How Kids Learn Foundation

TEMESCAL Associates
Building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development

Supporting Foster Care Youth in Afterschool Programs

A Briefing Paper

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sam Piha (he/him) has served as founder and president of Temescal Associates since 2007. Sam began his career in 1974 as an afterschool worker, an experience that led to 13 years of classroom teaching and work as a child and family counselor and school social worker. Between 1989 and 2006, Sam managed school-based youth programs at the regional and national levels. He later founded Temescal Associates and The How Kids Learn Foundation, both dedicated to improving the quality of afterschool programs. Sam served as editor and contributing author of several important practice guides and journal articles on afterschool programming. Sam holds a master's degree in Social Welfare.

Samantha Fasen (she/her) joined Temescal Associates and the How Kids Learn Foundation in 2019 and has fully embraced her work with the afterschool field. She helps to coordinate and develop marketing campaigns and multimedia elements to reach a wider audience and share with people the importance of out-of-school time and youth development.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

Temescal Associates is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development.

The How Kids Learn Foundation (HKLF) is a 501(c)(3) organization. It is dedicated to improving the effectiveness of settings that support the education and healthy development of youth. This includes schools and out-of-school time programs. The HKL Foundation provides educational and training activities. Examples of activities include conferences, speaker forums, screenings of relevant films, training sessions, coaching sessions, the awarding of digital badges to acknowledge exemplar programs and the learning that happens within these settings. Activities also include the development and distribution of educational materials (papers, self-assessment tools, videos, program guides, etc.). You can see a catalogue of the resources we've produced for the afterschool field.

FRONT COVER PHOTOS: All photos are sourced from www.pexels.com.

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Supporting Foster Care Youth in Afterschool Programs

Source: childwelfare.gov

INTRODUCTION

Foster care is when a child lives with and is looked after by a temporary family or group home because their own parents cannot care for them safely due to:

- Unsafe homes: When parents cannot keep a child safe from harm.
- Parent illness: If a parent gets very sick or has to go away.
- Need for time: To let parents fix big problems so the child can return later.

The state-run foster care system aims to provide a safe home, and food while adults work toward reunification. But most often it is both traumatic and stressful. Traumatic stress can have a significant impact on a child's development, including their physical health, cognitive learning, and social/emotional well-being.

In the United States, about 400,000 school-aged children or about 0.5% of the school-age population in the U.S. are in foster care at any given time. The number enrolled in afterschool programs is probably higher. Students in foster care often face much higher rates of school changes, absenteeism, suspension, and lower graduation rates.

This paper helps youth program staff to better understand the experiences of youth in the foster care system and recommends ways to support these youth. It will examine how staff training, program design, and supervision can help us know how best to respond to challenging behavior in a way that can increase safety, self-regulation, and belonging so ALL students can learn, play, and thrive.

IMPORTANT TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

- Foster care system: a state-run network holding roughly 400,000 children at any given time in group homes or foster families. [1]

- Foster youth: Foster youth can grow up in a group home or with a family. Most foster kids end up reunited with their parents, relatives, or guardians.

- Foster families: Fostering is the process of bringing up a child in place of their natural or adopted parents. Foster parents give parental care even though there are no blood ties or legal ties.

- Group home: a licensed residential facility that provides 24-hour care, supervision, and structured support for children and teenagers who cannot safely live with their families.[2]

- Foster youth risk factors: Students in foster care often face much higher rates of school changes, absenteeism, suspension, grade retention, and lower graduation. Under 50% graduate from high school and roughly 8–12% earn a college degree.

- Trauma Informed Practice/ Care: An approach that assumes that a person is more likely than not to have experienced at least one traumatic event in their life. It acknowledges that trauma may have a role in a person's life and recognizes the presence of symptoms of trauma. [3]

- Positive Youth Development: An intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths. [4]

- Social Emotional Learning: The process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. [5]

- Whole Child Development/ Approach: An educational philosophy that focuses on the comprehensive development of a child rather than narrowly measuring success through test scores. Core principles of whole child approach are known as the Three R's:
    - Relationships: Caring, consistent adults act as the primary active ingredient for healing.
    - Routines: Predictable schedules and transition warnings calm the brain's predictive machinery.
    - Resilience: Recognizing that both youth and adults experience stress and recovery. [6]

- Asset-based approach: This approach focuses on the strength of youth. It views diversity in thought, culture, and traits as positive assets. All are valued for what they bring to the program rather than being characterized by what they may need to work on or lack. [7]

- Deficit approach: This approach calls for intervening when young people exhibit problems, or for identifying those young people "at risk" for problems and trying to prevent them from engaging

in specific negative behaviors. This narrow focus on young people's deficits and specific problem behaviors led to the creation of a youth services system that was largely fragmented. [8]

- Transition-age youth: those who are about to or have already aged-out of the foster system at age 18. They are very vulnerable and face high homelessness and low economic mobility.

