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Discussion

Consensus statement on developmentally appropriate policy and practice for adolescents in foster care

M. Dozier [a,1,*], J.G. Smetana [b,1], J. Allen [c], M.J. Bakermans-Kranenburg [d,e], A.D. Benner [f], L.M. Burton [g], N. Campione-Barr [h], G. Carlo [i], K.A. Dodge [j], A. Fuligni [k], A. Galvan [k], K. Ginsburg [l], W. Grolnick [m], V.M. Murry [n], S.D. Simpkins [i], M.H.Van IJzendoorn [o,p], C. Zeanah [q], C. Shauffer [r]

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Delaware, United States
[b] Department of Psychology, University of Rochester, United States
[c] Department of Psychology, University of Virginia, United States
[d] William James Center for Research, ISPA Instituto Universitário, Lisbon, Portugal
[e] Facultad de Psicología Y Humanidades,Universidad San Sebastián, Chile
[f] Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Texas at Austin, United States
[g] University of California, Berkeley, United States
[h] Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Missouri, United States
[i] University of California, Irvine, United States
[j] Duke University, United States
[k] University of California, Los Angeles, United States
[l] University of Pennsylvania, School of Medicine, United States
[m] Clark University, United States
[n] Vanderbilt University, United States
[o] Faculty of Psychology and the Humanities, Universidad San Sebastián, Chile
[p] Department of Psychiatry, Monash University, Australia
[q] Tulane University, United States
[r] Youth Law Center, San Francisco, California, United States

A B S T R A C T

Adolescence is a period of important neurobiological, social and cognitive changes. Under optimal conditions, adolescents are supported by parents who allow autonomy seeking while maintaining involvement and a strong relationship with their adolescent. Pubertal and neurobiological changes, alterations in adolescents' sleep cycles, and changes in adolescents' relationships with parents, peers, and schools (e.g., transitions to middle or high school), as well as increases in risk-taking are but a few of the changes that provide challenges to healthy adolescent development. These are exacerbated for adolescents in foster care who often experience changes in caregivers and transitions between neighborhoods and schools. The foster care system often fails to support navigating developmental challenges successfully. This consensus statement on youth in foster care makes a case for a developmentally informed system of care. Although we avoid making specific policy and practice recommendations, we identify general areas where research can inform change.

1. Introduction

Research on neurobiological, social, emotional, and cognitive development has yielded new perspectives on parenting, education, mental health, and community supports for adolescents and young adults. However, policy and practice in social service systems that are intended to provide protection and support to young people have not effectively incorporated these perspectives. As a result, these systems do not function to optimize the ability of adolescents to reach their full potential as adults. This paper identifies some of the ways that these systems are failing adolescents in foster care and makes recommendations for systems change that addresses the special needs of adolescents in foster care.

Researchers have defined the period of adolescence in various ways

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: mdozier@udel.edu (M. Dozier).
[1] Mary Dozier and Judith Smetana share first authorship.

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(e.g., biologically, psychologically, sociologically, and chronologically; see Smetana & Rote, 2019), but here we define it as the age period extending from age 10 to the early twenties. Regardless of the definition, adolescence is a time of change, learning, and opportunity. In addition to physical and neurobiological growth and development, adolescents in most cultures, including our own, experience changes in their relationships with parents, friends and peer groups, romantic partners, and schools (e.g., transitions to middle or high school). Adolescents are physiologically and psychosocially primed to take increased risks to explore their worlds and to assume increased responsibilities (Steinberg et al., 2018). As a result, adolescents may appear to have less need for parenting and other family relationships, instead seeking greater independence than younger children. However, adolescents' ability to successfully navigate these changes, develop autonomy, succeed academically, and develop healthy peer relationships depend on a strong relationship with a "parent" and other family members whom they trust to be acting in their best interests while taking into account their expressed needs.

All adolescents are embedded in broader social ecologies and systems that directly and indirectly impact their development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci et al., 1994). Foster care youth and caregivers must learn to successfully navigate those existing systems and ecologies. Identity development is one of the key developmental tasks of adolescence, and many adolescents in foster care self-identify as members of minoritized populations (e.g., ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion). Therefore, addressing the needs of foster care youth requires foster care systems to accommodate to the unique needs of culturally diverse foster care youth.

While this article focuses on multiple areas of adolescent development, the need for strong emotional ties, and especially emotionally effective parenting, is key to all of the areas. When the youth's parents cannot, on their own, provide effective care, a substitute caregiver may be necessary. To be successful, that caregiver must have an emotional connection and strong interest in the needs of the adolescent.

With this relationship as a "secure base," adolescents also need to experience autonomy, or a sense of choice or agency, in the things they do. This includes some input into the decisions that affect them. Whereas younger children also have a need for autonomy in many areas, adolescents need to have a role in larger decisions, as well as day-to-day choices.

Adolescents in foster care experience a perfect storm when it comes to meeting their developmental needs. First, in addition to the normative changes of adolescence, youth entering foster care, by definition, experience a complete change in living situation. This often includes new "parents," separation from siblings, frequent school moves, and leaving friends and community supports. Second, foster care systems have not focused on ensuring that adolescents develop or maintain connections with caring adults who are capable of parenting or with extended kinship networks. Finally, bureaucratic systems often strictly limit the ability of adolescents in foster care to influence decisions about their lives, try new experiences, take risks, and recover from failure.

