

**Supporting a Successful Transition to Independence
for Youth in Residential Care Programs**

by

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Abstract

The outcomes for transitional-aged youth in care continue to be a concern, regardless of their setting (i.e., foster homes, residential treatment centers, residential group homes).

Successful transitional programming must consider the complex needs of these youth. This review synthesizes approaches to transition planning for youth in residential care programs. Five themes emerged from the literature: extending care, independent living, mentoring, self-determination, and policy interventions. Implications for research, policy, and practice are discussed.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, transitional care, youth in transition, residential care, congregate care, independence, youth in care, independent living, mentoring, extending care, policy, self-determination

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Introduction

According to Pecora and English (2016), approximately 6% of out-of-home placements for children and youth were in residential group home settings; this percentage excludes those in residential treatment centers. These children and youth come from various backgrounds, but the vast majority come with personal trauma that must be addressed. In these congregate care settings, youth without a support system will find themselves “aging out” of their program with few options. Therefore, congregate care settings must have effective transitional programs to move these youth from institutional dependence toward successful independence. The conversation surrounding youth “aging out of care” continues to grow and evolve. Unfortunately, youth are meeting the endpoint of their care every day. Practitioners may feel overwhelmed and hopeless when trying to address this issue; however, it is of utmost importance to consider the many layers of this issue in program development.

Congregate Care as Residential Care

The 2015 report "A National Look at the Use of Congregate Care in Child Welfare," released by the Children's Bureau, defined congregate care as:

a placement setting or group home (a licensed or approved home providing 24-hour care in a small group setting of 7-12 children) or an institution (a licensed or approved child care facility operated by a public or private agency and providing 24-hour care and/or treatment typically for 12 or more children who require separation from their own homes or a group living experience). These settings may include child care institutions, residential treatment facilities, or maternity homes. (Children’s Bureau, 2015, p. 1).

Congregate care may also include shelters, psychiatric hospitals, and detention/corrective facilities (Pecora & English, 2016). The expansive inclusion of these settings could make it challenging to find relevant information when researching transitional care. Therefore, for this review, residential care was the sole focus.

Residential Care Defined

Jones & Lansdverk (2006) defines residential care as a campus-based program where residents (students) live in family-like cottage settings while often attending an on-campus school. Placements in such programs are often considered long-term, with the goal of the resident completing high school and transitioning to independence. In these programs, education and social development are the emphases rather than treatment-based services (i.e., residential treatment centers) (Jones & Lansdverk, 2006). Residential care programs are often less restrictive and serve youth requiring a lower level of care. Such programs may have more in common with preparatory boarding schools than residential treatment centers (Jones, 2012). In these cases, residential care can often mean fewer placements for youth. This is of importance because youth who have experienced fewer placements report better developmental outcomes and a decreased risk of homelessness (Garcia et al., 2012; Shah et al., 2017). However, the challenge of successfully transitioning youth from care to independence remains, regardless of the care setting.

Problem Identification

Youth leaving care face significant and complex challenges. These challenges include homelessness, educational barriers, lack of employment opportunities, limited physical and mental health care, limited or nonexistent social support, and, at times, involvement in the justice system (Youth.gov, n.d.). Courtney et al. (2011) noted in the Midwest Study that 31% - 46% of

youth transitioning from care experience homelessness at least once by age 26. Further, the U.S. Department of Education (2023) reports that youth in care are more likely to drop out of school and unlikely to attend or graduate from college. The literature consistently reveals problematic outcomes in all categories studied. The complexity of the issues facing youth during this transitional process may require multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches.

Purpose of Review

Given the unique intricacies of congregate care, both in definition and practice, practitioners have an ethical obligation to identify and implement strategies that prepare youth for a successful transition to independent living. When transitioning youth in residential care programs to independence, it is common to see these organizations include basic life skills training in their programs. Such teaching is often available to youth in care through the foster care program or their school system. However, there is a persistent gap between the services and education provided and the success of these youth aging out. Youth transitioning from care still face uncertainty with housing, education, vocational training, and care coordination (Jarczok et al., 2021; Goemans, van Breda, & Kessi, 2021; Brisson et al., 2022). This review will examine approaches to transition planning identified in the literature that are available for youth in residential care programs. This research intends to focus on youth across the spectrum of needs who are transitioning from a residential care program. Youth in these settings may be exposed to a more extensive and consistent support system than youth in a typical foster care setting. Therefore, they may experience life differently, as many residential care settings tend to be more structured in day-to-day operations, resulting in approaching "aging out" more "sheltered" and with less practical knowledge than youth in the traditional foster care home.

Methods

To identify approaches, EBSCOhost searches were done through various databases, including Academic Search Premier, APA PsycINFO, APA PsycArticles, E-Journals, ERIC, MEDLINE, and SocINDEX with Full Text. These databases were specifically chosen due to the social service-related content readily available for such research. Various relevant resources were found, including academic journal articles, books, and dissertations. However, only peer-reviewed academic journal articles published between January 1, 2012- February 28, 2023, were considered for this review. Initially, there appeared to be ample research on this topic; however, a significant portion was specific to youth with disabilities or special behavioral health needs.

