

CONFERENCE:

Fostering Success for Children and Youth in Foster Care

A conference highlighting the needs to provide children and youth in foster care with permanency, educational stability, financial literacy, community, and avenues for expression and connection – with a focus on programs that improve outcomes for children in care.

Conference:	Fostering Success for Children and Youth in Foster Care
Date:	June 22, 2010, 9:00 am -1:00 pm
Location:	The Children’s Center, 492 First Avenue, at 29 th Street, NYC
Sponsored by:	The New York Center for Children , in association with Prevent Child Abuse America and NYC Children’s Services
Conference Chairs:	Katherine Teets Grimm , MD, Medical Director, New York Center for Children; and Anne Reiniger , JD, LMSW, Past Chair, Prevent Child Abuse America
Audience:	175 professionals, including foster care caseworkers/staff, child protection workers, doctors, nurses, social workers, teachers, guidance counselors, lawyers, child advocates, and child care professionals.

There are approximately 16,000 children in foster care in New York City, and over 500,000 children in out-of-home care in the United States. Foster care is intended as a safe haven for children whose parents are unable to properly care for them. Unfortunately, the foster care experience is often unstable, difficult and traumatic for children, and too often results in poor outcomes for youth when they exit the foster care system.

Studies show that youth who are raised in foster care are:

- more likely to be undereducated, including a high rate of failure to complete high school
- more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, and living in poverty
- when employed, more likely to have low earnings
- more likely to become a parent at a younger age
- more likely to be incarcerated or involved in the criminal justice system
- more likely to be homeless and/or to live in unstable housing conditions
- more likely to be dependent on social assistance
- more likely to have mental health issues including depression
- at higher risk for substance abuse.

The New York Center for Children, in cooperation with NYC Children’s Services and Prevent Child Abuse America, convened a conference to examine ways that professionals, agencies and the community can improve the foster care experience and facilitate better outcomes for children and youth in foster care. The conference, **“Fostering Success for Children and Youth in Foster Care,”** brought attention to issues and resources that will support positive experiences for children while in care, and will increase academic and life success after care.

While communities share the goal of reducing the need for foster care, this conference focused on best practice model programs and approaches that are successfully providing essential support to children in the foster care system. A panel discussed issues of placement stability; educational needs and stability; mental health needs; youth engagement; creative outlets for children and youth in care; financial security; and preparation for transition to successful adulthood after care.

Remarks of John B. Mattingly, MSW, PhD: Commissioner, NYC Children’s Services.

In his welcome to the participants, Commissioner Mattingly said, "the system has been moving forward, but we still have a long way to go. We are still trying to make sure that our frontline workers are committed, well trained and well supervised. The key to our work is good practice. This is too important a job, and we will stick with it. That is my commitment to the children and families of New York City." He identified the primary goals of Children’s Services regarding youth in foster care as needing “to do better by children who come into our care and to do so more expeditiously.” Dr. Mattingly stressed the importance of caring, compassionate, committed and persistent workers who recognize the need for children to experience as little separation from their family as possible.

Remarks of Bill de Blasio: NYC Public Advocate.

Mr. de Blasio spoke of the importance of preventive care for children as an alternative to the more expensive, and often more traumatic, option of removal into care. Mr. de Blasio stated that it is not enough to protect children in moments of crisis; that we need to provide services to families along the road that leads to crisis, in order to change their trajectory. To improve our protection of children, Mr. de Blasio suggested more accountability in the foster care system, and more advocacy to preserve preventive services. He challenged the audience to imagine if everyone actually made children a priority and treated them as the future of our society, our economy, and our national and global well-being. He closed with a quote from Carol Bellamy: “in serving the best interests of children, we serve the best interests of all humanity.”

Keynote Speech

Remarks of Richard R. Buery, Jr.: President and Chief Executive Officer, The Children’s Aid Society.

Mr. Buery described the various preventive and foster care services provided by the Children’s Aid Society, and the ideal goal that “foster care become an anomaly” -- that removal of children from their homes should happen as rarely as possible. Echoing Mr. de Blasio’s speech, Mr. Buery emphasized the need for more preventive services, and pointed out that “foster care is by definition a poor outcome.”