Informed by our research and the research of other scholars as described throughout this consensus statement (e.g., Allen et al., 1994; Dodge, 2024; Murry et al., 2018a; Smetana et al., 2024), we believe the following principles are key to the design of a developmentally appropriate foster care system. We bear in mind the words of John Bowlby, a pioneer in child and adolescent development. From an evolutionary perspective, '*the more the social environment in which a human child is reared deviates from the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (which is probably father, mother, and siblings in a social environment comprising grandparents and a limited number of other known families), the greater will be the risk of his developing maladaptive patterns of social behaviour*' (Bowlby, 1969/1982, p. 166).

1. Whenever possible, and consistent with physical, emotional, and sexual safety, youth should remain with their birth families, and those families should be provided with supports to care for them and help them meet the challenges of adolescence.
2. If remaining with their birth families is not possible, and to minimize the negative impact of dislocation and loss of emotional support, adolescents should remain within their network of family, friends, and community, including the school community. Ideally, they should live with people they know so as to minimize the negative impact of dislocation and loss of emotional support and to continue their cultural connection.
3. If remaining with people whom they know is not possible, youth should live in a family setting, rather than in an institution or group care facility, and this family should be enabled and encouraged to create an emotional bond with the youth, to support connections between the youth and their significant others, including parents, siblings, other family members, and friends.
4. Adolescents in foster care should be given a voice in decisions that affect them and in the rules that govern them.

With these principles in mind, specific situations and issues confronting youth and caregivers are discussed below.

2. Neurobiological Background

Changes in hormones, neurotransmitters, and neural connectivity in the adolescent brain are designed to propel youth to explore, discover, and connect with the world around them (DePasque & Galván, 2017; Murty et al., 2016). Brain systems linked with motivation and reward, particularly those in the limbic system, are more active during adolescence than earlier in childhood and later in adulthood. Increased levels of pubertal hormones and dopamine during adolescence make these systems more attentive and responsive to rewarding stimuli in the environment than earlier in development, propelling youth to take risks in order to explore their environments and learn new things (DePasque & Galván, 2017).

Connections between key brain systems continue to develop during adolescence. Brain cells form, strengthen, and streamline connections in response to experiences more rapidly than in any period of life, other than early childhood (Murty et al., 2016). The pruning of unused and inefficient neural connections along with increased myelination of remaining neurons create more effective connectivity between neural networks associated with motivation, reward, learning, and executive control (Mills et al., 2021; Ojha et al., 2022). These developments allow youth to learn to regulate and direct their emotions and decision-making in effective ways (van den Bos et al., 2012).

Adolescent brain development appears to be particularly directed towards sophisticated social learning (Crone & Dahl, 2012). Neural networks associated with social cognition, perspective-taking, and self-knowledge continue to refine (Mills et al., 2014). Motivation and learning systems are particularly responsive to social settings and relationships. As a result, adolescents can better understand the perspectives and needs of other people than can younger children. At the same time, highly charged social situations can make it challenging for youth to engage in the same level of effective decision making and emotion regulation as they can in calmer situations (De France & Hollenstein, 2022; Schweizer et al., 2020).

Emerging evidence suggests that adequate sleep is linked with greater connectivity within the developing brain (Baker et al., 2023; Tashjian et al., 2018). Sufficient, consistent, and high-quality sleep serves critical functions for both physical and psychological health at all stages of the life span, including adolescence (Fuligni et al., 2018). Healthy sleep is associated with fewer internalizing and externalizing problems such as depression, anxiety, and substance use, as well as reduced inflammatory processes that could lead to later health problems such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers, relative to low quality sleep (Fuligni et al., 2018; Irwin, 2015; Park et al., 2020).

Significant physical and social changes during adolescence intersect

to make it difficult for youth to maintain healthy sleep habits in many contemporary societies, including the United States. This may be particularly so for youth in the foster care system, who often have the additional challenges of early life adversity and housing instability, both of which can make obtaining enough high quality sleep more difficult.

The numerous physical changes associated with puberty naturally move adolescents toward later sleep and wake times, also called a "phase-delay" shift to a later chronotype, or sleep-wake cycle. This phase-delay shift may occur because the brain structure that primarily influences sleep timing, the suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN), is responsive to the hormonal changes taking place during puberty (Hagenauer & Lee, 2012).

Social changes intersect with the delayed chronotype of adolescence to make it difficult for youth to obtain sufficient sleep (Park et al., 2019). Most notably, school start times typically move *earlier* during secondary school. Thus, youth have less and more variable sleep as they move through middle and high school (Park et al., 2019). Other school and social factors, such as study time and late-night screen use, can interfere with sleep during adolescence as well (Bauducco et al., 2024; Gillen-O'Neel et al., 2013). Unstable and conflictual home environments also predict sleep disruption during adolescence. Finally, sleep shows up as a significant type of health disparity even during adolescence, with those from lower-income households and African American backgrounds getting significantly less sleep than their peers (Matthews et al., 2014; Rocha et al., 2022; Yip et al., 2020).

Youth in foster care may be especially in need of high quality sleep (Hambrick et al., 2018; McGlinchey et al., 2023). The early adversity experienced by many adolescents in the foster care system is associated with poor sleep, in part because the physiological impacts of adversity tend to be in the same neural, immune, and stress systems that are linked with sleep (Fuligni et al., 2021). Additionally, youth in foster care are less likely than other youth to have stable bedtime routines and sleep habits, which are associated with higher quality sleep. Indeed, although the research is limited, studies have suggested that youth in the foster care system are less likely to obtain sufficient, consistent, and high-quality sleep than youth who are not in foster care (Hambrick et al., 2018; McGlinchey et al., 2023).