The search was completed on March 1, 2023. It involved the primary key terms "youth or teen or youth adult or adolescent or young people" with the addition of "aging out or leaving care" as well as "transition planning or transition to adulthood or emerging adulthood or independence" and "congregate care or residential care or residential placement or institutional care or residential education." This search (Table 1) yielded 167 articles. Articles were reviewed initially to remove duplicates. This initial review yielded 55 duplicate articles, leaving 112 articles for consideration.

Table 1. Chart of Search Criteria for EBSCO Search

Primary Search Term	youth or teen or youth adult or adolescent or young people
AND	aging out or leaving care
AND	transition planning or transition to adulthood or emerging adulthood or independence
AND	congregate care or residential care or residential placement or institutional care or residential education

Given the broad context of the term "congregate care" and "residential care," title and abstract reviews were completed to screen out articles that specifically involved psychiatric hospitals, mental health facilities, immigration facilities, youth with disabilities, and detention/corrective facilities, as these deal with special populations and were outside the scope of this review. The title and abstract review excluded 34 articles, leaving 78 articles. A full-text review of these 78 articles excluded 18 articles due to the lack of an intervention focus or the content being specific to therapeutic care. A total of 60 articles were selected for this review (Figure 1).

Additional sources were identified through an analysis of the selected articles' bibliographies and a Google search. This follow-up resulted in seven additional articles that were included in this review. These additional articles were deemed relevant to the purpose of this review and were not duplicates of the EBSCO search conducted. For clarity, (*) is used in the

reference list to identify EBSCO-searched articles used in this review, and (**) is used to determine the supplemental seven articles used in the review. The total number of articles reviewed was 67. The articles were read to identify intervention methods for youth transitioning from residential care. The articles and interventions were recorded using Google Sheets (Table 2). Interventions were then sorted to account for the frequency of mentions per article. The interventions were then categorized based on classifications that emerged from the readings.

Figure 1. Flow Chart of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of Relevant Articles

