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## Perspectives of Youth in Foster Care on Essential Ingredients for Promoting Self-determination and Successful Transition to Adult Life: My Life Model

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## **The Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Research clearly documents the serious challenges and poor outcomes experienced by many young people exiting foster care, as well as compounded disparities for the high percentage of youth in care who are identified with disabilities and/or mental health challenges. However, very little research has been conducted to specify or validate effective models for improving the transition trajectories of youth exiting care. Evidence suggests the My Life self-determination enhancement model offers a promising approach for supporting youths' self-determined and positive transition to adulthood. The model includes youth-directed, experientially oriented coaching in the application of self-determination skills to achieve youth-identified transition goals, coupled with peer mentoring workshops that provide opportunities for learning, networking and fun. This in depth qualitative study of 10 youth who completed the My Life intervention focused on investigating coaching and mentoring elements and processes that youth participants identify as most important to their success, with the intention of informing the further development of youth-directed approaches to supporting young people who are transitioning to adulthood. Themes emerged around the centrality of youth self-direction, important processes in the coaching relationship, the essential value of experiential activities and self-determination skill development, and peer mentoring experiences that youth identified as fostering their success. Implications are discussed for research and practice in supporting youth exiting foster care.

### **Keywords**

self-determination; foster care; transition to adulthood; coaching; peer mentoring

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Transition Challenges for Youth in Foster Care**

Young people in foster care experience exceptional disadvantage as they attempt to navigate their transition to adult life. Of 243,060 children and youth who exited foster care nationally in 2015, approximately 19% left care between the ages of 16 and 19, and about 47% of those youth exited care through aging out or running away (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Numerous studies have documented the persistent transition barriers of young people exiting foster care. For example, the Midwest Evaluation follow-along study of 736 youth exiting foster care found that at age 19, 63% had a high school

diploma or GED, compared to 91% of youth in the general population (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). At 19 years of age, approximately 41% of these young people were employed, compared to 58% of their peers; and 39% were enrolled in higher education, compared to 59% of youth in the general population. By ages 25–27 these disparities persisted: 20% of former foster young adults still did not have a high school diploma or a GED, compared to 6% in the general population. Only 8% of former foster youth reported they had graduated with two- or four-year postsecondary degrees, compared to a 46% graduation rate for young adults in the general population; and they had an employment rate of 48.3% vs. 79.9% for their general population peers. Further, their median annual earnings were \$18,000 below those of young adults in the general population, and their incarceration rates were ten times greater than their peers (Courtney et al., 2011a).

**Compounded disparities**—Young people exiting foster care also are strikingly more likely than youth in the general population to be identified with disabilities and/or mental health conditions, most likely associated with related histories of maltreatment, trauma, recurrent foster care and school placement changes, separation from family, and other factors. Research on youth in foster care has generally suggested a special education disability prevalence rate of 30 to 40% overall (e.g., Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, 1995; Geenen & Powers, 2006; Lambros, Hurley, Hurlburt, Zhang & Leslie, 2010), and 50 to 60% for older youth (Hill, 2012, Schmidt et al., 2013; Wulczyn, Smithgall, & Chen, 2009). With regard to mental health challenges, the Northwest Foster Care Alumni study found that 54% of young adults who had recently exited the foster care system had a diagnosed mental health condition, with 25% experiencing PTSD and 20% experiencing major depression (Pecora et al, 2005). Courtney and colleagues (2011a) found that 33% of Midwest evaluation study participants had social anxiety, 25% had depression, 60% had PTSD, and 14.5% were taking psychotropic medications.

Young adults exiting foster care, including those who are identified with disabilities and mental health issues, face multiple disadvantages in transitioning to adulthood, such as secondary education difficulties, financial and housing insecurity, low expectations and stigma, living, educational and social restrictions that limit opportunities, and lack of support from caring adults (Courtney & Hughes-Heuring, 2005; Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek & Fogarty, 2012; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Geenen & Powers, 2006; Hochman, Hochman, & Miller, 2004; Quest et al., 2012; Schmidt et al., 2013; Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013; Smithgall, Gladden, Yang, & George, 2005; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2004). Evidence suggests that young people in foster care with disabilities and/or mental health challenges typically experience even greater disadvantage than youth in foster care without disability or mental health experiences (Anctil, McCubbin, O'Brien, Pecora, & Anderson-Harumi, 2007; Geenen & Powers, 2006; Smithgall et al., 2005).

## 1.2 Supporting More Positive Transition Trajectories for Youth Exiting Foster Care

While substantial attention has been directed toward documenting the concerning transition outcomes experienced by youth exiting foster care, relatively little research has been conducted to validate approaches that could promote more positive trajectories by these

young people. Key federal policies adopted to expand support include the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Public Law 106–169), which increased funding for states to provide foster care independent living services and, as part of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001 (Public Law 107-133), provided Education and Training Voucher Program funds to help off-set the cost of college. The 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Public Law 110-351) enabled states to optionally extend foster care to age 21 for youth in college and/or employed, and required a written plan for exiting foster care. The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (PL 114-95), which replaced No Child Left Behind, also has specific provisions for youth in care, focused on minimizing educational disruption and instability.

Despite these policy initiatives, only modest gains have been achieved in transition to adulthood outcomes for youth exiting foster care. Further, very little rigorous study has been conducted of intervention approaches with proven efficacy for promoting youths' transition outcomes, including those with disabilities and mental health challenges. Independent Living Program (ILP) services are the typical support offered to young people exiting care, often incorporating skill training and service coordination plus additional supports offered by individual programs. Randomized controlled evaluations of three ILP sites did not reveal significant differences between control and intervention groups in two of the sites (Courtney, Zinn, Koralek & Bess, 2011b; Courtney et al., 2008). Youth in the third site study received intensive or therapeutic foster care services, and compared to the control group, those in the ILP intervention group were significantly more likely to have a driver's license, a birth certificate and to enroll in college. However, the youth receiving ILP services were more likely to remain in care past age 18 and these differences between groups disappeared once this factor was taken into account (Courtney, Zinn, Johnson & Malm, 2011c).