Acknowledging the unavoidable need for foster care, Mr. Buery emphasized the importance of recruiting and certifying foster parents who want to be foster parents for the right reasons. Mr. Buery also addressed the role that race plays in foster care outcomes, noting that black children are both more likely to have reports made against their families and less likely to receive preventive services. He acknowledged a 2010 study that concluded that such risk is related to socioeconomic status, not race. However, he argued that, controlling for poverty, employment, and drug use, there is a stronger correlation between black families and reported abuse and an absence of any data that demonstrates that black parents are actually any more abusive.

Unfortunately, resources dictate the availability of preventive services. When the economy is suffering, budgets are cut, staffs are cut, and the availability of preventive services decreases. Reducing the availability of preventive services may cause an increase the need for foster care services – a trade-off that poorly serves children and the community. We need to give families the tools to avoid problems in the first place. Mr. Buery envisions a system that delivers holistic services that meet all needs of

children and families at a single location, rather than the current system that treats a family like a series of problems to be addressed at multiple locations. To be effective, services must work with and reach families before they reach crisis. Mr. Buery closed by stating that the overarching purpose of these services is to make the American dream possible for children, and he asked, “Will this dream move forward or backward under our watch?”

“Permanency: Buzzword, Building Block, Bottom Line.”

Remarks of Lauren Frey, MSW, LCSW: Project Director of Permanency Services, Field Operations Department, Casey Family Services.

Ms. Frey spoke about the importance of permanency and presented statistics regarding children in foster care. There are fewer children in foster care in recent years, but an increasing number of youth who age out of foster care without achieving permanency (currently 33,000 per year nationwide, up from 24,000 in 1998). Ms. Frey praised the progress embodied in the recently enacted *Fostering Connections Law*. However, “none of the policies are magic bullets,” she noted, and none will work without providers understanding the true idea of permanency. Ms. Frey defined permanency as one of three things:

- 1) safely reuniting the child or youth with the birth parents;
- 2) connecting the child with relatives who legally/permanently parent him or her; or
- 3) adoption/legal guardianship.

This definition reinforces the objective that foster care be temporary. Children need a family, either with their biological parents, relatives, or a family re-created by adoption. When children reach the maximum age for foster care, they should be exiting that care into a permanent family.

Addressing the need to empower youth who are in foster care, Ms. Frey discussed Darla Henry’s 3-5-7 Model. “Three” represents three procedural steps: clarification, integration, and actualization. Clarification is the process of having kids acknowledge pain and be free from shame, turning their focus to the planning for their future. In this first step, there are five (5) key questions for youth to think through: “Who am I? What happened to me? Where am I going? How will I get there? When will I know I belong?” The second step is integration -- the process of uniting a child’s “network of love,” i.e., bringing together a child’s legal families, birth families, and those who “feel like family” in order to repair emotional cutoffs that come with loyalty conflicts. This network is viewed as a “family team” and, though it can be a “messy,” it is important for the child to have the foundation of family and to have everyone involved working together as adults to support the child. Finally, Step 3 is actualization -- creating permanency by giving children committed parents through reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship. “Seven” represents the seven skill elements required of professionals and parents: to engage, listen, be truthful, validate, create safety and recognize that the work for children and youth is to resolve and heal the pain of the past.

Ms. Frey emphasized that reunification is not something we should simply allow to happen after a child ages out of foster care, but rather something that – if safe and recommended – should be actively supported and supervised. An adopting family should be taught to embrace the child’s heritage, past, and choice regarding contact with the birth family, and to exercise moral adoption and full family support of the child until such a time as the adoption becomes legal. Ms. Frey urged everyone to “push for, fight for, and insist on” permanent placement with a family for every child in foster care. Referring to the film, “Voices of Youth.” shown before her presentation, Frey expressed her hope that there will

come a day when no child enters care at age three and ages-out 16 years later without ever receiving a family.

Innovative Programs Supporting Foster Care Children and Youth

Remarks of Jodi A. Saitowitz, LCSW-R: Director, Bridges to Health (B2H), Division of Family Permanency, NYC Children's Services.