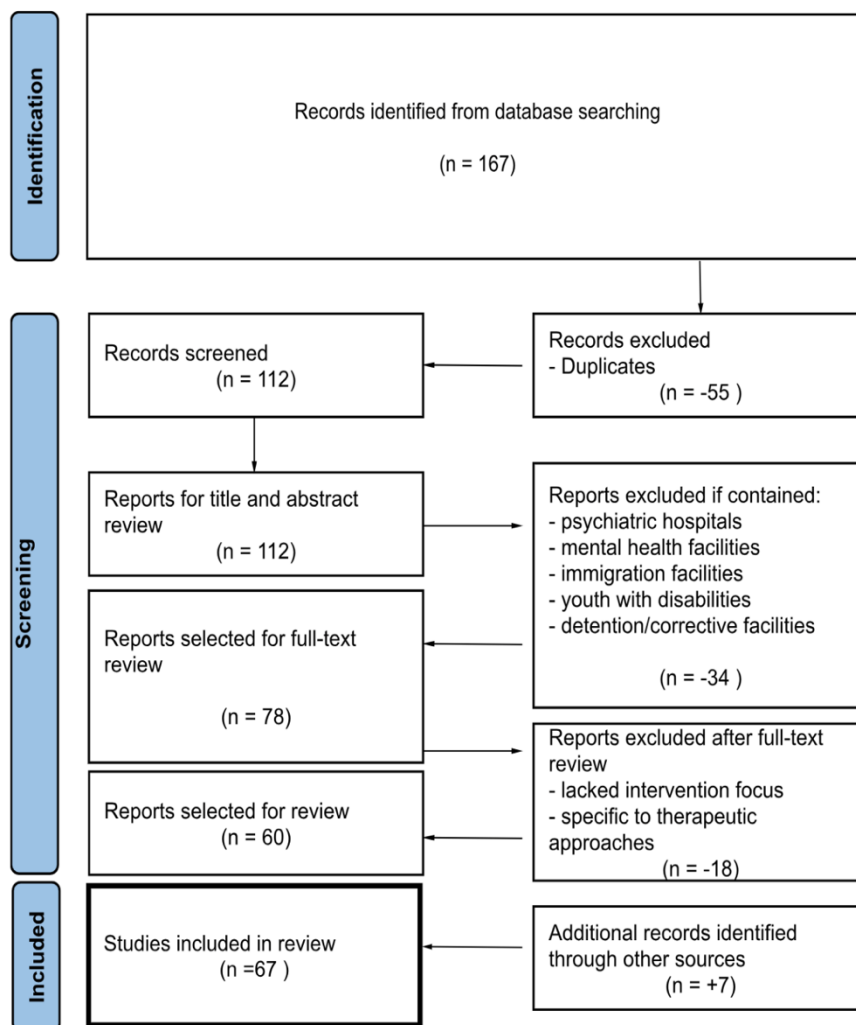


Table 2. Overview of Reviewed Sources Here

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Abrams et al.	2017	To explore the influence of policy context on the views of self-sufficiency among foster youth transitioning to adulthood.	Access to resources, life skills training, education support, employment support, mentorship, aftercare planning, housing assistance, financial assistance, counseling, and emotional support
Adley, N. & Jupp Kina, V.	2017	To examine the role of emotional support in the experiences of care leavers.	Emotional support, counseling, and emotional support, mentorship, aftercare planning, education support, employment support, housing assistance
Ahmann, E.	2017	To provide recommendations for healthcare providers in supporting youth who are aging out of foster care.	Life skills training, education support, employment support, mentorship, aftercare planning, housing assistance, financial assistance, counseling, and emotional support
Allen, T. & Williams, L.	2012	To present a theoretical and practical approach to life skills group work for youth transitioning to independent living.	Life skills training, education & employment support, mentorship, aftercare, housing, financial assistance, and counseling.
Armstrong-Heimsoth et al.	2021	To explore the perspectives of former foster youth on transitional supports and programs.	Education support, employment support, mentorship, aftercare planning, housing assistance, financial assistance, counseling, and emotional support

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Berejena Mhongera, P.	2017	To explore the perspectives and program needs of adolescent girls in Zimbabwe as they prepare for successful transitions beyond institutional care.	Individualized transition planning, mentorship, aftercare planning, education support, employment support, counseling and emotional support, life skills training, financial planning, access to healthcare
Boldiš, I.	2014	To examine the challenges faced by youth transitioning from care to independent adulthood and to consider it as a social problem.	Comprehensive and individualized support, education support, employment support, mentorship, aftercare planning, housing assistance, financial assistance, counseling, and emotional support
Brisson et al.	2022	To identify the correlates of successful moves to independence for youth transitioning out of juvenile justice or foster care systems.	Comprehensive support, individualized transition planning, education and employment assistance, mentorship, counseling, and emotional support, aftercare services
Carr, N.	2014	To discuss the provision of leaving and aftercare in the Republic of Ireland and how it is experienced by young people leaving care.	Comprehensive support, individualized transition planning, mentorship, education and employment assistance, housing assistance, counseling, and emotional support
Collins, M.	2019	To review recent research on transitioning from foster care to independence and to propose next steps for policy and practice.	Education support, employment support, mentorship, aftercare planning, housing assistance, financial assistance, counseling, and emotional support

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Coyle, D. & Pinkerton, J.	2012	To highlight the importance of making connections for young people leaving care.	Building supportive relationships, mentorship, aftercare planning, individualized transition planning, education support, employment support, housing assistance, counseling and emotional support
Curry, S. & Abrams, L.	2015	To review the research literature on housing and social support for youth aging out of foster care and to provide directions for future research.	Access to affordable and stable housing, social support, education support, employment support, mentorship, aftercare planning, financial assistance, counseling, and emotional support
DePanfilis, D.	2014	To provide a review of "Youth Leaving Foster Care: A Developmental, Relationship-Based Approach to Practice" and its usefulness in the field.	Developmental, relationship-based approach to practice, mentorship, aftercare planning, education support, employment support, housing assistance, counseling, and emotional support
Dinisman, T.	2016	To examine the contribution of readiness to leave care and social support to life satisfaction during the transition from care to adulthood.	Readiness to leave care, social support, counseling, mentorship, aftercare, education & employment support, housing assistance.
Dixon, J., Ward, J., & Blower, S.	2019	To explore the use of participation, consultation, peer research, and co-production to raise the voices of young people in and leaving care in England.	Participation and consultation of young people in care, co-production of services, mentorship, aftercare planning, education support, employment support, housing assistance, counseling, and emotional support

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Dumaret, A., Donati, P., & Crost, M.	2011	To investigate the educational achievement, behaviour, and transition to independent living among children after a long-term placement.	Education support, employment support, housing assistance
Frimpong, M.	2017	To examine the formal and informal social support networks of care leavers from a children's village in Ghana.	Formal and informal support networks, counseling and emotional support, mentorship, aftercare planning, education support, employment support, housing assistance
Garcia et al.	2012	To identify the institutional predictors of developmental outcomes among racially diverse foster care alumni.	Comprehensive support, individualized transition planning, mentorship, education and employment assistance, housing assistance, counseling, and emotional support
Glynn	2021	To propose a theoretical framework for studying the transition out of care among care leavers.	Preparation for transition, support during transition, aftercare services
Glynn, N., & Mayock, P.	2019	To explore care leavers' perspectives on the aftercare planning process.	Flexible aftercare planning, comprehensive support, individualized transition planning, financial assistance, education support, employment support, access to healthcare, counseling, and emotional support
Goemans, M., van Breda, A., & Kessi, S.	2021	To investigate the experiences of young people preparing to transition out of cluster foster care in South Africa.	Peer support, life skills training, job training, education assistance, mentorship, counseling, and emotional support

