad from it. There's places I should be able to go...to learn to deal with that, so you don't get so mad from it."

> "I tend to let anger get the best of me; that's how I got evicted. I did damage to the house."

In terms of housing, several participants reflected that they tended to move frequently from one place to another upon leaving care, a situation which they attributed to their lack of stability in their childhood and/or while in care. In addition, for a number of participants, being alone and on their own was a new experience; for some, this was also highly stressful. This might be a natural experience for youth who move away from home, however for young people leaving care, there is the additional pressure of not having a family to go back to if the transition to living alone proves to be too stressful. As participants shared with us:

> "I've moved around so much because I moved a lot growing up."

> "I'm one of those people, I can't live on my own. I cannot. I have an anxiety disorder and one of the things is, if I'm by myself I'll have anxiety attacks."

On Preparation and Readiness

Just as there was diversity in participants' reflections on leaving care, there was a wide range of views and experiences relating to youths' readiness for leaving care and their sense of being prepared. Some youth felt they were ready and that they had been prepared by their life experiences living at home and/or in foster or group care, or with their partner. Others felt that there had been inadequate planning or preparation for their departure from care. And still others felt somewhat prepared or prepared in some ways, but not in other ways. Some youth commented that there couldn't be pre-planning or formal preparation for certain facets of living on their own; these situations had to be experienced and dealt with as they arose.

"Fully, no. Prepared to deal with it and to live with it, yes. In the last four months on or, before I went out on my own, my foster parents taught me about cooking and budgeting. Not enough with the budgeting. "

"No. None whatsoever (planning). They just said, 'Here's your stuff.' Handed me my bags. 'You're a grown man.' 'No, I'm not.' I said, 'I haven't learned any life skills. Sure, I know how to cook toast, and peanut butter and jam, and whatever, macaroni.' And that's it. That's all I knew. 'Cause everything was always prepared for me, everything. So, I didn't have that many skills. ...Yeah, it was like the sheet was whipped from right underneath me. I hit rock bottom. It was a huge factor in my life."

Many youth commented that the transition from care process felt abrupt and that the rushed pace contributed to their struggles. Some suggested that age alone was not necessarily a good predictor of readiness. Moreover, a number of youth reflected that they would have liked to begin learning independent living skills, including budgeting and decision making, years before they left care, e.g. at 14-15.

"I was too rushed. ...I had a hard time finding a place and it stressed me out. The rent was too high...(I needed) some flexibility about the time frame. I was rushed... I also needed to start getting help way before moving so that I would have a long time to realize what I'd be going through."

Yet, as much as youth told us they wished they had developed various life skills prior to leaving care, a number of participants also noted that they may not have been really ready or receptive to learning these skills when they were younger. This suggests that any strategies to help youth acquire independent living skills need to take into account youths' receptivity and their preferred ways of learning skills.

"If I got $600./month when I was 16, I doubt I would have spent it on bills. Let's just say that I'd have a lot of clothes, but nothing to eat."

Finally, a number of participants spoke of wanting to demonstrate their readiness to live on their own to their social worker, and of wishing that there were some sort of agreed upon framework or process whereby they could demonstrate their skills.

"I was ready to move on my own...I had everything. I knew how to cook. I knew how to do laundry. I know, like, to do a lot of things. "

"I contacted every social worker I knew and said, 'Put me on independent living.' I felt that I had proved that I could be on it...from what I had done in the transition home. They hadn't really given me a chance to prove it...I knew that I could prove it, that I could be independent."

"Fourteen is a good age, I think (to learn independent living skills)....Because that way, it also gives (youth) a few years to learn it and realize it all. ...I was given like six months. It was all of a sudden 'this is what we're doing."

(Source: Youth Research Participant)

On Needed Skills for Leaving Care

Cooking was the independent living skill about which the majority of youth were most confidant, and most spoke of having adequate skills in this area. A number of youth also said they had cleaning skills - that their cleaning skills had been well-developed while living in care - and that they were neat and liked being organized. One young person spoke of being able to fix things, while another reported being taught independent living skills that would enable him to live in the bush, in keeping with traditional Aboriginal ways. Youth reported learning these skills from their family or while in care, or on the job, or in some cases through their experience of living on their own.

> "I worked at a restaurant. I was a prep cook. ...I was doing two different jobs, prepping and dishes...My foster parents (helped me learn these things); they gave me a lot of work. "

At the same time, participants reported needing a number of skills to better prepare them for living on their own, including: budgeting, banking, cooking, nutrition, job-finding, anger management and conflict resolution, time management, maintaining relationships, and decision making. The need for better budgeting skills was identified most frequently; indeed, nearly all participants said that they wished they had been better able to manage money, in light of the very limited amount they would have living independently, so that they didn't have to live "day by day". As well, one participant spoke of needing life skills that would enable him to "get my self-confidence back".