3. Attachment in adolescence

All adolescents face a complex challenge in seeking to establish autonomy in their day-to-day lives while also preserving a sense of connection in their relationship with their parents (Allen et al., 1994; Smetana et al., 2024). These needs – to establish autonomy and maintain secure bonds with parents – are strong and evolutionarily based, even if at times they appear to be in opposition to one another. Difficult as this process is, the parent-adolescent relationship serves as a vital proving ground that facilitates the development and refinement of relationship skills that will serve them in future close friendships, romantic relationships, workplace encounters, and even in their own later roles as parents (Allen et al., 2014, 2020; Oudekerk et al., 2015).

Adolescents in foster care face this developmental task in a different context than their peers. They must manage it without living with their parents and in many cases with those parents *in absentia*. In foster families, this challenge is extremely difficult, but is manageable with the right knowledge and support. Under optimal circumstances, the adolescent can express wishes and needs, knowing that they have a parent who will exert significant efforts to maintain the relationship. Without a parent working to maintain the connection, however, adolescents may be left floundering.

Bowlby's attachment theory describes the secure bond with a caregiver as a 'goal-corrected partnership' (Bowlby, 1988). In this partnership, the parties each have the same overarching goal: Seeing the youth grow safely and learn to explore and master their world. In infancy, this is exemplified by the idea of "exploration from a secure base." A secure infant is able to move (carefully) away from their parent's embrace to explore the larger world, but only because they know that embrace is there if they need it (Ainsworth et al., 1978). The adolescent explores in a more dramatic and challenging way, arguing and testing limits and rules, but needing the secure base to thrive (Allen, 2021).

4. Issues of particular relevance to systems serving children in care

4.1. Group settings are not appropriate places for adolescents to live

In many parts of the world, institutional care (orphanages, residential care, congregate care) is the primary type of out-of-home placement. In the United States, foster care has become the primary out-of-home placement, although congregate care (i.e., small group homes) is still used relatively widely and residential care is used often for youth with significant behavior problems. Group, congregate, or institutional care is problematic, not only for young children, but also for adolescents (Van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). A series of *meta*-analyses on the developmental outcomes of children who grow up in institutional settings, including more than 300 studies with more than 100,000 children in more than 60 countries, indicated that substantial delays in physical and brain growth, health and cognition, and socio-emotional development and attention were related to growing up in congregate or group care settings (Van IJzendoorn et al., 2020).

Developmental delays among children and adolescents in congregate care are arguably due to the structural neglect that is inherent in group care. Institutional rearing falls outside the range of the environments of evolutionary adaptedness (Bowlby, 1969/1982), due to their regimented organization, with high child-to-caregiver ratios, multiple shifts, and high staff turn-over. The frequent change of caregivers leads to fragmented care, resulting in high risks for children to become physically and mentally delayed, and emotionally disturbed. Moreover, adolescents and handicapped children in group care are at increased risk of physical and sexual abuse (e.g., Euser et al., 2015).

The absence of kinship relationships has sometimes been used to explain the heightened prevalence of abusive care of adolescents. However, such heightened levels of maltreatment have not been found in adoptive families (van IJzendoorn et al., 2009). Mixed-gender and mixed-age peer groups in congregate care may play a role, as well as contagion by deviant peers (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011). Instability of care and the absence of reliable attachment relationships between youth and staff may play a crucial role in creating an unsafe environment. Caregivers often lack training and are underpaid for their challenging jobs, leading to high turnover rates.

Small group homes do not present a feasible alternative that would promote healthy child development. A *meta*-analysis (Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2022) compared children in small group homes with peers reared in typical institutions and in families. Children in both small group homes and large institutions lagged behind family-reared children in mental health and physical growth. Children and youth need safe, stable, and shared care (Triple S care, Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2024). Safe care means a caregiving environment free from abuse or neglect; stable care implies a minimum number of transitions and break-ups of relationships with caregivers; and shared care implies a supportive network for both youth and their caregivers (Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2024). Such care cannot be provided in a group care setting. Sufficient evidence has been collected in the majority and minority world to support the transition from institutional care to family-based alternative care for youth without available parents (Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2024).

4.2. Moves may be particularly damaging in adolescence

Adolescents who experience out-of-home care often experience multiple changes in caregivers as they move from birth parents to foster parents (often multiple times) and from foster parent to foster parent or

group care. Indeed, adolescence is the developmental period when the highest frequency of placement changes is seen (e.g., Sattler et al., 2018). Although the number varies from state to state, about one-third of adolescents experience three or more placement changes per year (Annie E. Casey, 2024). Changes in caregivers have been found to be problematic across child and adolescent development. While infants and toddlers may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of changing attachment figures, adolescents are also adversely affected by moves involving a change in educational placement, community, and peer group, in addition to the loss of their caregiver (Schmidt et al., 2018). Researchers in Denmark (Sabel et al., 2024), studying more than 1 million Danish participants followed over 20 years, found that moving from one neighborhood to another had a larger effect on children's later depression than living in a higher-poverty neighborhood.

The effects of moving from one neighborhood to another, as is typically the case with foster placement, may be particularly problematic for adolescents who are shy or introverted (Oishi & Schimmack, 2010) or who are prone to delinquency (Schmidt et al., 2018). Oishi and Schimmack found that more residential moves during childhood predicted lower levels of well-being as adults, *but* only for introverts. Introverts had difficulty maintaining close relationships when they experienced frequent moves. These findings point to the importance of avoiding caregiving changes for adolescents that involve changes in neighborhoods, schools, and friends.