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Gomez et al.	2015	To examine the perceptions of learned helplessness among emerging adults aging out of foster care.	Mentorship, aftercare planning, education support, employment support, access to healthcare, counseling, and emotional support
Greeson et al.	2015	To examine child welfare professionals' attitudes and beliefs about natural mentoring as a form of support for older youth in foster care.	Child welfare-based natural mentoring for older youth in foster care
Greeson, J. & Thompson, A.	2017	To develop, pilot, and assess the feasibility of a natural mentoring intervention for older youth in foster care.	Natural mentoring interventions, relationship building, providing emotional support, advocacy, guidance, and advice
Gunawardena, N. & Stich, C.	2021	To conduct a systematic literature review of interventions for young people aging out of the child welfare system.	Mentoring, financial support, housing support, education and career preparation, mental health and wellness services
Gwenzi, G.	2019	To explore the perspectives of social services professionals and institutional caregivers on the transition from institutional care to adulthood and independence in Harare, Zimbabwe.	Preparation for transition, life skills training, financial support, educational support, mentorship
Häggman-Laitila et al.	2019	To provide a systematic review of perceptions and experiences of young people in the transition period after leaving foster care, with a focus on their preparedness for adult life and coping mechanisms.	Preparation for transition, support during transition, aftercare services

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Hlungwani, J. & Breda, A.	2020	To examine the psychosocial processes of resilience that help female care leavers in South Africa make the transition to young adulthood from residential care.	Gender-specific psychosocial processes of resilience, mentorship, life skills training, education, and career preparation, aftercare services
Hokanson et al.	2019	To explore the tension between independence and interdependence among former foster youth who are emerging adults and how it affects their lives.	Balancing independence and interdependence, life skills training, mentorship, housing support, and aftercare services
Jarczok et al.	2021	To identify the needs and accessibility of care leavers in Switzerland.	Individualized support, housing, job training, education support, healthcare, counseling, mentorship, aftercare services.
Jones, L.	2012	To identify predictors of success for foster youth placed in a residential education program.	Individualized education plans, case management, mental health services, family engagement
Jones, L. & Lansdverk, J.	2006	To examine a new approach to improving outcomes for foster youth by providing them with a residential education program.	Residential education
Leathers et al.	2019	To examine the outcomes of a transition support program for older youth exiting foster care, with a focus on their educational, employment, and housing outcomes.	Transition support programs, case management, life skills training, housing support, education and career preparation, aftercare services

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Lee, J., Courtney, M., & Hook, J.	2012	To examine the relationship between formal bonds during the transition to adulthood, extended foster care support, and criminal/legal involvement.	Extended foster care support, mentorship, access to education and employment opportunities, counseling, and emotional support
Liabo et al.	2017	To explore the experiences of care leavers in the UK during their transitions from foster or residential care to adulthood, using participatory research methods.	Participatory approach, communication, and information sharing, aftercare services
Liu, C.	2020	To examine the effects of independent living programs on outcomes of youth aging out of foster care, using a multi-level analysis.	Independent living programs, educational & employment, housing support
Manso, K.	2012	To examine the preparation of young people leaving care in Ghana, using the case of SOS Children's Village.	Preparation for transition, mentorship, life skills training, education, and career preparation, aftercare services
Marion et al.	2017	To examine the role and impact of social networks on the transition to adulthood for young people leaving care.	Social networks, mentorship, and aftercare services
McGhee, K. & Deeley, S.	2022	To explore the implications of the emerging adulthood stage for care experienced young people and those who care for them, including challenges, opportunities, and ways to support their transition to adulthood.	Holistic approach, individualized support, aftercare services

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Mitchell et al.	2014	To explore the voices and visions of 17-year-old youth in transition from foster care to adulthood and their perspectives on their own futures.	Preparation for transition, mentorship, life skills training, and aftercare services
Modi, K. & Kalra, G.	2022	To explore the experiences and perspectives of care leavers in India and their interactions with child protection services, using a case study approach.	Listening to care leavers, participatory approach, aftercare services, mentorship, life skills training, education and career preparation, housing support, financial support, mental health, and wellness services
Modi, K., Wadhwa, A., & Prasad, L.	2021	To discuss the development of leaving care law, policy, and practice in India.	Legal and policy framework for leaving care, comprehensive transition planning, mentorship, aftercare planning, education support, employment support, housing assistance, counseling, and emotional support
Narendorf et al.	2019	To examine the success factors of a formal mentoring program for youth exiting foster care.	Formal mentoring programs, life skills training, housing support, education, and career preparation, aftercare services
Newton et al.	2017	To explore the perspectives of care leavers on mentoring during the transition from care to prevent depression.	Mentorship, aftercare planning, education support, employment support, housing assistance, counseling, and emotional support

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Paulsen, V. & Thomas, N.	2018	To explore the experiences of young people transitioning from care to adulthood and the challenges they face in seeking recognition from society.	Recognition and support of individual identity, education, and career preparation, housing support, mentorship, aftercare services
Richards, G.	2014	To discuss strategies for helping youth transition out of the foster care system with a particular focus on housing.	Affordable housing options, job training, financial planning, access to healthcare, education assistance, mentorship, life skills training
Roberts, P.	2021	To investigate the experiences and challenges faced by young women leaving care, specifically their struggle to find safe and stable housing.	Safe and stable housing, education, and career preparation, mentorship, aftercare services
Salazar et al.	2018	To define and examine the factors that contribute to achieving permanency for older youth in foster care.	Permanency planning, education, and career preparation, mentorship, aftercare services
Scannapieco et al.	2016	To identify the ecological predictors associated with positive outcomes for youth transitioning from foster care to independent living.	Ecological predictors associated with successful transition from foster care to independent living
Schofield et al.	2017	To explore the construction of identity and resilience among young people leaving residential care.	Risk and resilience factors, identity construction, housing support, mentorship, aftercare services

