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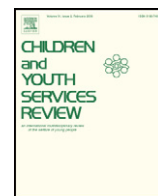
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Smoothing the transition to adulthood: Creating ongoing supportive relationships among foster youth

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the utility and effectiveness of a foster care model designed to improve youth transitions to adulthood. The model engages the youth's social network, helps youth to develop supportive, ongoing relationships with adults, and is heavily focused on youth empowerment. A three-year evaluation of 88 foster youth revealed that youth exposed to the model felt they had more power over their lives, had a wider variety of supportive adults in their lives, and could better regulate their emotions than those in a comparison group.

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1. Introduction

Youth aging out of the foster care system experience a host of risks including lack of education, unemployment, criminal behavior, and inadequate housing (Courtney et al., 2011; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Reilly, 2003). Child welfare as an institution has an obligation to address the needs of youth aging out of foster care. This is evidenced both in the changing tide of child welfare services that attend more to transitional needs and is supported by public policy (Foster Care Independence Act, 1999; Fostering Connections Act, 2008).

1.1. Socio-emotional support

There is rising recognition that traditional independent living skills (ILS) are important but are not enough and do not ultimately provide what is needed to develop sustaining supportive relationships and truly become self-sufficient. Courtney et al.'s (2011) extensive longitudinal research on former foster youth has demonstrated repeatedly that despite rigorous ILS training, youth discharged from foster care continue to be un- or underemployed, experience recurring bouts of homelessness, engage in high-risk behaviors, and become incarcerated at rates substantially higher than in comparable populations of youth who were not in foster care.

Some of the shift toward meeting social and emotional needs is reflected in policy changes over the past decade. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which was created in 1999 as part of the Foster Care Independence Act, speaks specifically to the needs of transitioning youth. Much of this program was designed to address

their concrete needs such as employment, education, and housing. However, another primary purpose of the program is to provide personal and emotional support to these youth via mentoring and “dedicated adults” (National Resource Center for Youth Development, n.d.).

Young adults depend on parents and other adults for support and guidance long into early adulthood. Foster youth, however, often enter adulthood with severed or compromised family relationships, histories of trauma, and a limited ability to trust others. Moreover, these youth may still be coping with losses and change resulting from their transition into foster care while they are expected to prepare for their transition out of foster care. The disruption of social networks when foster youth experience transition, whether it is entering care, changing placements during care, or when they leave care, can result in psychological distress (Perry, 2006). A strong network while the youth is in foster care has been found to reduce anxiety and depression (Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010).

Social support can include emotional support, advice or guidance, material aid, spending time relaxing with the youth, or a demonstration of love and affection (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Having a high level of social support is essential for youth transitioning out of the foster care system; yet many youth find that their social support needs are unmet at the time of their exit from care (Ahrens, Richardson, Lozano, Fan, & DuBois, 2007; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). While support from biological families and foster families is most common, youth may also find support from peers, support groups, or caseworkers (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Mitchell et al., 2010; Wade, 2008). In interviews with 96 former foster youth, Collins, Spencer, and Ward (2010) found that youth reported a wide range of mentors, many of which were informal relationships. The presence of mentors among these youth was significantly associated with an increased rate of high school

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graduation and decreased rate of homelessness. Formal mentoring has some challenges, particularly for this population of young people who may have learned not to trust adults. Current evidence suggests that mentoring relationships that occur naturally are most effective and help youth achieve competence in independent living after exiting the system, leaving them with support in the event of challenges or crises (Ahrens et al., 2007; Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Scannapieco et al., 2007; Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010).

Youth with larger support networks have more overall life satisfaction, leading to healthier lives, higher levels of education, as well as lower risk of suicide, sexually transmitted infections, and physical aggression, whereas youth with smaller support networks are more likely to experience homelessness after leaving care (Ahrens et al., 2007; Reilly, 2003). Increasing the level of social support youth receive before and during their transition out of the foster care system can minimize stress levels, creating more opportunity for success (Mitchell et al., 2010).

1.2. Trauma

The effects of past trauma can exacerbate foster youth's behavior and relationship-building skills. Almost by definition, children who have been placed in foster care have experienced some trauma, due to either the events that led to out-of-home placement, the experience of being removed from their homes, or both. Separation and loss from a parent at a young age can hinder one's ability to form trusting relationships in the future.

The mechanism underlying the harmful effects of network disruption may be the inability to develop and maintain sufficient supportive networks to replace those that were lost (Perry, 2006, p. 386).

