

Applied Promising Practices Toolkit Pilot Project

Autumn House Final Report

**Prepared by:
Tracey Hulten &
Michele Haddon**

Applied Practice
Research & Learning
Branch

Ministry of Children
and Family
Development



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1. Project Background

The Federation of Community Social Services of BC (“Federation”) first launched its Applied Promising Practices (APP) initiative in 2008. They invited community service agencies to identify a practice, activity, strategy, service or program that they believed was making a positive difference for children, youth and families, or for the practitioners and agencies that were delivering services to children, youth and families. In the first wave of APP initiatives, groups based in four areas of the province looked at practices in residential care, clinical supervision in family development work, early years development, and youth hub models¹.

Through a facilitated process, the community agencies and the Federation APP team learned about the promising practices, identified key elements of success (and challenges), compared the practice-based evidence with available research evidence, built ‘communities of practice’, and encouraged ‘scaling up’ of the most promising practice. Examples of scaling up could include expanding the application of the promising practice to additional client groups, program areas, geographical areas or organizations.

The communities of practice encouraged curiosity, reflection, applied research and learning. Some of the groups had short lifespans, whereas others may continue.

In a broader sense, the APP project also helped the participating agencies and the Federation learn how to increase:

- Organizational capacity to collect and analyze data from ongoing service delivery;
- The use of quality- improvement processes for ongoing enhancement of service delivery; and
- The adoption and integration of promising practices in child, youth and family organizations through the timely distribution of new and emerging knowledge to front- line practitioners and program leaders.

In 2013, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD)’s Applied Practice Research & Learning (APRL) Branch in partnership with the Federation of Community Social Services of BC developed the [Applied Promising Practices Toolkit](#). In 2014/15, APRL and the Federation set out to pilot the toolkit with four promising practices. In the summer of 2014, APRL and FCSSBC initiated the APP Toolkit Pilot Project, in which four promising practices were selected from within the province in order to assess the efficacy of the APP Toolkit prior to promoting it more broadly across MCFD and the social services sector.

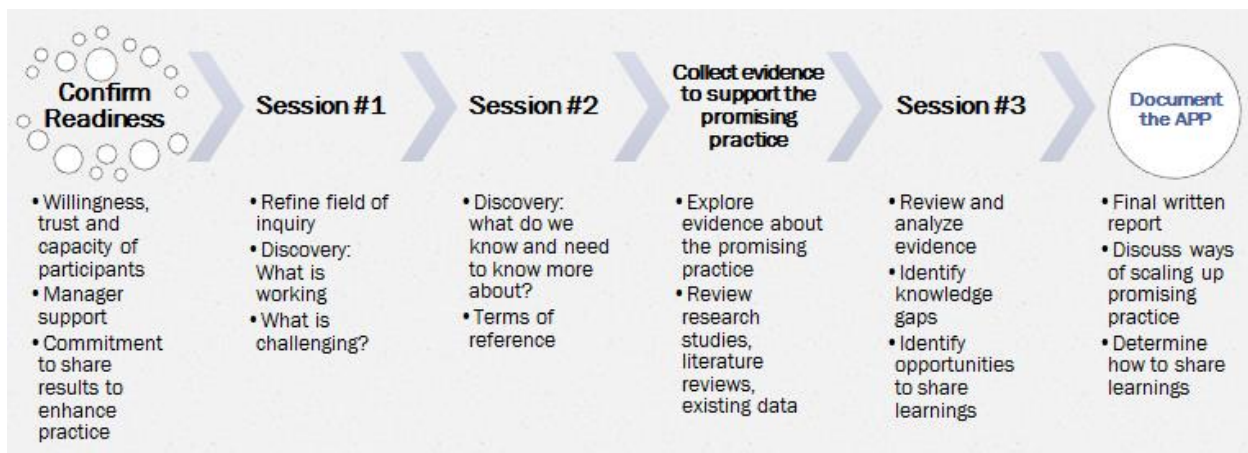
A “promising practice” is an activity, strategy, service or program that has preliminary evidence of effectiveness in smaller scale interventions and for which there is potential to generate knowledge and expand the intervention.