> "I never learned time management. That was one thing that was never shown to me. Schedules. Money management. How to maintain a relationship with somebody, whether it's just a friend, or your lover, or whatever. Anger management. Everything, the whole shebang. "

> "I still wish I had skills in dealing with money. If you don't have a lot of money, you don't get to play around with it, or learn from it, or learn with it."

On Needed Supports for Leaving Care

Several participants shared important stories of having received both emotional and instrumental, hands-on support during their transition from care. Some participants received significant support from their social worker; others were assisted by a foster parent or their partner. In describing this support, it was clear that participants valued not only the practical assistance, but also the caring relationship that sometimes carried on even after they left care.

At the same time, quite a number of participants were apparently without these types of supports in their transitions from care. Youth thus identified a number of types of support that they would have found useful in the process of leaving care to live on their own, including:

- Ongoing supportive relationship
- (Peer) mentoring for youth leaving care
- Hands on, practical support
- Transitional skill development program and group support
- Semi / Supported independent living housing or foster homes
- Foster parents who engage youth in decision making and who instill self- confidence in youth
- (Additional forms of) post-majority programs that all youth leaving care can access

Many of these ideas are complementary; many, as well, could be implemented in a variety of ways. However, young people's principal message was clear: they envisioned support as coming primarily via an ongoing relationship – with either peers, service providers and/or caregivers – rather than via social programming, services or other resources.

A number of youth spoke of the importance of having a "buddy" or mentor relationship with someone during the process of their transition from care. Youth clearly wanted a mentor who was empathic and who had recent lived experience of moving out on their own. However, according to participants, this mentor figure could either be a youth support worker or a peer (i.e. someone who had lived in care).

> "I'd like to see someone for kids coming up in care. Someone that the kids could look up to; someone they could talk to. Play basketball with, hang out. Eventually, they would start talking to them and say, 'This is what happened to me. Try to learn from my mistakes.' …I think if I had that, a lot would be different."

> "Someone strictly for people on Independent Living…and if you had a problem you could actually go to that person. …That would be kind of cool, if that person was there to guide you through it, and they could take you out to lunch once a month or something like that. Like a big brother or big sister."

A number of youth spoke of the need for hands-on, practical assistance during the process of exiting care. A buddy or mentor could support youth in these ways:

> "I also needed help to go through the process, with getting furniture and stuff. Youth don't have cars."

> "Having information ready and available, like where to find shelter, crisis lines, drug awareness programs, how to get off poverty."

Although participants spoke of a need for an ongoing supportive relationship first and foremost, several also indicated that they would gave benefited from taking part in a transitional skill development program. One important aspect of such a program would be group/peer support, which could facilitate identifying and addressing youth's multi-faceted needs in a holistic way.

> "I think a transitional program would have been really cool. Like, where they said to you, 'You're going to have to learn how to cook...' Hygiene, it would be all right there. That would have been really good for me, because, when I think about it, I had to learn those skills for myself. I had to, because I was so used to having someone say, every day, 'Take a shower.' If I didn't take a shower, they'd rant and rave."

Along similar lines, some participants emphasized the value of supported independent living housing or foster care for youth that needed some additional residential support during their transition from care. Residential support may be especially important for youth with particular needs or life circumstances, such as young single mothers.

> "A program like the Pandora Project that would teach me to live on my own would be a very good program for me to experience. ...Pandora...is like living in a big house with a lot of people but you have your own space. And you learn a lot about living on your own."

> "My other thought is that if it (leaving care and/or the youth agreement) doesn't work out for the youth that they can go back into semi-independent foster care. I see semi-independent foster care as being for the youth and for young parents with children. For example, a basement suite situation. It gives the youth independent space, but there's still someone there to support them. Especially for young women with kids. It would allow someone to be right there in the moment. It's hard enough to be a youth alone, let alone with a young child."

"There should be group support. ... There should be places where people can go to talk about it. ...To be able to live independently you have to have self-confidence."

(Source: Youth Research Participant.)

Finally, some participants spoke of the importance of expanding government's post-majority programs for youth who had lived in care. Participants strongly believed that existing education-related programs, such as SPY, ought to be available for all interested youth from care. Participants also urged the creation of new programs that could address young people's needs for support in other areas of their life, such as obtaining employment experience.

"I would have liked there to be a couple of programs for when you leave care. Like I know there's the SPY program, but ...I may not get it. It would have been nice if there's a job program. I'd make it for kids in care. Like I know in Victoria they have the janitorial Youth Works program, which I think is really good. But I was thinking maybe we could do a retail store, or a food/cafe kind of thing."

"Post majority program funding to help people in care with schooling should be increased and extended. It takes time to figure out what you are doing in life... "

GROWING UP

Please believe in me.
Though I've let you
    down,
I don't try to, I'm
    young
And I still have to walk
And experience
    many miles
That you have al
    ready trudged.
Help me believe in
    myself.

Please stick by me.
Even when I act
    rebellious
And I don't seem to
    care.
I need you. And
    though I'm
Not receptive all the
    time
Give me yet another
    chance
To hear and grow.

