



**CALIFORNIA
CHILD WELFARE COUNCIL**

CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND
SUCCESSFUL YOUTH
TRANSITIONS COMMITTEE



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

CALIFORNIA YOUTH
CONNECTION

HUMBOLDT COUNTY
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES

CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION
OF CHILD AND FAMILY
SERVICES

SENECA FAMILY OF
AGENCIES

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF
SOCIAL POLICY



JUNE, 2015

SUPPORTING HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The Child Development and Successful Youth Transitions Committee (CDSYTC) established a workgroup to further identify and explore the topic of how child welfare systems can better support and promote healthy sexual development of foster youth. This topic stemmed directly from the personal stories, statements, and concerns expressed by former foster youth on the barriers they have experienced within the current system, and the lack of policies and practices to protect and promote a young person's healthy sexual development.

On February 5, 2015, the work group – in partnership with California Youth Connection, Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services, California Association of Child and Family Services, Seneca Family of Agencies, and Center for the Study of Social Policy – hosted a day-long gathering devoted to exploring issues and creating recommendations that will make meaningful improvements in our ability to support youth's healthy sexual development. The guiding questions to frame the discussion were:

- How does the child welfare system currently support the healthy sexual development of youth in foster care?
- What actions, policies, and practices do we need to create, clarify, or make visible to support sexual safety and well-being of youth in foster care?
- What are the strengths and needs of youth in the child welfare system that will impact their healthy sexual development?
- What practices or policies act as barriers? What might be our solutions and opportunities for breaking through these barriers?
- How do race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression affect healthy sexual development outcomes for youth?

Seventy-five people who care deeply about this topic – representing current and former foster youth, foster parents, youth advocates, mental health clinicians, county social workers, state community care licensing managers and evaluators, state children and family services managers, and state education managers – set the agenda for the day by identifying 35 topics related to these questions. Participants gathered in small groups to contribute their thoughts, experiences, discoveries, and ideas related to each topic. Details of these rich discussions are captured in a *Book of Proceedings*, which includes a list of all participants.¹ Significant themes and recommendations for improving policies and practice to address them, taken directly from the opinions expressed by participants, are presented below for consideration by members of the full Child Welfare Council.

¹ Available at www.chhs.ca.gov/Pages/CACChildWelfareCouncil.aspx

THEMES AND FINDINGS

SELF-ESTEEM

Youth report that self-esteem triggers decision making choices, and if they have low self-esteem they are more likely to make unwise choices about the way they handle their bodies. Feeling lonely or isolated causes self-esteem to drop. Temporary highs, like prostitution and exploited sex, are the cause of youth making choices that negatively impact their whole lives. Family-oriented love keeps youth encouraged and empowered. Organic, trusting relationships help youth feel more complete.

SEX, DATING, AND MASTURBATION

Youth in group and foster homes report they most often do not have opportunity to engage in age-appropriate sexual exploration, and normal sexual development is often discouraged through policies and practices. Youth who engage in consensual sex, dating, or masturbation are often met with punitive responses from caregivers, social workers, administrators, and other adults involved. This results in missed opportunities to provide youth a chance to safely talk about their relationships, and to learn about healthy and non-healthy interactions in intimate relationships, safe sex practices, and how to communicate their needs to a significant other.

Social workers, clinicians, and caregivers identified a need for more information on how to respond to youth's questions and behaviors relating to sexual curiosity. Sexual health appears to be a taboo subject, and there is confusion about what may be discussed with youth and what may be considered a violation of state regulations.

Caregivers stated that they are not often informed about a youth's history of being abused, and it is not clear whose role it is to provide this information for the purpose of better understanding and supporting youth. Even when caregivers are informed, they do not always know how to talk with young people who have been through these horrific situations.

HELP FOR YOUTH TO RECOGNIZE SIGNS OF ABUSE IN A CURRENT RELATIONSHIP AND TO SAY "NO"

Youth reported that they may not be aware of abusive relationships, such as being manipulated and isolated from family and friends. They find ways to excuse or dismiss signs of abuse, resulting in a loss of self-confidence.

CONFLICT BETWEEN RELIGIOUS/CULTURAL BELIEFS OF ADULTS AND THEIR ABILITY TO SUPPORT THE SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY, AND EXPRESSION (SOGIE) OF YOUTH IN THEIR CARE

Youth reported that foster parents vary in their understanding and acceptance of youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, and some do not accept orientations other than heterosexual. This may result in making the topic of identity taboo, which can be emotionally harmful to youth.