¹ More information can found on their website: <http://fcssbc.ca/alliances/applied-promising-practices/>

2. The Applied Promising Practices (APP) Process

An APP project is, by design, a practice-based, practitioner-driven undertaking; one does not have to be in a formal position of leadership to invite others to participate in the process of co-learning. Shared leadership and responsibility are keys to its success over time. The APP process is designed to be a collaborative and iterative process whereby participants are given the opportunity to examine their own practice-based experiences.

Although the APP approach is considered relatively flexible in nature, there is a general flow to the APP process. In terms of flexibility, additional sessions can be convened, timeframes can be flexible, participant groups can change over time, etc. The following diagram depicts the general flow of the APP process in identifying, documenting, and sharing learnings about promising practices:



2. A) Project Selection – Autumn House

In 2014/15, the APRL Branch set out to evaluate the efficacy of the APP approach and Toolkit, and to assess the resources that are required to carry out APP projects, prior to promoting it more broadly across MCFD and the sector. As such, a variety of proposals for potential APP projects were collected and reviewed by the APRL Branch against the following ‘readiness criteria’, which is an abbreviated list of what is outlined in the APP Toolkit itself:

- Willingness, trust and capacity of participants;
- Manager support; and
- Commitment to share results to enhance practice.

The Abbotsford Autumn House was one of four groups selected to participate in the APP Toolkit Pilot Project. The Autumn House team came forward as a result of a ‘Call for Interest’ the Federation put out to its members. The Autumn House team wanted to use the APP approach to explore the factors that have led to successful programming, strategies and practices to support youth in transition.

The journey of Autumn House began in 2004 as a result of a number of factors, including the closing of the safe house in the community, which led to concerns about the success of young people considered to be at higher risk as they began their journey towards independence. Over the past 10 years, it has moved from a concern, to a vision, to a continually evolving program. Autumn House brings together a unique collaboration between the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), Abbotsford Community Services, a local landlord, and the support and involvement of a variety of services and agencies throughout the community.

According to Autumn House statistics, 91% of youth who graduate from the program have maintained housing, 84% were employed upon graduation, and a number have gone on to post-secondary education. These are statistically higher rates than for youth who go directly to independent living. Follow-ups with former residents indicate that youth graduating from Autumn House are better equipped with life skills, have a greater sense of connection to the community, are better able to negotiate and resolve issues that arise, and have an increased capacity to make a successful transition to living on their own in the community.

2. B) APP Participants

The first APP session was held with seven project participants, including members of the Autumn House steering committee and key stakeholders involved in the development of the program.

During this session, the group decided to open the discussion to include the participation from a larger number of stakeholders; therefore, the second APP session held later that month saw close to thirty people from a wide spectrum of the community, along with those involved in the delivery of the program. Leading up to the second session, the project facilitators also met with a group of former Autumn House residents to hear their perspectives on the program.

The Federation contracted two Project Facilitators to coordinate the project. The facilitators were responsible for planning, organizing and guiding the APP sessions; developing materials, completing research and reports, and arranging unique ways of sharing learnings from each of the pilot projects.

The APRL staff attended sessions and conducted an evaluation of the project with the following objectives:

- To learn about and assess the usefulness of the APP approach;
- To assess the usefulness of the APP toolkit; and
- To assess the resources used in the APP process.

A number of data sources and methods were employed to meet the evaluation objectives, including debriefing sessions with the facilitator, a participant survey, interviews with key contacts from each of the four projects, focus groups with APRL staff observers, and project documents.

2. C) APP Sessions

The fundamental purpose of an APP project is to bring practitioners together as a group to focus on new or emergent practices and their applications and impacts. At these sessions, practitioners share what they think is working, and then through a stepped process, they identify key themes that emerge from the discussion. Research literature is then explored to uncover evidence that supports the practices that groups are finding to be successful.

On the following page is an overview of the phases of the APP project and summary of the emergent learnings and knowledge gained along the way.