4.3. Parenting adolescents

As noted previously, parent-adolescent relationships involve a continuous readjustment to (re)balance the parent's role as protector and the child's need for autonomy. As adolescents mature, their increasing cognitive, emotional and social skills allow them to better regulate their own behavior and to take a greater role in decisions that affect them.

In the case of children in foster care, the system itself, as well as the identified caregiver, serve in the role of the parent (Allen et al., 1994). For the foster parent to function optimally, they need to support adolescents' exploration and self-regulation, with policies and practices governing the system supporting them in doing so (Fuentes et al., 2014). For example, youth need to feel they have a respected voice in decisions about where they live, where they attend school, and in which activities they participate. Children and adolescents differentiate between areas in which their parents or adult authority figures have legitimate authority to regulate and those in which they are entitled to self-regulate and exert their own choices and preferences. Specifically, adolescents view parents as having the legitimate authority to regulate *moral issues* (issues that have consequences for others' rights and welfare, such as hitting, teasing, bullying, and stealing), *conventional issues* (such as etiquette and manners, which provide norms for appropriate behavior in different contexts), and *prudential issues* (which involve the child's health, safety, and comfort, and include risky issues like alcohol and drug use; see Smetana, 2011, 2018, Smetana et al., 2025 for reviews).

However, children and adolescents do not view parents as having the legitimate authority to regulate *personal issues*, which involve control over one's body, privacy, and certain preferences and personal choices (like the choice of recreational activities, hairstyles, or friends), as long as they do not interfere with prudential issues involving health, safety, or harm to the self (Smetana, 2011, 2018, 2025). Having decision-making control over personal issues is important for the development of adolescent autonomy and identity, which are key developmental tasks of adolescence. As youth grow older, they view an increasing set of issues as personal and beyond parents' legitimate authority to regulate (Smetana, 2011, 2018, 2025). Furthermore, the extent to which parents are willing to negotiate with adolescents and cede decision-making authority to them varies for these different types of issues and follows different timetables during adolescence (Smetana, 2011, 2018; Smetana & Rote, 2019).

Providing the appropriate level of input into decisions is complicated when the foster parents and youth do not have a strong, pre-existing relationship. Youth's ability to manage decisions varies, not only from one child to another but also, in terms of the different types of issues and decisions adolescents need to make. It is necessary to tailor rules and consequences to adolescents' individual needs. When the system is reciprocally responsive, parental rules can be modified as youth mature and become capable of making increasingly responsible choices. This allows adolescents to gradually assume ever more control of their lives with a "safety net" for errors in decision-making. However, this individualization and interaction depends on the parent knowing the adolescent and recognizing patterns of behavior as well as having the flexibility to adjust rules to meet youth's unique needs, which is challenging in the foster care setting.

Allowing input into decision making is only one aspect of how adults can support adolescents' autonomy. Supporting autonomy also involves parents taking adolescents' perspectives, empathizing with their emotions and points of view, encouraging their interests, providing choice, and working together to solve problems. When parents use these strategies, adolescents are likely to view parental requests as important, feel more competent, and experience smoother school transitions (e.g., Grolnick & Ryan, 1989).

Adolescents also have needs for competence, which parents can support by providing structure, which involves clear rules, expectations, and guidelines that help adolescents know how to succeed and avoid failure (Grolnick et al., 2014). However, structure needs to be provided in a way that supports autonomy. This involves jointly creating rules and expectations with youth, allowing for input and opinions, and providing rationales for the guidelines in terms of adolescents' own goals. In contrast, when parents enact structure in a controlling manner (i.e., imposing rules unilaterally, not providing opportunities for input or meaningful rationales), they may thwart adolescents' autonomy, and in turn, youth may be more likely to defy requests and prohibitions and to experience internalizing and externalizing symptomatology (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2023). Pressure, stress (Grolnick et al., 1996; Zussman, 1980), perceptions of threat (Gurland & Grolnick, 2023), and uncertain conditions have all been associated with more controlling parenting and may be exacerbated in foster care settings. Foster parents may fear that if something goes wrong they will be accused of abuse or neglect or the youth will be removed. As a result, foster parents may not meet the adolescent's need for autonomy, which may be exacerbated by youth's difficult behaviors (Bernedo et al., 2014; Grolnick et al., 1996), and apparent low levels of competence (Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001). Rigid and judgmental enforcement of licensing rules and expectations can result in parents feeling that they or their child will be evaluated and their parenting will be assessed negatively, which can also result in controlling and pressuring parenting (Grolnick et al., 2002; 2007).

Finally, adolescents have needs for relatedness, which can be facilitated by caregiver involvement, defined as the provision of both tangible and intangible resources, including time spent as well as warmth and affection (Grolnick & Slowiczek, 1994). Caregiver involvement is important in the school domain (e.g., Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005) and in general (e.g., Kenney-Benson & Pomerantz, 2005). The foster care system may undermine adolescents' feeling of relatedness (as well as autonomy). Policies may prohibit youth from engaging in age-appropriate activities and tasks in an effort to eliminate all risks of physical harm. Frequent changes in caseworkers undermine a feeling of relatedness, particularly when the change of caseworker results in the cessation of all contact between that caseworker and the youth.

By failing to address youth's basic needs and seeking to enforce rules that youth perceive to be illegitimate, foster care systems can produce the behavior they seek to reduce, potentially increasing the likelihood that risky behavior may go unaddressed. Recent research has shown that parents' knowledge of adolescents' away-from-home activities (who they are with, what they are doing, and where they are going) comes primarily from adolescents' willingness to disclose to parents, rather

than from parental surveillance, control, or monitoring (Kerr et al., 2010; Smetana et al., 2025). In other words, parental knowledge of adolescent behavior is mostly an adolescent-driven process, not a parenting issue.

