

Easing Transition for Foster Youth with Disabilities

At-a-Glance: The transition from youth to adulthood is difficult for youth in the foster care system, and even more so for youth with diagnosed disabilities. They are often unaware of the social supports available to them as adults, how to access these supports, and who to turn to for help. Vocational rehabilitation professionals can play a key role in the success of these young people by using best practices when working with them.

Key Findings

Approximately 40% to 47% of children in foster care also have an identified disability. The abrupt change from the foster system to independence can have negative impacts on earning and education outcomes. Study results showed that:

- Participants who transitioned out of foster care had a household income 35% lower than the general population.
- Approximately one-third were living below the poverty line and had no health insurance, and one-fifth had experienced homelessness.
- Participant postsecondary education outcomes were low. Only 8% of participants completed a postsecondary degree and, by age 25, one-fifth of participants still had not earned a high school diploma or GED.

Putting It into Practice

Encouraging Youth to Meet Transition Challenges

Young adults with disabilities who have experienced foster care have many strengths. With practitioner encouragement, these strengths can be leveraged to help them meet the challenges of transitioning to a stable adult life. Vocational rehabilitation professionals working with these youth can support them by:

- Honoring their resiliency and encouraging them to use it as a strength to overcome difficult situations they might encounter.
- Teaching them self-determination and self-advocacy skills so they can build stable, fulfilling lives.
- Helping them invest in their own futures by assisting with transition plans.
- Identifying financial and housing supports to improve transitional outcomes.
- Working with them to access qualifying services, including mental health supports.

More about this Research

Participants in the study were referred by social workers, independent living specialists, university staff, and youth advocates. They had all received special education or identified as having a disability, graduated from high school or received a GED, been in foster care for more than 6 months during high school, and were between the ages of 18–24.

Limitations:

The sample size was small, and researchers had difficulty recruiting enough people to balance the gender of participants. Youth came from the same geographic area, so those living in other states with different laws may not have had the same experiences. Researchers did not collect longitudinal data, so they were unable to gauge the long-term impact of participant experiences.

Learn More

Access this research by visiting the [Project E3 Research Database](#)

Harwick, R., Lindstrom, L., & Unruh, D. (2017). In their own words: Overcoming barriers during the transition to adulthood for youth with disabilities who experienced foster care.

Children and Youth Services Review, 73, 338-346.

Questions? Feedback?

Do you have questions or feedback about putting this research into practice? We're waiting to hear from you! Send us your [questions or feedback](#).

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Have you tried any of these practices? Have you had success working with these populations in your area? Tell us more and [join our conversation](#).