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Schwartz-Tayri, T. & Spiro, S.	2017	To conduct a follow-up study on Israeli young adults who participated in a transitional housing program after aging out of care and to explore the program's long-term effects.	Transitional housing programs, life skills training, education, and career preparation, mentorship, and aftercare services
Scott, T.	2012	To review the policies and outcomes related to the transition of youth from care to adulthood.	Policy interventions, education and career preparation, housing support, mentorship, aftercare services
Shah et al.	2017	To identify the predictors of homelessness among emerging adults aging out of foster care.	Individualized transition planning, mentorship, aftercare planning, financial planning, access to healthcare, housing assistance, employment support, education support, counseling, and emotional support
Singer, E., & Berzin, S.	2015	To explore early adult identification among youth with foster care experience and its implications for emerging adulthood.	Mentorship, educational support, job training and employment assistance, housing assistance, counseling and emotional support
Stein, M.	2019	To examine international practices for supporting young people from care to adulthood.	International practices for supporting youth from care to adulthood, education and career preparation, housing support, mentorship, aftercare services
Stein, M., & Ward, H.	2021	To examine the persistent issues across time and place related to transitions from care to adulthood.	Comprehensive support, individualized transition planning, education and employment assistance, mentorship, counseling, and emotional support, aftercare services

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Storø, J.	2017	To reflect on research and language and to discuss which transition concept is useful for describing the process of young people leaving state care.	Comprehensive and individualized support, education support, employment support, housing assistance, counseling, and emotional support
Storo, J., Sjoblom, Y., & Hojer, I.	2019	To compare the state support for young people leaving care in Norway and Sweden.	Financial support, education, housing assistance, job training, counseling and guidance, mentorship, and aftercare services
Sulimani, A.	2019	To explore the role of supporting figures in the lives of emerging adults who left care compared to their non-care leaving peers.	Identification and support of important individuals in the lives of youth transitioning from care, mentorship, life skills training, and aftercare services
Sulimani et al.	2020	To investigate the impact of mentoring on the life skills and hope of youth leaving care in Israel.	Formal mentoring programs, life skills training, education, and career preparation, aftercare services
Sulimani et al.	2019	To explore the contribution of mentoring in nurturing hope among youth in care.	Formal mentoring programs, life skills training, education and career preparation, aftercare services
Teer, P.	2021	To review the existing literature on how informal networks play a role in the lives of young people transitioning from care.	Informal support networks, housing support, education and career preparation, mentorship, aftercare services
Törrönen, M. & Vornanen, R.	2014	To explore the experiences of young people leaving care and to promote their participation in child welfare practices and advocacy for their rights.	Participatory research to improve child welfare practices and youth rights

Author(s)	Year	Purpose	Identified Interventions
Tysnes, I., & Kiik, R.	2021	To explore the challenges faced during the transition between social welfare systems for young people.	Flexible and individualized support, comprehensive transition planning, education support, employment support, counseling, and emotional support, access to healthcare, financial assistance
van Breda, A.	2018	To examine the process of aging out of residential care and its impact on young adults in South Africa, with a focus on identifying the challenges they face and the factors that contribute to their resilience.	Aging out of residential care in South Africa, education and career preparation, housing support, mentorship, aftercare services
van Breda, A. & Hlungwani, J.	2019	To explore the resilience processes of women who have left residential care in South Africa and to identify the factors that contribute to their successful transition to independent living.	Resilience processes of women leaving residential care in South Africa, mentorship, education, and career preparation, aftercare services
Woodgate et al.	2017	To conduct a scoping review of the interventions available for youth who are aging out of care in order to identify promising practices and gaps in the existing literature.	Life skills training, education, career preparation, housing support, mentorship, aftercare services

Results

This review identified a multidimensional and complex set of issues for youth transitioning from care. Consistent results across studies (including across genders, races, and cultures) could indicate that the findings are generalizable. Categorizing the literature based on identified interventions mentioned in the articles revealed interesting findings (Figure 2). Ultimately, there were a total of 15 distinct interventions identified in this review. All of these findings were then categorized for discussion. The categorization of interventions is as follows:

