

Strengthening Family-Based Care

February 21

2012

Response to the request for advice on strengthening family-based care
from the Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare.

Input from
YouthCAN's
Youth Policy
Advisory and
Advocacy
Group

Background

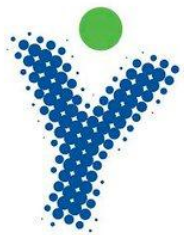
OACAS YouthCAN and the Youth Policy Advisory and Advocacy Group (YPAAG)

Ontario YouthCAN (Communication, Advocacy and Networking) is a program designed by and made for youth in care of Children's Aid Societies (CASs) in Ontario. YouthCAN is supported by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) and is a result of the need for more opportunities for youth to get together to network, develop skills, communicate, share and plan. Most importantly, youth are able to use their voice and work together for change.

One advocacy component of YouthCAN is the Youth Policy Advisory and Advocacy Group. The group was initiated following the *Youth Leaving Care Report, 2006* as well as the recommendations for change coming from the June 2006 OACAS conference. Youth reiterated that they have made these recommendations time and again and wanted to be able to follow-up year by year as to what changes had occurred. The group has reported back and presented in some form each year since. YPAAG is designed to provide opportunity for interested youth in care throughout Ontario to use their voice by advocating, advising in policy making, and putting forth recommendations to CASs, public officials, ministries, and other consultants. YPAAG is youth voice only. Youth commit to being contributing and productive members and are dedicated to helping create a brighter future for children and youth in care. Four main areas have remained the foundation for the advocacy work that YPAAG engages in:

1. Age of Eligibility (being supported beyond 18 and 21 years of age; to minimum age 25)
2. Emotional Support (more worker time once we turn 18, not less)
3. Educational Support (help us get into and stay in post-secondary)
4. Financial Support (help us live safe and healthy lives while we transition)

Our system's culture towards youth is an overarching issue. The question "*What would a good parent do?*" should be asked when making decisions and planning for the care of children and youth.



YOUTHCAN
communication | advocacy | networking

Process

YouthCAN's Youth Policy Advisory and Advocacy Group welcomes the request for advice from the Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare and for ongoing opportunities to provide input into the work of the Commission.

On February 11, 2012, 15 members of YPAAG met in Toronto. Part of the group's time was spent on developing responses to the questions asked by the Commission. As a large group, the documents from the Commission were reviewed and the questions were discussed overall. The group then broke into four smaller groups and worked on the individual "requests". In each group there was a recorder, a presenter and report assistant (provide input for final write up). Afterwards, the group came back as a whole again. The sub groups presented what they had worked on and the large group was offered time to provide feedback and make additions. As a take-away, the report assistants were asked to provide a summary of their groups' work which also was to include the additional input from the larger group. The YouthCAN Program Coordinator then completed the final write up based on the report assistants' summaries and provided the document to YPAAG members.

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Request #1 – Exploring how to encourage ‘home-like’ and ‘family-like’ settings

Question 1.1 - What kinds of limitations inhibit young people from experiencing a home-like or family-like experience when they are in care?

Firstly, our groups discussed specific examples from our experiences in care that made us feel excluded and unwanted in homes. We discussed being excluded from family pictures, having to take pictures for the families at family functions. We also discussed being placed with relief or respite homes during the times that families visited cottages or went on family vacations, and the great discomfort of being in another stranger's home even if it was just for the weekend. We discussed holidays, and how we felt there was rarely a place for us as foster children in foster families during this time. Being excluded and reminded of our difference made us feel like a burden, and like we were boarders or lodgers in a family's home.

In foster parent training (PRIDE training) there should be an emphasis on integration into the foster family. There shouldn't be any separatism between bio children or favoritism. We believe that if facilitators are honest about what to expect welcoming foster children into their home that this could make it easier for both parties to begin a positive dialogue to sort out any issues that may arise – like a family would. Real families do not request that their biological children be removed from their home when their kids act out, or there are problems. Also, we believe strongly as a group that threatening a child that you will remove them as a behavioral disciplinary tool should never take place. We also think that having a former youth in care

invited to participate in PRIDE training could enhance the experience for potential caregivers immensely as we have experienced it first-hand.

Question 1.2 - Are there additional rules, requirements, and limitations in the in-care experience that leave young people feeling stigmatized compared to their peers?

