Building Capacity in Foster Care to Support the Self-Regulation Development of Youth and Young Adults:

Meeting Summary

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Meeting Summary

On March 28th, 2019 the Children’s Bureau and the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families brought experts together from around the country to discuss self-regulation and how the child welfare system can support the development of youth in foster care and youth transitioning into adulthood. Our expert participants included researchers, pediatricians, foster parents, child welfare program directors, therapists, and federal staff, including those with lived experienced in the child welfare system. The purpose of the meeting was to characterize what is already known, to identify gaps in the knowledge base, and to illuminate opportunities for learning. Pre-meeting webinars were provided to all participants to acquaint them with current research on self-regulation development from birth through young adulthood; the influence of adverse experiences, chronic stress, and trauma on self-regulation development; and the application of this knowledge to youth who are in foster care placements or transitioning out of foster care.

Grounding in Co-Regulation. The morning began with meeting facilitators sharing that although we acknowledge the importance of self-regulation and providing these skills to youth, we need to do more than just provide skills. Relationships are at the heart of this work and it is relationships that influence outcomes. Participants reflected throughout the day and shared their expertise on how to provide co-regulation supports for youth within the context of the foster care system.

Shared Interests: Our expert participants introduced themselves by sharing what draws them to this work. There were several common themes that emerged from these introductions:

- **Relationships**: Many participants mentioned the central role of relationships as the foundation for positive development. They stressed the importance of enduring relationships with caregivers and the significance of feeling a sense of belonging.

- **Positive Youth Development**: Our expert participants discussed how the term ‘self-regulation’ can distract from the broader message about normative development and proposed a frame that focuses on ‘positive youth development.’ This re-frame facilitates a focus on the life course of adolescents and young adults who have been touched by the foster care system, rather than a focus on deficits.

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**Co-regulation**: The interactive process between caring adults and youth, whereby caring adults do these three actions: build warm supportive relationships, collaboratively structure the environment, and coach self-relationship skills. Coaching self-regulation skills can occur ahead of time, in the moment, and through reflection afterwards.

**Self-Regulation**: The act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions.
• **Building Knowledge:** Participants expressed a desire to learn more about how to best support youth in foster care, including developing self-regulation and co-regulation models. Valuing and listening to youth voices was identified as a critical part of this process.

• **Translating and Applying Knowledge:** Translating knowledge into practice was a common theme as well. Participants shared that current supports and training are missing and that we need to do more to help develop the capacity of adults as co-regulators.

• **The Effects of Trauma, Adverse Experiences, and Chronic Stress on Youth and Caregivers:** Participants voiced an interest in understanding the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), chronic stress, and trauma on the brain and on self-regulation, including thinking about how these can impact the self-regulation and co-regulation of caregivers.

• **Deeper Understanding of Research on ACEs and Trauma:** Many times throughout the day, participants expressed concern that research on ACEs and trauma continues to be translated in ways that primarily focuses on the ‘adverse experience’ side of the equation (e.g., ‘counting’ adverse experiences) and overlooks the research on the key role of supportive relationships in buffering the effects of adverse experiences. Participants were very interested in ways to broaden the field’s focus to one that also ‘counts’ supportive relationships and ways to build those.

• **Shifting the Focus in Foster Care to the “Long View”:** Participants discussed the importance of shifting away from a limited focus on immediate, short-term solutions, and turning instead to an emphasis on gradually building up skills and relationships that will serve youth across the lifespan.

**Developmental Processes in Adolescence:** Participants reflected on the normative developmental processes that ground this work, and shared aspects of adolescent development that should be considered as we think about the needs of youth in foster care:

• **Importance of Peers:** Peers become increasingly influential as youth age; this is developmentally appropriate and normal as youth begin to rely more on peers as sources of support. Participants noted that we do not always know how to facilitate or honor peer-to-peer friendships and that sometimes our systems devalue these relationships. For many youth in foster care, instability of placement and frequent moves can make peer relationships especially challenging to form and maintain. It can often feel like no one understands what the youth is going through, so participants also acknowledged the importance of connecting with peers who also have experience in foster care themselves.

• **Gradual Independence:** Typically, adolescents have the opportunity to gradually transition into more independence, branching out through trial and error from the comfort of a safe base. In contrast, youth in foster care often go from having no independence, with few chances to make their own decisions, to suddenly having complete independence.

