

Involving Foster Care Youth in Planning for their Transition: Does it make a difference?

The Fostering Connections Act of 2008 requires that, 90 days prior to a youth's emancipation from foster care, the caseworker develop a personalized transition plan as directed by the youth. While engaging young people in planning for their futures (much earlier than 90 days prior to aging out) is widely accepted as best practice, there are a variety of factors that get in the way of consistently implementing a youth-directed planning approach for all young people in care. Among those factors is lingering doubt that taking the time and trouble to develop a truly youth-directed transition plan will make any difference for the young people involved.

To address this issue, the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa took advantage of a semi-annual survey of young adults in Iowa who had been discharged from foster care around the age of 18 to explore the extent to which they had been involved in developing their transition plan and to assess how they felt about themselves and about their pending transition from foster care to adulthood retrospectively when they were about to turn 18 and how they felt now after having been on their own for a short period of time.

The Survey: The young people surveyed were between the ages of 18 and 21 and voluntarily participating in Iowa's Aftercare Services in October 2013. Of 362 youth completing the survey (97% of all active Aftercare participants that month), 348 responded to questions related to their involvement in transition planning and self-concept.

The survey asked the young person to think back to before they left foster care and select one of the following statements that best described their involvement in planning for their transition from care:

- I did not have a transition plan
- I had a plan but I was not involved in developing it
- I had some say in my transition plan but it did not reflect what I thought was right for me
- I was involved and supported in developing a transition plan that was a good one for me

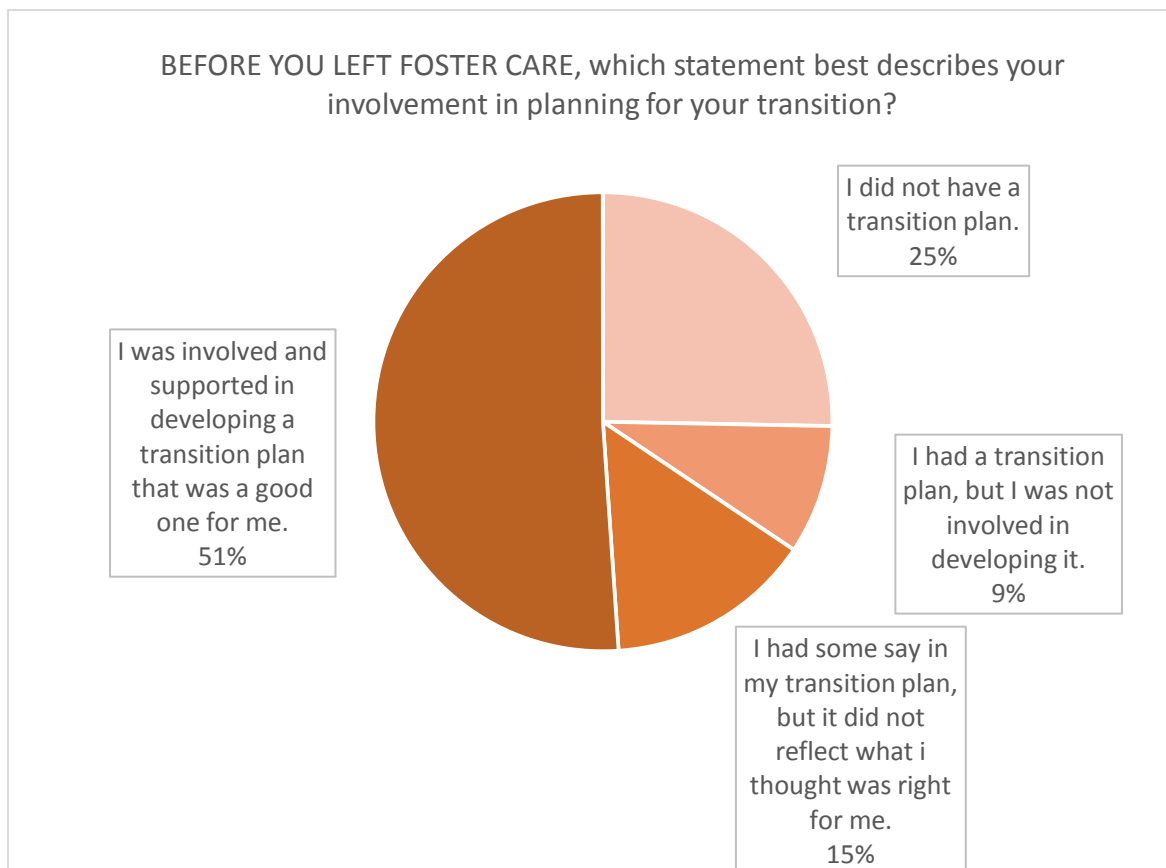
The survey then asked youth to assess how they perceived themselves retrospectively to when they were about to leave foster care around age 18 using the following word pairs and a scale of 1 to 5:

- Not Supported (1) to Supported (5)
- Worried (1) to Hopeful (5)
- Ignored (1) to Respected (5)
- Helpless (1) to Confident (5)
- Not Ready (1) to Ready (5)

Finally, the survey used the same word pairs to ascertain how the respondents were feeling now (while participating in youth-directed self-sufficiency planning provided by the Iowa Aftercare Services Network).