### 1.3 Potential Benefits of Self-determination Enhancement for Youth Exiting Foster Care

Substantial attention has focused on examining the role of self-determination as a key aspect of positive youth development (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004), and as a facilitator of adolescent health behavior (Gloppen, David-Ferdon, & Bates, 2010) and successful transition to positive adulthood outcomes (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001). Generally congruent definitions of self-determination have been offered, which focus on causal agency (Wehmeyer, 1996), intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002), and self-directed action (Powers et al., 1996). Considerable research has been conducted with youth in foster care who receive special education services, revealing consistent associations between increased self-determination and improved educational, career and independent living transition outcomes (e.g., Algozzine et al., 2001; Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, & Alwell, 2009; Geenen et al., 2013; Halpern, Yovanoff, Doren, & Benz, 1995; Powers et al., 2012; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

The potential value of self-determination enhancement for youth in foster care is underscored by findings suggesting youth in care want more control in the process of making decisions about their life and perceive needs that are unmet as they prepare to exit care (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). Multiple authors have emphasized the need for youth voice in the transition planning and decision-making process, and argue that

it is a critical component of preparing youth for exiting care that has been largely missing (Frey, Greenblatt, & Brown, 2007; Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Mech, Ludy-Dobson, & Hulseman, 1994).

#### 1.4 My Life Self-determination Enhancement Model for Youth in Foster Care

For the past several years, our research team has conducted a series of experimental studies to investigate the outcomes of the My Life self-determination enhancement model (MLM). The model is implemented over 9-12 months and features: 1) one-on-one, weekly or biweekly youth-directed coaching to support youth in identifying and pursuing goals they value, and 2) four complementary peer mentoring workshops where youth discuss transition topics, share their knowledge and accomplishments, and receive support from successful slightly older “near-peers” and adults who also have lived experience in foster care.

Coaching focuses on providing youth-directed relationship support to foster communication, trust, and confidence; didactic support to facilitate youth’s learning of meta-cognitive skills in achievement, partnership development and self-regulation to achieve their life goals (e.g., problem-solving, negotiating with allies, managing stress); and experiential support to promote youth’s successful logistical preparation and engagement in activities to take action toward their goals, manage challenges and learn about themselves (additional detail on the model is found in Geenen, Powers, Hogansen, & Pittman, 2007). Coaching is flexibly provided and meta-cognitive skill introduction is integrated with a youth’s goals and situational opportunities that emerge. For example, a youth with a goal of applying to college may first problem solve and then carry out the steps for visiting a local college to speak to an admissions advisor. Depending on the youth’s skill and interest, the coach and youth may rehearse strategies for friendly communication and make a list of the youth’s questions. The coach also may provide support during the activity (e.g., assist the youth to ask a question), with the intention of encouraging the youth’s leadership while at the same time offering support needed to ensure a high likelihood of success. Coaches gradually fade their involvement as youth demonstrate increasing confidence and skill. Over time, youth experience increasing success in carrying out activities toward their goals, in actively managing barriers that arise, and in increasing their confidence and agency. Youth also develop individualized transition plans that they share with adults during youth-led planning meetings, and each youth identifies and enlists the support of an adult ally or two by developing a partnership plan with the adult(s).

Mentoring workshop topics are selected by youth, focusing on issues such as employment, postsecondary education, exiting foster care, and leading a transition meeting. Workshops typically involve 8-20 youth and include large and small group activities to facilitate participation. Each workshop includes information sharing, a facilitated activity (e.g., fun role play of a youth-led meeting), and an informal recreational and networking activity (e.g., laser tag). Workshops are held at various community locations convenient and of interest to youth (e.g., college student union, local career center, foster care Independent Living Program), and youth are provided with logistical support to attend (e.g., a ride or support to take public transportation, scheduling workshops at different times as well as offering one or two additional workshops to increase opportunities for employed youth to attend).

The MLM was adapted for young people in foster care from an approach originally experimentally validated by Powers, Turner, Phillips & Matuszewski, 2001a, Powers et al., 2001b with students in foster care who received special education services. To date, three longitudinal randomized controlled trial (RCT) studies have documented promising outcomes of the model for youth exiting foster care. The first MLM pilot study included 69 young adults in foster care in foster care who received special education services and was evaluated using a two-independent groups X 3 repeated measures design with a 12-month intervention and one-year post-intervention follow-along. The intervention group achieved significantly greater gains in self-determination, quality of life, transition planning, and performance of independent living activities, compared to the control group (Powers, et al., 2012). A subsequent longitudinal RCT evaluated the efficacy of the model, delivered over nine months, on the secondary and transition outcomes of 123 high school students in foster care who received special education services. Findings revealed significantly greater gains for the intervention group on indicators of self-determination, engagement in educational planning, school performance, postsecondary preparation and reduced anxiety and depression (Geenen et al., 2013). The third study adapted the model to focus on preparation and participation in postsecondary education by youth in foster care who experienced mental health stressors; the model was supplemented with an on-campus summer institute that exposed participants to the world of college, and all the coaches had lived experience in foster care and/or in living with mental health stressors (Phillips et al., 2015). Significant differences were found in favor of the intervention group from baseline to six-month post-intervention follow-up on higher education participation (73% vs. 36%), as well as measures of postsecondary and transition planning, self-determination, mental health empowerment and hope (Geenen et al., 2014).

Currently, the model's impact on transition outcomes is being evaluated through a mixed method explanatory sequential design study, featuring a longitudinal experimental study coupled with a qualitative study, described herein, of the perceptions and experiences of ten youth who successfully completed the intervention and demonstrated increased baseline to term scores on self-determination and quality of life. Given our previous promising outcome findings, a major aim of the study was to qualitatively investigate critical elements and processes in intervention delivery that appear most important for self-determination enhancement. While substantial validation exists around the benefits of self-determination, little information is available that describes precisely how self-determination enhancement approaches such as the MLM actually engage and support youth toward taking charge of their lives, particularly from the perspectives of youth. This article details key themes that emerged in youth's perceptions of important processes and experiences associated with their participation in the MLM, and their suggestions for improvement.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

The ten participants of the qualitative study were recruited from a larger sample of 111 youth who were randomized to the intervention group of a longitudinal RCT study of intervention outcomes and who completed the one-year intervention. Eligibility for the

overall longitudinal RCT study was defined as being in the guardianship of DHS Foster Care for at least 90 days prior to study enrollment, between 16.5 and 18.5 years of age, and residing within the study's tri-county geographic area. Youth were eligible to participate regardless of mental health or disability diagnosis or school status (in or out of school). The only exclusion criteria were having a placement that did not allow access to the community to work toward goals (e.g., youth was in a 24-hour, locked residential facility or incarcerated) and being able to communicate in any form a "yes/no" choice (e.g., ability to use words, gestures or sounds to indicate a basic self-determined preference), as required for the intervention. Additionally, on a few rare occasions case workers requested that a youth not be invited to participate (e.g., mental health crisis, preparing to move out-of-state). Recruitment was accomplished in partnership with the DHS project liaison, who identified all potential participants from the DHS database and contacted each youth and their foster parent and caseworker to overview the study. Those interested in learning more were introduced to a researcher who provided additional information, answered questions and invited a youth's informed assent and DHS guardian consent. Over 90% of potentially eligible youth elected to participate in the RCT study.