Project Phase	Timeframe	Key Players	Summary
APP Session #1	Early October 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project Facilitator APRL staff 7 APP participants 	<p>Participants discussed what makes Autumn House successful and began to identify the factors that have led to its accomplishments.</p> <p>The participants chose to open up the APP discussion to a larger number of stakeholders in the next session in order to obtain a diverse representation of perspectives from those who contribute to the program's success.</p>
Focus Group	Mid October 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project Facilitator Former Autumn House residents 	<p>Leading up to the second session, the project facilitators met with a group of former residents to gain their perspectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> After graduating, they could stay in touch with Autumn House – it was their “home base” They could seek advice on issues as they arose in their transition to independence Being in Autumn House was “a reality check” “We know how to deal with landlords. We had to get real about it and realize we cannot procrastinate”
APP Session #2	Late October 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project Facilitator APRL staff 30 APP participants 	<p>This session identified themes that the group felt were central to Autumn House's success, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A collective goal inclusive of many community partners A clear vision coupled with an ability to adapt and respond as exemplified by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Autumn House Curriculum for the program, -Live-in mentor Autumn House develops a sense of community where youth are able to learn, connect, and contribute.
Evidence Collection	Nov 2014- March 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project Facilitator 	<p>A number of data sources and methods were employed to meet the APP objectives, including, debriefing sessions, interviews, and review and organization of research literature to support key themes and promising practices.</p>
APP Session #3	April 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project Facilitator APRL Staff APP Participants 	<p>Participants were provided with research evidence to support some of the key themes that make the Autumn House successful.</p>
Knowledge Sharing	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> APP Participants Community Stakeholders 	<p>With support from the Ministry and other stakeholders, the APP participants decided to produce a video about Autumn House for public distribution.</p>

2. D) Discovery

Discussions in the first two sessions with the APP participants, combined with the perspectives gathered from discussions with former residents, highlighted a number of success factors attributable to the programming at Autumn House:

- One of Autumn House’s main strengths is that the program has a unique partnership between MCFD, Abbotsford Community Services, a local landlord, and the support and involvement of a variety of service agencies and businesses within the community.
- For former residents, the ability for them to stay in contact with Autumn House as a kind of “home base”, where they can seek guidance on issues as they arise in their transition to independence was identified as crucial to their success.
- One of the key factors that participants in the APP sessions noted as having contributed to Autumn House’s success has been its ability to maintain a clear vision and goal, while also being able to adapt and change in order to carry out this vision. From its inception, the program’s main goal has been help youth at risk to successfully transition to independence in the community.
- Through the combination of building a strong curriculum, the Live-In Mentor, the focused work of the Youth Outreach Worker, and the active connection with MCFD staff, Autumn House has been able to help youth strengthen fundamental life skills and competencies in greater depth than for youth who are in individual housing without access to similar programming.
- While living at Autumn House, youth work closely with their care-team to develop an individual plan for their integration into independent living. This includes a focus on independent living skills curriculum, both in a one-on-one setting and in groups, in order to learn how to achieve balance in their lives so that they can live independently.

Discussions and a focus group with former residents identified three key elements that have contributed to Autumn House’s success. These are explored in the next section.

3. APP Session Findings

The Autumn House APP project set out to explore the factors contributing to the effectiveness of their housing services and programming. Throughout this iterative process, three key themes emerged:

- 1) A collective goal inclusive of many community partners
- 2) A clear vision coupled with an ability to adapt and respond as exemplified by:
 - The development of the Autumn House Curriculum for the program, and
 - The inclusion of a live-in mentor
- 3) A sense of community where youth are able to learn, connect and contribute.

A summary of discussions at the APP sessions around these key themes is to follow. Evidence from the research literature that supports these key themes has been provided in Appendix A.

3. A) Theme 1: Collective Goal Inclusive of Community Partners

One of Autumn House’s main strengths noted by the APP Working Group is the fact that the program is a unique collaboration between the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), Abbotsford Community Services, a local landlord, and the support and involvement of a variety of public agencies and private businesses throughout the community.