The challenge, then, extends beyond identifying a network for youth, to developing the skills needed to build and sustain such connections. Bruce Perry, a renowned authority on childhood trauma has demonstrated that a wide range of adverse experiences can disrupt normal brain development, including abuse, neglect, premature exposure to drugs or alcohol, and impaired early bonding (Perry, 2009). The neurological effects can include hyperarousal to triggers that may be unknown or misunderstood by foster parents, and can create significant problems with attachment and quality of relationships (Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995).

1.3. Empowerment

In child welfare, youth empowerment often is described as permitting youth to “give input” or “have a voice” in decisions. However, to adhere to an underlying social theory of youth empowerment, they must go far beyond this. In such models, youth play significant – not minor – roles in meetings and programming, many times taking on a leadership role (Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011; Kaplan, Skolnik, & Turnbull, 2009; Wehmeyer & Gragoudas, 2004). In other words, youth are not just provided an opportunity to give input; they are part of the decision-making process. Moreover, they have opportunities not only to receive support but to serve as mentors and educators as well. Another important dimension of empowerment is knowledge of power structures. That is, youth need to understand how decisions are made so they can navigate the system in their best interest (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006).

There has been movement toward giving youth more power at the point of transitioning to adulthood. This is seen in the federal John G. Chafee Program of 1999 which requires that youth are directly involved in planning, and federal requirements under the Fostering Connections Act which direct youth and their caseworkers to work together to create a transitions plan, typically in the final three months of care. However, it likely requires more than a few months to fully learn the skills necessary to make good decisions that affect one's life. Giving youth more power

to make their own decisions earlier, rather than immediately prior to discharge, may present the opportunity to learn from their mistakes before they leave foster care, while the stakes are not as high.

1.4. The present study

Considering the grave long-term outcomes for former foster youth and their lack of social support, it is imperative to identify program models that have a demonstrated impact on helping youth develop a support network before they leave care. This study evaluated a model for older youth in foster care that integrates youth empowerment, trauma-informed practice, and emphasizes relationships. The model is called Creating Ongoing Relationships Effectively (CORE). Over the course of three years, we compared youth in this program to similar foster youth who received traditional independent living skills training.

2. CORE model description

CORE is a foster care program model designed to address the socio-emotional needs of older youth in foster care who are nearing transition to adulthood. The model was conceived and implemented by Family Alternatives, a private Minneapolis-based foster care provider (henceforth “the agency”). Typically, private foster care agencies provide services that are aimed at foster homes rather than the children, such as recruiting, training, licensing, and monitoring. This agency chose to make their services youth-oriented and to provide direct services to youth in addition to their foster home licensing services.

CORE was sparked by the agency director's observation that “focus-ing only on independent living skills perpetuated an adult-led paradigm and did little to meet youth's socio-emotional needs or to encourage foster parents and social workers to help youth take control of their own lives” (Riebel, 2010). The mission of CORE is to ensure that youth have the supportive ongoing relationships necessary to help them through their transition out of foster care and into living on their own as young adults. The model employs a holistic approach by educating youth, foster parents, and social workers, and by transforming the agency culture to one that empowers youth long before they embark on their transition. As such, the CORE model focuses on three areas: building supportive relationships, youth empowerment, and trauma-informed practice. Fig. 1 depicts the logic model for CORE.

2.1. Building supportive relationships

The CORE philosophy asserts that an agency serving youth who have been removed from their families must recognize and value the primacy of relationships. The agency aimed for youth to have at least one person looking out for them as they navigated their entrance to adulthood. The most likely supporters were foster parents and biological relatives. Both are important sources of support but cannot always be counted on for exiting youth. Foster parents have a continuous flow of children entering and leaving, and may not be able to provide ongoing support for every youth who leaves their home. Biological relatives, though often a top choice for youth, can be unavailable or unreliable for some of the same reasons the youth was placed outside the home. Therefore, CORE encouraged youth to look broadly to other people in their lives who might be willing to step forward to support them through their transitions. Because many foster youth lack basic relationship-building skills needed to develop such connections, the agency brought youth and their foster parents together to learn critical relationship-building skills that they could then practice together at home.