HOW CAN WE DESIGN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS THAT CAN SUPPORT THEM?

Traumatic stress can have a significant impact on a child's development, including their physical health, cognitive learning, and social/emotional well-being. By understanding how children express the lingering impacts of traumatic experiences, schools and youth programs can create more conducive learning environments and better respond to and support affected students.

Source: Temescal Associates

Staff Knowledge

To begin, it is important that all staff have a good understanding of the foster care system and the issues that youth in this system face. It is recommended that staff participate in a training on this topic. It helps if staff know which kids are foster kids, which can be learned by speaking with the school counseling staff. Unless kids self-identify as a foster youth, this information should remain confidential and not be shared with other youth or adults.

Common Feelings of Foster Youth

Many foster youth have experienced trauma and loss, and carry strong feelings as a result. These feelings include:

- Scared: Worried about who the new people are and what the new house rules will be.
- Sadness: Missing their parents, siblings, old friends, pets, and familiar bedrooms.
- Confused: Wondering why they had to leave and how long they will stay at the new place.
- Angry: Feeling mad that they did not get to choose to move or say goodbye.

How will your program respond to these feelings when expressed?

Frameworks To Guide Quality

Over the years, there have been a number of frameworks developed to promote quality afterschool programs. They align well and any and all support foster youth. These include Positive Youth Development, Trauma Informed Practice, Social Emotional Learning and Whole Child Approach. As a program it is important to determine which framework will guide your program design and actions. To learn more about the framework for Positive Youth Development, see our *Youth Development Guide 2.0*. This guide provides a comprehensive discussion of the YD supports and opportunities, program assessment tools and youth activities. To learn more about the Social Emotional Learning framework, explore the CASEL website.

> ***"The effects of trauma can be reversed: Using trauma and related terms can establish a deficit orientation. People who have experienced trauma need to know that it can be fixed, without additional trauma or stigma. The brain is a dynamic living structure that can recover from trauma – it is electric and the fuel for brain development comes from experiences and relationships."*** [9]

Below, we detail Trauma Informed Practice and Whole Child Development.

Whole Child Development/ Approach

According to the Afterschool Alliance, Whole Child Development requires a focus on the Three R's:

- Relationships: The science tells us that relationships are the active ingredient in the learning environment, and the antidote to toxic stress.

  "Afterschool settings cultivate relationships with caring adults: Central to positive developmental relationships is consistency, and 'creating the web' for young people to be surrounded by multiple caring adults who know and value them. Afterschool programs provide access to networks of caring adults that are able to build and sustain these developmental relationships: a recent survey of youth by the Search Institute found that children and youth in OST programs generally have stronger developmental relationships with OST staff than students do with adults in their schools." [10]

- Routines: The brain is a predictive machine, and is calm when things are orderly and predictable, making routines and consistency vital pieces of environments that encourage brain development.

- Resilience: The key to building resilience is recognizing that we all – adults and youth alike – have strengths to build upon. Asset-based approaches allow us to help them understand and manage their emotions.

Source: Afterschool Alliance

Trauma Informed Practice/ Care

> ***"Trauma-informed afterschool programs shift focus from 'what is wrong with you?' to 'what happened to you?' to build safety, connection, and resilience."***

According to the Afterschool Alliance, "We need to be able to model the kind of space and place where the principles we were refining could be put into play. Along with well-trained adults, a Trauma Informed Care environment includes the implementation of the Trauma Informed Care Principles (adapted from Wisconsin Department of Human Services and Department of Public Instruction).

- Safety: An environment where kids feel physically, emotionally, and culturally safe; helps kids regulate and fosters relationship building. Important components of this are staff to youth ratios and physical space. Fifty youth with two adult leaders in a large open area does not create an environment of safety; smaller ratios and access to soft, comfortable spaces creates a safer environment and helps to support youth's ability to better regulate.

> ***"There are two ways to help people feel safe and unintimidated: avoid inadvertently getting too close to people and avoid standing over them and creating reporting systems and taking action against people who violate the individuals' emotional and physical well-being are other ways to use the principles of this type of care."*** [11]

- Trustworthiness: Programming is predictable and consistent; youth know what to expect when arriving at the program. Staff "walk the talk" to alleviate any fear or anxiety that may be created by the unknown.