Both MCFD and Abbotsford Community Services have committed staffing resources to Autumn House. The project also has funding commitments from the United Way, and throughout the years has benefited from the collaboration of a large number of community partners who have contributed funds, materials, gifts and services. For example, the program recently received a grant from Home Depot to allow the program to make improvements to the building and surrounding areas. Every year, community members also donate Christmas gifts for the youth participating in the program.

Collaboration with community partners is one of the dynamic strengths of the program, connecting youth to many community services in order to help them on their path to independence. The importance of *community partnerships and cross-sector collaboration* emerged alongside *maintaining a clear vision and ability to adapt* in the literature review on youth in transition.

Research evidence on this theme says:

The benefits of “fostering collaboration among youth-serving agencies means overcoming barriers to sharing information, creating standard assessments, and establishing agreement on desired outcomes prevents duplication of services” (Walters et al, 2010).

“In terms of youth in transition...every partnership – community-based organizations, local government agencies, the business community, neighborhood organizations, and individuals – was important. But no one player could successfully tackle the challenge by themselves” (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2012).

3. B) Theme 2: Clear Vision with Ability to Adapt

Maintaining a clear vision coupled with adaptability, was the second key factor that the APP group identified as having contributed to Autumn House’s success.

From its inception, the project’s main goal has been to help youth at risk to successfully transition to independent living in the community. However, the way the program is structured and runs today is not the same as it was when it first began. During one of the APP sessions, when asked if the vision of Autumn House had changed from its original concept, the participants agreed that it had not. However, the program is constantly evolving based on the needs of residents and experiences happening within the program.

For example, in the initial stages of the program, Autumn House did not have control of the whole building where it is currently located. It began with four of the apartments in the building and a day-time Youth Worker to assist those youth living in the apartments. When it became apparent that this situation was not ideal for a number of reasons, the steering committee negotiated with the landlord to achieve occupancy of the entire apartment building. This allowed Autumn House to provide a Live-in Mentor on site so that youth in the program would always have access to an adult they could turn to when needed.

“We are all stubborn people and all have issues and no skills to deal with them.”
~Former Resident

Another example of Autumn House’s ability to adapt to address challenges and meet the unique needs of the youth it serves is the creation of the Autumn House curriculum which provides a structured program to build capacity in the youth residents around specific life skills. Autumn House staff report that the curriculum is one of the “jewels of the program.”

Research evidence on this theme says:

In the context of health care, one assistant director at a UK Health Foundation stated: “rather than aiming for control and stability, leaders need to have and maintain a clear vision and be able to enhance the adaptive capacity of their organisation” (Masterson & Gough, 2010).

While there is an abundance of literature regarding how to best support youth in transition, the research supports several key areas which must be addressed in order for them to be given the best opportunity for a successful transition into adulthood:

- Fostering healthy relationships;
- Access to safe, affordable housing;
- Encouraging/directing education and/or training opportunities;
- Access to physical and mental health care, including emotional healing and fostering their sense of identity;
- Life skills; and
- Youth engagement (Rutman et al., 2007).

3. C) Theme 3: Community in Which to Learn, Connect, & Contribute

The former residents told APP project facilitators that being able to remain in contact with Autumn House as a kind of “home base” - where they can seek guidance on issues as they arise in their transition to independence - is critical to their success.

While the participants came from very different backgrounds and faced different challenges in their personal lives, they all acknowledged that the Autumn House program is very beneficial for youth in transition who want to move forward and overcome obstacles they may face.

For all of the former residents, being in Autumn House was a bit of a “reality check”. They thought living independently would be easier than it was. They commented on the difficulties of cohabitating with roommates, and being responsible for shopping, cleaning and planning. They also spoke about how their time in the program enabled them to put challenges they faced in their own lives into perspective, when seeing others around them “even more in need than they were.”