Extending Care

Case Management/Aftercare Planning

Extended Support

Self-Determination

Self-determination

Mentoring

Mentorship

Peer Support

Family Engagement

Policy Interventions

Policy Changes & Considerations

Independent Living Program

Education Support

Housing Support

Employment Support

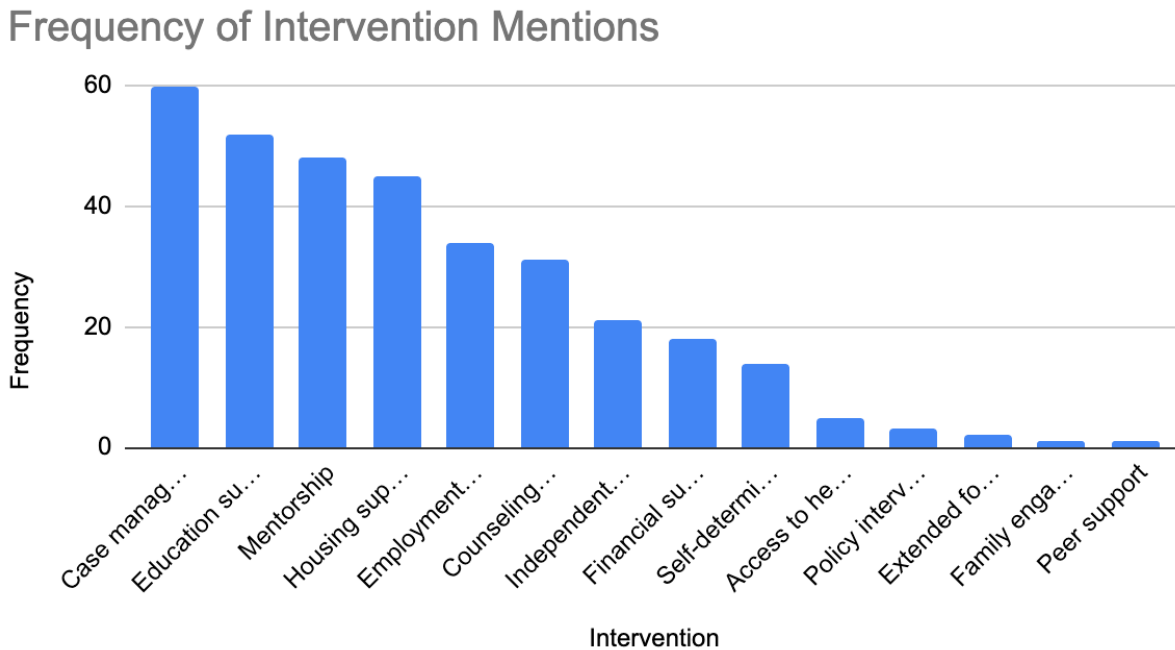
Counseling/Emotional Support

Independent Living/Life Skills

Financial Support

Access to Health Care

Figure 2. Frequency of Intervention Mentions



Given the needs of youth transitioning out of care and the elevated risk of homelessness, finding and implementing efficient and effective programs is vital but complex due to the unique challenges these youth face (Shah et al., 2017). Modi & Kalra (2022) noted a "sphere of aftercare" that involves the following eight essential considerations for youth leaving care: housing, physical health, independent living skills, education and vocational skills, social support and interpersonal skills, financial independence and career, emotional wellbeing, identity, and legal awareness. This concept emphasizes the complexity of the needs of youth leaving care and coincides with the findings of this review. Therefore, residential care facilities serving transitional-aged youth may consider the following themes in transitional-care program development.

Extending Care

The culture of the United States, and an ideal perpetuated by the law is that youth become adults, with limited restrictions, at 18 and are unrestricted adults at 21. Over the past decade, the age of youth reaching independence has increased, making these cultural benchmarks no longer realistic (Mitchell et al., 2014), especially for those transitioning from a foster care setting. The *Federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* granted states the option to allow those in foster care to remain until age 21 if the state elected and with conditions (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022). The literature suggests that continuing in care beyond 18 was associated with outcome improvements in education, employment, and housing (Liu, 2020; Gunawardena & Stich, 2021; Scannapieco et al., 2016; Dumaret et al., 2011). Gunawardena & Stich (2021) recommends that youth should remain in care until 25 due to research suggesting that identified benefits of remaining in care after 18 began to decrease for 23 and 24-year-olds. Scannapieco et al. (2016) further support the idea of extended care by recognizing that human behavior theory added a stage of development referred to as Emerging Adulthood. Storo, Sjoblom, & Hojer (2019) compare the concept of extended care as seen implemented with success in Sweden (care extended until age 25) and Norway (care extended until age 21). Though no conclusion is drawn on the best approach, the concept of extended care appears to be effective. Of course, a significant consideration for implementing the extension of care is the required additional funding and administration of such a program.

This extension of care may also have positive effects on education. Studies show that youth who leave care when "aging out" may not finish high school, if still enrolled, and are even less likely to enroll in any form of higher education (van Breda, 2018.) Ahmann (2017) highlights a research project documenting that 50% of youth interviewed for the project left care without completing high school. Such impacts on foundational development and safety warrant

the consideration of a policy review. Rather than having an "aging out" process, programs should consider a gradual process in which the youth works to meet goals leading to independence (Collins, 2019; Carr, 2014).

Lee, Courtney, & Hook (2012) argue that extended care for youth in care also decreases involvement in the criminal justice system due to the additional support such a program provides. Extended care may also address the need for increased focus on "aftercare." Efforts to gradually move youth toward independence while providing needed support (housing, financial, education, transportation, mental health services, etc.) and actively working to address gaps will lay a foundation for success (Carr, 2014). Additionally, Courtney, Okpych, & Park (2018) noted that extended foster care resulted in positive outcomes for youth completing high school; youth enrolling in college; youth employment; and social support.