Analysis and Results: Of the 348 young people who responded to the October 2013 Aftercare survey, 59% were female and 41% were male. At the time of the survey, 31.5% were still age 18, 38.6% were age 19, and 29.7% were age 20.

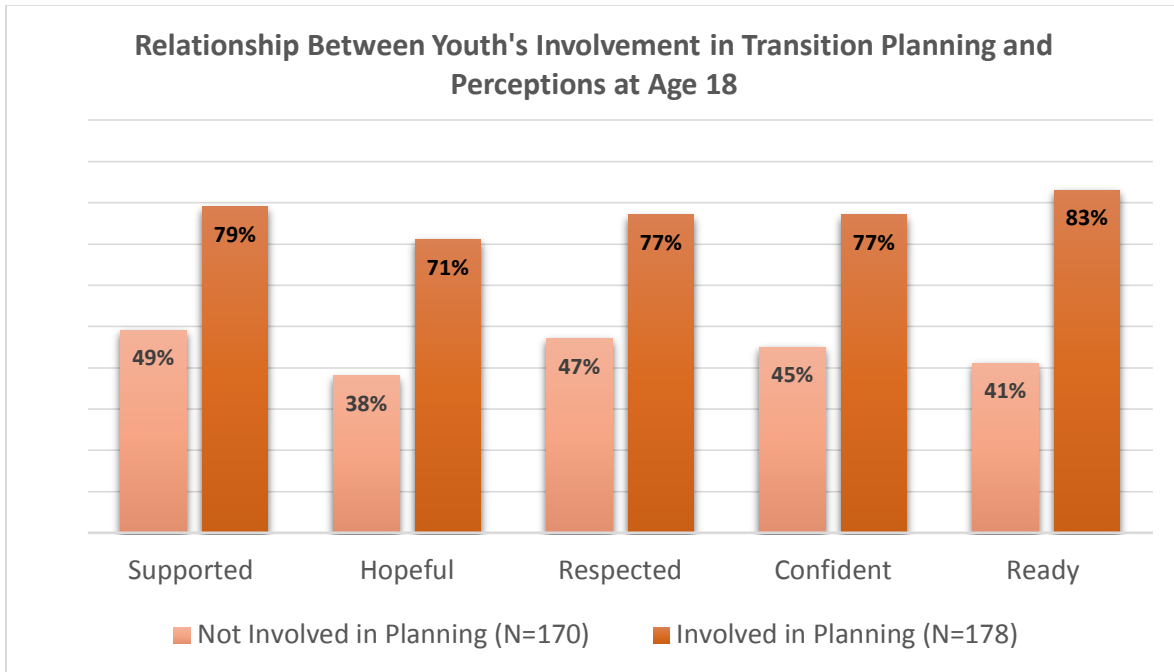
Approximately 51% of youth responded that they had been involved in the development of their transition plan while in foster care (N=178); the other half either didn't recall having a plan (25%); weren't involved in developing their plan (9%); or had some say but didn't think the plan was a good one (14.5%).