One participant emphasized they were “just grateful for a place to go” after having lived on the streets and in other precarious situations. When questioned about their experience in moving on from Autumn House to independent living, one participant expressed a desire to have had a more gradual transition. Another noted: “I was able to build my resources; even save money for a car.” One participant described the tangible skills they gained through the Autumn House program, stating, “We know how to deal with landlords, and we had to get real about it and realize that we cannot procrastinate.”

The APP participants spoke of the many challenges young people were facing in the community in their attempts to fulfill the commitments of their Youth Agreements, and to successfully transition to independent living. The APP group had noted that the youth lacked basic life skills, had poor communication and interpersonal competencies, often ceased their studies and lacked the professional experiences necessary to find and maintain employment, among other challenges.

The Autumn House program has developed and evolved as a unique way to meet these identified needs. Through the combination of building and implementing a strong curriculum, having access to a Live-In

Mentor, and Youth Outreach Worker, along with an active connection with MCFD staff, Autumn House has been able to assist youth in transition by strengthening these areas in far greater depth than for youth who are in individual housing.

Research on this theme says:

Permanent connections are essential to youth successfully transitioning from care,” and research indicates that “feeling close to at least one adult reduced the odds of homelessness by age 19 by more than half.” (Dworsky et al., 2009)

Youth must be provided with life skills training programs that “provide real-world practice experiences where youth have the opportunity to internalize and personalize what they have learned about a skill and feel confident in the ability to use this skill in the future” (Collaborative Community Health Research Centre, 2002).

Research has demonstrated that youth who are engaged in positive, meaningful activities, while connected to caring adults and role models who support them, are less likely to engage in negative risky behaviours, such as drug and alcohol abuse, dropping out of school or breaking the law (Segalowitz, 2015).

4. Potential Applications of the Applied Promising Practice

Key components of the Applied Promising Practice Toolkit highlight the value of promising practices and propose ways in which the learnings from the Autumn House Program can be shared and applied more broadly. This table outlines some possible ways that a variety of stakeholder groups can apply these learnings.

Discovery and Learnings	MCFD Field Staff	Service Providers	Policy Makers	Strategic HR/ Learning and Development	Funders	Public	GCPE
a. The importance of a collective goal among stakeholders in community	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
b. The importance of staff mentors in developing long-term connections to youth	✓	✓		✓			
c. How a clear vision and adaptability contributes to better services and outcomes for youth in transition	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
d. The benefits of a flexible, adaptable service delivery model	✓	✓		✓	✓		
e. How connection with community supports impacts youth in transition	✓	✓				✓	✓
f. Benefits of a life-skills based curriculum for youth in transition	✓	✓		✓	✓		
g. Access to safe, inclusive spaces	✓	✓	✓		✓		

5. Conclusion

The Autumn House APP Project set out to shed light on the processes and principles underlying Autumn House's success. The pilot sought to solidify knowledge and strengthen the work that Autumn House does, as well as identify knowledge gaps, and allow for opportunities to share these learnings with others. During the collaborative and iterative APP process, the participants identified the following factors that led directly to the Autumn House's success:

1. A **collective goal** inclusive of many community partners;
2. A **clear vision** and goal coupled with an **ability to adapt** and respond as exemplified by:
 - a. The development of the Autumn House Curriculum for the program, and
 - b. The inclusion of a live-in mentor; and that
3. Autumn House develops a **sense of community** where youth are able to learn, connect, and contribute.

Research evidence supports these promising practices. Through the ongoing connection to the "care team" - including Autumn House's live-in mentor, Youth Outreach Worker, MCFD staff, as well as peers and other community members - youth are able to work toward learning life skills, connecting to others through fostering healthy relationships, and contributing to the construction of their own future and the betterment of the community in which they live.

Sustaining and carrying forward the Autumn House Program has not been without its challenges; however, the Autumn House APP Project affirmed the essential work that Autumn House is doing in Abbotsford. The findings in this report will help inform other youth-in-transition service providers, as well as policy makers, funders, and the general public as we work together to provide transitioning youth with promising opportunities and practices that encourage and support their development into healthy, happy, and productive adults within our communities.