The qualitative study was conducted during the follow-along period of the RCT study. The participants were youth who had increased scores on the Arc Self-determination Scale (Wehmeyer, 1995; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995) and the Quality of Life Questionnaire (QoLQ, Schalock & Keith, 1993) from baseline to post-intervention; both measures were sensitive to the intervention in the earlier My Life study (Powers et al., 2012). Additionally, to ensure the study captured youth's perceptions of the wide range of coaching styles, each of the 10 youths selected had a different intervention coach (10 coaches). Our goal was to select a small number of participants who had different coaches and seemed to have benefited from the intervention for an in-depth inquiry into their experiences around the model, and to capture their perspectives on what was most helpful, what could be improved, and the nature of the intervention's continuing impact on youth as they navigated their lives during the follow-along period. The study was reviewed and approved by the University's IRB and study procedures, risks, and benefits were carefully explained to each youth; all 10 youths approached for the qualitative study agreed to participate and assented on the consent form; as the legal guardian, the Child Welfare agency provided consent.

At the time youth started the intervention, four were 16 years of age, two were 17 years old, and four were 18 years old; six of the participants were male. Half were young people of color, half were in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, four youth were behind in credits and eight received special education services for learning, emotional, cognitive, autism spectrum and other health issues; three of these youth also received Developmental Disability Services. Eight of the youth resided in non-relative foster care placements, with half experiencing at least one placement change in the past year; total length of time in foster care prior to study entry ranged from 7 months to 17.7 years. Information about youth's experiences in foster care (e.g. placement type, number of placements, etc.) was based on youth self-report and confirmed by data from the state's child welfare administrative database. School data (e.g. special education status, primary disability, grade) was obtained from educational records.

## 2.2 Data Collection

Youth participated in a two-part interview. In phase one, they met one-on-one with an interviewer from the project and in phase two, their former coach from the My Life study joined the youth and interviewer while the youth was asked additional questions about components of the MLM. The purpose of phase one was to first gather information from the youth based on their own recall of their experiences during intervention. The purpose of phase two was to support youth's recall of their activities and experiences with their coach and peer mentoring. During phase two, the coach participated in the interview to listen and offer the youth further details that might help the youth elaborate on their recall of the experience. Youth were notified at the time they assented to be in the qualitative study, and then reminded again that the primary goal of the interview was to learn about their experiences, opinions and perspectives on MLM coaching and peer mentoring, and their coach would join the latter part of the interview as a resource to help the youth recall some of the things they did in My Life; all youth expressed interest in having their coaches join in.

Each interview started with open-ended questions, followed by more specific questioning that encouraged youth participants' elaboration of key points (Patton, 1990). Each phase of the interview took approximately 45 minutes with a break in-between. The interviewers were graduate students; each had training in interview techniques and experience in gathering other data for the project. Prior to beginning the study, rehearsals were conducted with the interviewers to review strategies for building rapport with the respondents, for asking follow-up questions and for providing interview accommodations for youth with communication challenges. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim; participant names and other identifying information were redacted from the transcripts.

Interview questions invited participants to share: (a) key experiences during the intervention; (b) their views of the different components of the MLM; (c) and their perspectives of the impact of participation on their lives, post-intervention. Questions included: "Can you talk a little about what you want for your future? How much will your experience in My Life help you? Anything else that could have helped you more? What did you like about your coach? What didn't you like? What did or didn't you like about the mentoring workshops - meeting other youth in care, meeting with the mentors, workshop activities? Did anything change for you after being in My Life? Would others say you are different? If so, how?" To promote recall, the interviewer began by helping the youth to create a timeline of key events during the period when the youth participated (e.g., youth's birthday, start or end of the school year, etc.).

## 2.3 Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed by the interviewers and study investigators. A three-pronged, iterative approach was used to capture a detailed understanding of the experiences and perspectives participants had around the intervention, and to identify key cross-cutting themes that emerged across the youth. Transcripts were coded using established ethnographic and content analysis techniques (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Themes were identified and recorded within and across each youth's transcripts according to the constant-comparative procedures described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The data units were



computer-sorted by category and initial categories were expanded to accommodate new themes that emerged. Transcripts were reviewed by a primary and secondary coder to offset possible coding biases, and each coding disagreement was discussed until an agreement was reached. The interview team had a series of meetings to discuss unique and cross-cutting themes emerging across the youth. Some adjustments were made to theme definitions to facilitate consistent labeling of similar themes across the transcripts. Theme saturation was judged to have been reached across participants. Data trail procedures allowed for a follow-up audit to confirm the verifiability of the findings.

### 3. Findings

Themes emerged related to the central importance of youth-direction, elements and processes in the coaching relationship, self-determination skill development, role of experiential activities and peer mentoring experiences that youth identified as important for their success.

#### 3.1 Centrality of Self-direction

The theme of self-direction was consistently woven throughout all the interviews. Desire for increasing self-direction was alluded to as a reason for youth's decisions to participate in the MLM, was referenced as an emerging value underlying youth's actions, was identified as central to youth's self-attributions of success, and was described as fuel for their continuing growth and building partnerships with allies. For example, when asked why they joined My Life, several youth referenced their interest in self-direction from the very beginning, offering general statements such as, "It was really kind of to help me focus my life a little bit better," and "I wanted to be more independent." One youth articulated his reasons more specifically by saying, "I had this huge motivation back then to live on my own, have a job, because I was sick and tired of living with others, and the foster care system and all that... And I have a job now."

