



# Promoting the Healthy Sexual Development of Foster Youth

Child Development & Successful Youth Transitions Committee

California Child Welfare Council



## The Known Consequences of Inaction

Adolescence and the transition to adulthood is a time filled with growth, including in the area of intimate relationships. This period of time can be especially challenging for youth that have grown up in foster care, who often lack the healthy role models and secure relationships that serve as the foundation for exploration and development.

Research has found that youth who grow up and age out of foster care are at increased risk of challenges related to their sexual development and behaviors compared to youth not in foster care, including:

- Engaging in riskier sexual behaviors, such as having sex for the first time at a young age and using condoms inconsistently (Manlove, et al. 2011)
- Having unwanted pregnancies (CITE XXX)
- Being involved in intimate partner violence (CITE XXXX)
- Contracting an sexually-transmitted disease (CITE XXXX)

For foster youth, the average challenges of sexual maturation and development can be compounded by histories of abuse, which may include sexual abuse, disrupted early attachments, and a lack of stability and security. These challenges may result in an increase in risky behaviors as well as increased vulnerability to coercive and unhealthy relationships. Some young women in foster care reported that they want to get pregnant at a younger age, possibly as a way to create a family or fill an emotional void (Boonsta, 2011; Love et al., 2005).

## Barriers to Change

Given the unique challenges faced by foster youth as well as the potential life-changing impact of risky sexual behaviors, caregivers of foster youth have a responsibility to provide youth the guidance and opportunities to form developmentally-appropriate, healthy, and safe intimate relationship. However, current child welfare practice in California does not specifically address how providers of child welfare services will promote the healthy sexual development of foster youth, and there are regulations and processes in place that can limit the opportunities that youth have to explore their sexual identity and form age-appropriate, intimate partner relationships. Over time, our inattention to this aspect of child well-being often may result in foster youth's engagement in risky sexual behaviors and compromises their ability to develop the vital emotional and interpersonal skills necessary for successful relationships in adolescence and throughout their adult life.

Furthermore, youth's developmentally-normal drives to form relationships within an environment of heavy restrictions can, at times, lead to behaviors and consequences. For example, youth who are prohibited from exhibiting normal sexual behaviors or forming romantic relationships may act out in frustration or run away to pursue a romantic relationship, leading to placement in more restrictive settings. If the acting out behaviors continue youth may be placed in physical restraints or on medications.

Practice reform is needed to more effectively and consistently promote the healthy sexual development of young people growing up in foster care.

## A Path Forward

A 2012 study by Child Trends, a national nonprofit, nonpartisan research center that studies children at all stages of development, highlights the importance of positive relationships for healthy development and emerging evidence that relationship skills can be learned. Citing the serious problems and poor related outcomes among foster youth, the study surveyed existing relationship education programs as well as intervention programs that included relationship education as one component of a broader approach.

These findings were presented at a forum attended by foster youth, relationship experts, program practitioners and government leaders who developed the following recommendations:

- Policy makers and public administrators should recognize positive romantic relationships as an important and legitimate outcome for youth in foster care, with potentially positive impacts for other outcomes;
- Relationship education programs that address the needs of youth in foster care and other highly vulnerable populations should be developed;
- Resources should be directed to supporting strong programs for youth in foster care that include identified core components and that are manualized, assessed, refined, and rigorously evaluated;
- To assess impacts, relationship education programs need to be rigorously evaluated, ideally in a random assignment evaluation or secondarily in a quasi-experimental evaluation, among youth in foster care, with adequate sample sizes to assess impacts overall and across subgroups (for example, males and females);
- Relationship outcomes should to be included, if possible, among the outcomes assessed in other youth development program evaluations; and
- Relationship education programs for youth in foster care are hypothesized to be more successful if they are integrated into existing services for youth in foster care, rather than provided as stand-alone programs. In other words, relationship education would be incorporated in a tiered approach to address the multiple needs of youth in foster care, as well as other vulnerable youth.

### Proposed Next Steps

The Child Development and Successful Youth Transitions Committee has formed a work group to address this issue. The workgroup proposes a stakeholders meeting comprised of public agency leaders, community providers, former foster youth, and parents to develop recommendations for concrete steps on how California's Child Welfare System can better promote the healthy sexual development of foster youth. Specific steps to be taken include:

- Work with Community Care Licensing to review current regulations and devise strategies and/or proposed regulation revisions that allow opportunities for youth to develop healthy relationship while still maintaining protections for youth's safety.
- Investigate and disseminate information on research-based training curricula and practices for promoting healthy relationships, including among LGBTQ and heterosexual youth.
- Develop advisory recommendations for consideration across the multiple systems serving foster youth.

Throughout these efforts, the work group will pay particular attention to challenges that foster youth may have to face as a result of former sexual assault, sex trafficking, and/or early disrupted attachments.