Appendix A – Research Evidence Supporting the Promising Practices

This appendix summarizes the research-based evidence found the literature review phase of the Autumn House APP Project that relates directly to each thematic category explored and developed during the APP sessions with participants.

The APP participants felt the following promising practices best embodied the Autumn House program, and could best inform policymakers and support other service providers in developing programs and initiatives for working with youth in transition and preparing them for independent living:

- 1) A collective goal inclusive of many community partners and stakeholders
- 2) A clear vision coupled with an ability to adapt and respond as exemplified by:
 - The development of the Autumn House Curriculum for the program, and
 - The inclusion of a Live-in mentor
- 3) A sense of community where youth are able to learn, connect and contribute.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research on the state of young people under government care, both in Canada and abroad, and their outcomes as they transition into adulthood. The general sense is one of urgency, as the results of studies “paint a disturbing picture” of the outcomes of youth transitioning out of care. While youth in care are by no means a homogenous group, in their 2007 analysis of research undertaken in Canada, the UK, the US and Australia, Rutman et al. revealed that in contrast to their “mainstream” counterparts, many youth from care:

- Have not completed their high school education;
- Lack personal stability and support in the form of someone who cares about how they are doing;
- Become parents at a young age;
- Experience health and mental health problems;
- Struggle with issues of poverty, homelessness, and underemployment; and
- Often lack practical skills, such as grocery shopping, meal planning, budgeting, decision-making and self-advocacy.

Theme 1: Collective Goals and Community Partners

The APP participants and former residents agreed that one of Autumn House’s main strengths is the fact that the program is founded on a unique and dynamic collaboration between a broad array of community stakeholders. United under a common goal—to support and prepare youth in transition—Autumn House is supported by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), Abbotsford Community Services, a local landlord, and a variety of individuals, service agencies, and local businesses in Abbotsford. These partners come together to talk about the provision of services, supplies, and a sense of belonging in order to enrich the experience for the youth participants and elevate their chances for successful transition into adult independent living.

The importance of community partnerships and cross-sector collaboration emerged in the literature as a major theme. In his report on the first six years of ACT – Assets Coming Together for Youth: a community-based public health youth development initiative across New York State, Dotterweich (2006) noted the most effective youth transition programs were those that were able to accomplish the following four tasks:

- Clearly define the purpose and vision of the initiative;
- Establish a community development partnership and memberships;
- Develop collaborative work processes; and
- Create sustained momentum (2006).

Research from a youth perspective shows that “youth expressed anxiety about their subjective experiences of ‘aging out’ - including economic challenges and housing instability, loss of social support, and pressure to be self-reliant” (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). The study also found that within youths’ narratives, “loss of social support emerged as a specific anxiety tied to experiences of aging out” (2012). One young adult describes his reactions to initial placement in foster care and the loss of social connections: “I was ripped away from everything – my house, my friends, my family, everybody I knew” (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

Research also suggests that for the majority of youth transitioning to independent living, “connections to foster families were tenuous during (and often dissolved in the months following) the transition to independence” (C & D, 2012). These fears and experiences demonstrate both the personal and systemic factors that intersect when youth are facing transition. In this context, not only is collaboration necessary to secure the resources and expertise needed to address such a complex issue and provide support to youth in transition, it is also important in order to foster greater communication and coordination amongst youth services and the community at large to meet youth needs, create social supports and avoid the duplication of efforts.

Walters et al., in their interdisciplinary literature review on transition planning for youth aging out of care, found that the number one theme that emerged was the importance of “fostering collaboration among youth-serving agencies by overcoming barriers to sharing information, creating standard assessments, establishing agreement on desired outcomes, and preventing duplication of services” (2010). The Child Welfare League of America also stressed that “partnerships among public agencies, service providers, youth, and the community” were critical to providing a continuum of services for transitioning youth (2005, as cited in Walters et al.).

The literature also suggests that the ability to build effective community partnerships was found to be linked to the importance of maintaining a clear vision, which is coupled with adaptability, the second key factor that the APP group identified as having contributed to Autumn House’s success.