Agency social workers and psychologists with extensive training on relationship development skills created 12–15 week sessions that met weekly to help youth build their relationship skills. On a weekly basis, foster parents and youth ate a meal together while they were presented information on relationship skills such as emotion regulation, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness, mindfulness, and anger

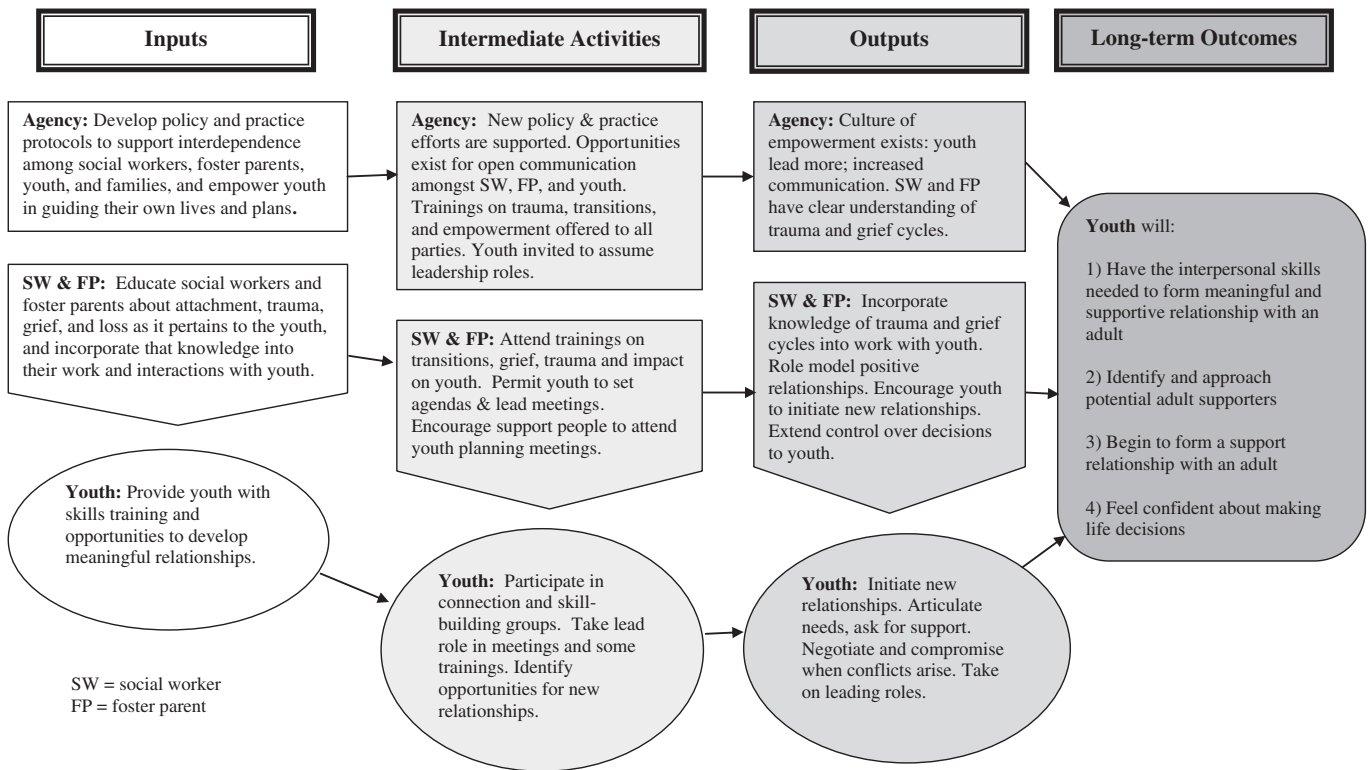


Fig. 1. CORE logic model.

management. Following this, foster parents and youth met separately to discuss what they learned, then met again together to share their conclusions. The families then practiced the skills at home during the intermittent weeks. Youth who had been through a full set of sessions then played a leading role as educator in subsequent sessions.

To emphasize that *interdependence* is more important in adulthood than independence, the agency role-modeled adult supportive connections. For example, they created foster parent networking breakfasts as a means for foster parents to discuss and reinforce the new skills and information they were learning. Youth participated in an ongoing “connections” group that focused on evaluating the quality of their current relationships, identifying new people who might be supporters, and learning how to reach out to those individuals.

2.2. Empowerment

The CORE model is grounded in empowerment. The agency transformed its culture to one that is youth-driven. The model developed youth positions on decision-making committees that affect their lives, and paid positions as junior counselors at the agency-run camps and educational programming. Youth are trained as coaches in the CORE model, to train not only other youth, but also foster parents in CORE. Quarterly review meetings that once were led by county social workers (outside the target agency) are now led by the youth. Prior to the change, youth and foster parents reported that the youth seldom spoke during the meetings, if they attended at all. In the new model, the agency social worker meets with the youth ahead of time to help them establish an agenda based on the youth's interests and needs. The youth then chairs the meeting. While historically the meetings included county and agency social workers and foster parents, in the new model, youth are encouraged to invite anyone they wish to the meetings. The review meetings were rebranded Circles of Support, which the agency believes is a more accurate description of the process.