Independent Living Program

Youth having the option of entering an independent living program showed promise in the literature. This option may be costly for residential care programs but may be vital in the transitional process. Such a program would provide training to live independently, housing options, employment assistance, financial teaching, and educational assistance (Woodgate et al., 2017; Coyle & Pinkerton, 2012). Such a program within a congregate care setting may allow the youth to continue living on campus, providing additional support services (Woodgate et al., 2017). This arrangement would allow for continued coaching/teaching, providing youth with much-needed life skills education while encouraging transitional-aged youth to remain in the program (Scannapieco et al., 2016). Liu (2020) found that post-secondary educational support in independent living programs was "the most effective type of service for improving all outcomes, not only educational attainment." Of course, addressing the housing issue for the youth relieves

significant stress regarding the transitional process. Housing consistently appears in the literature as a critical concern for youth in transition (Liabo et al., 2017; Marion, Paulsen, & Goyette, 2017; Liu, 2020; Curry & Abrams, 2015).

Creating an independent living program within an established residential care setting will have challenges. Many of these care settings are more structured than a traditional foster home setting, even those that are non-therapeutic. Though the structure makes the program function more efficiently and safely, transitional-aged youth are often ill-prepared for independent living. For example, Manso (2012) noted that the youth felt unprepared for discharge in a congregate care setting in Ghana, citing a lack of support and guidance and minimal personal input about their future. These issues are common in such settings; due to liability and safety concerns, the youth may have limited access to activities often considered ordinary or normal (i.e., relationships, mentors, and social groups) (Scott, 2012). Residential care settings must create an environment where transitional-aged youth can develop decision-making skills while assisting the youth in navigating mistakes and providing them with ongoing support and functional life skills training (Woodgate et al., 2017; Glynn, 2021; Berejena Mhongera, 2017).

An underlying barrier to independent living programs for youth transitioning out of care is the stigma associated with leaving care (Modi, Wadhwa, & Prasad, 2021). Helping youth understand their value to society and how to navigate questions about being involved in residential care prepares them for the emotional effects of this kind of scrutiny. This may be best addressed by providing mental health services through the independent living program or by allowing the transitioning youth to continue to utilize the services provided by the residential care program. Storø (2017) suggested that one way to alleviate the stigma is to alter the language frequently used when discussing leaving care. He suggests that leaving care should be called

"emancipation." He argues that this verbiage indicates that the youth was empowered to make their own decisions and was not simply a victim of their age. Of course, there are numerous barriers that these youth will face as they move into adulthood. An independent living program must be ready to provide support to these youth as they navigate the stigma of their care history, address new and never-before-experienced triggers to their trauma, and face challenges they have never experienced (Berejena Mhongera, 2017; Modi, Wadhwa, & Prasad, 2021; Coyle & Pinkerton, 2012).

Mentoring

Another factor highlighted throughout the literature was the need to assist youth in "social capacity building" (Woodgate et al., 2017). Consistent and supportive relationships are essential for transitional-aged youth (Leathers et al., 2019; Ahmann, 2017; McGhee & Deeley, 2022; Brisson et al., 2022; Newton et al., 2017). Sometimes such relationships are treated as an outcome, and other times as part of the overall process (Collins, 2019). Either consideration expresses the importance of these relationships. Glynn (2021) called it "authentic belonging," while Salazar et al. (2018) stressed the importance of "relational permanency." For decades, social programs, large and small, have utilized the idea of mentors. In our culture, individuals are encouraged to have mentors for teaching, training, accountability, and counsel. For youth in care, the concept of a mentor is often well-received because someone is investing in their lives without getting paid to do so (Narendorf et al., 2019). Mentorship can be seen by older youth as a great alternative to adoption; no fear of losing their autonomy and no fear of betraying their biological family (Narendorf et al., 2019). Richards (2014) insists that mentoring should be included in transitional planning, financial support, education, and life skills.

Programs may not have to look far to implement a mentorship plan. Natural mentorships, or relationships that may already exist between a youth and a non-parent family member or close adult friend, have shown to be just as effective (Greeson & Thompson, 2017; Teer, 2021). Studies show that many youths in care view their caseworker or similar child welfare worker as a vital part of their life (Marion, Paulsen, & Goyette, 2017). Therefore, building on existing healthy relationships can be a much more feasible option. This type of relationship can often be seen between a coach and the team. Such engagement has positively affected employment and educational outcomes (Scannapieco et al., 2016). Research shows that mentorship outcomes have produced higher rates of education completion, employment, and a higher quality of life, making it one of the most successful transition-to-adulthood programs (Woodgate et al., 2017). Newton et al. (2017) highlight that an effective mentoring program is much like tailored care in that the youth receives specialized attention from someone fully-invested in assisting them.

Self-Determination

A fundamental right of clients, self-determination allows the client to make decisions concerning their initial and continued care and treatment. Though highly recognized for adults, self-determination can be deprioritized when youth are involved. Youth interviewed in a residential care setting felt decisions were made with more concern for the facility than for them and felt their voices were not heard concerning their future (Manso, 2012). As youth age, they expect a directive voice in their future and desire to be empowered (Narendorf et al., 2019). However, less than 10% of youth felt they (or the people of their choosing) were involved as much as they wanted to be in their care (Leather et al., 2019). Providing avenues for youth in care to have a voice in their transitional plan is mutually beneficial. Youth hear and know about the statistics of success when coming out of care; however, when they have a chance to play a

part in that plan and see the support received, it gives them hope for their future (Mitchell et al., 2014).