Please be my friend.
    I need
Someone to look up to
And learn from.
    Know that
Only as time passes
    may I
Really feel your I
    influence.
So please don't give
    up on me.

Please love me. Not
    always
Do I love myself. I get
Mad at the things I do
And so often am my
    own
Worst enemy. I need
    your
Gentleness, softness
And even your
    correction.
Please love me.

(Source: Victoria Youth
In Care   Network's
newsletter "Reality". May
2000)

3. Elements of Supportive Practice: Social Workers

"She was like a mother at the time."

"She always remembered Christmas and birthdays, she got me counselling, gave me her old bed, helped me move ...She gave me the support that I wasn't getting from anywhere else."

Youth indicated that they wanted to have a social worker who was supportive, helpful, and cared in ways that were not unlike a parent. Given that government assumes the role of parent when children and youth enter care, it should be no surprise that youth have a need to find someone who could fill the parental void. The social worker was often the most obvious person and typically the person in the strongest position to affect events in the youth's lives.

According to participants, supportive practice on the part of social workers involved developing and maintaining a supportive relationship, which in turn involved several key components, including:

- consistency
- accessibility
- empathy
- advocacy - that he or she worked on the young person's behalf as an ally;
- going above and beyond; and
- promoting self-confidence and self-esteem. (These key components are discussed more fully below.)

On Consistency

In order for relationships to develop, the social worker needed to be a consistent presence in the youth's lives.

"I had a permanent worker and I had her the whole time. So I never got switched around, moved around or anything like that. And I've heard of other kids who had that happen but it didn't happen to me at all."

When that consistency was not there, youth felt let down emotionally and/or materially, and often found themselves having to tell their story yet again. All too often, youth felt that consistency in social workers was missing, as workers were reassigned to different offices or positions, as caseloads were shifted, or as youth themselves moved. This much transience often led to a breakdown in the relationship between youth and worker.

One impact that youth experienced when there was no consistency in Ministry workers was that they felt like they fell through the cracks. For these youth, their definition of good practice was described more in the context of what did not happen.

> "I had four social workers over four years."

> "If there was a semi-emergency, I'd call. Then I'd be told that they had been transferred to another city. And I'd go, 'Can I talk to them?' and they'd go, 'No, they're busy.'...It just got really frustrating."

On Accessibility

Youth indicated that they appreciated having social workers who were accessible. Youth spoke eloquently about the need to have someone who was there when needed and who could be there for them through difficult times as well as good ones. Being able to access their worker helped reduce anxiety for youth when their plans and care arrangements changed, when they felt they were in a crisis, or even when they had a question that needed to be addressed.

> "I saw her quite often...she helped me move. I'd say 2-3 times a month, I saw her and I talked to her quite often on the phone."

> "(What I wanted was) Being taken seriously and not being blown off and expending so much energy just to get called back, to get hold of somebody because you have a question you need answered."

On Empathy

Youth valued workers who showed that they empathized with the young person's situation, circumstances and feelings. Along with empathy, youth appreciated when workers actively listened to them, and when workers related to youth without being unduly biased by their own differing values or morals. When this existed in the relationship, youth were able to be honest and to share with a worker all that was going on in their lives:

> "I could tell her anything."

> "I was always brutally honest with my social workers...she told me she appreciated that."

Unfortunately, not all participants had experienced what they perceived as empathy. As one young person told us poignantly:

"...The social worker should try to be me for a week..."

(Source: Youth Research Participant)

On Working on Behalf of Youth as an Ally

FOSTER CARE

Foster care really
    sucks
However not very
    often do you
    have to duck.
No more abuse
    we are told,
Truth is we've just
    been sold.

The system is
    screwed
Yah, I know this
    sounds rude
Hopefully I won't
    be sued
For my opinion
    of self
    explanation.

Care to me was
    the worst
They should have
    just placed me
    in a hearst.
All I ever wanted
    was to be loved
But of course
    noone would
Even though they
    knew they
    should.

Took to the
    streets, dead as
    meat
Never knew when
    I could eat
Never mind try-
    ing to sleep.

...con't

Youth often viewed their social workers as being allies or advocates, someone who could assist them through the myriad of systems that affected their lives. Youth also greatly appreciated when workers assumed this role; they valued the efforts of Ministry workers to access services for them on their behalf. According to participants, working on youth's behalf meant listening carefully to what they said they needed, being non-judgemental about youth's preferences and choices, and working with youth to help them achieve their own goals.

> "She was really understanding and knew what I wanted in life and helped me to get that."

> "I had an awesome social worker. Best social worker anyone could ever have. She was generally very supportive of everything I wanted to do; she was always there."

> "And her first words out of her mouth, after I had told her I was pregnant, was "what do you want to do?" And I said "I want to keep the baby". And she goes, "Then you are keeping the baby"."