2.3. Trauma

The agency recognized that all youth in foster care have experienced trauma, due to not only the maltreatment most experienced, but also by virtue of being removed from their homes. Staff, foster parents, and youth are educated about the impact that trauma has on a developing brain and how, in turn, this affects behavior, emotional regulation, and social skills. The trainings are grounded in Bruce Perry's work on neurodevelopment and trauma (Perry, 2009; Perry et al., 1995). Important to the impact of trauma is recognizing the grief and loss that most youth placed outside the home experience, which is also part of the training. Learning to recognize the cyclical patterns of grief and loss can help both youth and their foster parents anticipate and plan for triggers.

The rationale for this component is that training on trauma helps adults understand the reasons behind youth behavior and helps youth make sense of their own reactions to others. It shifts blame away from youth by crediting some of the more powerful emotional reactions to changes in the brain caused by past trauma rather than “bad behavior” on the part of the youth. The trainings include bringing in experts on trauma and neurobiological development, book clubs centered on empirical readings about trauma, and groups to discuss how these concepts applied to youth in care. Staff were also trained to become trainers themselves for new staff and foster parents. In keeping with an empowerment model, youth who completed the training were offered an opportunity to assume a leading role in future trauma trainings for foster parents.

3. Methods

This three-year study examined changes over time for youth who experienced the CORE model and youth served by a comparison foster care agency. The study sought to answer three questions: 1) To what extent did youth's relationship competency change over time?; 2) Was there a difference in relationship competency over time between the

two groups?; 3) After exposure to CORE programming, who did the youth count on for support and what was the quality of those relationships?

3.1. Sample

We recruited adolescents aged 14 to 19 who were currently in care at one of two foster care agencies: 1) the target agency (Family Alternatives), which implemented CORE, and 2) a comparison site, a similar foster care agency serving a comparable population with similar geographic bounds.

Ninety-seven eligible youth were identified and invited to participate, and 88 enrolled in the study. Of the nine who did not enroll, eight expressed interest in participating, but their legal guardians did not respond to requests for consent. One youth declined to participate, citing a busy schedule as the reason.

Of the 88 participants, 58 were exposed to CORE and 30 were in the comparison group, receiving traditional foster care services. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the youth sample from the two sites. The two groups were comparable in many respects. The youth in both sites were, on average, 15 years old at admission to their current placement, and 16 or nearly 17 at the first interview. The ethnic breakdown of the two groups was also similar. The samples of both agencies were comprised of about two-thirds boys and one-third girls.

On the whole, placement characteristics for the two groups were comparable as well (Table 2). The majority of youth in both groups were in their first-ever placement outside the home at the time of the first interview, 76% for CORE and 70% for the comparison. In both groups, 93% resided in non-relative placements at the time of the first interview. Chi-square analysis revealed no significant differences between groups for the variables presented in Table 2.

A larger share of the CORE youth were in placement due to neglect (65%) and for abuse (50%) than the comparison youth (54% and 38%, respectively). Three-fourths of both groups had permanency plans to remain in care until they aged out.

Eighty of the 88 (91%) youth were reached and interviewed a second time, including 55 of the CORE youth and 25 of the comparison youth. There was some limited information about three of the eight youth who were not reached for the post-test. All three were in the comparison group; two were last known to be homeless and one had enrolled in college out of state.

3.2. Measures

The primary data source for this study was in-person interviews with the foster youth. Each youth was interviewed twice, approximately

Table 1
Youth demographics.

Demographic	CORE (n = 58)	Comparison (n = 30)
Age (in years) at the time of:	Mean	Mean
Admission to current placement	15.3	15.2
At original placement ^a	10.6	9.4
Baseline interview	16.4	16.9
Post-test interview	17.3	18.0
	%	%
Race/ethnicity	100%	100%
African Amer. or Black	43%	40%
Asian	10%	7%
White	20%	30%
Other ethnicity/biracial	27%	24%
Gender	100%	100%
Female	36%	40%
Male	64%	60%

^a Refers only to the 23 (26%) youth who had a prior placement.

Table 2
Youth placement characteristics.^a

Placement characteristic	CORE (n = 58)	Comparison (n = 30)
First-ever foster care placement	76%	70%
Prior adoption	19%	20%
Non-relative foster home at baseline	93%	93%
Permanency plan to remain until age out	75%	74%
Placed because of neglect	65%	54%

^a Chi-square analysis yielded no significant results.