• **Opportunities for “Risk Taking:”** Relatedly, a certain amount of positive risk taking is critical to adolescent development. Youth who have opportunities to “fail” can learn from their experiences. Unfortunately, adults may pathologize this normative process in youth in foster care and may view these “mistakes” as something wrong with the youth, rather than developmentally appropriate opportunities for growth.
• **Identity Development:** Adolescence is a critical time for identity development, a time when youth are seeking meaning and understanding of their place in the world. It was noted that learning about yourself and your identity does not happen independently; youth often learn about themselves through their relationships with others. Participants said that for youth in foster care, instability of relationships may contribute to challenges in identity development.

• **Understanding and Communicating Emotions:** Ideally youth learn to identify emotions, qualify their intensity, and communicate about them, gradually learning how to de-escalate when a feeling is too intense. However, this normative process can be disrupted when youth do not get the benefit of supportive relationships to help teach and model these skills.

**How can we use co-regulation to support youth in foster care and those transitioning out of care?**

Participants reflected on the value of thinking about co-regulation in foster care settings. A common theme that emerged was the idea that co-regulation starts with the caregiver or adult. One participant shared that “it takes more than just having your heart in the right place to do this – the caregivers and people working with [youth] need to be in the right place to do this work before worrying about the kids being in the right place.” Another participant used the analogy of securing your own oxygen mask on an airplane before assisting others – it is very important that adult co-regulators are prepared before helping youth. Modeling co-regulation is powerful for both youth and caregivers.

Participants also stressed how intentional the focus on relationships needs to be in foster care settings and that this requires a shift in mindset. Participants said sometimes the emphasis needs to be less about solving an individual problem and more about gradually building skills over time that will help in the long-term. One participant shared that youth were more engaged when they understood the point of learning these co-regulation strategies was not to get fast results, but to develop skill to use for the rest of their lives.

Participants also discussed the challenges of translating this larger picture and understanding of the importance of co-regulation into everyday interactions with youth. While understanding the science behind co-regulation is important, one participant suggested that this deep understanding might not be necessary for everyone. Rather, perhaps we should be thinking about ways to make information more accessible about universal features that make everyday interactions work – things like strategies for helping youth to feel seen and heard in their interactions.

**Focus on Prevention**

Jerry Milner, Associate Commissioner at the Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children Youth and Families, welcomed participants and shared the vision of creating conditions for healthy and thriving communities and families where children are free from harm. He discussed the agency’s efforts to work to prevent the circumstances that bring families into the child welfare system, making sure families get support before problems arise. This shift toward primary prevention involves a reshaping of the foster care system, so that it is a system designed to support entire families.
How does a focus on prevention that is shifted towards primary prevention relate to a focus on self-regulation? After having a chance to listen to and engage with Jerry Milner about his priorities, participants were enthusiastic about the numerous ways in which the day’s discussion on building the co-regulation capacity of the child welfare system connected to those priorities. For example, his attention to the role of enduring and supportive relationships for the healthy development of all children and youth parallels the way that self-regulation develops in context and within relationships across the lifespan.

What are the gaps in our knowledge and what are opportunities to learn? To identify gaps in knowledge and opportunities to learn, two breakout groups were created. In one breakout session, participants discussed ways to support youth still in foster care placement; in the other, participants discussed youth who are transitioning to adulthood. They identified areas where there are still significant gaps in our understanding of how to strengthen co-regulation supports. Facilitators encouraged participants to consider co-regulation not as an isolated concept, but rather as a capacity to develop within a broader context, nested within relationships, communities, and systems.

Knowledge Gaps for Youth in Foster Care Placement:

- **How do we prepare foster parents and help them feel confident supporting the self-regulation of youth and young adults through co-regulation?**
  Participants shared that there is still much to be learned about how to prepare foster parents differently than the training they have traditionally received in the child welfare system. One contributor shared that their organization is exploring caregivers’ role in being coaches and has been working to train foster parents as coaches. In addition to knowledge, foster parents need practical operationalization of the knowledge. Opportunities to learn were identified in programs that leverage shared experience and bring in the expertise of other foster parents and foster care alumni. Participants also discussed the idea of shifting the dynamic between foster parents and child welfare workers to be more of a joint team effort that supports foster parents in using co-regulation, rather than a strict hierarchy where child welfare workers are monitoring foster parents and the youth/young adults in their care. More could be learned about how to restructure the environment to make that relationship more trusting.