Some of the specific experiences we discussed where we have felt stigmatized and different are when we turned sixteen, and not being able to learn to drive. Because we were youth in care, families could not teach us how to drive for insurance and safety reasons. Many coming-of-age experiences such as this that require permissions or legalities are postponed for us. Some of us in our elementary and high school years required background checks, criminal record checks, and a meet and greet from our social worker (who is already very busy) of our friends' parents for something as simple as a sleepover. When we have to "go through hoops" to get things approved, it deters us from wanting to participate and makes us feel different. Being forced to leave our homes when we are seventeen or eighteen is traumatic and forces us to fend for ourselves. Also, clocking mileage in front of youth in care or collecting receipts makes us feel like we are a financial burden. We also reflect on the times that we have been introduced by our caregivers: not being introduced as a foster child, but rather by our names was profound for us. Those caregivers, like the ones a youth in our group had, who tried to fight these stigmas, who did not assume us be stereotypical 'problem foster children' remain in our memories as very close to us.

A suggestion we have to make these circumstances better overall is to make an open-door policy for the children/youth to communicate with their caregivers. All of us in the group were in agreement that we would have benefitted immensely from the opportunity to talk things out with our workers and caregivers. As we reflected, we also expressed the yearning for this open-door policy to be extended after we have left their home, as we all wish to have positive relationships continue into our adulthood. This could include any sort of communication, email, messaging, phone calls, maybe even coffee.

We also suggest caregivers get to know the youth that are in their home. For birthdays or special occasions, some of us can recall caregivers making it special by making our favorite foods and cakes. One of us also spoke about becoming a Crown ward, and the stress and sadness that came out of that. The foster mother the youth was residing with encouraged and participated in smudging with the youth, even though she was not aboriginal.

We suggest that in terms of reimbursements through the agency that caregivers be subtle/discreet about receipt collection, mileage, etc.

Question 1.3 - What practical changes would youth like to see the Commission recommend to establish a more positive experience for young people to feel a greater sense of "home" and "family" while in care?

We recommend that caregivers and youth that have strong positive relationships be presented with the opportunity to be adopted. Formal legalities for some can make them feel like it is the final step to belonging with a family. We strongly encourage caregivers to assist youth in maintaining connections with previous foster families, biological family members, siblings,

friends and even teachers or mentors we may be close to. We very strongly believe that youth can never have enough family and friends. We also believe very strongly that there should never be a placement option that is ruled out without being looked into – this includes group home care. We believe that if youth are treated like they are family, and caregivers are prepared to have training, that we can flourish with stability and permanency. We know from experience that independence skills and morals that are taught to children and youth by people who care are the skills and morals that we adopt as our own in adulthood. One youth recalls learning her foster mother's 'way' of folding, sorting laundry, using dish soap to remove stains, speaking with waitresses and waiters, and conversing with persons with disabilities stayed with her because it was taught with love. We yearn to belong. We acknowledge that this may not take place with a single family, friend, or personal relationship, but we believe belonging can be attained by having a variety of people in a young person's life.

Request #2 – Exploring how to decrease multiple moves

Question 2.1 – What are the factors experienced by youth that give rise to multiple moves when they are in care? What kinds of moves are positive? What kinds of moves have more downsides than upsides?

Some factors that result in kids in care making multiple moves when in a so-called “regular family setting” wouldn't occur if they were with a “normal family”. In several instances, the decision to remove a child/youth is because there is an argument, religion is either pushed on the youth or religious views are not the same. Another reason kids are being taken out of stable homes is because of one executive decision or the foster parents are not warned of the youth's lifestyle so when the youth does act out they are not educated on how to approach the youth. Sometimes there is a language barrier between the youth and the parents so communicating is very difficult. An accusation towards the youth is also a big issue that gets youth taken out of their foster homes. Unfair punishments take a huge toll on youth because they don't feel respected by their foster parents and if youth don't feel respected they will not respect people in return. Also, after many moves, youth may have a wall up and need time and support to be able to become more comfortable and open up.

Some moves in the system are very positive. For example, if youth can get a placement with a teacher or even a mentor that you look up to and at some point they want you to become a member of their family, that is positive. Another reason moves are positive is because it gives the youth a fresh start with a new school and new friends. One of the biggest positive moves in the system is from a group home to an actual foster home because it gives the youth a chance to have a family setting and develop more family-like relationships.