Relying on pre-existing parenting relationships can help foster parents to meet this challenge. By working together with birth parents, kin, or former foster parents, new foster parents can leverage existing positive relationships to support their family's expectations and build a trusting relationship with the youth. These relationships are more likely to develop when supported by foster care systems, policies, and practices than when they are not supported.

4.4. The impact of trauma

Many adolescents in the foster care system have experienced adversity in early childhood, including physical abuse and other trauma that trigger involvement by the child welfare system. Separation from the family of origin and placement into the foster care system is, by itself, yet another trauma for many children. Trauma, as well as other challenging experiences, predispose adolescents in foster care to adopt a defensive mindset (Dodge, 2024), which is a particular way of processing social information in real time in their interactions with others. Imagine an adolescent walking down a high school hallway when several peers whisper to each other and laugh as the adolescent passes by. Many adolescents might not pay attention to this ambiguous provocation by their peers, but the defensively-minded adolescent processes this circumstance in a sequence of steps that begins with hyper-vigilance of the peers' hostile cues and proceeds to a bias to interpret the cues as hostile.

This pattern of responding is adaptive in truly threatening situations but leads to maladaptive outcomes as the adolescent grows into adulthood. Numerous studies (e.g., Dodge, 2024; Evans et al., 2013; Lansford et al., 2021) suggest the antecedents of maladaptive adolescent outcomes lie in early-life experiences of physical abuse, neglect, adversity, and stress, which are the kinds of experiences that lead many children to end up in the child welfare system.

Administering punishment to a previously traumatized adolescent, even when necessary to keep order, brings the risk of perpetuating a defensive mindset. That is, a defensively-minded adolescent is perceptually ready to interpret negative experiences as unfair and malicious, even if the rest of the world sees these experiences as necessary and fair. Of course, adolescents cannot be unsupervised, so justified consequences must be administered as they would be for other adolescents. This should be done in non-emotional ways in which the rules have been made clear in advance and are implemented in transparent ways with full verbal explanation. The challenges of trauma and involuntary placement are harrowing but can, in some cases, be overcome through at least one ongoing stable relationship. A strong network—parent, relative, teacher, neighbor, friend, or therapist—can provide stability and reality-checking to allow the adolescent to maintain a positive mindset toward their future. Awareness of this dynamic is essential to the foster parent's ability to maintain a strong relationship with the youth even when their behavior is frustrating or even dangerous as well as to avoid escalation of problematic behavior.

4.5. Sibling relationships

While relationships with parents and caregivers are important for adolescent development and well-being, the importance of sibling relationships is often overlooked. Research on normative youth's sibling relationships illustrates the importance of siblings' bonds with one another (Tibbetts & Scharfe, 2015). These relationships can serve as significant sources of support, particularly in the context of shared family difficulties, and these bonds may create relationships that offer lifelong benefits (e.g., Stocker et al., 2020). Notably, supportive sibling relationships have also been found to be particularly beneficial to the mental health of sexual minority and gender diverse youth (e.g., Klepper et al., 2024).

Even in the context of supportive relationships, most siblings have frequent conflicts with each other during adolescence. These conflicts may be annoying to parents and guardians but do not necessarily imply long-term negative implications for youth wellbeing (provided they are not physically violent or involve consistent bullying behavior). In addition, in many cases, older siblings, and particularly older sisters, provide caretaking and teaching roles for their younger siblings (e.g., Wikle et al., 2018), and this is even more likely to be the case in Latinx and Black families (e.g., East & Hamill, 2013). Generally, these relationships are beneficial to both the older and younger siblings, with younger siblings feeling supported and learning new skills and older siblings gaining leadership experience, self-esteem, and prosocial behaviors. These positive sibling relationships can buffer the negative effects of poor parent–child or co-parenting/marital relationships (Noller et al., 2013).

Less is known, however, about the relationships youth form with unrelated youth who live in the same family (i.e., "foster siblings" within foster care placements). Most other types of sibling relationships are built upon their shared environments, experiences, and life histories. Youth who grow up together in care (whether they are unrelated or are extended family, such as cousins) may develop bonds similar to those of biological, step-, or adoptive siblings, particularly in the absence of other forms of sibling relationships. Unfortunately, these "foster sibling" relationships are unlikely to be protected or prioritized due to a lack of legal connections, but when separated there may still be significant relationship loss to the youth in care (Frost-Calhoun, 2022).

The support, shared life histories, and personal knowledge of siblings and foster siblings may be particularly important as youth age out of the foster care system and seek somewhat normative familial relationships post-care (Frost-Calhoun, 2022). A narrow definition or a one-size-fits-all approach to siblings does not address this complexity. The actual emotional relationships of each youth to biological, half or step, or de facto siblings should be carefully assessed with the help of the youth so that connection can be maintained in the most beneficial way possible to meet the needs of each adolescent in the sibling group, and mindfully of each sibling group's cultural and identity contexts.

4.6. Race and ethnicity

Youth from ethnic/racial minoritized backgrounds are overrepresented in the foster care system (Annie E. Casey, 2024). The experiences of youth of color are often impacted by others' perception of them. For example, Black youth, in particular, are often not afforded the benefits of being perceived as children or adolescents, and are more often than White youth viewed as being older than their actual age (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021). In turn, older Black youth are more likely to be perceived as hostile and angry (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021), less innocent, more independent, and more knowledgeable about adult topics than other youth (Epstein et al., 2017). Having to constantly navigate challenges associated with being exposed to unrealistic expectations and othering may evoke coping behavioral responses that may appear inappropriate and deviant from societal norms (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Murry et al., 2018, 2022).