9 to 11 months apart. The interviews included two self-report scales that were developed for the study, the *Relationship Competency Assessment* and the *Quality Youth Relationship Assessment*.

3.2.1. Relationship Competency Assessment

The *Relationship Competency Assessment* was administered to both groups as pre- and post-tests. This 23-item scale produced a summed composite score that demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .86). Participants rated statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The tool contains three subscales: motivation, relationship skills, and current support. The motivation subscale was used to assess to what extent youth had an interest in developing supportive relationships with adults. This was important because some youth, especially those who move through many foster homes, may feel they "don't need anyone" and must overcome that belief before they can be open to working on new relationships.

The relationship skills subscale assessed the youth's skills for developing and maintaining relationships. For example, how open they were to hearing others' opinions, how clear they were about what personal information they should share, and how much they were willing to compromise or work through conflicts. The current support subscale assessed to what degree the youth felt they were receiving the support they needed at the time.

3.2.2. Quality Youth Relationship Assessment

Participants were asked to identify the most supportive adult in their lives at the post-test interview. The *Quality Youth Relationship Assessment* assessed the quality of that relationship. The scale includes items addressing areas such as trust, encouragement, and a willingness to devote time to the youth. This scale contains 21 items, each with five-point answer choices ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. It yielded an internal reliability Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87.

3.2.3. Other measures

The post-test interviews asked youth in the CORE group to rate their satisfaction with the CORE programming attended between pre- and post-test. Youth were also asked to rate their satisfaction with the change in quarterly reviews (Circles of Support), if they found that taking a lead role led to feeling that their ideas were valued. The interviews included some open-ended questions to gather specific examples and learn the subjective reactions that youth had to some aspects of the model. Finally, administrative data regarding placement information was gathered for pre-test baseline comparisons.

3.3. Analysis

T-tests for independent samples were used to compare mean post-test scores for quality of relationships, relationship competency, and its three subscales: motivation, relationship-building skills, and current support. T-tests were also run on individual scale items.

The youth were asked some brief open-ended questions after completing their scaled ratings. Some of their responses are reported in the findings to provide context to the scale scores.

4. Findings

There were no significant between-group differences found on pre-test scores.

4.1. Satisfaction with CORE

In the CORE group, all staff and foster parents participated in trainings, and all participants were exposed to the overall agency-level changes and new Circles of Support review meeting protocol. CORE youth were offered an array of programming that enhanced relationship skills. These included 12-week “Emotional Effectiveness Education” sessions which brought foster parents and youth together to work on emotion regulation and relationship skills, teen camps, hands-on life skills and apprenticeship opportunities, and “connections” groups to help youth assess their current relationships and identify ways to develop new ones. For each program, youth were asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of the programming on a scale of one to five in which 1 = *very unsatisfied* and 5 = *very satisfied*. On average, they were satisfied with the programming (4.3). They were very satisfied with the leadership (4.7) and with how much their ideas were valued during activities (4.5).

Both groups were asked at the post-test to assess how they felt about their quarterly review meetings (Table 3). The CORE youth, during their Circles of Support meetings, set the agenda and chaired the meetings whereas the comparison group retained the standard adult-led format.

The CORE ratings were consistently high, between “satisfied” and “very satisfied” (4.0 to 4.3). The comparison group rated these lower, more toward “neither satisfied nor unsatisfied” (3.6 to 3.8). The CORE group yielded satisfaction scores significantly higher when asked how much they felt their ideas were valued during the meetings.

4.2. Reactions to decision-making in review meetings

We asked youth to share their perspective on how decisions are made in the review meetings. For those who were dissatisfied, the criticisms were similar among the pre-test CORE group and the comparison group. The most common complaint was that social workers sided with the foster parents on decisions. One comparison group youth explained,

Not a lot of decisions are what I want. There's something that I'd like to do and they disagree with it and then I just completely shut down and not talk. It's just like wanting to hang out with my girlfriend for a certain amount of time, here... in the same room as my foster parents, and play like a board game or something. And they just right away were like, “No. We're not to that point yet.” My worker came in was like, “Well, I don't think you're ready for that kind of relationship yet and I agree with your foster parents.”

Another shared,

It wasn't even about me. It was everybody talking but me. The county worker was all about what she wanted. And then she listened to my foster mom.

These were similar to comments from the CORE group, prior to Circles of Support,

Table 3

Review meetings: mean satisfaction ratings (range 1–5).