> ***"Afterschool settings cultivate relationships with caring adults: Central to positive developmental relationships is consistency, and 'creating the web' for young people to be surrounded by multiple caring adults who know and value them. Afterschool programs provide access to networks of caring adults that are able to build and sustain these developmental relationships: a recent survey of youth by the Search Institute found that children and youth in OST programs generally have stronger developmental relationships with OST staff than students do with adults in their schools."*** [12]

- Choice: Abuse and neglect are experiences which steal an individual's autonomy and ability to make choices for oneself. Providing opportunities for youth to have choice within programming (youth can choose from activity options) and choice in directives (it's homework time, you can sit at the table or grab a clipboard and go to the rug) can help fill that void. These choices allow for autonomy while giving youth multiple options to get to where it is we want them to go (getting out their homework).

Source: NYU Steinhardt

- Collaboration: The understanding that learning happens in relationships; staff who intentionally work to make all youth feel like they belong and help youth to develop new skills allows for greater social-emotional learning. In addition, supporting parents and working with other agencies (such as schools, therapists, or social workers) builds a net of support for youth.

- Empowerment: The lifting up of youth's strengths and an understanding that troubling behavior patterns have served the youth in some capacity. Acknowledging the behaviors they have developed and helping them reframe those behaviors can be an incredibly powerful message. The idea that "sassy" is the strength of advocating for your needs and helping youth to find more successful ways to exercise those strengths is empowering and more likely to illicit skill development than rewards or punishment." [13]

  "Organizations and caregivers must be sensitive to various concepts, including race, culture, and gender. Taking a range of lived experiences into account helps increase care standards. Positive results can be achieved by creating an environment where youth can feel a sense of control over their destinies." [14]

If you want to build a plan, you can use Chat GPT. List the ages of your group and include if you are looking for staff training or direct student activities.

FINAL NOTES

Transition to Adulthood

Transition-age youth are those who about to or have already aged-out of the foster system at age 18. They are very vulnerable and face high homelessness and low economic mobility.

According to Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Youth and young people in foster care face many challenges as they transition into adulthood and prepare to live on their own. While all youth may

struggle to achieve self-sufficiency and independence, youth in out-of-home care face additional obstacles and often benefit from extra support.

Source: youth.gov

Young people transitioning from foster care should be connected to and supported in maintaining positive relationships with trusted adults who can provide stability and introduce them to programs and services to help improve their life skills, knowledge, and self-sufficiency. Connecting youth and young people to information and services can empower them to make informed decisions about their transition in collaboration with trusted adults and child welfare professionals.

Independent living programs help youth in transition reach their goals by providing services and resources to help them more effectively and smoothly transition into adulthood with a sense of normalcy and permanent, stable connections. All decisions should be youth driven, and it is also essential for young people to maintain and continue supportive relationships during and after they leave care." [15]

To learn more about working with youth to develop a transition plan, click here.

How To Report A Concern Regarding Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect, or Imminent Harm to Self or Others

If you suspect child abuse, neglect or imminent harm to self or others, you should confer with your supervisor and possibly your school. You can also contact the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (Call or text 1-800-4-A-CHILD [1-800-422-4453]). Professional crisis counselors are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in over 170 languages. All calls are confidential. The hotline offers crisis intervention, information, and referrals to resources.

END NOTES

[1] Adopt Us Kids, *About the Children*
[2] California Department of Social Services, *Group Homes*
[3] The Walker Center, *The 5 Core Principles of Trauma-Informed Care Explained*
[4] Youth.gov, *Positive Youth Development*
[5] Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), *Fundamentals of SEL*
[6] ISTE + ASCD, *The ASCD Whole Child Approach to Education*
[7] NYU Steinhardt, *Teacher Education Reinvented*
[8] Temescal Associates, *Youth Development Guide 2.0*
[9] Afterschool Alliance, *Caring for Children and Youth in Crisis: Using Evidence to Support Trauma Informed Approaches to Healing in Afterschool*
[10] IBID.
[11] The Walker Center, *The 5 Core Principles of Trauma-Informed Care Explained*
[12] Afterschool Alliance, *Caring for Children and Youth in Crisis: Using Evidence to Support Trauma Informed Approaches to Healing in Afterschool*
[13] Jennifer Smith, *Building a Trauma Informed Care Approach for Afterschool Programs & Community-Based Organizations*
[14] The Walker Center, *The 5 Core Principles of Trauma-Informed Care Explained*
[15] Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Independent Living and Transitioning from Foster Care*