Social workers were seen as people who could help facilitate a range of services, as well as care arrangements or placements, planning for transition, and ultimately the transition process. Social workers had knowledge of entitlements, policies, programs and services, and understood ways to "work the   system" that often seemed confusing and difficult for youth and typically   presented considerable barriers. While many youth had the knowledge and savvy to learn the system of the Ministry, in times of turmoil and personal stress, they greatly appreciated when a knowledgeable ally stepped in with a helping hand.

> "I talked to her quite often on the phone. She was a big part, you know. She always made sure that me and (my daughter) never went without. She made sure we got our clothing allowances. ...She got me counselling when I needed it, like she always got me anything I needed."

Youth in care mentioned times that they appreciated a social worker helping them in situations where accessing a resource would not necessarily have been possible without the worker's assistance. Some of these situations included helping youth get into a group home of their choice, finding a placement near their school, being a personal reference for rental agreements, or issuing

On Going Above and Beyond

There were many examples of Ministry workers going above and beyond youth's hopes and expectations. Central to this theme is the idea that the social worker went "out of their way" to support and assist the youth, or that the worker made time - on their own time - to help.

> "And I think she actually even gave me an extra cheque to help me out, like she totally went out of her way to help me out...I think what she did was split my cheque up every two weeks which was really helpful..."

> "I think the only one who tried to do that with me (teach me independent living and relationship skills) was my social worker. She was my auntie. She used to come and visit me. She used to drive six hours, just so that could visit me for one day. She used to visit me out at the group home, she used to take me out for clothes shopping."

In addition, based on many participants' experiences, the notion of "going above and beyond" suggested that the worker was looked upon as a friend. Youth appreciated that no matter what, they could always just call up their social worker (even at home), or stop by for a chat. This went beyond the basic requirements of accessibility as the social worker allowed the youth into their personal lives as well: a step many people might have been reluctant to take.

> "She came to visit me in the hospital, she would come at Christmas and at birthdays, and always remember us. She's excellent. Her and her husband even bought a new mattress...and she got her sons to drop off her old bed to my house, and then she took me out and bought me a bedframe."

Youth also appreciated when workers took a personal interest in seeing that all their needs were met (such as money and counselling), took them to the doctor, went grocery shopping, helped them get identification, and helped them deal with landlords and banks. Some of these activities are akin to those that a natural or foster parent might do with a child in transition. If a youth was on Independent Living, often the social worker might have been the closest substitute for a parental figure the youth might have.

On Promoting Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem

For one young woman, having her social worker express that she was going to succeed in life had a tremendous, positive impact on her self-confidence and self-esteem.

...con't

Family isn't about mom, dad, sis & bro,
It's where ever you are and who-ever you're with
Foster care is not to be screwed with no more.

Kids and youth aren't some-thing
You can buy at a store
They need love, care and un-derstanding
And to know how it is to become an adult
With a safe land-ing.

(Source: Victoria Youth In Care Network's newsletter "Reality". April 2000)

> "She also told me that I was the one that was going to make it. As a mother, as a person. ...It's like, she told me I was going to make it, so I know I will."

Although this was the only participant to comment on how their social worker fostered self-esteem, we were struck by the importance of this as an element of supportive practice for workers.

Elements Of Supportive Practice During Transition

The support provided by a social worker during the transition out of care made a real difference for youth. Often the social worker was in a unique position to assist a smooth transition for youth in ways that other supports, such as foster/group home parents, natural parents and friends, could not. For example, workers were able to help youth access post majority services, and they could assist youth to overcome the challenges and barriers that youth typically encountered with other systems (for example, education, income assistance, health). Youth reported that not only were tangible services (such as emergency food money) helpful, but intangible ones as well (such as emotional support after the transition) were also vitally important.

On Facilitating the Transition Process

The majority of youth mentioned the importance of a social worker taking part in the process of transition, particularly in the beginning stages of it. The start of the transition process included sharing knowledge and skills in areas that would benefit youth when they left care. Youth also noted that there wasn't a specific time prior to when they were "due" to leave care that the social worker ought to become involved in the planning process. Some youth, due to particular learning styles, needed the planning and skill development work to begin as soon as they entered care.

> "Everyone is unique; everyone's situation is unique. So these strict rules need to, they need to be flexible a little bit in some situations."

On Setting up Services

Many youth spoke of valuing their social worker's assistance in setting up transitional services that could continue after the youth left care. The most frequently mentioned resource was the SPY program, which provided youth with funding for post-secondary education and their living expenses.

Without assistance from their social workers during the transition out of care, many youth typically failed to receive necessary services and supports. Not getting help or services for which they might be eligible meant that youth sometimes did not have enough money for basics such as food and rent, or that youth simply drifted towards leaving care with little in the way of planning or preparation.
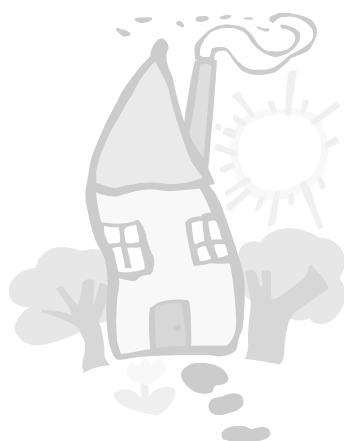
> "(I) was not prepared for the difference in the amount of support provided by social workers versus financial aid workers. I missed having someone to talk to... most of them (Financial Assistance Workers) just want to deal with money and that's about it."