Theme 2: Clear Vision and Ability to Adapt

According to APP participants, another key success factor contributing to Autumn House’s success has been its ability to maintain a clear vision and goal, while being able to adapt and change in order to carry out this vision. From its inception, the program’s main goal has been to help youth at risk successfully transition to independent living in the community

The ability to adapt to changing needs and circumstances - while maintaining a clear vision and goal - is gaining recognition in the business sector and the social service sector. For example, in speaking in the context of health care, one assistant director at a UK Health Foundation stated: “Rather than aiming for control and stability, leaders need to have and maintain a clear vision and be able to enhance the adaptive capacity of their organization” (Masterson & Gough, 2010).

The literature also revealed strong correlations between mentorship, live-in mentors and successful youth programming. There are several examples of programs utilizing adult mentors to fortify youth transition and build capacity for independence. In Illinois, the Alternative Schools Network of Chicago partnered with the state department of CFS to develop the Youth Skills Development and Training program specifically designed to foster youth aged 16-21 who had dropped out or were at risk of dropping out of school (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2008). Not only were program youth provided the same educational opportunities as peers attending the same alternative school, youth in care were also provided a case worker on site to serve as a mentor in guiding the youth through various systems (school, child welfare) the youth was involved with.

Theme 3: A Community in Which to Learn, Connect, & Contribute

The third theme that emerged through the APP sessions with participants was that Autumn House program actively engages youth in order to develop their capacities as adults and foster a sense of belonging where youth are able to:

- Learn;
- Connect; and
- Contribute.

I. Learn

The learning aspect of the Autumn House program was strongly supported in the research findings as essential to supporting youth in transition (YIT). Numerous studies cited the importance of life skills training in a youth’s transition to independence (Fallis, 2012; Walters et al., 2010, RYC, 2014).

Furthermore, the Collaborative Community Health Research Centre at the University of Victoria did a review of best practices in youth services, which emphasizes that youth must be provided with life-skills training programs that “provide real-world practice experiences where youth have the opportunity to

internalize and personalize what they have learned about a skill and feel confident in the ability to use this skill in the future” (2002).

There is an abundance of research that supports this theme and the importance of a learning environment for youth who are transitioning to independence.

- “The overarching goal of independent living program services is to prepare older adolescent foster youth for self-sufficiency upon exit from care” (Lemon et al., 2005). “With the provision of independent living services, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that the provision of life-skill instruction improves outcomes for foster youth, or youth graduates of the child welfare system (Lemon et al., 2005; Casey Family Programs, 2001).
- “In Toronto for example, the Pape Adolescent Resource Centre (PARC) is a preparation for independence program serving youth in care and formerly in care ages 15-24. In addition to providing supports related to employment, housing, identity, health and life skills, the agency also offers a schooling program tailored to youth who have experienced being a child or youth in the child welfare system” (Reid & Dudding, 2006).

While at Autumn House, youth are also encouraged to continue their studies, and/or to work on achieving employment/career goals. According to Vancouver Foundation research, more than two-thirds of B.C. youth in care will reach age 19 without having completed high school (2013). The fact that the majority of YIT have not even graduated from high school puts them at a substantial disadvantage in today’s marketplace. Essential to a youth’s transition to independence is his/her ability to become financially stable. The research, therefore, indicates that it is of utmost importance to encourage youth to achieve further education, and/or vocational training opportunities (Vancouver Foundation, 2013; Center on the Family, 2012; Fallis, 2012, Golonka, 2010, Rutman, et al. 2007; Collaborative Community Health Research Centre, University of Victoria, 2002).

II. Connect

The number one need for youth cited in the research is the fostering of healthy relationships, both with adults, their peers, and with the broader community. The literature varies on just how many positive relationships a young person needs in order to become successful as a young adult, but in general, the more connected a youth is to supportive and healthy relationships in his/her life, the better their chances are for a successful transition.