To ensure that youth are self-determining, they must also define permanency and success for their future (Salazar et al., 2018; Boldiș, 2014). The social worker, case manager, education team, or program director cannot independently define success for the youth. Youth in care must be involved in the decision-making process of their care planning and aftercare planning (Glynn & Maycock, 2019; DePanfilis, 2014; Tysnes & Kiik, 2021; Dixon, Ward, & Blower, 2019).

When asked, youth often engage and share valuable information that will help cultivate a successful transition plan (Mitchell et al., 2014). Collaboration between the youth and all parties involved in transitional planning should be facilitated regularly (Manso, 2012; Boldiș, 2014). A youth-driven collaborative approach has boosted youth perceptions and increased positive transitional outcomes (Leathers et al., 2019).

Policy Interventions

Ultimately, the sustainability of success with youth transitioning from residential care programs to a life of independence will require supportive and empowering policies.

Practitioners should consider recent outcomes, identify shortcomings in serving this population, and provide necessary education to policymakers. An example would be the May 2023 *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023* report released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Though not specific to residential care, this report provides significant information that can be used to identify where policy advocacy is needed for youth in out-of-home placements. One highlight of this report is the increase in supportive services provided to youth beyond the age of 18; however, the reported enrollment in such programs is low. It is further noted that less than a quarter of eligible transitioning youth received federally-funded services in 2021 (Annie E. Casey Foundation,

2023). This serves as a reminder that policy and practice must work together to bring about needed change.

Discussion

For youth workers, the mark of success is to provide a high level of care that supports the youth to grow and mature into emotionally healthy, relationally strong, and socially prepared individuals. Sadly, outcome studies do not reflect consistent success for youth coming out of care (Scott, 2012). Glynn (2021) noted that youth who approach the transition with unmet needs or feel disrespected might struggle with anger, depression, or shame, which could develop into maladaptive coping behaviors. These concerns increase when considering youth coming out of a more structured, residential care setting. Practitioners and program administrators have an ethical obligation to ensure transitional planning is done correctly, taking action to promote the rights of these young adults (Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014).

In developing a transitional program, it would be essential to consider the youth's autonomy by including them in discussions and planning for their future. Youth/caseworker collaboration in transitional planning has led to positive outcomes (Leathers et al., 2019). Another item to consider is the cultural expectation that these individuals have ascertained some level of knowledge and ability for successful independence when they reach the age of 18. In reality, the 18th birthday is not an appropriate benchmark for adulthood, especially for those youth working through trauma (Mitchell, Jones, & Renema, 2015). Instead, the youths' knowledge and comprehension of life skills and tools for successful sustainability, such as housing, employment, and educational opportunities, would be more accurate indicators. Therefore, the foundation of a transitional plan may include collaboration with the youth while also considering their physical, emotional, and mental health. Funding for such a program may

also allow for supportive care for the youth for several years after their 18th birthday in cases deemed necessary and appropriate by the interdisciplinary team.

As noted, basic life skills training is often a part of residential care's "teaching" element, but the training alone did not indicate successful transition planning. Gunawardena and Stich (2021) stated that for those who participated in life skills training, they "found no difference between intervention and control groups." Allen and Williams (2012) noted that the perceived ineffectiveness of the training may not be the content of the training but *how* the content is presented or implemented. Life skills development cultivates in youth a sense of readiness to provide for their needs, and this increased readiness has the potential to lead to better outcomes (Sulimani, Melkman, & Greeson, 2020). Therefore, basic life skills training is essential, though insufficient, as a stand-alone transition plan for youth aging out of care. The findings in this review indicate that programs which include mentoring, independent living, extending care, and are youth-driven may have greater success than just basic life skills training, although the training could and should be incorporated into the program. Given this, the conclusion can be drawn that a transitional program in residential care should be a collaborative, interdisciplinary, youth-focused model of transition planning.

Limitations

These searches did highlight a significant gap in the area of non-therapeutic residential care programs. Given that many private residential care programs are non-therapeutic, additional research is warranted. It would be important to note, as well, that many youth in care are considered special needs requiring specific interventions that were not included in this review. As stated earlier, the broadness of the definition of congregate care warrants a more direct approach to the research, as there are many contributing factors to the success of youth transitioning out of care. Further research should also be completed on the effect and importance of youth autonomy and self-determination as it concerns their transition planning from care.

Implications

This review provides several considerations for those working with youth transitioning from care. Admittedly, a service provider has significant limitations in making these identified program changes. However, advocacy at the organizational, local, state, and federal levels is possible for all involved in caring for these youth. Transitioning to independence from care is a time filled with uncertainty and risk; therefore, providing interventions early and effectively will bring much-needed stability to these youth (Singer & Berzin, 2015; Goemans, van Breda, & Kessi, 2021). This at-risk population also requires service providers who have been adequately trained to deal with their unique challenges (Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Gomez et al., 2015). Finally, there must be a review of current policies (at all levels) and modifications, as needed, to better serve this population.

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