On Keeping the Door Open

In the confusion of transition from care, youth often felt unsettled and lonely. The social worker could be a combination of parental figure, mentor and friend. Often the social worker was the only person who could fill this position when there was no real parent in the picture, or when the youth did not stay in any group or foster home long enough to really make a connection. Youth appreciated having an open-door relationship with their social worker after they left care. They may not have chosen to walk through it, but it was definitely a comfort to know it was there if they needed it.

> "I still have (my former, now retired social worker's) phone number in Victoria and she says I can go visit her whenever she wants. So I guess I still have her."

> "She was like a mother to me at the time, and she lived down the road from the group home, and she'd always say, 'If you ever need to talk, walk through the park and I'm just a block away.' "

4. Elements of Supportive Practice: Foster Parents

Youth participants spoke of having both good and bad experiences living in foster/group home care. They also spoke of both good and bad experiences with foster/group home parents during their transition from care. In examining and trying to understand what made for participants' good experiences, a number of themes emerged. These themes can be viewed as elements of   supportive practice for foster/group home parents; they include:

- Promotes a sense of belonging, being part of the family;
- Provides emotional support;
- Provides instrumental support – helps connect youth with things they need;
- Facilitates youth's learning about culture and traditions;
- Provides youth with privacy, and with their own physical space;
- Provides independence – freedom to come and go;
- Allows youth to figure out own ways to learn and practice skills, and participate in decision making;
- Promotes youth's sense of self-confidence; and
- Encourages/facilitates youth in maintaining a relationship, even after the youth has left care

On Promoting a Sense of Belonging

Many participants spoke of the importance of feeling as though they belonged in the family and that they were part of it. Everyone needs to feel as though he or she belongs, yet for children or youth whose relationships with their biological family are troubled or disconnected, this need is, arguably, all the more profound and acute. Among participants who had had a positive experience living in care, their sense of belonging seemed to be a critical feature contributing to this experience. Similarly, a factor that seemed to contribute to youth's negative experiences in care was their perception that their caregiver favored a biological child. Foster parents who were able to instill in youth this sense of belonging, who communicated through word and deed that the young person was part of this "real" family, were deeply appreciated.

Participants spoke of different ways that foster and group home parents communicated that they belonged. For a number of youth, their belonging was reflected in being treated "like a member of the family", or being treated

"(He was) like a father to me....(He) treated me like a real son".

This youth went on to note that over time he assumed a special role in the household amongst the different foster children, that of big brother. Having this special role signified and continually reinforced the feeling that he belonged in the family:

"I had a role in the house; I was like a big brother to everyone else."

Another participant said that she appreciated the way in which her foster parents would seek her out to spend time over coffee, so that they could "catch up" with what was going on in each other's lives:

"But it was kind of like, "Hey, how is it going?" I would go for coffee. If we hadn't really seen each other for a while, so we'd catch up every now and again. It felt like I really fit in there and belonged. Like I was kind of their daughter."

By contrast, youth who did not experience belonging (at least in certain circumstances) reflected:

"I didn't feel like part of the family in one foster home. I wish she would be more honest with kids. She's a nice person, but she needs to focus on her foster kids just as much as on her own kids."

A lot of emotions every time I see the parents dealing with their kids and then how they treat me. One instance, I got a stamp collection, another kid got a brand new computer. A huge difference, eh? Eight hundred dollars for the computer, and the stamp collection was a total of $32.

Participants also experienced a sense of belonging when they felt physically "at home" in the home and when they could be in all areas of the home – when there were not areas in the home that were "off limits" to them because of their status as a foster child. As one youth who felt as though her access to the home was restricted, told us:

"I had to stay away from the family – separate space."

On Providing Emotional Support

In describing their experiences in care, it was clear that youth really valued the emotional support that they received from foster/group home parents. Care-

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WHAT IS A FAMILY?

What is a family?
I do not know.
Want one yes I do!
Need one sure I do!

Father, Mother
Sister, Brother
I want all of these!

Families are nice
   to see,
Could you give
   one to me,
Please!?!

(Source: Victoria Youth In Care Network's newsletter "Reality". December 1999)

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shoulder to lean (or cry) on, or who demonstrated that they were people to whom the youth could go to for comfort, support and advice, were appreciated for years to come. In participants' words:

"(My foster parent was) very understanding and supportive."

"He seen me go through a lot - jail, break-ups with girlfriends.

Moreover, for some youth, it seemed as though the emotional support they received from foster/group home parents represented the primary, and possibly, the only source of ongoing emotional support that they had during this period in their lives. As one young person told us:

"She was the only one who'd take an interest in me."