A strong relationship with cultural identity is therefore a source of strength for adolescents (Carlo et al., 2022; Murry et al., 2022). For example, traditional cultural values (e.g., familism, respect, religiousness, communalism), as well as ethnic/racial identity, serve protective and growth-promoting roles (Carlo et al., 2022; Murry et al., 2022) and have been shown to be promoted by caregivers who are warm and supportive and engage in racial-ethnic socialization practices (e.g., teaching about their ethnic and racial heritage and preparation for racial biases; Carlo & Conejo, 2019).

Specifically, several studies demonstrate that embracing *familism* values (i.e., family as part of one's identity, support to and from the

family, and duty or obligation to them) and a stronger *ethnic/racial* and *bicultural identity* (i.e., affinity to one's native heritage, or to one's native heritage and majority society heritage) are associated with better academic outcomes, lower levels of depression, and higher levels of self-efficacy and esteem (Carlo et al., 2022), and avoidance of risky behaviors (Murry et al., 2022). Therefore, socialization experiences that strengthen ethnic/racial heritage identity and cultural values are especially important for ethnic-racial minoritized youth in foster care.

Much research also has emphasized the protective effects and beneficial consequences of prosocial behaviors in ethnic/racial minoritized youth (e.g., Carlo & Conejo, 2019). Prosocial behaviors are positively linked to most of the positive outcomes noted above, as well as some others (e.g., better self-efficacy, self-regulation skills, higher levels of empathy and moral development. They are also associated with various indices of maladjustment, including depression and anxiety, delinquency, aggression, and illegal substance use; Carlo, 2014). Prosocial behaviors can be undermined by family conflict, harsh parenting practices, and discriminatory experiences (Carlo & Conejo, 2019).

The multiple social identities of youth are important to consider in foster care placements. Conversations with youth about how they identify and what is most important to them are essential. Adolescents may be placed in homes and connected to communities on the basis of an outsider's view of race, culture, and ethnicity, which may undermine their success. In addition, many youth rely on participation in affinity groups to support their identity and sense of self. Understanding the complexity and individuality of the issue is key to healthy development for adolescents in the foster care system.

4.7. Education

Changes in educational placement may be an unintended consequence of placement in care or moving from one family to another. Substantial research exists on the impact of normative changes in school, e.g., transition to middle school or high school, on the academic success and emotional well-being of children that can be applied to children in care (e.g., Benner et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2013; Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

Normatively, school transitions coincide with the transition into and through adolescence. Consequently, scholars, practitioners, and parents typically attributed the academic and socioemotional challenges observed during this time to pubertal transitions and the storm and stress of adolescence. Groundbreaking work by Simmons and Blyth (1987), however, took advantage of variations in school structure, comparing students in K-8 schools to those who transitioned from K-5 elementary schools to grades 6–8 middle schools. They documented that many of the challenges observed were seen only for those students making a physical school transition from elementary to middle school and not for those enrolled in elementary schools serving grades K-8. This foundational work set the stage for 35 years of scholarship on normative school transitions.

Research on the impact of normative school transitions on adolescent development has focused primarily on academics. Youth experience declines in both grades and achievement test scores as well as an increased likelihood of academic course failure as they transition from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school (Benner et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2013). Beyond these academic performance indicators, transition challenges are also found in relation to youth's academic behaviors and cognitions, with declines in school engagement, attendance, feelings of school belonging, and academic motivation observed when youth make normative school transitions during adolescence (Ryan et al., 2013). As adolescents move through high school, evidence (albeit limited) suggests that many do not recover from these initial academic challenges, with adolescents continuing to exhibit declines in both grades and attendance rates across 9th and 10th grades (Benner & Graham, 2009).

In comparison to the academic domain, the socio-emotional impacts of normative school transitions are less well investigated. However, this work suggests that the transitions from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school pose challenges to youth's socioemotional well-being. This includes declines in general self-concept (Coelho et al., 2017; Onetti et al., 2019) and increases in delinquent behaviors (Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2010). Additionally, increases in both loneliness and depressive symptoms have been documented as students navigate normative school transitions (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Benner & Graham, 2009; Benner et al., 2017). The socioemotional challenges may persist even after youth gain additional experience in their new settings, with declines in loneliness accelerating across 9th and 10th grades (Benner & Graham, 2009).

Protective factors supporting school transitions are important to consider. Positive relationships with significant others (parents, peers, and teachers) can buffer the challenges of these transitions (Grolnick et al., 2014; Newman et al. 2007; Roderick 2003). Early research focusing on parents found that supportive parents who monitored and were involved in their adolescents' academic and social lives had adolescents who experienced fewer disruptions and exhibited greater resilience following the transition to high school than youth of less supportive parents (Newman et al. 2007; Roderick 2003). Parallel to this early work, Grolnick and colleagues (2014) found that both parents' autonomy support and provision of academic structure were linked to academic competence, motivation, school engagement, and grades across the transition to middle school.

During adolescence, peer relationships take on an increasingly important role for many youth (Benner, 2011; Benner et al., 2017). Normative school transitions, however, can disrupt peer relationships, as school feeder patterns and broadening school choice via magnet and charter schools mean that students may not move en masse as they make school transitions. These moves can disrupt existing friendships but also foster new friendship bonds (Benner, 2011). As with parents, the quality of adolescent friendships appears to play a central protective role for youth. Friendship quality is linked to achievement across the transition to middle school (Sebanc et al., 2016). In the socio-emotional domain, greater feelings of belongingness with peers pre-transition promotes better emotional well-being after the transition to high school (Wentzel et al., 2019), and stable or increasing peer support across the transition to high school is linked to less socioemotional disruption across the high school transition (Benner et al., 2017). In contrast, peer exclusion is associated with greater socioemotional challenges following the transition to middle school (Gazelle & Faldowski, 2019).