Ms. Saitowitz presented the B2H waiver program as a resource for foster care children diagnosed with Serious Emotional Disturbances (SED), Developmental Disabilities (DD) and Medical Fragility (MedF). She highlighted eligibility requirements and benefits under the program. An additional advantage of this program is that, though it is only for children in foster care, access to benefits continues until the child reaches age 21 regardless of any change in foster care status. This encourages adoption and permanency, as some families may be hesitant to adopt a child with significant emotional medical needs without knowing that the child will continue to receive benefits after exiting foster care into an adoptive home. B2H's services provide supplemental support to assure families that they can maintain children with specific additional needs in the home, and encourage placement and permanency for children with disabilities. B2H is a pilot program that other states are now looking to replicate.

Remarks of Gwendy Fuentes, MSW: Support Services Coordinator, Mott Haven Academy Charter School.

Ms. Fuentes presented the Mott Haven Academy Charter School, a school in partnership with NY Foundling designed specifically to meet the needs of children with child welfare involvement. The school reserves two-thirds of their seats for children in foster care or receiving preventive services, and the other third for children who live in the District 7 community. Currently serving children in grades K-2, Haven Academy will expand to K-8 over the next 6 years. Haven's mission is to provide an academic setting that reduces the barriers facing children in the child welfare system. In addition to academic instruction, Haven provides students with staff who are specially trained on working with trauma, a behavioral specialist who works closely with the teachers, small classroom settings, two teachers per classroom both trained in Responsive Classroom (RC), and an emphasis on social and emotional growth. NY Foundling sponsors an after-school program for the students and next year will have co-located staff on site. The school has a commitment to educational stability and provides funding for transportation for children who, due to changing homes, must move out of the 5 mile radius covered by public school buses. This allows school to be a truly stable safety net for children whose lives are in so much flux.

Remarks of Meara Beirne, LMSW: Therapist; and Meredith Carleton, MS, MPS, ATR-BC, LCAT, CCLS: Clinical Psychology Extern, The New York Center for Children (NYCC).

Ms. Beirne and Ms. Carleton discussed therapeutic foster care groups led by NYCC for youth aging out of the foster care system (ages 18-21). Funded by a grant from New Yorkers for Children, the groups provide participants an opportunity to discuss and prepare for leaving foster care, to build relationships with others who have been through similar experiences, and – in doing so – to better process their own experiences. The groups are given the freedom to decide on group discussion themes. Ms. Beirne said that the NYCC clinical staff co-facilitators serve as guides during the sessions. Group therapy also allows youth to work through relational conflicts. She pointed out that, for many of us, family are the people with whom we learn how to process conflict because we cannot just walk away as we might after a fight with a friend. With family, we have to work through the problem and come out the other side. She explained that for many youth in care, they have never had a conflict that did not end with removal, rejection, or a goodbye.

Ms. Carleton spoke about using artistic expression in the group therapy sessions. Participants made and decorated *Inside/Outside Boxes*. The inside of the box represented who they truly are and the outside represented misconceptions and stereotypes that others have often had of them either specifically or generally as youth in foster care. After creating these boxes, participants were given the opportunity to share what they made with the group, though, in keeping with the theme, nobody was required to share the inside of his or her box. Rather than taking the boxes home with them, most participants wanted to leave the box at the Center. Ms. Beirne and Ms. Carleton suggested two reasons why group members would want to leave their boxes behind: 1) they may not feel that their current homes are safe spaces for such a personal project (“creativity can be a vulnerable form of self-expression”); and 2) some of the youth may have wanted “to leave a piece of themselves behind at the center.”

Remarks by Kimberly Cortorreal: Foster Youth Voice.

Ms. Cortorreal spoke about her personal experience in foster care. She and her younger siblings were removed from their biological mother and placed into foster care when she was seven years old. Ms. Cortorreal expressed that she felt rejected and worthless in her foster homes. “Each foster parent proved they simply viewed me as a check.” She also spoke about her experiences with case workers, who she described as more like a second parent than foster parents because they talk to your birth parents, know about your court cases, and make decisions that affect your future. Originally she turned to her case worker for support but eventually, as she spent more time in the system and had multiple case workers, she “realized they began to fail on me just as my mom had.” After slipping in academics, engaging with alcohol and drug abuse (as her mom did), and dating a boy involved in a gang, Ms. Cortorreal reached a point where she wanted a change. She drastically altered her life, for the sake of her own future and to better provide a role model for her siblings. She is doing well in school now and graduates high school next year with hopes to attend Columbia University. She has a desire to become a criminal justice attorney and to then become a judge in the Supreme Court. Ms. Cortorreal ended with a message for foster care youth, asking conference participants to pass it on. She told them that if they have to advocate for themselves, do, and above all to keep their heads up.