	CORE (N = 55)	Comparison (N = 25)
Overall	4.0	3.7
Interaction with adults during meeting	4.3	3.8
How much my ideas were valued*	4.3	3.6

* $p = .027$.

Every time I speak my mind, don't nobody listen. I don't want to be here. Especially my guardian. She's not doing really good. She lives way out and I feel like she's not meeting my needs at all. Not at all ... every time she meet with me, it's like rush, rush, rush.

After CORE was implemented and the review meetings transitioned to Circles of Support, the CORE group descriptions of the meetings changed noticeably,

I would say it's mostly about me... yeah, I feel like they're more about me, you know? Like I know that they're there to help benefit me and help me succeed. Things I need to know about even if it's not that exciting.

Another CORE participant described her most recent meeting as positive,

The whole conversation was about what I wanted to talk about. We talked about my school and that was important to me because I am transferring to a different transition school right now. Mostly we talked about things I wanted because it was my support meeting.

While there were also neutral responses for each group, the quotes here highlight how the stronger responses aligned with the type of programming.

4.3. Relationship competency

Reports from social workers and foster parents suggested that a decline in support is typical for older foster youth because as they prepare to leave care, they may begin to emotionally pull away from those around them. At pre- and post-test, the youth were assessed for relationship competency with the anticipation that there might be a decline over time due to the items regarding level of current support. The groups began with the same mean score at the pre-test.

In Fig. 2 we see that the CORE group remained stable over time whereas the comparison group's score declined. The *Relationship Competency Scale* subscales for relationship motivation, relationship skills, and current support are reported below.

4.3.1. Motivation

Both groups had a strong interest in developing relationships with supportive adults at the start of the study, leaving little room for improvement, and both remained high at the post-test, with a slight non-significant increase in the CORE group. At the item level, the CORE group improved in three of the four subscale items (no change in the fourth) whereas the comparison group decreased in two items and remained the same in the others. One item was statistically significant ($p = .002$): *I want a lifelong connection with someone*. For this item, the CORE group mean increased from 4.4 to 4.7. The comparison group mean score for this item remained nearly the same from pre- to post-test, 4.5 and 4.4, respectively.

4.3.2. Relationship-building skills

The range of possible scores for the relationship skills subscale was 12 to 60. The groups were similar at the pre-test, moving slightly in opposite directions at post-test, CORE increasing and the comparison decreasing (See Fig. 3.)

We asked youth to share their perspectives on their relationship skills in their own words. One youth described his personal transformation as he was exposed to CORE,

I was angry all the time. I'd look at someone and think, “What are you looking at? What's your problem?” Maybe I'd want to punch them. But now I look at people differently. I think maybe they aren't thinking something bad about me when they look that way. Maybe they got their own stuff going on and it's not about me at all.

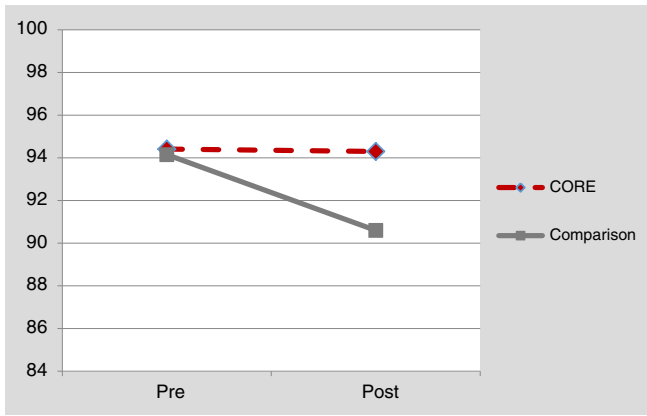


Fig. 2. Relationship competency, comparison of mean composite scores.*

Another youth shared changes in her communication skills after participating in the emotional effectiveness education (EEE). For her, it was important that foster parents and youth worked together on these skills.

I didn't have communication skills at all. At EEE we did stuff that helped us communicate with each other. And then I felt more comfortable communicating with my foster mom because we both got taught at the same time how to do it.

Learning how to ask for help or support was critical to the model. Many youth at the start of the project did not recognize adults who might be willing to support them. One CORE youth reflected back on his experience,

There were people I didn't know that I could turn to before. People I worked with and, you know, once you're done there or done working with them you think you can't turn to them again, but they were asking about me and that was pretty cool to know. People at my school I didn't really think I could call, but now that I told them my situation, they were like, "why didn't you call me? I could have helped you" and all that stuff.

For this youth, after going through the CORE program, he understood that he needed to take initiative to request help from adults.