In considering youth in foster care, this larger literature on the challenges of school transitions—both normative and nonnormative—is particularly salient, as these youth often move from one foster home to another, and these moves frequently instigate school transitions. School transitions are challenging for all youth, and greater exposure to these disruptive events can derail academic trajectories and contribute to accumulating disadvantages that undermine adolescents' socioemotional well-being (Benner et al., 2021). When school transitions must occur, available research suggests that ensuring that youth in foster care are able to maintain positive relationships with the important others in their lives (e.g., peers, teachers) will likely help them weather the school transition challenges more effectively than when they lack these positive relationships.

The importance of peer relationships to successful educational transitions is often overlooked by foster care systems. Significant relationships with adults, including birth parents, former foster parents, kin, and teachers, may help youth successfully cope with school transitions. Policies that sever relationships during periods of transition, when youth need them most, jeopardize the youth's emotional well-being and ability to benefit from education. Thus, stability is key.

4.8. Extracurricular activities

Adolescents' extracurricular activities are also a key setting for

adolescent development. Extracurricular activities during adolescence are associated with a broad array of positive outcomes, including academic performance (e.g., grades, attendance), social-emotional skills, friendships, contributions to the community, and reductions in risky behavior (e.g., drug use) (for reviews, see Mahoney et al., 2009; Vandell et al., 2015). Moreover, participation in activities during childhood and adolescence is associated with adjustment in adulthood. For example, greater participation in organized after-school activities during elementary school was related to less risk-taking and less contact with police at age 26 than less participation (Vandell et al., 2021). Not only do organized after-school activities serve a protective function, they also help adolescents build healthy habits. For instance, participating in sports in adolescence was associated with exercise in early adulthood, with similar relations seen for volunteering/community service, art, and religious activities (Simpkins et al., 2023; Zarrett et al., 2021). Extracurricular activities are settings that build adolescents' strengths — where they may hone their skills, learn positive behaviors, develop a sense of who they are and their future goals, experience positive social norms, develop supportive relationships with adults and peers, and may provide opportunities to engage in endeavors they do not have access to at school or home.

Adolescents' participation in activities during high school has the potential to serve as a catalyst launching them on positive trajectories (Roeser & Peck, 2003). The impact of any organized after-school activity depends on the quality of the activity and how responsive it is to adolescents' developmental needs (Simpkins et al., 2023). For example, Durlak and colleagues (2010), in analyzing data from 68 studies, found that youth development increased only if they participated in a high-quality activity; youth who participated in an activity of lower quality did not show any significant differences in their adjustment.

Activity effects also vary across individuals (Simpkins et al., 2023). Youth who participated more consistently on a weekly basis, across multiple years and in the same type of activity, were more likely to experience positive changes than youth who participated less frequently (Bohnert et al., 2010). Participating across several years gives youth opportunities and time to develop skills, motivation, a social network, and an identity around the topic of the activities (e.g., musician, athlete, or STEM person). Activities that adolescents are engaged in and care about have larger impacts than other activities (Bohnert et al., 2010).

Most of the research in this area has not focused specifically on foster youth, but several studies have done so. The existing work suggests that adolescents in foster care typically participate in organized activities less often than adolescents not in foster care (Conn et al., 2014; Connelly et al., 2022; Heath et al., 2021). Preliminary studies suggest that participating in organized activities is beneficial for youth in foster care in terms of improvement in academic outcomes (e.g., GPA, college enrollment, achievement, and motivation) as well as reduced levels of loneliness, depression, and drug use (Connelly et al., 2022; Heath et al., 2021; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). Organized activities also provide youth with adult mentors (Thompson & Greeson, 2017).

5. Conclusions

Most foster care systems identify working with adolescents as being among their greatest challenges. Rather than being the fault of the adolescents, challenges arise because systems are not equipped to appropriately meet adolescents' developmental needs. We reviewed research on areas of adolescent development that are most problematic for youth in the foster care system. The findings point to areas in which the foster care systems are not addressing the basic needs and characteristics of normative adolescence. While adolescents who have been exposed to adversity face particular challenges, we suggest that any adolescent entering the foster care system would have difficulty adapting to the system's conditions and expectations.

Several themes emerge from the research:

- Throughout adolescence, youth continue to need consistent, safe, and stable caregiving and support in addressing the changes and new needs resulting from their social, physical, and neurobiological development.
- Caregiving and other factors affecting adolescent development (e.g., minoritized status, neurobiological development), relationships with others (e.g., siblings and peers), and adolescents' participation in different social systems, including the educational system and participation in community and extra-curricular activities, must be tailored to adolescents' individual needs and strengths.
- Strong relationships and social networks, including parents, siblings, extended family, peers, and teachers, among others, are critical to healthy development.
- Youth are biologically, socially, and emotionally primed to need and be involved in decision making and problem solving about their own lives, even when that involves risk. If the need for autonomy is unmet, it may increase rather than reduce their risk.
- Youth in the foster care system do not all experience the system equally. Minoritized youth often have additional minoritized-status stressors and traumas that place additional burdens and require additional attention. However, researchers have identified positive growth and protective mechanisms that can mitigate negative developmental consequences of these adversities. Some of these mechanisms include providing socialization experiences that foster stronger ethnic/racial identity, cultural values (such as familism), and prosocial behaviors.
- Adolescents' individual needs are constantly changing, so it is essential that one or more people who know the youth well are involved in decision-making and setting boundaries in a shared care network.
- Quality matters in family life, but also in education and community activities. Checking a box on school or extracurricular activity enrollment, sibling contact, or family involvement does not equate to meeting the adolescent's needs.