- **How do we shift the focus of the system to encourage supportive adults to be there for the long term?**
  Participants shared that the timeframe of child welfare cases can feel like a ticking clock for foster families, who may believe they only have limited time to spend with the youth in their care. This perception of only having a narrow window of time together can undermine their ability to form long term relationships and establish a secure base for the youth. Participants expressed the need to have foster parents who have the expectation that this will be a lasting relationship with opportunities to be a resource for families.

“We need to have a foundation of safety. You need to have foster parents who are in it indefinitely.”
Knowledge Gaps for Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care:

- **How do we value relationships when youth are transitioning to adulthood?**
  Participants noted that when youth transition out of foster care the maintenance of their relationships is often devalued. If relationships are no longer placement options, or if they are not viewed as entirely positive, they may not be considered an important aspect of the case plan. Child welfare workers are of necessity trained to consider safety first, and in the process of ensuring safety can sometimes miss the importance of relationships. Likewise, foster care parents are not always trained about the importance of that lasting relationship. Youth who transition out of foster care can experience a jarring change from having almost no control of their relationships to suddenly managing relationships on their own with total independence.

- **How do we promote a supportive environment for youth entering college or a new job?**
  Participants reflected on the importance of setting up a network of support for youth when they are transitioning to adulthood and talked about the challenges of entering new professional or educational environments. Unfamiliar aspects of college culture can be overwhelming for all youth. Whereas classmates can often call their parents or go home over breaks, youth coming out of foster care can experience a distressing lack of social support. One participant described this as a “social capital cliff” that youth fall off of when they transition out of care.

Knowledge Gaps for All Youth in the Foster Care System:

- **How do we help youth reframe their own narrative?**
  A common theme of discussion was the importance of the stories we tell ourselves and of helping youth to reframe their narrative in a way that integrates what happened to them within the context of their developing identity. Participants shared that youth in the foster care system often feel defined by negative stories and have felt blame when adults have mislabeled the cause of their actions. There is an opportunity for foster parents and child welfare workers to help youth reframe their own story and help them understand it in a different way.

- **How do we shift interactions from being heavily transactional to more of a relational focus?**
  **What should we look for in a good, healthy interaction?**
  Participants shared that interactions in the foster care system are often transactional and that supporting youth through co-regulation requires a shift toward a more relational frame. For youth transitioning to adulthood, the prevalence of purely transactional relationships can be especially challenging, as there may not be as many other social supports. Participants also shared that we have more to learn about how to identify the components of positive interactions and how to “make the concept of a relationship concrete, specific, and actionable”.

- **How do we define and measure success? How do we measure caseworker success?**
With this shift toward valuing relationships, our definitions of success also need to change. Participants shared that we want to better understand a youth’s perceived quality of life and that the factors that matter aren’t always obvious. A gap was identified in the tools we have to measure relationships and positive interactions for youth in the foster care system. Often, child welfare agencies are scored on things that can be easily checked off, such as finding an apartment, but it is more difficult to score these new concepts.

On operationalizing and translating what we know:

“Knowledge is necessary, but not necessarily sufficient.”

- **How does underlying trauma impact these interactions? How does trauma impact our workforce?**

  It is important to ensure that co-regulation and self-regulation are considered through a trauma lens, to understand the complex trauma often experienced by youth in foster care. Participants also stressed the need to recognize paths for recovery and to build confident expectations that youth can overcome trauma. Similarly, the impact of trauma on the workforce, both primary and secondary trauma, was highlighted as a barrier to ensuring the stability of enduring relationships for youth. Trauma was identified as one of the key factors that contributes to burnout and staff turnover. Participants identified a need for more support for staff who have experienced trauma.

**Identification of Priorities and Next Steps**

At the close of the meeting, participants reflected on the priorities that emerged and identified future directions for this work.

- Participants identified the need to distill core pieces of the co-regulation process to have actionable steps that could be applied with youth in foster care and in transition to adulthood.
- Needed resources include tools for caregivers and messaging documents that raise awareness of the concept of co-regulation.
- The participants agreed we should think about the broader systems-level factors that support co-regulation, including training and support for the workforce.
- There was emphasis on engaging youth in this work and focusing on youth driven outcomes, including youth-led assessment tools.
- The importance of refreshing and updating the field’s shared understanding of the impact of trauma, the role of supportive relationships, and paths to recovery as the knowledge base increases was highlighted as critical in this context.

**Closure**

Participants closed the meeting by sharing insights they learned from the discussion and ways to bring a new focus on co-regulation back to their work.

“[I] will take away this continued excitement and enthusiasm around how you make co-regulation actionable”