We feel a huge upside to youth moving homes is because they are either moving out of a group home into a foster home setting, or even an abusive situation to a home where they will feel safe. Another good move for a youth is to independence if they feel being in a foster home is really not the best for them. This decision and planning should not be taken lightly as many youth believe they may want to move out but later realize it was a bad choice.

Question 2.2 – What are the strategies that can reduce unnecessary moves for children and youth in care? What can foster parents/kinship caregivers do to help reduce unnecessary moves for children and youth in care?

There are a few strategies that we feel would work for youth in care that would eliminate moves. We feel that there needs to be more support from workers and foster parents and, with saying that, even public awareness and understanding of the foster care system. Many youth are getting bullied because they are foster kids; which may cause kids to “act out” and this puts a strain on the foster parents. Many feel that they can’t do anything to help the youth. We feel that school staff need to be educated to better support youth during difficult times and to help fight the stigma that “all foster kids are bad”. It frustrates youth because they feel their peers are always judging them for something that isn’t even their fault and should not define who they are.

There are ways foster parents and kinship caregivers can help reduce unnecessary moves. Most importantly, by having family meetings to discuss issues, so that the foster parents/caregivers and children/youth can talk about their issues openly and not having “you’re gone” or “I’m leaving” as the most common response to any problems. This can prevent further conflicts which would result in the youth being “removed”.

There are many ways that the CAS can reduce moves also. In many cases, letting youth and caregivers work out their issues like a “real” family would, is the best first option before making big decisions on moving a kid. Also they could work on making decisions with the youth, social worker and foster parents together so everyone’s input can be considered. A good way for the CAS to make sure youth do not get moved around is to let the foster parents meet with the youth and also the immediate family so the foster parents can get to know what the youth and family is like before moving in. We feel that workers need to meet with their youth more so they can discuss issues and get it out in the open instead of bottling it all up inside until they act out. When it gets to this point, it’s more likely foster parents want the youth out because they don’t know how to handle them.

Question 2.3 – What practical changes would youth like to see the Commission recommend to reduce multiple moves for children and youth in care?

The recommendations we feel that the Commission should recommend to help reduce moves within the system for youth and children are:

- Let the guardian and child/youth work their issues out
- Create decisions with guardian and child/youth together and not just worker/supervisor
- Foster home suiting child/youth needs
- Document everything (ie. Rules of the house, agreements, etc.) so that the youth has a visual of what is expected and what they may receive
- Courage to communicate (trust in someone to share problems with) – let youth know more about their rights and responsibilities
- Plan of care – questionnaires (how youth is influenced) – issues need to be addressed
- Show other opportunities that the youth would not want to be in
- Be proactive with youth’s needs, decisions, future planning

Request #3 – How to increase opportunities for children and youth to be placed with kin

Increasing Kinship care seems like the most ideal solution to a lot of the problems facing children and youth in care, but it might not be the solution unless certain measures are met. Kinship care should be considered on an individual basis and involve much planning. It is not the answer for every situation.

Question 3.1 – What are some of the benefits that youth have experienced when placed with kin?

Kinship care does work in some cases and has benefits. Sometimes some of the benefits may also be challenges.

One of the benefits of kinship care is maintaining the connection a child or youth has with their biological family. They gain more knowledge of their biological family: the history, culture and anything else that they may not have been able to find out if they were placed in a foster home or group home. The family may be more likely to treat the child or youth as family because they are considered “blood”, and most people in society today have strong values when it comes to family. Youth may get the opportunity to participate in family vacations and outings (where in some foster homes youth stay with relief homes during vacations, etc.), and this gives the child a sense of belonging and love. Also, being close to the biological family might help the child achieve what they need to and to remain on the right track. Since the family is so close, they can also be more understanding and helpful in dealing with the issues that the child might be going through. They can be more understanding and loving when dealing with the traumatic experiences the child had gone through. In this family setting, the child is more likely to feel unconditional love and guidance compared to foster homes and group homes. Being in a home with family, the child will understand what love and family is, feel a sense of their roots and be able to bring this into adulthood and have this knowledge and confidence when planning to have a family of their own.

In a lot of native communities, kinship care is often considered. They want the children to remain in the communities where family is and they do not want their backgrounds and culture to disappear if moved to another community. It would be like losing your identity and sense of belonging when a child is removed from their biological family, so being placed with kin for native children and youth allows them to maintain much of their identity and culture.