For the following reasons, it is apparent that elements of the foster care system as presently organized make it difficult to meet these needs.

- Many youth in foster care do not feel a strong emotional connection with their caregiver. In some instances, they are living with a stranger, and in others with a relative whom they do not know well or whose role has changed. It takes time for a caring caregiver relationship to develop and, in the interim, youth have to comply with the expectations of the family and the system.
- Group care does not provide adolescents with a safe, stable environment that supports autonomy and relatedness.
- Foster care systems are bureaucracies, and bureaucracies thrive on uniformity, not on individual characteristics and their variations. Tailoring processes and decisions to the individual needs of the child takes time, skill, and the support of the system for risk-taking, which might not be readily available.
- Foster care systems often impose rigid restrictions on relationships in the name of confidentiality or safety, whether or not these are necessary in the young person's specific situation.
- Foster families and agency staff are not educated about the developmental needs of adolescents and so cannot effectively accommodate to them.
- Complex decision-making procedures and explanations take time, which may adversely affect compliance with regulations and limitations.
- As with various systems that serve poor people, the quality of services is unreliable at best, and because of the scarcity of resources, adolescents may get whatever is available rather than what is most appropriate. These barriers are not insurmountable, but require creativity, flexibility, and intentionality to overcome them and give adolescents the best chance possible to succeed.

While our aim in this paper is not to make specific policy and practice recommendations, we have identified general areas where research can inform change.

As discussed, because of the intrinsic challenges to the foster care system in meeting developmental needs, every effort should be made to keep children and youth in home and out of foster care when keeping them in their homes is consistent with their physical or mental health and emotional safety. Child welfare systems should be creative in offering supports to families that are challenged in caring for their children and adolescents, while still ensuring the safety of the youth. Consistent with research on the importance of autonomy for youth, adolescents should have the opportunity to assist in developing creative approaches to serving their families.

Similarly, adolescents should have a role in identifying kin and other families that may be able to care for them. This role should begin when separation from their family is initially contemplated rather than allowing participation only after no other options exist. Adolescents should know that the decision does not rest in their hands, but they should feel that they have been heard and their opinions seriously considered. The cultural identity needs of minoritized youth should also be considered and be part of the decision-making process.

If no family known to the adolescent is able to care for them, they should understand the process and the options and be given as much input into the decision as possible. Full information about prospective families should be disclosed, and adolescents should be able to express a preference (with the understanding that the preference is not always viable). Agency staff should talk with the adolescent about their concerns as well as learn as much as possible about them. Families should be selected based on the specific needs and preferences of adolescents and not on the basis of a rotation or first-come, first-served system. This may require agencies to obtain more information about foster parents than they have currently, with a particular focus on family life, activities and culture.

Foster families and case workers should have education and coaching in meeting the needs of adolescents, specifically in understanding the need for stable and unconditional commitment. Foster families need a network of caring others to fall back on as much as the youth needs it, to support them in providing a stable and unconditional caregiving environment. The youth's underlying confidence that a caregiver will be there consistently, to provide not just food and shelter but also emotional support and practical guidance, is essential to *allowing* them to confidently and strongly pursue their goals and interest in healthy ways. It is important that the commitment also embraces the cultural identity of the youth. The lack of safety and stability, along with feelings of rejection, are fundamental challenges for adolescents in foster care and, unless addressed, can lead to emotional and behavioral struggles.

Families should also be educated on some of the less obvious biological and neurological changes in adolescence, such as the change in sleep patterns. Failure to recognize these needs can lead the foster parent to view the youth as lazy or uncooperative. The impact of inadequate sleep on school success can similarly challenge the relationship and lead to conflict and even unnecessary disruption of the youth's living situation.

Recognizing the difference between autonomy-seeking behavior and rejection is critical. A key error made by parents of all types is to misinterpret the adolescents' autonomy strivings as rejection rather than as the normal expression of a developmental need. Parents who feel they are experiencing repeated rejection by their adolescents will often withdraw. The adolescent, sensing this, pulls away further, and the relationship falters. The foster parent must be supported to understand that strivings for autonomy do *not* indicate that an adolescent is rejecting them—but rather is seeking to establish some self-determination and choice. The foster parent can then take on their appropriate role in the autonomy-relatedness dynamic – making clear their commitment to making the relationship continue to work.

The research we have reviewed indicates the importance of strong interpersonal relationships to youth's ability to benefit from education, accept limits and structure, work successfully in a family, and adapt to change. Foster care systems and foster families should work with youth to identify and support these relationships. Cooperation between birth families and foster parents can support the young person in adapting to new rules and situations. Policies that separate the youth from their community including peers, siblings, teachers, and other adults interfere with normal support for adolescents.

Finally, quality and individualization are key to effectively caring for youth. Adolescents in care, although they may have certain experiences in common, are nonetheless individuals with differing cultural backgrounds, needs, and strengths. Blanket policies, other than policies that prioritize relationships, including connections to culture and family care, should be flexible enough to meet these needs and capitalize on strengths. None of that is possible without ensuring quality, not only in those aspects of the youth's life that the system directly controls, such as parenting, but also in ancillary systems such as education and community activities.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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