Emancipated Foster Youth Returning to Birth Parents

Regardless of the potential dangers, emancipated youth often return to their families – they still feel connected and often have no other place to go

Background

Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY) conducted a two-year study examining the process of youth's transition from foster care to independence in San Francisco County. The Emancipation Research Project (ERP) consisted of 30 in-depth interviews held 2008-2009 with professionals and youth involved in the county's dependency system. Many topics were discussed, including personal emancipation experiences, official transition planning, and perceptions of stakeholders' roles. As responses were analyzed, a number of themes emerged.

One theme identified a tendency of some emancipated foster youth to return to their birth parents, once they have aged out of the system. Several youth and professionals cited this occurrence, either from their personal experience, or those of acquaintances and colleagues. In a separate San Francisco study, 8% of youth reported living with their biological parents 1 to 2 years after emancipation from the foster care system.[1] This is an alarming finding, as foster youth were removed from their families due to the substantiation of abuse or neglect. They emancipate only because reunification is not considered a safe option for them as they age out of care. If emancipated youth return to their parents by their own choice, out of necessity or for any reason, it is important for the foster care system to recognize this tendency and consider alternatives that would support a youth's reunification while system support is still available.

Causes of Unsupported Reunification

There are several reasons why a youth may return to a family from which they were originally removed, many dealing with housing. When a youth emancipates from foster care at the age of 18, their former caregiver no longer receives funds to house them. As some caregivers may then be unable to afford housing them, the youth must move out. In a group home, the contract to house the youth has been closed, so the youth must leave. In many cases, a youth's case plan includes a housing plan, but situations change, youth's plans change and other life issues occur, and an emancipated youth may not have a home to go to. Many studies show that foster youth experience high rates of homelessness once emancipated. As reported by interviewees, most youth still feel connected to their families and some may turn to them for assistance.

Successful and Unsuccessful Reunifications

While in care, foster youth are supported by the county welfare department as they reunite with their families, within the regulatory framework of safe and appropriate parental behavior. In many cases, youth are in foster care for a short period of time while their biological family works to correct whatever the problem is through court-mandated parenting classes, addiction counseling, cultural competency building, or other services. Sometimes the parent is released from an incarceration, gains employment, or changes habits, making the home once again safe for the youth to return. When the court decides that the family has completed its requirements, and is able to provide their youth with a supportive home, it will recommend a reunification. Many cases are then permanently closed. In 2007, 214 youth were successfully reunified with their parents before aging out of the system, compared to 157 youth who left the system through aging out.[2] Many youth experience safe and permanent reunifications with their families.

In other cases, reunifications are unsuccessful and the youth must return to foster care after a failed attempt. One foster care worker interviewed in the ERP described an unsuccessful reunification:

"She had a breakdown when she was reunified and actually, [we] tried to stop it saying, 'this is not going to be good for her mental health and she's on track. Please don't do it.' They did it."

In this example, the worker describes a youth who was likely re-traumatized during interactions with her originally abusive or neglectful family.

HONORING EMANCIPATED YOUTH

Emancipated Foster Youth Returning to Birth Parents

Regardless of the potential dangers, emancipated youth often return to their families – they still feel connected and often have no other place to go

Fortunately, the youth was able to return to foster care, where she could be housed and provided with resources. This finding and example is important because, unlike the young woman in the case mentioned above, foster youth who reunify with their families at emancipation and are re-traumatized may not have access to housing and other resources.

It is therefore critical that social workers consider youth's tendency to reunify with their families at emancipation as a likely possibility and prepare accordingly.

Once emancipated, a youth cannot access the many services offered by the child welfare system. They are legally independent, and therefore the court has no jurisdiction to remove the youth from danger, or provide supportive services. One Child Welfare Worker interviewed advocated for connecting with biological family earlier than the legal dismissal age of 18:

> "Well, why are we waiting until they're 18 if that's the case? Why not test that water while we still have some control and some resources to give them?"

While the youth is still in care, the child welfare system can engage the youth and their parents in supportive services to ensure a permanent and safe reunification. For instance, while in care, a youth can access counseling services to help them process the emotional and mental issues that will likely surface when visiting with formerly abusive or neglectful family members.

Child Welfare System Helps with Developing 'Plan B'

Additionally, the child welfare system can help youth develop a solid plan for emancipation. According to California Welfare and Institutions Code (W&IC) 391, the county welfare department shall submit a report verifying that a child has received "written information concerning the child's dependency case, including his or her family history and placement history." One foster youth worker interviewed said that she has seen many youth consider returning to their family out of fear. She encourages young people to develop not only a plan for where to live, but also a "Plan B." In other words, in case a reunification attempt fails or a transitional housing program placement fails, a youth will have another housing opportunity to use instead of being forced to choose between an unsafe housing arrangement with their family – and homelessness.

HEY Advocates for More In-Care Reunification Support

HEY supports reunification as a primary objective, and believes that families often simply need education and support to create safe environments for their children. HEY also supports permanency, and believes biological families and other relatives should be considered as permanent connections while also recognizing that in some cases reunification may not be a safe or appropriate option. If emancipation is the only option, HEY encourages all emancipation professionals to provide resources to families *before* the youth emancipates, helping them seek supportive services through other avenues. If the youth plans to return to the family, HEY recognizes the benefit suggested by the worker above: allowing a youth to return home and "test" the placement while they are still eligible for the supportive services offered by the child welfare system. HEY supports youth's and family's access to all necessary resources for reunification and advocates for early emancipation planning.

HEY recognizes the benefit of allowing a youth to return home and 'test' the placement while they are still eligible for the supportive services offered by the child welfare system.

[1] Needell, Barbara. 2007. *Survey of San Francisco's Emancipated Foster Youth*.

[2] Nguyen, Adam. *San Francisco Foster Care Demographics 1998-2008.* City & County of San Francisco Human Services Agency.

HONORING EMANCIPATED YOUTH