Question 3.2 – What are some of the challenges that youth have experienced when placed with kin?

There are always challenges that follow being placed with kin. With any foster child, there is the fear and the sad realization that you will not be considered "first" for anything, you will always be second in the eyes of the people taking care of you. It doesn't matter if it is foster parents, biological parents, or group home caregivers, every child and youth, every person wants to feel

like they matter. Kinship care might not work because the child wishes to remain away from the family, or it is decided that that child should not be living with the family due to certain circumstances.

Kinship care can be more destructive than any other placements for many reasons. The biological family the child is placed with, for example an aunt and uncle, may not have the same views, rules, or customs as the child/youth is used to. The family can have different political and religious views and many problems can arise. Often, the positive relationship the child or youth may have had with their relative(s) prior to being placed with them can become extremely strained and sometimes destroyed. The placement may fail and ending with it, a family connection.

Another challenge kinship care faces is the fact the child will still be living in the same community as the parents and that may cause problems as well. Parents may try to visit when they are not allowed and add further stress to kin caregivers who may feel torn between the placement rules set out by the Children's Aid Society and the wants of the parents. A lot of the time, youth are caught in the middle of this.

Question 3.3 – What advice do youth have regarding how to achieve the goal of increasing opportunities for children and youth to be placed with kin?

Kinship care can work in many situations if certain measures are taken into consideration. One thing that needs to be stressed very strongly is the fact that kinship care is VERY individualized. There is no way that kinship care will work if you try to generalize it to fit everyone's needs.

- There needs to be very specific training for the caregivers. Not just the essentials; age specific training for the child/youth coming into their home.
- Family counselling as well as individual counselling should be made available through the Children's Aid Society.
- There also needs to be consistency in the family where both sides of the story matter. Having consensus on certain things prior to the child/youth moving in can prevent unnecessary family drama and/or family members choosing sides over different things. The child or youth should not have to face blame or bias for things that have happened when joining the family.
- The family should also be well aware of the background and history of the child and what had happened to the family before. This knowledge should be used to help the child or youth and not used against them. As the child grows up they will need all the support, guidance and love they can get.
- Making the transition from the destructive home to another biological family home can be difficult, so it is best to make sure the child is completely comfortable with the family and the situation. It can only work if the family and the child/youth are a good fit; otherwise time and hard work will be wasted and relationships are at risk.
- There needs to be lots of support from the CAS as well in order for it to be successful. It will not work out if it's just a "place child and finished" process.

- Once again, each case of kinship care needs to be looked at carefully and individually because for kinship to be successful and long term, all the needs of the child must be met and the connection between the family and the child needs to flow properly.

Kinship care is a great solution to the many problems facing youth in care today, but every corner and angle must be carefully be looked at, ongoing financial and emotional support must be provided and child/youth as well as family voice must be heard in the planning process.

Request #4 – Exploring how to increase lifelong relationships

Relationships with birth families

Question 4.1 – What are some of the positive experiences that youth have had in staying connected with their families while in care?

Every child and youth in care wants to belong and know where they came from and who they really are. Maintaining relationships with biological family can help with this and can assist youth with maintaining culture, heritage, traditions, etc. Knowing one's background can make youth more confident and help them to grow. We believe that the Children's Aid Society should support the youth if they want to know more about their background.

Some relationships with birth family members are important. Many family members may have in the past or continue to play positive role models to young people in care. Another example is that an older youth in care may act as a support to their younger siblings in care. Sibling relationships can be important as a lot of the time they have been through traumatic events together. Some of the connections that youth may have with family members are irreplaceable.

Many children and youth will be more open and able to communicate because they know that there are other family members out there that know what they went through and how they feel. We know that not every child and youth in care has a good connection with family but the family they do have are there no matter what. If they are having a bad day, they could call them and they will not judge them.

Many of us have been open about our past and have shared our stories several times. We have done this with support from other brothers and sisters of care and/or biological family. We recommend that workers need to be more considerate on how they give news (ie. Family updates, court information, etc.) to the youth and to their family because the way they planned it may not be the way it happens.

Question 4.2 – What challenges do youth experience in staying connected with their family while in care?

There are some difficult challenges that youth experience in staying connected with family while in care. Distance can play a huge part in how often children and youth in care are able to spend time with their biological family (parents, siblings, etc.). Family may live in different communities or even provinces.