On Providing Instrumental Support

In addition to emotional support, foster/group home parents' instrumental (practical) support was really appreciated by participants. Participants valued their caregivers' assistance in arranging for and/or accompanying them to appointments, helping them negotiate bureaucratic systems, and/or linking them with information or resources that they needed or that they would need, especially upon their transition to independence. One young person was struck by the hands-on support that his group home father provided:

"He got me my learner's and my driver's license."

For youth leaving care, there can seem to be an overwhelming number of things to know. For example, youth told us that they often didn't know they would need something (such as a SIN card) until they were at a job interview (or other types of intimidating appointments) and they didn't have it. Thus, foster/group home parents' practical assistance to youth made a big difference.

On Facilitating Youth's Learning About Culture and Traditions

Aboriginal participants spoke of the strong importance of knowing about their culture. They were greatly appreciative of foster parents (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal) who actively facilitated their learning about Aboriginal traditions and who helped instill in them a sense of belonging and connection with their heritage. Similarly, they regretted when their foster parents did not attend to their cultural identity needs; this was experienced as a deep and enduring sense of loss. One

Aboriginal youth had very fond memories of a foster parent who taught him Aboriginal ways:

> "She's the one who showed me a lot. Like, if I was ever to live in the bush - actually, she showed me life skills. She showed me how to skin an animal, how to prepare it, how to smoke it, she used to sit with me, prepare sweet grass, pray to the great spirit. She helped me a lot. She showed me quite a bit actually."

On Providing Youth with Privacy

Another dimension that made for young people having a positive experience in foster/group home care was having their own, private space:

> "I had my own space - lots of it."

For youth living in care (and especially in group homes), sharing space and not having much private space tends to be the norm. Thus, youth in care may crave and appreciate their own space even more than other youth do. Foster/group home caregivers who were able both to create a private physical space for youth and to respect youth's privacy were truly valued by participants.

On Providing Independence

Along with physical space and privacy comes emotional space, as demonstrated by extended curfews and other "freedoms". Allowing youth to "come and go as they pleased" signified to youth both the caregiver's trust in them and their imminent transition toward independence.

Among youth whose experiences in care were more negative, a common lament was the restrictiveness of the rules in the foster/group home. One participant told a powerful story of how he was affected by his foster parents' restrictiveness, which he believed stemmed from their particular religious practices:

> "I couldn't go treat or treating. Couldn't go, fucking nothing. Christmas. I couldn't even celebrate my own goddamn birthday. Teachers knew about my birthday. They had to sneak presents to me so my mum and my dad wouldn't find out. Used to leave me treats and gift certificates for me as a birthday present. Foster mum would get mad if she ever found out."

In this situation, the foster home's restrictions, which were out of step with mainstream society, resulted in the youth being denied opportunities to participate in major cultural ceremonies and festivities. Arguably, these restrictions could also

contribute to a deep sense of deprivation, loss of community, stigmatization and ostracism by the youth's peers.

On Allowing Youth to Figure Out Own Ways to Learn and Practice Skills, and Participate in Decision Making

USELESS

I am here
I live and breathe
I exist
Why…
What is it for
I don't see you
I don't hear you
You are gone
Why…
I don't wanna see
   it
I am what I hate
I live for the
   death
I count for you
You lost
Why…
Take it
You want it
You can't escape
   it
It is you
You leave
Why…

Youth who were soon to leave care clearly appreciated when their caregiver provided them with opportunities to learn and practice independent living skills. Perhaps what was even more important, though, was when the caregiver enabled the young person to find or develop their own ways to learn those skills, and then supported the youth through the learning process. In other words, youth wanted to be able to make their own mistakes and learn from them, not simply learn someone else's method of performing a skill or activity. At the same time, youth appreciated having support in learning life skills such as cooking, budgeting, and anger management. As participants said:

> "(My foster parent) allowed me to make mistakes and I'm a better person because of it. I could learn from my mistakes and deal with them on my own."

> "(My foster parent) would have us help him budget (which was) a good way to do things, as long as you learned".

Closely related to this, youth emphasized that they wanted to make their own choices or at least participate in decision making processes regarding fundamental, day to day living issues, including what they wore and what they ate living in the foster/group home.

On Promoting Youth's Sense of Self-Confidence

Connected to the theme of providing emotional support and facilitating ways to learn skills and participate in decision making is the notion of promoting youth's sense of self-confidence. For youth in care, developing and maintaining a strong (yet not inflated or artificial) sense of themselves and their   capabilities is essential, since youth in care often have low self-esteem stemming from the situation that prompted their entry into government care. For youth who are soon to leave care, a sense of self-confidence is all the more important. A key component of supportive practice for foster/group home parents is helping young people feel better about themselves and promoting their sense of self-worth.