**Value for self-direction**—Regardless of their initial motives for participating, all youth expressed their increasing value for self-direction in conjunction with participation, and several youth specifically recalled how their participation in the intervention catalyzed their growing desire for self-direction. As described by one youth:

Everything was there, but it is just the fact of me getting the will to stand up and do it. That was the only piece. That is basically how it was with me in high school, when it comes to a job, getting my driver's license, basically everything. It is just me getting the will to get up and finding the worth in doing it, and doing it... The mentoring motivates you, throws out opinions, gives you all these options and ideas... The coaching is kind of like where it tells you all these things that you do need to do, if you want to be successful, no ifs ands or buts.

A second youth stated, "Before I wasn't self-motivated, really. I mean, I was self-motivated in a way that I want to do this and I want to do that, but I was never self-motivated to where I am going to do it right now." A third youth affirmed, "Yes, the youth is in control. This is

something that every youth should know... It doesn't matter the actual age, they have the right to voice their opinion of what they want."

**Taking action**—Similarly, many youth recalled their pleasure in setting and accomplishing goals: "It is worth making goals, new ones, and accomplishing those. I just like having that accomplished feeling." When asked what he was most proud of from the previous year, another youth responded, "Just planning ahead and setting goals, setting goals that I need to do for school and after school. Then just setting goals for every day."

Youth reported achieving a wide range of self-identified goals, such as passing a class, getting a job, changing foster homes, passing the test for a driver's permit, and finding an apartment. As described by one youth, "I planned out things for my career. Went to Job Corps and looked at their program." Another youth said, "Graduating from high school. I think that was my biggest accomplishment. That was the goal I was going for and that is what I achieved, and getting my permit." Youth expressed pride in their persistence around pursuing goals:

If it is really, really something I want – like when I wanted to go to [school name], it was like I spend half a day at the school bothering them about letting me go back [to school]. I had this call about a day and a half later saying we have accepted you. They said this kid is the first person who has ever come in to apply for herself.

**Self-attribution of change agency**—Many of the participants demonstrated impressive capacities to reflect on their development of change agency and confidence. One youth stated, "I started paying for stuff with my own money. That was one of my goals that I achieved. I am proud of myself." In reflecting on her growing self-direction, another youth reflected, "Yeah, that was my biggest weakness and now it is probably one of my medium strengths."

**Self-identifying allies and supports**—Youth were encouraged to identify allies and broaden their support networks. Coaches worked with youth to apply key self-determination skills such as asking for help, negotiation and schmoozing to build relationships with adults, and they helped youth to identify one or two key allies with whom they could create written partnership plans outlining concrete ways allies would support youth as they transitioned out of care. A youth noted that while it was difficult to directly ask for support, it was helpful: "They [my allies] said sure. Then added on to my [partnership plan] – that I could also, how do I say that, I have another place I could go during my breaks and holidays like that." Commenting on having the arrangement with an ally clearly delineated in a partnership plan, a youth noted, "Just it was easier, like in the future, to read that I have this and this and this, instead of thinking about, oh, three years ago we decided on this and I can't really remember what it was."

### 3.2 Critical Coaching Elements and Processes

Youth generally described their coaching experiences in line with the MLM's focus on providing a youth-directed coaching experience, featuring interrelated elements of relationship, didactic and experiential support. A youth described the integration of these

forms of support as, “They [the forms] seemed equal because we did it all along the way, relationship building while doing these activities and learning skills. ...Doing activities and learning skills were kind of combined. We would use learning skills to do the activities and vice versa.” Key subthemes and processes in providing these three types of support are detailed in the following sections.

**3.2.1 Youth-directed Coaching Relationship Support**—Relationship formation was often cited as the factor that promoted youth ‘buy in’ to participation: “If we didn’t try to have a relationship, I wouldn’t probably have been meeting with her, making goals, because we wouldn’t have had things in common. She wouldn’t really understand me, so I wouldn’t want to interact with her.” Another youth stated, “The relationship...is always important because if you really have a bad relationship, those things [activities and skill building] are not going to work out.” A third youth reported, “I don’t usually feel comfortable talking to certain people about certain things, and just being comfortable with my coach made it better. ...It made it easier for me to ask her for help...”

**Nonjudgmental acceptance, trust and respect:** Knowing that they would be respected for their choices, no matter the coaches’ personal feelings, was impactful for youth: “If I wanted to do anything she would say, go ahead, jump off that building, just don’t hurt yourself. It was that type of thing. I like being encouraged by other people even when they don’t think it is the best idea, but if it is something that I personally want to do for myself.” A youth shared how acceptance from his coach was different from other adults, “She wasn’t trying to control my life. She was giving suggestions, not demanding. She was supportive of how I felt toward things, and what I wanted.” Another youth highlighted the importance of knowing his coach did not read agency treatment files before they began working together (a MLM guideline), reporting that his trust of the coach, “...wouldn’t have felt as strong, because it would just feel like you know everything and it didn’t seem like you would care as much.”

**Consistent and reliable support:** Youth appreciated the consistency with which they were able to meet with their coach each week, with one youth saying, “...I developed this trust toward her, because...the consistent thing. I knew that I could always rely on her to help...” Several youth said that their coaches were easily accessible; available by phone and text outside of scheduled meetings, willing to schedule more than one meeting in a week when a youth needed extra support, and willing to drive to meet a youth who had moved or was working out of town. One youth described a particularly stressful day and the importance of being able to connect with her coach: “...I texted a message to [my coach] saying will you call me as soon as you can. Then she called me right way and said, ‘What’s going on?’ I just told her everything and she was like, I’m in a meeting right now, but if you need me to come and get you, I will. She offered her help more than anyone else I know would really do...I felt like I had support, a reliable person.”

**Transparent/honest communication:** Youth suggested that forthright communication by their coaches about their experiences and feelings was very useful. For example, one youth reflected that her coach, “was really laid back and honest with me. I never really had

somebody be that honest, you know, to the point where they are telling me exactly how they felt or how they thought. Everybody else just kind of sugar-coated it or brushed it off – ‘Oh, it is nothing.’ She actually told me straight up.” Youth also expressed appreciation of their coaches allowing for different points of view and candid discussions about their differences. One youth shared, “She supported me all the way through. If she thought something was a bad idea, she gave me her opinion, good valid opinions, instead of just, ‘Oh, I don’t like it’. She actually gave me legit reasons.” During the dyadic portion of the interview, coaches echoed the importance of highlighting and respecting a youth’s growing capacities to consider and make decisions. A coach recalled, “I remember suggesting that we go to a store, because you are also working on budgeting at school. I remember it was a situation where you didn’t really want to do that, so you told me, no, I don’t want to do that... I thought that was really cool.” Another coach recalled, “We (the youth and I) were going through something with different opinions. That was probably the maddest, about as frustrated as we got with each other. We didn’t have to brush it under the carpet. We could talk about it. I could talk about, ‘Okay, these are the things I’m worried about and this is why I feel that way.’”