4.3.3. Current support

Youth were asked to assess their level of perceived current support at the pre- and post-test. The composite subscale scores for current support ranged from 7 to 35 and were not significantly different between groups. Two items in the subscale yielded significant differences

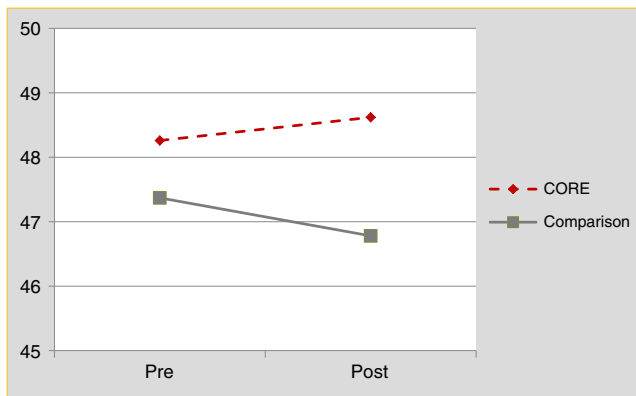


Fig. 3. Relationship-building skills, comparison of mean composite scores.*

between the groups: feeling loved by another and feeling accepted by another. At the post-test, the CORE youth were more likely than the comparison to feel they were loved by at least one person ($p = .009$). When asked if they had an adult in their lives who accepted them, the CORE group mean was stable over time (4.6), while the comparison group began with a high mean score and shifted downward over time (4.8 to 4.1, $p = .038$).

4.4. Supportive adults

All youth interviewed at the post-test were asked to identify the most supportive adult in their life—even if this person was not particularly supportive. The CORE program aimed to encourage youth to look beyond just their foster parents. Nevertheless, the most commonly named support person across both groups was the foster mother followed by the biological mother. However, the CORE group reported a greater variety in the type of relationships than the comparison group. CORE youth named 15 different types of relationships among their supportive adults, compared with 8 in the comparison group. The CORE youth mentioned parents of friends, teachers, coaches, and adults from church,

I've developed more relations with more adults, more than just my foster mom. A lot of my friends' parents know me more. They've offered that if I ever get into trouble, I can go over there. I can turn to them for help.

Table 4 presents the breakdown of the most frequently mentioned supportive adults by group. Here we see that 30% of the CORE youth identified someone other than their foster or biological family members as their primary support, as compared with 17% in the comparison group. However, chi-square analysis did not yield statistically significant difference on these variables.

Youth who were still in care were asked to think to the future and identify the adult they believed they would most be able to turn to at that point. Most from both groups named their biological mother, even if they currently found their foster mother most supportive.

4.5. Quality Youth Relationship Assessment Scale

This scale assessed the relationship quality of the most supportive adult that the youth identified. On the whole, the two groups yielded similar results. The youth in both groups reported very high ratings overall, suggesting that the primary support person was indeed an important and valued person in their lives. The composite score was slightly higher for the CORE group than the comparison group, though not statistically significant. There were some differences between groups for individual items. Two of the items yielded statistically significant differences between CORE and the comparison group. Relative to the comparison group, the CORE group agreed more strongly with the statement, *I feel this is someone I can turn to for the rest of my life* ($p = .006$) and disagreed more with the statement *This person does not always support my ideas* ($p = .011$).

Table 4
Most supportive adult, as identified by youth.^a

Relationship	CORE	Comparison
Foster mother	31.5%	45.8%
Biological mother	20.4%	8.3%
Other relative	18.5%	29.2%
Social worker, guardian ad litem, or treatment staff	9.3%	4.2%
Adoptive mother	3.7%	0.0%
Other non-relative	16.7%	12.5%

^a Chi-square analysis yielded no significant results.

4.6. Preparedness for transition to adulthood

At the second interview, the youth were 17 or 18 years old on average, and the transition to living on their own was on their minds if not already in progress. The youth were asked to discuss how prepared they felt to live on their own, either looking to the future for those preparing to leave, or assessing their current situation for those already discharged.

Most youth fell into one of two extremes, either feeling very prepared, or very unprepared, though some were unsure. The CORE youth were more likely to report feeling prepared than the comparison youth. Two CORE youth described it this way,

- I think I'm ready for it. I need a better job to support myself, but I have most of the skills. And I can pick the other ones up as I go.
- I already have plans in place. I'm to enter the Navy when I graduate. So I know what I'm doing.

