



The Adolescent Brain – Key to Success in Adulthood

Extending Foster Care Policy Toolkit: Paper 5 of 5



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independence and maturity. They must pursue

Introduction

As foster youth grow into adolescence and early adulthood, they must navigate the complex processes of becoming independent, responsible adults while developing a sense of personal and sexual identity, and establishing emotional

Key Facts: Older Youth in Foster Care

- Nationally, there are approximately 400,000 children in foster care on any given day, with nearly half (200,000) age 14 or older.
- Nearly 26,000 youth age out of foster care at age 18 each year.

Significant Challenges:

Aging Out at 18

- More than one in five will become homeless.
- 58 percent will graduate high school by 19 (compared to 87 percent of peers not in foster care).
- 71 percent of young women will be pregnant by 21.
- At age 26, only half are employed.
- One in four will become involved in the juvenile justice system within two years after leaving foster care.

educational and vocational goals while learning how to balance a checking account, obtain a car and participate in a host of other critical activities. Without an adequate and ongoing adult support network, foster youth struggle. Young people in foster care often lack the opportunity to engage in the decision-

making and leadership development necessary to successfully transition into healthy and productive adulthood. Additionally, foster care services are typically aimed at young children--not older youth in adolescence whose developmental needs are much different.

Research also now indicates that children do not go from adolescence directly into adulthood; they undergo a complex and lengthy transition in a period called "emerging adulthood." The concept of "emerging adulthood" recognizes that a person does not achieve independence at a pre-determined age. In fact, most people do not likely achieve full adulthood until their late 20s. It follows that foster youth are not likely to become independent adults by virtue of being discharged from foster care at either 18 or 21.

The Adolescent Brain: A Critical Period for Development

New research on brain science and the impact of trauma and frequent placements of children and youth in foster care has exciting implications for child welfare policy.

For more than a decade, research on early brain development indicated that the most rapid period of brain development occurs in the first few years of life. During this time the basic architecture of the human brain is being constructed through an ongoing process that begins at birth and continues into adulthood. Indeed, the early years are critical ones for brain development and future success. During this early

Chemical changes in the brain that prime adolescents for risk-taking present rich opportunities for them to learn from experience and mistakes and, with adult support, gain greater self-regulation, coping, and resiliency skills.

(Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative)

period, there is a rapid proliferation of neural connections-- in fact 700 to 1,000 new neural connections are formed every second.

Even though the early years are important, the brain continues to form new connections and to prune unused connections

throughout a person's lifespan. One of these critical

periods is during adolescence. As the adolescent brain continues to develop, youth have an opportunity to gain critical skills needed for successful independence and transition to adulthood.

During adolescence, teens experience:

- **Significant brain growth and the development of new connections** within areas of the brain responsible for reasoning, decision-making and impulse control.
- **Changes in dopamine** (a chemical linking actions to pleasure) levels, which potentially lead adolescents to engage in riskier behaviors as activities they previously enjoyed no longer excite them. These changes also allow youth to tackle the complex challenges of impending adulthood, explore adult behavior and learn from experience. Working with a network of supportive, caring adults, this can provide foster youth with an opportunity to more successfully transition to adulthood.
- **Pruning of unused neural connections**--synapses that are not used frequently weaken and die off.



This process is known as "pruning" or "use it or lose it." This could allow foster youth to overcome former trauma by pruning connections formed as a result of that trauma and making new neural connections. Synapses that are used frequently become stronger, faster and more stable.

Such growth and development continues into the mid-20s to 30s and offers teens and young adults a significant window to recover from the trauma they may have experienced through child maltreatment and involvement with foster care. Providing young people additional services through extended foster care-- and providing the same or similar skills and assistance as

children in intact families receive--may result in foster youth being better equipped to enter adulthood.

Additionally, the brain science research tells us that experience plays a critical role in how the adolescent brain matures and develops; young people who can “practice” adult decision-making skills fare better than those who do not.

Points for Policymakers to Consider

Drawing on its seminal paper, “The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning From Foster Care,” the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative developed key messages to help policymakers and other community leaders understand the opportunities that exist to help young people overcome trauma during their adolescent years:

- ***Adolescence and early adulthood provides just as much opportunity to impact brain development as early childhood.***
 - Between the ages of 14 and 25, a person’s brain experiences a period of major growth and development. This period shapes the planning, decision-making, judging and coping skills a person needs in adulthood.
- ***There isn’t a “point of no return” for young people who have experienced trauma.***
 - Young people in foster care have often experienced a range of stressful and traumatic

experiences. There is a window of time, though, to counteract the damage caused by those experiences. Adolescence is that time and it offers tremendous opportunity for young people. When the adolescent brain is exposed to developmentally healthy experiences, it can actually “rewire” itself. This can help any young person, regardless of prior trauma, get on a better path to a bright future.

- ***Experience matters.***
 - Experience matters more than we ever thought during adolescence, especially experiences within relationships. The more and varied relationships a young person can maintain within family, peers, school, work, or in their community, the better positioned they will be to achieve a healthy and balanced adulthood. Experiences during adolescence can largely determine future success as adults.

Resources:

- Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative: Brief on the Adolescent Brain:
http://jimcaseyyouth.org/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Adolescent%20Brain_prepress_proof%5B1%5D.pdf
- NCSL’s Supports for Older Youth in Foster Care:
<http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=28544>

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