**Compatible personality and shared experience:** Youth noted specific characteristics that they valued in their coaches like having a sense of humor, being fun and outgoing, having helpful knowledge about aging out of care, and modeling confidence and assertiveness. They also emphasized benefits of their coaches having similar experiences or backgrounds that allowed the coach and the youth to relate to one another (e.g., being a parent, having personal experience in foster care, similar cultural background, disability or mental health experience). A youth of color explained that it was particularly important that she had a coach with shared racial background: “I don’t know, I just wasn’t really trusting other races like that. I was kind of like [inaudible] to people who were of my culture because I feel they understood me the most and cared for me the most. I don’t know, an African American coach, for me, was perfect.” This youth also shared that her coach’s disclosure of having been in foster care contributed to her decision to participate:

One day [the coach] called me, ‘Hey, I want to meet with you, I’m your mentor.’ I was, ‘No, I’m busy now, no, no.’ One day she just said, ‘Where are you at?’ I said, ‘I’m over here’ and she shows up.... She let me know a little bit of her personal life [experience in foster care], and how she got to be with the program.... To me, I felt she was kind of another me, but just an older version of me. With her, I got a lot of accomplished, more than I got with anybody else...

**Relationship reciprocity:** Youth shared that they valued the reciprocity and fluid boundaries experienced in their coaching relationships. Contrary to more traditional approaches, where the coach functions as teacher and the youth as student, both youth and coaches recalled important instances where the youth was the one to impart knowledge and information to the coach. The impact of this role reversal and power shift was apparent in a simple exchange during the interview between a youth and his coach around driving directions:

[Coach] When we first met, I was taking you up to [community program] and you were giving me directions, and I didn't listen to you and made a wrong turn. I got us super lost, but then you were able to get us back. It was kind of this moment for me as a coach, like, hey, this guy knows what's going on. I need to listen to him.

[Youth] I am going to be your coach now.

[Coach] You are totally my coach. You were totally the coach in that moment. You were telling me which way to go. I should have listened because you were totally right, totally right. Alright, I'm going to listen to this guy, because he knows what's up, he knows what's up.

[Youth] I am the man.

**Logistical support:** Youth recalled coaches provided important logistical support and accommodations. For example, a youth noted, "I came up with the idea and she wrote it down for me." Another youth discussed the importance of having a coach provide transportation and fit in coaching around their busy schedule: "She helped me, picked me up, took me to work, especially on times when I had lunch, I wasn't able to meet for the week because the schedule was crazy. She still came to me, we met for 30 minutes, almost an hour." A youth interested in getting a job said, "Not only did she [my coach] help me [inaudible] but she is out there for hours on Craigslist for me, would print out a list of job applications for me all the time. I wouldn't even ask her." This basic support in times of need helped facilitate a deeper relationship for some youth and coaches. A youth who was unexpectedly hospitalized shared, "People who said they were there for me didn't come to the hospital and check in on me like they were supposed to. And [my coach] came, brought me food, she was willing to help me find resources and stuff... That is why I kind of put [my coach] in the category of being my family, because she didn't have to come to the hospital when I was having complications."

**Support for efficacy and action:** Youth alluded to support they received in gaining confidence in their capacities for self-direction and taking action in their lives. They recalled various forms of motivational, conceptual, tangible and other support for self-direction received from their coaches. A youth reflected, "She motivated me to actually want to look for a job. Like I said, I wasn't really doing much before I met her. I wasn't really paying that much attention and I didn't really give a shit. She kind of influenced me and kind of gave me a little push and actually made me want to do for myself... Just helped me believe that what I liked I could do." In recalling the coach's support during community activities, another youth shared, "It was easier to have someone there with me...because if I didn't have [coach], then I probably wouldn't have done as much as I did."

In sum, this unique combination of coaching features—nonjudgmental acceptance, trust and respect, consistent and reliable support, reciprocity, compatible personality and shared experience, logistical support and support for efficacy and action—appears to have enabled coaching relationships to develop that youth often identified as more meaningful and useful than they experienced with other professionals. One youth described her coach as "...a

professional friend”, while another shared, “Most of the adults in my life are people that are real “businessy”, so to speak. It is hard for me to get along with some of them and I more or less just tolerate them. [My coach] is a lot like my friend...”

**3.2.2 Self-determination Skill Development**—Youth also reflected on their learning and development of meta-cognitive self-determination skills. One youth shared, “I guess the skill learning, the skill building ... that was definitely a big part of it.” Their perspectives varied as to whether they preferred to work directly from their written youth guide or to have the coach verbally introduce the information. For example, one youth reflected, “It is easy, if you actually just read the curriculum, it was a lot easier than trying to do it by yourself a lot of the time.” That youth’s coach recalled, “With [youth name] it was really easy to work in the curriculum, because I could pull the book out and kind of flip through and it would be like, let’s do these things.” Another youth preferred to use her coach as a resource: “When they ask you questions...or whatever, I am like, ‘Oh, well, [my coach] will know. I’ll just ask you.’ She is the manual for My Life.”

Self-determination skills were not introduced in a predetermined sequence but rather were integrated into natural opportunities and real-life situations that emerged. For example, in the context of wanting to save money, a youth learned to identify and list the key activities needed and to narrow down the list to the most important steps for achieving the goal. As described by a youth:

Say I wanted to save some money so I could get a sweater or shoes or something. She would draw up a plan and said, ‘Okay, in order to do that, what do you have to do here, how do you do this?’ I was like, ‘Okay, that helps.’ She helped me draw a more solid plan out, instead of just panicking and worrying about it...It was really helpful...I didn’t realize how well that really did help me until I actually did it. I was like, ‘Oh, I’m not worried anymore. I did that by myself.’

Another youth reflected on how her coach positively labeled her use of a skill during an activity:

Basically, she [the coach] was there for one of my interviews, and she was, ‘You do a lot of schmoozing.’ I was Schmoozing, what the hell is that? So basically that is how that started...It was a skill I already knew, evidently.... Cool, I thought it was just me being nice, but it is legitimate, cool...I feel awesome.

