



Make it Seem Like We are Regular Kids: Youth Perceptions of Restrictiveness in Out-of-Home Care.

Shauna Reinhart, MPA, Mary E Rauktis, Ph.D., Rachel A. Fusco, Ph.D., Helen Cahalane, Ph.D., Ivory Kierston Bennett

Child Welfare Education and Research Programs, University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work

Introduction

Placement in the “least restrictive environment” is a goal for dependent children and young persons who are placed in out-of-home care by the child welfare system. Absent from these efforts is how youth think about the rules and restrictions that they encounter while in out-of-home care. Additionally, little focus is paid to how these restrictions hinder the youths’ development of life skills. The purpose of this study was to obtain the perspective of child welfare involved youth who have lived in out-of-home care regarding the impact of placement restriction (Rauktis et al., 2011).

Acknowledgments

1. Research has been supported by Casey Family Programs and the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work Research Development Fund.
2. Youth Focus group participants for sharing their experiences and Independent Living staff for coordinating the groups.
3. PA Child Welfare Training Program staff for transcription assistance.

Research Questions

1. Do youth agree or disagree the project’s definition of restriction?
2. What is the youth’s definition of restriction or a restrictive environment?
3. What have youth experienced as “restrictive” in out-of-home placements?

Restrictiveness

The way in which adults in a youth’s life have anticipated that limits need to be made for the youth’s safety, developmental and therapeutic needs.

Methodology

1. Focus groups conducted in 6 regions of Pennsylvania: Northwest, Southwest, South Central, Northeast, Philadelphia & Pittsburgh.
2. Youth recruited through Independent Living Program Coordinators.
3. Transcripts read repeatedly to determine themes and codes.
4. Codes grounded in data as well as research.
5. NVIVO 8 used to assist with analysis.



Who Participated

1. Forty (40) participants; Ages 18-20 years old.
2. 62% were female
3. 64% were African American
4. 39% in care 4 years or less; 42% in care 9-15 years.

Results

1. Respondents agreed **unanimously** that the definition of restriction was **wrong**.
2. The youth definition of **restriction** was synonymous with **rules**. Rules/restrictions are often arbitrary and are inconsistent. Developed to limit liability, not help youth experience successful development.
3. Restrictions or rules limit development and are **labeling** or **stigmatizing**. Youth are not like regular kids. Youth perceive life in out-of-home care as not **normal**.
4. According to youth, rules or restrictions **can be helpful**, fairly applied to biological and foster children, help teach new behaviors and help meet current or future goals.

Conclusions

1. Youth perceive restrictions as synonymous with rules. They infer intentions behind the rules.
2. Responses to the rules can be moderated by the relationship with the individuals making or enforcing the rules.
3. Out-of-home care does not consistently provide youth opportunities for healthy socialization.

Implications

1. Policies need to recognize that youth well-being is as important as safety.
2. Youth need more opportunities for healthy, normal social development which will help them to successfully transition to adulthood.