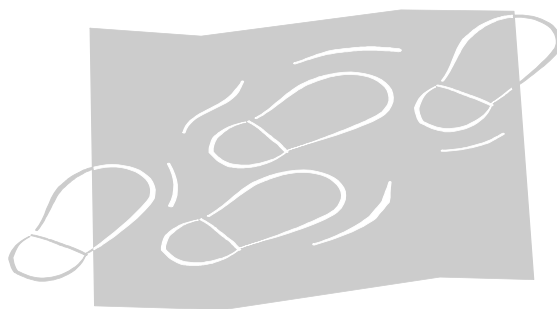> "You have to have self-confidence."

On Encouraging/Facilitating Youth in Maintaining a Relationship

Finally, youth who had left care expressed a strong desire for continuity in their relationships, a desire arising, quite likely, because of the disruptions and discontinuity that often characterized their lives. They valued foster/group home parents who permitted or encouraged them to stay in touch after they had left home. At the same time, it seems that many foster or group home parents do not want to have ongoing relationship with the youth formerly in their care; it was suggested that caregivers may not have the mental, emotional or financial resources for sustained relationships. Nevertheless, when relationships are severed, participants expressed lasting feelings of loss and, at some level, rejection. As one youth shared with us:

> "She didn't want to continue being in contact with me after 19. ...Having someone grow up and leave on them is really hard on them."

Another youth, when asked whether he would have liked to continue having ties with his former group home parent, replied:

> "Oh sure, that would have been the choicest thing in the world. I did talk to (my former foster dad) for, about six months after that. I did see him occasionally, but he did the same thing that the other foster parents did, pushing me back... Every time I seen him, he would just stray further away from me. I didn't like it. Every time I used to see him and the family I used to cry. Every time I see him, I was 19 and I'd still cry, because that was the family that I wanted. I thought I had found my family."

SECTION 4
Conclusions & Recommendations

The findings of this research project on the experiences of youth in care are consistent with what has already been documented in the literature. The data confirm the necessity of providing for more successful transition experiences for youth leaving care. The findings also confirm that for the most part government as parent is failing to live up to its responsibilities and that youth are having difficulty making a successful transition to adulthood.

There is a growing awareness that youth placed in care tend to have greater difficulty than others do in making the transition to adulthood. Canadian studies (Dumbrill, 1994; Raychaba, 1993, Martin & Palmer, 1997) show that typically youth leaving care face issues of:

- Poverty
- Emotional, mental and physical health problems
- Lack of education and educational opportunities
- Social isolation
- Unemployment

Research on youth from care in the USA (Casey Family Programs http://www.casey.org) shows that in addition to the above challenges, youth who have been in care experience:

- A higher rate of arrest and incarceration
- An increased likelihood of early parenting and instability in relationships, including divorce
- A greater likelihood of experiencing homelessness, and
- A higher rate of substance abuse

With these experiences and challenges as a backdrop to their post-care experience it is not surprising to find that the need for emotional/social support emerges as a key theme for youth who are facing the transition from care to living on their own. For example, a research project on improving the outcomes for youth in transition from care, (Mann-Feder & White, 2000) found that "*emotional support was repeatedly emphasized as the most critical component of services for youth in the transition to independent living and consistently emerged as more important than programming per se.*" (7; italics added).

Unfortunately youth who have left care generally have limited or no contact with the people in the government care system who formed their social support network during their time in care (Raychaba, 1988; Martin & Palmer, 1997). The 'system' as it is currently structured does not encourage or make room for ongoing relationships. Consequently, many youth with whom we spoke described feeling let down by the 'system' rather than being supported – a feeling that was characterized by a lack of ongoing connection with anyone of importance or significance in their lives.

This is in sharp contrast with the experiences of most youth who do not enter care, and who typically do retain a relationship with family members as they grow older and move out on their own. Clearly this is an area of concern that needs to be addressed by the Ministry so that youth have a greater chance of making a successful transition to adulthood.

Findings from our research likewise indicate that youth needed and wanted ongoing emotional support during their transition from care. They wanted someone or some individuals who took an interest in their well being, their emotional health, physical comfort and material needs, and who could help them feel special, as well as help them to gain the necessary skills and confidence that could enable them to move toward adulthood. Moreover, the need for that emotional/social support did not diminish once they left care.

A young person's transition from government care is often referred to in the literature and in policy discourse as a transition to independence. However, in the past decade many youth, practitioners and researchers have rejected the traditional notion of independence as a goal for youth leaving government care—or as areasonable goal for any young person in transition. Instead, youth in and from government care and others have described the goal as *interdependence* , since "nobody should be left out in the cold, and that's what independence could end up meaning" (Canadian Mental Health Association, 1992, 9). Similarly, Lutke and Dubovsky (2001) have recently made the case for the goal of interdependence for young adults affected by fetal alcohol; among the key characteristics of interdependence are: being able to ask for help when needed; counting on family, friends and community for validation; and being able to stand with us, rather than alone.