If an opportunity to introduce a skill did not naturally emerge, youth said their coaches sometimes introduced it through role play or a hypothetical situation:

We were just playing. We weren’t serious. We were like, let’s do this exercise on making decisions. What shall we do? Let’s pretend like getting the hair [extensions] and what do you need to do to get the hair [extensions]. We will save the money and then we talked about it and problem solved it.

**3.2.3 Experiential Activities**—Youth generally agreed that if coaching had only involved talking with an adult, it would not have been as effective for them. One youth described coaching as, “...a therapy session without the therapy, if that makes sense...” and another

explained, "...It was easier to learn [by] going out and doing this stuff than just talking about it and sitting around doing nothing other than talking and talking..." Another youth said that if she and her coach had not gone out and done activities together, "...I probably would have left the program early, and I would have been really, really, really bored. I am an active person. I am hands-on..."

Naturalistic learning and achievement occurred for youth as coaches supported and encouraged them to take the actions needed to accomplish their self-identified goals, integrating their use of self-determination skills as the circumstances allowed. Youth reported that although taking actions and practicing new skills had been difficult for them at first, they were glad to gain experience managing challenging situations:

...I never had the courage to do [things] such as seeking employment... I was nervous to go in there and ask them what it takes to work here. [The prospective employer] just started hammering me with some answers, and I was like, 'Okay'. Then the next day I put my resume in. That was pretty cool. I accomplished it. I succeeded. That was awesome...

One youth described trying a new skill in real-life with their coach present, then "...after that I got used to it. Once you get used to something you can't let it go..." Another youth said: "...I had the coach showing me how to do things. When she left, I was able to take everything I learned from her, the way that she did everything, and turn it into what I need to do for myself, and try to at least become better..."

Youth said another benefit of doing activities in the community with their coach was the coach being there to encourage and celebrate accomplishments with them. One youth reflected, "It makes it a lot easier to be able to have someone there to explain it and understand it with you, and to make sure you are doing these things on time. It makes it a lot of fun when you are completing things with someone instead of by yourself. When you have another person there, they give you encouragement and kind of celebrate it with you that you did a good job ..." Another youth specifically described how her coach modeled skills that she later adopted:

...I learned how to do it on my own, like how to go and research it, like housing and calling certain numbers and if they could help me with my son. I started to see how [coach] found this resource and how to deal with [inaudible], and try to think about it and do it on my own. I was, 'Oh yeah, I mastered that. I know how to do it now.' So, if I need any help in the future, I can just go and search different programs and things and feel comfortable. Modeling, a lot of modeling.

Lastly, a youth described how having done activities to accomplish incremental goals gave him hope about accomplishing further goals:

Before I didn't really think I would accomplish getting my ID. I didn't really think about even having a job, because my mom supported me all the time. I was never expecting to have those things. I really didn't expect even to get this far. But then, [as coach and I started doing things] everything was coming along, so okay, I got my ID out of the way. That is one thing I got accomplished. Oh, I am going to get

my driver's test. That is something I failed but I accomplished [still tried]. WIC, I got that out of the way. So if I can accomplish one thing, and then one thing went to another thing, that made me feel that I had hope that I could do it...

**Youth-led meetings:** One required activity for enhancing youth self-direction was preparing youth to lead a team meeting with identified key natural supports and professionals. Youth prepared for the process by planning for their youth led meeting(s) with their coaches, preparing to discuss accomplishments, future goals, any support the youth wanted from the team, and strategies for addressing concerns team members might bring up in the meeting. Youth had opportunities to role play with their coach or at a mentoring workshop before leading their meeting. In reflecting on role playing, a youth recalled, "It made it a lot easier for me to learn that way, so for when I did my own thing like that, for the real part, I kind of understood what was going to happen and it made it a lot easier and not as stressed." In preparing for the youth led meetings, defining ways youth wanted support from adults for their goals was described as a routine practice. One youth explained how she asked adults to be allies during her youth led meeting: "The people I had come to the meeting, I assigned them job-type things. When I opened my bank account, I had my mom help me. That type of stuff, like I gave people jobs to figure out who could help me with what and help pay for stuff."

The experience of leading the meeting was often a catalyst for building self-confidence and reinforcing the importance of allies and social support in accomplishing self-directed goals. One youth recalled feeling "...accomplished... to be able to say what I needed to say and to tell people what I needed." Perhaps most importantly, many youth said they felt acknowledged and they followed through: "I felt all of my needs were heard. Everything I asked for was reasonable. Nobody denied anything, which was good. I'm pretty sure I followed through with everything that I talked about. Most of it has gotten done, which made it a lot easier. It actually felt like there was purpose to the meeting." When youth ran into difficulty getting support in the meeting, coaches helped to facilitate a shift in the dynamic: "My caseworker was really talking and I wasn't speaking up..., [my coach] kind of helped get my caseworker to shut up. She helped break it so that I could actually talk."

### 3.3 Peer Mentoring Elements and Processes

**Connections with peers and mentors**—While a less intensive component of the MLM than coaching, several youth reported valuing relationships they developed with other young people they met during mentoring workshops. One youth shared, "I did like meeting other youth...It was everybody was the same, so I talked to probably every person there at least twice, and then some other people all the time." Another youth reported, "I met a couple of really good friends there. We would just hang out, have fun, talk, just play games or whatnot." One of a few of the participants shared that her connections with some of the other youth extended beyond workshops. "It was like, I guess friends that I never really had because I haven't met them out in the community, so when I met them here, our relationships grew and some of them I hung out with and some of them not so much. It just made my social life a little different, in a good way." Still another participant offered a unique perspective on the personal impact of meeting other youth: "Yes, it made me want to



stand up... Just watching how others suffer and then comparing them to me, and then seeing how this just sucks. People should not be doing this. I shouldn't be going through this. This is not fair, so maybe that is when I actually snapped and actually wanted to start doing research [on child welfare]...making a change.”

