




Deepening Our Understanding of Adolescent Development for Young People in Foster Care

 Blog Post created by **Dianna Walters-Hartley** on Apr 8, 2025

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 Summarize

Our partners at the [Youth Law Center](#) (YLC) and the [Quality Parenting Initiative](#) (QPI) are collaborating with young people in foster care, resource families, and adolescent development researchers to deepen our understanding of what youth in foster care need for healthy development. The research phase of this [project](#) is nearing completion, and preliminary, thought-provoking resources are now ready to be shared. YLC and QPI are inviting our network to be among the first in the nation to benefit from this work.

As this network knows well, adolescence is a transformative period marked by significant changes in brain development and social growth. Unfortunately, the foster care system has not kept pace with the insights gained from adolescent brain science and developmental research. As a result, there are critical gaps in the support systems for teens in care. During these vital years, teens seek increased autonomy while still needing strong, supportive relationships with caregivers. This balance is especially crucial for youth in care, who often face unstable living arrangements and disrupted relationships. Without a stable, nurturing environment, navigating the complexities of adolescence can be overwhelmingly difficult.

Research underscores the importance of maintaining connections with biological families, friends, and community network -- relationships that provide essential emotional anchors. When remaining with biological families isn't possible, foster care should strive to minimize disruption to positive relationships. This can be achieved by placing youth with caregivers from their existing networks or, at a minimum, supporting continued connections.

Giving teens a voice in decisions that affect their lives is essential. Involvement in shaping their own experiences fosters a sense of agency and helps develop self-regulation—key tools for healing from trauma they have experienced or may encounter while in care.

Below is a summary of the findings. Please review the [consensus statement](#) from adolescent researchers, which we hope will inform and enhance your advocacy and practice.

Key recommendations for policy and practice change include:

- Supporting effective parenting for teens in foster care.
- Fostering autonomy—which, unlike “independence,” includes support from caring adults, for teens in relation to their experience in care.
- Strengthening and supporting teens’ relationships with important individuals.
- Uplifting racial identity and cultural connections.
- Supporting educational transitions and participation in extracurricular activities.
- Addressing the biological need for adequate sleep for teens.

These insights are essential to building a foster care system that better supports the developmental needs of teenagers and helps them thrive during this critical stage of life.

YLC and QPI are now working with four researchers and the system of care in Miami-Dade County, Florida—including leadership, staff, resource parents, youth, birth parents, and community partners—to apply these principles to the entry into care. While this pilot is still in the early stages, they have already identified changes that would support a more child- and youth-focused, developmentally informed approach. Based on the results of this and other pilots, they will develop implementation recommendations for the broader child welfare community.

This work also builds upon and contributes to the foundation-supported body of research and tools, including our previous investments in [adolescent brain development](#) , the [framework for partnering effectively with young people](#), and the [justice framework for young adults](#) .

Written by [Rodney Brittingham](#)



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