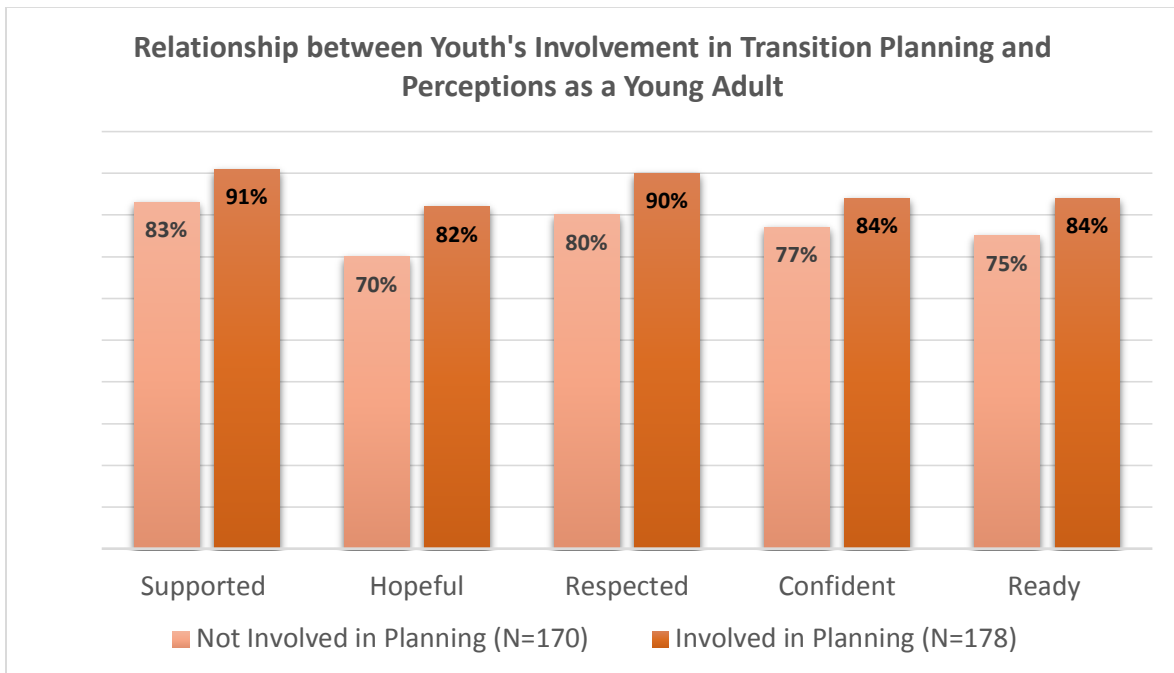
The level of involvement in transition planning reported by the youth did not vary much by age or gender; although 20 year olds were somewhat more likely to report not having had a plan (30%) than the 18 and 19 year olds (23%).

We then compared responses to the word pair questions of those who were involved with developing their transition plan and happy with it (N=178) with those who indicated that they did not have a plan, were not involved in developing their transition plan, or were involved, but the plan did not reflect what they wanted (N=170). A response of 4 or 5 on a word pair was considered a positive response and included in the percentages displayed the following graphs.

In all cases, youth who were involved in developing their transition plan were more likely to respond with a 4 or 5 rating on each word pair than of those who were not involved in planning by a significant margin.



Involvement in case planning also appears to have a carryover affect to young adulthood. While there is less difference between the two groups, those who remember being engaged in planning while in foster care remained more hopeful, confident, and ready as young adults than their peers who had not been involved or were not satisfied with their transition plan.



Policy Implications: Incorporating developmentally appropriate youth-centered approaches in case planning is important at all ages, and is particularly critical for youth nearing emancipation from the child welfare system. Iowa policy dictates that the transition planning section of a foster care case plan be updated regularly for all youth age 16 and older and that the plan *be personalized at the direction of the youth* and consistent with the federal Fostering Connections Act. Iowa's Youth Transition Decision-Making practice has been developed to meet these mandates.

This youth-centered teaming approach to case and transition planning provides critical developmental opportunities for older youth in care, allowing them to practice making decisions and take on increasing levels of responsibility and autonomy. As this approach becomes more common, it is important to regularly ascertain the level of the young person's involvement and satisfaction with their case planning and the impact that involvement has on their perceptions of readiness and support as they prepare for the transition to adulthood. Soliciting youth feedback as a method to monitor the quality and outcomes of their involvement in planning should be a priority.

About the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa

Founded in 2000, the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa (YPII) works to expand and improve the delivery of services and supports for Iowa youth by partnering with public and private entities throughout the state. Positive youth development and authentic youth engagement are hallmarks of our philosophy and approach to creating positive change for young people. YPII is involved in a wide range of initiatives, but specializes in policies and programs affecting youth transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, particularly those who have been involved in child welfare (foster care) or juvenile justice systems. YPII provides coordination, policy development, technical assistance, quality assurance, and evaluation activities for the Iowa Aftercare Services Network.

About the Iowa Aftercare Services Network (IASN)

IASN is a statewide network of agencies under contract with the Iowa Department of Human Services to support young people who age-out of foster care and other court-ordered placements. Services and support offered through IASN are designed to help young people move toward stability and self-sufficiency in six key areas: education, employment, housing, health, life skills, and permanent connections. Participants meet at least twice monthly with a Self-Sufficiency Advocate (SSA), who partners with youth to help them address barriers and develop skills to achieve their individual goals. In addition, needs-based monthly financial support is available to youth who qualify for the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Program. Created in 2002, the Network currently serves approximately 750 young adults between the ages of 18 and 21 annually. Participation in services is voluntary.

For Further Information

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