Remarks of Deborah Brooks: Project Lead, Youth Financial Empowerment, Resource Development and Special Initiatives, NYC Children’s Services.

Ms. Brooks presented on the Youth Financial Empowerment program. This program provides foster care youth with education on saving money, building financial management skills and acquiring key assets needed in the transition out of care: “your money, your future.” The program provides a 2-to-1 match when youth save \$1,000, bringing their total up to \$3,000. With the goal of providing them something of value that they can leverage, the funds must be used for housing, education, job training or a business initiative. For example, one teen bought cooking knives as part of his training to be a chef. Ms. Brooks expressed the desire to empower foster care youth, knowing that they can achieve success: “If they want to buy water bottles and sell them on the street corner and they need a vendor’s license, I’ll get one for them, that’s a business.” Youth Financial Empowerment currently has an 85% retention rate from orientation through completing the process.

Remarks of Virginia Vitzthum: Editor; and Imani Brammer: Writer, Represent, Youth Communication.

Ms. Vitzthum presented the magazine “*Represent*” and the opportunities it gives to youth in foster care for self-expression, skill building and job experience. *Represent* is a spin off of *Youth Communication*, a magazine founded in 1980 to provide youth a commercial-free forum for their voice and the opinions of other young people. In 1993, *Represent* was founded on the same principles but specifically for youth in foster care. Youth writers are assigned a staff editor. With their editor, youth writers brainstorm and pick topics to write about. They then work through several drafts in a professional work

environment, and are paid for their stories. Often, this is the first time many of them have truly expressed their own personal stories. Virginia Vitzthum explained that youth writers often experience self realization and a level of understanding of their experiences during the process of writing and editing the stories. Writers are also given opportunities to meet professionals in the field and learn to be self-advocates. Youth who write for the magazine gain job skills, a strong relationship with their editor, experience, and self-confidence. In addition, the magazine itself serves as link for other children in care with similar histories. They are able to open it up and think, “Wow. Here’s me. I’ve never my story in print before.”

Ms. Brammer spoke about her personal experience in foster care and writing for *Represent*. The writing helps her emphasize and process some of what she’s been through. “I didn’t realize how much I had been through until I put it on paper.” She also recently learned how to advocate for herself through the *Represent* summer 2009 workshop focusing on advocacy. In her current foster home, she had not been getting everything to which she was entitled. Last summer, through *Represent*, Ms. Brammer met professionals with legal backgrounds and learned about her rights. She was empowered to approach her foster mother and address her unmet rights. This summer the focus is finances. Ms. Brammer also emphasized that the writers are trying to use what they write to help others and not just themselves. The stories are not just sob stories; they have a message, and in writing them she aims to empower others as well. Ms. Brammer will be attending Ithaca College in the fall and – largely due to her experience with *Represent* – she plans to go into broadcast journalism.

Conference Evaluations

Conference evaluations were extremely positive. **97%** of respondents gave the conference an overall rating of a 4-5 (5 being the highest ranking). The average rating was 4.3. Attendee comments include:

- Speakers clearly presented topics, gave lively instructions, and inspired participants to foster success and better practice in our work. Speakers also reflected on what previous speakers stressed. Comfortable atmosphere and nicely organized. Good time length and transitions.
- Very informative and well presented.
- Great engaging speakers. Time length was appropriate for each topic.
- Always helpful. Got so many people together to hear what’s working and what is promising for the future.
- I especially liked the diversity of the speakers and the content covered.
- The panel speakers were informative and really touched on concrete programs/interventions!
- Very informative and motivating. Data very helpful in providing enforcement and affirmation for the great need in foster care. The conference helped validate my reasons for being a mental health provider.
- It would be helpful to learn new/emerging strategies for engaging youth in services and encouraging their participation in all these great existing programs/services.
- Nice combination of staff and youth in care. For next conference, have a segment for audience members to share what they are doing about permanency, etc.

The New York Center for Children is a privately-funded non-profit organization providing comprehensive services, free of charge, to children who have been abused.

This conference is made possible by a generous grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.