Another key finding is the importance of providing youth with more opportunities to make decisions, problem-solve, and practice skills for independent living. Youth themselves have recommended that they be given more independent living skills training, more opportunities to have responsibility, and more support and counselling as means of improving their transition from foster care. Similarly, Raychaba (1992, 6) has spoken about the need to involve young people in a hands-on way in

the development of skills for independent living: "Preparation for independence must allow young people to risk, perhaps even to fail, in certain undertakings within a supportive context." Kingsley (1996) and Raychaba (1996) also recommend peer support as a ways to help youth in and from care heal from past wounds, healing that enables youth to take on adult roles.

The results from this research project as well as the literature underscore the importance of viewing the transition from care as a process rather than as an event triggered by a person's 18th or 19th birthday. Furthermore, there is a strong need for individualized support and mechanisms to enable ongoing support for youth, especially support that extends beyond the age of majority and is geared towards helping them make a transition to adulthood. In particular they need access to resources that will make a difference such as education, employment and training programs. In addition, youth need to have a range of support options available, including peer mentoring, as a way to help youth in and from care heal from past wounds and take on adult roles. Finally, youth need ongoing opportunities to practice and develop their decision-making and problem-solving skills and to practice a range of skills necessary for independent living.

SECTION 5
Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, the following recommendations are offered:

Practice

1. That the elements of supportive practice as identified by youth be incorporated into the day to day practice of social workers, guardianship workers, child and youth care workers and others providing care for young people in government care. These elements are:
    *   consistency
    *   accessibility
    *   empathy
    *   working on the young person's behalf as an ally
    *   going above and beyond
    *   promoting self-confidence and self-esteem
    *   facilitating the transition process
    *   setting up services
    *   keeping the 'door' open

2. That the day to day practice of social workers, guardianship workers, foster parents and others, recognize that the preparation for the transition to adulthood and development of independent living skills is an ongoing process beginning when a child enters adolescence and continuing through to adulthood. Thus, the gradual acquisition of these skills needs to be incorporated into the plans for care.

3. In tracking of the developmental progress of children and youth that particular attention be paid to ensuring that there is adequate support to help them successfully meet developmental challenges.

Training

4. That there be increased training for social workers, guardianship workers, child care workers and others providing care for young people, in how to facilitate and support the transition to adulthood.

5. That training for foster parents include strategies for ways they can play a larger role in helping youth develop toward adulthood, including strategies for opti mizing decision-making and problem-solving skill acquisition.

6. That this training be hands on, experiential, and highlight elements of supportive practice

7. That training for foster parents highlight the elements of supportive practice as identified by youth including
    - promotes a sense of belonging, being part of the family
    - provides emotional support
    - provides instrumental support
    - facilitates youth's learning about culture and traditions
    - provides youth with privacy, and with their own physical space
    - provides independence
    - allows youth to figure out own ways to learn and practice skills, and participate in decision making
    - promotes youth's sense of self-confidence
    - encourages/facilitates youth in maintaining a relationship, even after the youth has left care

Research

8. In order to address existing gaps in knowledge regarding former youth in care, that qualitative research grounded in the experiences of youth in/from care be carried out with an aim of developing a framework for exploring and assessing youth's readiness to leave care to live on their own.

9. That research identifying and critically examining the barriers to youth's engaging in positive, sustained relationships (with, for example, workers, peers, family and other community members) be undertaken, with an aim of identifying means to remove these barriers.

10. That research tracking young people's post-care experiences, life circumstances and outcomes be undertaken such that a sample or cohort of youth be followed over time.

11. That in examining outcomes for former youth in care, research focussing on youth's own perspectives and understandings of both successful outcomes and appropriate indicators of these outcomes be undertaken, in keeping with a youth-focussed approach to working with youth in care.

Policy

12. That the Ministry for Children and Families consider development of a transitional support position with responsibility for supporting young people's transition from care and to adulthood. This position could be located either in government or the community. The ability to initiate and undertake collaborative practice with youth, foster parents, guardianship workers, social workers, child and youth care workers, and various government and community services would be a key requirement of the transitional support position.

13. That the Ministry for Children and Families develop and support a variety of mechanisms through which youth who are leaving care can sustain ongoing relationships with supportive adults/mentors. Such mechanisms may include: peer mentoring; transitional support workers; and supports for foster parents wishing to engage in ongoing relationships with youth from care.

14 That the Ministry for Children and Families actively support multi-disciplinary and interagency collaborative practice to engage professionals from outside the child welfare system in responding to the full spectrum of issues facing transitioning youth, such as health and mental health issues, substance use treatment, and employment and educational needs.

15. That the criteria for selection of Ministry youth team workers include:
  * desire to work with youth
  * knowledge of adolescent development
  * ability to demonstrate supportive practice as per recommendation #1

16. That the Ministry for Children and Families consider reducing the caseload of youth teams so as to enable and encourage supportive practice as per recommendations # 1 and #2.

17. That funding for post majority services, especially those relating to education, be increased.

18. That continuity between youth services and adult services be strengthened such that a youth transitioning into adulthood would continue to receive financial, emotional and social supports past the age of majority.

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