Youth's reflections on their connections with young adult mentors revealed generally positive experiences, as well as a few difficulties with mentor's interactions. As with their coaching experience, youth emphasized the importance of mentors having similar life experiences. For example, when one youth was asked to reflect on who would make the best mentor, the youth responded, “If you want something, if you want a certain life, talk to someone who has gone through those similar things, instead of just talking to someone else who doesn't know squat, and just throws out what they think they know.” Another youth reported, “I am pretty sure they have been helpful because they have shared that part of their life and actually thrown out what they have experienced and what they do and what they think.” One youth reported having stronger connections with mentors than with other youth: “I enjoyed meeting them [other youth] and hearing what they had to say and that type of stuff, but I didn't really make any friends. I did enjoy meeting all of the mentors. I had conversations with the mentors.” A differing perspective on some of the mentors was offered by another youth who said, “They acted more like they knew it all and we didn't know anything. However, this youth also reflected positively on her treatment by other mentors: “They [preferred mentors] talked to us like we mattered, with more respect and a neutral tone, so not that they were better than us or were not like they had no respect for us.”

Youth consistently expressed appreciation for being able to choose the focus for mentoring workshops: “I think it was mainly good because they gave us the choices of what we wanted to do.” Some youth reported benefiting from information they gained during didactic sessions. One youth shared, “When it came down to serious stuff that was going around, it was also really helpful information. When it came to jobs, housing, bills, etc., etc., etc., trying to get our future lives all planned out.” However, other youth reported that the workshop information was not relevant to their individual needs, although it benefited some of the other youth: “...everything had a purpose and I understood why they were teaching it... None of it was full of shit which is good. I felt overall, if I would have come in at the same level as everybody else, it would have been more useful to me...”

Youth generally reported enjoying experiential workshop activities (e.g., role plays, college tour) and most youth enjoyed having informal time for socializing and recreation following structured workshop sessions: “I enjoyed the activities that we did.” The fun activities were specifically identified as important for engaging some youth in peer mentoring workshops.

### 3.4 Enduring Impact of Participation

Beyond their participation in specific intervention activities, experiences and accomplishments, many of the youth reflected on their increasing confidence, skill, capacity and life satisfaction. For example, a youth shared, “I am more happy, happier with myself, more confident in what I do and who I am. I don't know, I'm not afraid to go get what I want. Before I would make goals and I just wouldn't do them because I didn't think I could.” A second youth shared, “I learned how to advocate for myself, how to do things on

my own. When I transferred, I ended up doing it all by myself...” A third youth described being able to communicate with allies: “I was able to present myself better and to get to the point of the things that I need to get done, instead of waiting and waiting and waiting for someone to point it out...”

Many youth reported they continued to apply skills they learned and to self-reflect on their needs and goals after coaching had ended: “Practically everything that I’ve learned has become a habit... I use a lot of them [skills] or try to at least, because times I will get over myself, like go too far and I will have to step back and think about it and think about where I want to go and what I exactly want and how to get it.” Others described increasing capacities to manage stress: “I got done with school and I was panicking a little bit because I was like ‘What if I don’t pass?’ I was freaking myself out, and it was like, ‘Okay, this is what I’m going to do instead...’ So, I just talked myself through it and I’m okay now. I’m not worried anymore.”

Youth also described the positive impact of participation on their relationships with others. As one youth noted, “My aunt and I have a really good relationship. Every now and then we are on rocky terms but we talk it out... Instead of being angry and just being like, ‘Okay, I’m done’, I am able to sit down and talk to my aunt when something is bothering me. If she doesn’t agree with me, she will talk to me. I don’t know, we have a good relationship.” Another youth noted the change in his relationships with teachers: “Before I always had bad relationships with them and never talked to them at all. I would always sit back and I would probably have a conversation with them maybe one or two times a year. Now...with one of my teachers I have a conversation every day, and then some other teachers I would have a conversation with [them] once a week or one time every other week.”

Many youth suggested their increasing self-determination would catalyze further growth. As expressed by one youth, “So if I can accomplish one thing, and then one thing went to another thing that made me feel like I had hope that I could do it.” Multiple youth described additional goals that they wanted to pursue. For example, a young parent shared, “I kind of want to further my education more...[and] I want to get my son into school so he can get used to being in school and be better than what I was at his age...” Another youth reflected, “I’ve been trying to think about where I want to [go for college] - first decide which school I want to go to and then I was going to lay down all of my goals and everything for it.” Finally, in summing up the self-perpetuating nature of self-determination, a youth shared, “Instead of being like, ‘Okay, I’m done, okay’, I did what I was supposed to, ‘Thanks, bye.’ It makes me want to be like, ‘What can I continue doing so when I look back and can say, you know, I did a lot?’

#### 4. Discussion

The study findings suggest that youth’s self-determination and positive future trajectories are promoted through key elements and processes that underlie youth-directed coaching and peer mentoring. Fundamental is the value for youth-direction and supporting youth’s efficacy and action in pursuing self-determined goals. Youth clearly affirmed that support for

their transition from to adulthood must be based on the vision that youth themselves hold for their future.

Importantly, this study clarifies that the foundation of a youth-directed coaching relationship appears to rest on a number of interrelated coaching processes: (1) communicating nonjudgmental acceptance, respect and honesty; (2) providing consistent and reliable support, including logistical help and encouragement in preparing for and taking action toward goals; (3) informal sharing of humor, strengths, challenges and common life experiences; and (4) expressing appreciation of the youth's growing capabilities and confidence, as well as for reciprocity in the relationship. Fundamental to relationship development is commitment and perseverance in building trust with youth, many of whom have experienced trauma, have many adults passing in and out of their lives, and are reluctant to make themselves vulnerable in order to engage in coaching. The youth-directed coaching relationship is then scaffolded by ongoing support as youth are carrying out goal-specific activities and managing challenges that stand in the way, all the while strategically encouraging youth's understanding and use of self-determination skills. Also important is the opportunity to spend time with same-aged peers in foster care, as well as more-experienced near-peer mentors who share similar life experiences: these interactions can validate youth's perspectives, can offer hopeful snapshots of what their futures could look like, and can underscore potential strategies youth can use in shaping such futures.

Youth suggested that participating in My Life was a unique experience that empowered them to find a voice, to build confidence and take action toward their futures, and to engage in meaningful relationships with their coaches that were different from many of their experiences with other adults. For many, the skills they developed and the experiences they had with their coaches and in workshops provided a framework for future planning and action, and for feeling more prepared to pursue goals and tackle obstacles or challenges along the way.