YOUTH WHO ARE PARENTS

Foster youth who are mothers and fathers reported concerns about learning parenting skills that will break the cycle of abuse, while at the same time wanting to maintain and develop healthy relationships. Additionally, foster youth who become fathers are often not included in planning and raising their children.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Foster youth's information in a court report is shared with the judge, parents, parents' attorneys, youth's attorneys, and foster parents. Foster youth stated they prefer that social workers keep information related to sexual development at a general level in court reports, with more detailed information in the case record, which should be sealed immediately upon emancipation. Youth expressed that they would like to see their court reports beginning at ages 12 to 15, instead of having reports go directly to their attorneys, who often do not give youth copies until right before the court hearing. Foster youth said they would like to be invited to discuss what goes in a court report with their social workers and to be able to talk with the judge directly if more information relating to sexual development is needed by the court.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 | Utilize existing practices and policies – such as Child and Family Team, Continuum of Care Reform, Katie A Settlement, and other initiatives – and incorporate best practice guidelines that promote positive self-esteem as a critical element of supporting healthy sexual development of youth in foster care. Based on findings, best practice guidelines may utilize a strengths-based, person-centered approach including, but not limited to, the following suggested elements:
 - Talk to youth first, before reading the file.
 - Ask youth to share information on everything they want known about themselves, creating a space for conversation where they are empowered to be in charge of their personal information.
 - Ask youth about their interests, hopes, dreams, likes, and dislikes.
 - Tell youth you want to be supportive, and ask what they need.
 - Honor youth’s universal desire for love and healthy relationships.
 - Recognize the role of physical health in promoting self-esteem and healthy sexual development, and include opportunities for physical activity and healthy living in programs for youth in foster care.
- 2 | Create robust guidance on how the intent of the “Prudent Parent” statute can be used in support of healthy sexual development, such as clarifying how group home staff, foster parents, and kinship caregivers can address various issues relating to sexuality:
 - Respond in a supportive manner to foster youth’s sexual curiosity.
 - Discuss youth’s sexual development and decisions regarding sexual behavior with them, and including information and guidance on sexual consent, use of condoms, and birth control.
 - Support and appropriately supervise youth’s normal dating relationships.
 - Allow youth to masturbate in private as a normal part of sexual development.
 - Appropriately supervise youth’s access to computers and phones to communicate with peers, build healthy relationships, and wisely use social media.
 - Develop and offer training by sex education specialists for child welfare workers, group home staff, foster parents, and kinship caregivers on how to involve the youth in genuine dialogue regarding their sexual development, and learn how the youth would like to be supported.
- 3 | Consider hiring youth mentors as a resource to support youth as they raise issues related to romantic relationships and sexual identity.
- 4 | Use existing curricula, such as training programs developed by the California Youth Connections YOUTH Training Project, to clarify:
 - Whose role it is to talk with youth about past abuse, and what will that individual do with the information.
 - What caregivers need to know about youth’s past history of abuse, and if, when, and how to talk with youth about it.
 - Ways to help youth become survivors of past abuse, and understand the impact on current relationships and healthy sexual development.

- 5 | When developing best practice guidelines and training opportunities for foster youth and relevant stakeholders, consider an array of specific suggestions, topic areas, and perspectives that may be incorporated. The follow recommendations were specifically highlighted at the event:
- Understand the signs and triggers of abuse, including physical, mental, verbal, financial, emotional, and sexual.
 - Be non-judgmental, and help youth communicate about concerns in a relationship through in-person conversations, media materials, blogs, and forums.
 - Support gender exploration and identity. Two resources to draw on in support of SOGIE include the language physicians use for SOGIE, and practices in Native American and Hawaiian cultures.
 - Identify legal issues related to the youth’s preferred legal name and pronoun, and create guidance for courts, such as “bench cards,” to promote inclusive courts for all youth.
 - Emphasize effective communication to address topics pertaining to a young person’s sexuality, follow the youth’s lead, and create a safe environment for communication
 - Support young parents in forming positive dating relationships, for instance, by utilizing curriculum offered by the Youth Training Project.
 - Clarify how child abuse reporting requirements apply to youth dating older people, such as a 16-year-old dating a 20-year-old.
 - Recruit foster parents who can accept foster youth fathers or mothers and their children as a foster family unit, preserving the family and educating them about healthy parenting and co-parenting (the Children’s Law Center is currently developing an “Agreement” for this purpose).
 - Determine who owns the information about a youth’s sexuality and what needs to be included in a court report regarding the youth’s sexual development.
 - Write court reports that include only required information, and give youth the opportunity to verbally share information to the court on a need-to-know basis, so that what is private can remain in the case file only.
 - Include youth input in court reports, and let youth know when they can expect to receive the report in advance of the hearing.

IMPLEMENTATION AND DISSEMINATION STRATEGY

The collaborative effort amongst various stakeholders informed these proposed recommendations. The recommendations are intentionally designed to complement and be incorporated into existing policies and practices in order to maximize feasibility, increase impact, and minimize barriers to implementation. Existing policies and practices that could build upon these suggestions include:

- Child and Family Team Meetings
- Community Care Licensing Guidelines
- Statement of Foster Youth’s Rights
- Katie A Settlement activities
- Continuum of Care Reform Initiative

Moreover, the workgroup proposes that prominent themes and recommendations are used to inform curricula offered through the California Social Work Education Center and the Regional Training Academies. Lastly, the workgroup recommends that the Department of Social Services utilize existing communication channels, such as All County Information Notices, to disseminate information that child welfare workers and caregivers can use to improve their ability to support the healthy sexual development of young people in foster care.