Question 4.3 – What recommendations would youth advise the Commission to make in regards to making it easier for youth to stay connected to their family while in care?

- Cover travel costs for youth to visit family.
- The time that children and youth get to spend together is very important in maintaining and helping relationships to grow. The time that they spend together can be cut short because of the distance and they only get to spend a few hours together. Not placing siblings so far apart unless it is absolutely necessary can help with this.
- Transportation- Sometimes due to the distance of travel, it can be difficult for youth. Also, sometimes a driver may not show up or can be late and it can make children and youth upset. Recommendations are to triple-check that the ride has been inputted properly and make sure the volunteer driver knows where they are going.
- Sometimes family does not want to visit, sometimes (ie. because of a family member passing away or opening up about something that happened in the past) the family may not want to visit.
- Better worker to youth communication- Workers should know the right time to tell youth things and also should be more open about talking about things to youth. Training on how to disclose things to youth.
- More counselling support- So that youth can get over problems that have arisen or will come up in future.

Relationships with foster families and significant adults

Question 4.4 – The connections children and youth forge in their foster placements can be important ones. At the same time, not every placement will create lifelong relationships for a child or youth. What are the kind of circumstances that should allow for continuing a relationship between a foster child or youth and a member(s) of a foster family? What would help youth to maintain relationships with member(s) of a foster family that they were placed with?

We can never have enough family. Youth may become “part of the family” of a foster home they are placed with. They may connect with the foster parents, foster siblings, or an aunt or uncle for example. These relationships should be allowed and supported to continue even after a youth leaves care. A foster family may have had a great impact on a foster child and they should not have to stop contact with them when they move out at 17 or when they turn 21. It is very individualized so planning and the support needed to maintain relationships with a member(s) of a foster family would be different for each youth.

- Make sure the foster home is a “right fit” in the beginning; do not rush in placing a child or youth
- Foster family relationships should not be considered as temporary.
- Allow youth to stay in their foster home longer; until age 21 or at a minimum until they finish high-school (policies that force youth out before their 18th birthdays are outdated and unacceptable). *Bill 179 and new ECM Guidelines may help with this
- Provide transportation so youth can go “home” for holiday dinners.

- Open door policies within Children’s Aid Societies and foster homes; encourage that relationships do not end when youth turn 21.
- Calling cards for youth to be able to call foster family members after they have left the home.
- Counselling for youth and their foster families may help in developing relationships that will last for a long time.

Question 4.5 – What suggestions does the Youth Policy Advisory and Advocacy Group have for enabling children and youth to build positive, lifelong connections with other significant adults?

The reality is that many foster families consider it to be a “job” or they may have 10, 20 or 50 foster kids during their time as a foster family. This may not allow for meaningful ongoing relationships for youth who were in their care and now have left.

It may be the case that a youth will not have a lifelong relationship with anyone from the foster home(s) they have lived in. The youth may however, have other people in their life who may possibly be the perfect candidate for a lifelong connection for that youth. Identifying these supportive adults and reaching out to them can create lasting relationships for young people in care. Like other relationships, some support in developing and maintaining these relationships is needed.

A meaningful adult connection for a youth can happen at any time. This supportive adult could be a teacher, a coach, a Big Brother or Big Sister, a community figure, and the list goes on. The key is supporting youth in doing the things that they enjoy. Financial assistance and/or other logistical support may be needed to get/keep youth involved. The next step is to help youth develop or maintain lasting relationships with these adults as friends, mentors or extended family members.

Peer groups can help (like YouthCAN or local agency groups). Youth meet others who may share similar experiences. This helps youth to not feel alone and helps to empower them; feeling more “ok” with being in care and wanting to work towards goals. The relationships that develop from these types of peer groups last beyond care. These groups may also help youth in strengthening relationships with foster parents and others as they become more secure and confident in themselves.

Many youth feel abandoned at 21. At a minimum, someone should contact them every once in a while to make sure they are ok and not homeless.

**“Family isn’t always blood.
It’s the people in your life who
want you in theirs; the ones
who accept you for who you
are. The ones who would do
anything to see you smile and
who love you no matter what”
~Unknown~ ♥ ~**



Family
like *branches* on a tree,
we all *grow* in different
directions yet our *roots* remain as one