Wald and Martinez argue that “by the age of 25, young people need to be “connected,” that is, embedded in networks – families, friends, and communities – that provide guidance, support, and help, both financial and otherwise, when they face the crises that are an inevitable part of the transition to adulthood” (as cited in Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011). This argument is echoed by Walters et al (2010) when they state: “in order to successfully transition to adulthood, young people most need ‘a circle of caring adults’ that will surround them with structure and mentoring, and help them build confidence as they develop their own decision-making abilities.”

Recent U.S. literature places an emphasis on providing “permanency” for youth by re-connecting them with family members, and/or parents. Walters et al. state: “Permanent connections are essential to youth successfully transitioning from care,” and Dworsky et al., 2006 noted that research indicates that “feeling close to at least one adult family member reduced the odds of homelessness by age 19 by more than half.”

Whether or not re-establishing a connection with a youth’s kin is a viable option, experts agree that helping youth establish healthy relationships with at least one caring adult is necessary. For example, the 2011 McCreary Centre Society report, which examined the lives of B.C. youth with government care experience, found that even for youth who had no supportive adults in their family, the presence of a supportive adult outside their family (such as a coach, teacher or friend’s parent, a social worker, etc.) made a positive difference in terms of improved mental and physical health (Smith, et al., 2011). These “relationships with caring adults outside of the ‘family’ are uniquely beneficial to youth because they may be able to offer career advice or share other interests that family members are not familiar with” (Golonka, 2010). Too often, low levels of human capital of former foster youth are compounded by a lack of social capital. Research suggests that access to social networks and resources can be important in seeking employment (Lin 1999, Granovetter 1995 as cited in Dworsky et al).

Most of all, young people need healthy relationships because, in order to thrive, people need to feel a sense of belonging: of “mattering” to someone. As world-renowned child psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner argued: “In order to develop — intellectually emotionally, socially and morally — a child requires participation in progressively more complex reciprocal activity on a regular basis over an extended period in the child’s life, with one or more persons with whom the child develops a strong, mutual, irrational, emotional attachment and who is committed to the child’s well-being and development, preferably for life”(Bronfenbrenner, 1991, as cited in Brendtro, 2010). In this way, Bronfenbrenner explained how trusting bonds with children and youth are the most powerful force in positive youth development. Often, the experiences YIT have faced of neglect and abuse leave them unwilling to risk further hurt, separation, or betrayal by investing in new relationships; therefore, these youth must be assisted in achieving emotional healing and in learning how to engage in healthy relationships (Representative for Children and Youth, 2014).

III. Contribute

The importance of allowing youth in transition to contribute to the building of their own future was supported in the literature as a “best practice” (Reid, 2007 as cited in Fallis, 2012). Far too often, youth in government care have been removed from natural opportunities for decision-making, community engagement and leadership, and experience a sense of powerlessness and isolation (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012). As the McCreary Centre Society states:

Meaningful youth engagement involves recognizing and nurturing the strengths, interests, and abilities of young people through the provision of real opportunities to become involved in decisions that affect them at individual and systemic levels (2012).

In a U.S. study, which sought youth in transition perspectives as they aged out of government care, researchers found that many of the inadequacies in the systems and policies in place to assist youth in transition reflected the lack of inclusion and involvement of the youth they serve. As a result, many of those interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the process of transition to independent living.

As unheard young citizens, too many foster youth will continue to transition into adulthood suffering from a perennial shortage of resources and lasting human connections. Socially conscientious developmental scholarship must do its part in bringing foster youths' voices and narratives of lived experience to the public imagination. The inclusion of current and former foster youths' experiences in the adolescent and emerging adulthood literature may shed some missing light in lives less visible (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

The Autumn House promising practice of creating an environment where youth are learning, connecting and contributing is supported by the literature in terms of resulting in positive outcomes. At Autumn House, not only are youth experiences and voices integrated into the evolution of the curriculum, each youth resident is engaged in the creation of their own specific plan for transitioning to independence, with the support of their own personal "Care Team": Youth Outreach Worker, live-in mentor and MCFD contact. According to the research evidence, these promising practices are vital factors in the long-term success of youth both as individuals and members of the community.

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