Some of the comparison youth were also prepared,

- I'm pretty prepared because I have a lot of support and stuff but I'm kind of scared. I'll have to do things on my own.
- I'm confident enough.

There was a more noticeable difference between the groups when youth expressed feeling unprepared. When the CORE group felt unprepared, they tended to speak with hope that they would be ready in the near future,

- I'm a little confident. It's growing. I think I'll do well.
- I ain't got no money or nothing but I think I can manage, you know. Like if I could have money and stuff then I know how to make everything work out. I'm not worried about it.

Whereas when the comparison youth felt unprepared, they described it in succinct, definitive terms,

- I'm very unprepared. I haven't a clue.
- Not prepared at all. Not even on the right path.
- I have no plan. None at all. I have no idea what's going on.

Their perceptions on preparedness were especially important because these were youth who were anticipating discharge to independent living in less than a year.

4.7. Limitations

The small sample size is the greatest limitation of this study. It both limits generalizability and precludes multivariate analysis which would control for confounding factors. Any conclusions drawn from this study must be viewed as preliminary; a larger follow-up study is still needed to confirm the findings observed here. Although we could not use control variables in the analysis, we do know that the two groups were quite similar on many key demographic and placement factors at the baseline.

The statistical significance of some of the individual scale items also must be viewed with caution. When running a large number of t-tests on the same dataset, there is an increased risk of a Type I error, finding statistically significant results that are actually due to chance. To some extent, the qualitative responses suggest that the significant scale items may be more than chance. Nevertheless, there remains the possibility that those items are significant by virtue of chance rather than a real effect.

5. Discussion

It is well established that former foster youth, on the whole, do not fare well in their early post-discharge years on numerous measures of well-being (Courtney et al., 2011). There is growing awareness that exiting foster youth lack needed social and emotional support to guide them through their transition to adulthood. Yet there is scant research

demonstrating effective programs to build support and counter poor outcomes.

The CORE model yielded promising results at helping older youth in foster care to develop relationship-building skills, to identify a broad range of supportive adults, and most importantly, to nurture a relationship with an adult who will support them through their transition. The key components that differentiated the CORE agency from the comparison site were a commitment to youth empowerment, the use of trauma-informed practice, and making supportive adult relationships a central goal for youth preparing to transition out of care.

Basic living skills and meaningful relationships are both critical to youth aging out of care. Programming that nurtures relationships should not supplant independent living skills training, but rather be a part of it. It is important that young adults leave foster care knowing how to interview for a job, find housing, and manage their money. However, it is equally, if not more important, that they have a safety net of people they can turn to for advice, emotional support, or even concrete support such as a couch to sleep on or money to get them to the next paycheck. It has been demonstrated that mentoring programs, while a step in the right direction, are not typically designed to provide long-term, natural relationships that former foster youth need (Greeson et al., 2010; Spencer et al., 2010). The CORE model offers a way to help youth nurture and sustain natural relationships.

We found that adolescents in foster care recognize the value of supportive relationships with adults as they transition, but do not always have the skills or wherewithal to build them. Youth naturally turn to the most proximal people to support them – their foster mothers – as was seen in this study. However, foster mothers cannot realistically serve as the primary support person for the ever-increasing group of young adults leaving their care. Moreover, not all foster parents and youth develop a bond that will carry them beyond the youth's stay. Past research suggests that it is important that youth have a wider range of adults they can turn to once they are discharged (Collins et al., 2010; Reilly, 2003).

Critical to the CORE model is youth empowerment. Empowerment theory suggests that youth need more than the chance to give input; they need to hold an integral role in the decision-making process (Ferguson et al., 2011). Forging out on their own for the first time can be very scary for youth, as many in this study indicated. Having the chance to lead their own meetings and explore choices that they select for themselves provides youth with an opportunity to discover what they need and perhaps to make mistakes while the risks are still low. It gives them practice at making their own decisions and allows them to learn by doing, before they are completely on their own.

The CORE program uses trained youth to subsequently serve as trainers for future foster parents. Playing the role of educator instead of only being in the position of learner is a critical component of genuine youth empowerment (Jennings et al., 2006).

Finally, understanding the impact of past trauma on current behavior is critical for foster youth. Education on trauma contextualizes youth behaviors for the adults working with them and provides self-understanding and direction for youth as they develop new relationships.

The results here show encouraging though not definitive results. The sample size was small and the CORE model has not yet been replicated; it remains to be seen if these results would be observed in different agencies or geographic locations, or how long-lasting the effects are. However, with a dearth of empirically studied program models addressing the socio-emotional needs of transitioning foster youth, this model shows promise.

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