Lastly, we were consistently impressed by the abilities of most of the participants in this study to incisively self-reflect on their lives and their experiences with the My Life intervention model. It may be that the decision to recruit youth who had demonstrated a positive response to the intervention on standardized measures resulted in the participation of youth who were particularly insightful. Additionally, the complex and difficult experience of being in substitute care may foster youths' capacities for thoughtful contemplation, while facilitated experience of success and challenges, coupled with skill-building around self-reflection as part of the My Life intervention may specifically support youth in developing awareness of their thoughts and feelings. Further study is needed to clarify the most influential reasons for their seemingly enhanced level of insight.

#### 4.1 Study Limitations

The study findings are useful in highlighting the strategies and processes through which self-determination enhancement can help facilitate positive outcomes for young people exiting foster care, however important limitations must be noted. Foremost, the study was qualitative and designed to examine in-depth the experiences and perspectives of a defined group of youth who positively responded on standardized measures to participation in the

My Life intervention. Youth who dropped from coaching or who did not make substantial gains in the above-noted areas were not included and as such, their unique perspectives around retention of participants or experience of the model may have been missed. That over 90% of all eligible youth in foster care in the region participated in the experimental evaluation study provides some reassurance that the overall sample from which youth in the current study were recruited represented a broad array of youth characteristics and experiences. However, the final qualitative study sample surprisingly did not include youth who reported residing in highly restrictive living environments (group home, therapeutic foster care, residential treatment etc.). This is important given that approximately one-third of all youth who participated in the experimental evaluation study resided in such placements, which often place additional restrictions on youths' communication, community participation and opportunities to participate in self-determined behavior (Schmidt et al., 2013). As such, the perspectives of youth on important factors and unique obstacles to building self-determination and transitioning toward adulthood while living in these settings are missing. That no youth from these settings were identified for the study could be coincidental, however it also raises the question of whether placement restriction could differentially influence response to intervention. Finally, while each youth in the study had a different coach who was assigned primarily based on coach availability and geography, which could speak to the robustness of intervention delivery across staff, we cannot rule out the relative influence of coach-youth matching, which could be more limited in small programs.

#### 4.1 Implications for Practice

The findings suggest that practice models which focus on building the self-determination of youth exiting foster care and which incorporate elements and processes identified by youth as promotive, can facilitate positive growth in transition planning, goal achievement and management of barriers. Too often youth in foster care, as a whole and especially those with disabilities, mental health stressors and other forms of marginalization, have little opportunity to express self-determination, despite the reality that they are expected to soon become as self-sufficient as possible (Schmidt et al., 2013). This unfortunate paradox may be further exacerbated by professionals who lack the understanding and skills needed to effectively support the voices and agency of young people (Thoma, Pannozzo, Fritton, & Bartholomew, 2008).

For those who question the feasibility and merits of self-determination enhancement, this study provides powerful descriptions of how a self-determination enhancement approach can be implemented with positive impact. Additionally, the coaching and mentoring elements and processes identified in this study may be, to some extent, already incorporated in some programs and could perhaps be more effectively provided through adoption of rigorous fidelity monitoring tools and methods, including regular practice documentation and observation, as well as solicitation of youth evaluation input. For programs seeking to operationalize such mentoring and coaching processes, various other strategies for integrating processes program-wide could also be helpful. Such youth-directed program strategies include: a) hiring coaches that have previous experience in providing youth-directed coaching, which encompasses those elements emergent from the findings; b)

seeking out applicants with lived experience in foster care, disability or other characteristics or perspectives most relevant to the targeted youth, along with involving youth in search committees; and c) providing new and existing staff with ongoing training and supervision to bolster and maintain their skills and perspectives toward youth with whom they work. While on one hand, the approaches inherent in providing youth-directed coaching and mentoring may seem like natural facets of quality support, the reality is that providing such support, particularly in the context of supporting youth with complex needs within complex service systems, is often very challenging. A certification training and supervision program has been developed for the MLM with these critical training, supervision and fidelity monitoring needs in mind.

The findings also provide validation of the feasibility of implementing transition planning practices that not only enhance youth voice, but go beyond that to promote coordinated team planning and cultivation of personal allies, all led by the youth. When provided with information, opportunities, skills and support, virtually all youth can voice their goals and identify help needed from others on a youth's service team and in their chosen support network. The findings also suggest that informal relationships between youth and professionals, described as quasi-friendships by many youth, can promote healthy and productive working relationships. In fact, many of the traditional formal methods of ensuring professional boundaries were noted by youth as barriers to working effectively with adults, preventing their full "buy-in" to participation and inhibiting their ability to build trust and honesty. The findings call on us to re-examine the implications of policies such as full guardianship for young adults, ages 18-20, who remain in foster care, and traditional "professional" practices such as reviewing treatment files before working with youth, avoiding personal self-disclosure and texting, and inherently discouraging young adult risk-taking instead of supporting their informed decision-making and safety planning in undertaking activities.

## 4.2 Implications for Research

Despite the literature that highlights the positive impact of self-determination enhancement for young people, little has been available beyond classroom curriculum that details specific processes for facilitating self-determination by individual youth, particularly from the perspectives of youth. This study provides important qualitative evidence of processes underlying self-determination oriented transition support through youth-directed coaching and peer mentoring workshop participation for young people preparing to exit foster care, many of whom also experience disabilities and other forms of marginalization. Further research is needed to quantitatively evaluate the relative influence of these elements and processes on promoting self-determination and transition to adulthood success for large groups of youth in foster care, as well as investigating the potential benefits of self-determination oriented transition support for youth who are navigating other forms of disadvantage such as homelessness, identity-related marginalization (e.g., race, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, gender and disability) and involvement in juvenile justice. Related study is needed to investigate the experiences of youth who do not seem to benefit from interventions such as MLM, identifying those elements and processes that appear helpful and unhelpful, as well as additional strategies which could be integrated within new or adapted models.

Finally, while this research focused on youth ages 16.5-18.5 when they enrolled in the parent study, research on the self-determination of older groups of young people, such as college-aged students, may help to clarify the developmental timing during which self-determination enhancement models may be most useful. Sufficient validation exists of the positive impacts of self-determination enhancement; now it is essential to more clearly understand how, for whom and when self-determination enhancement yields the largest gains for young people who are striving to make positive lives for themselves.

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### Highlights

- My Life model fosters self-determination, achieving goals and managing challenges.
- Effective coaching and mentoring involves supporting youth on self-defined goals.
- Coaching supports relationship, activity engagement and self-determination skills.
- Mentoring based on shared life experience can promote knowledge and confidence.
- Improving transition outcomes necessitates listening to and learning from youth.