# Relationships Matter for Youth 'Aging Out' of Care

## Research Report

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This research report is accompanied by:

The *Relationships Matter for Youth 'Aging Out' of Care Photo E-book,* which features the valuable photography work of the co-researchers.

E-Book: https://www.yumpu.com/document/view/59918518/relationships-matter-e-book

AND

The *Relationships Matter for Youth 'Aging Out' of Care Project Video*, which features the co-researchers, the principal researcher, and the collaborative photo exhibit event held at Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Center, on December 18, 2017.

Project video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lmPDZ360ow

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# BACKGROUND & PURPOSE OF STUDY

This collaborative photovoice research project aims to build upon research already implemented in British Columbia on youth 'aging out' of care rather than replicating it. The Vancouver Foundation has conducted research on youth 'aging out' of care through their Fostering Change Initiative, and released two reports in 2016: a cost-benefit analysis on extending government supports for youth in care until the age of 25 published in the *Opportunities in Transitions*; and a report summarizing the preliminary results of the *Youth Transitions survey*. A *Fostering Change Youth Photo Voice Project* was also conducted in 2016 in partnership with the Society for Children and Youth of BC (SCYBC) and young people in care ages 15 to 19 from Abbotsford and New Westminster, focusing on issues related to transitioning to adulthood and the rights of youth preparing to leave care.

By focusing on pathways to long-term supportive relationships for youth 'aging out' of care, this research project contributes to the existing work by adding a social support element to the findings. The research is also timely; a report released in February 2017 by the BC Representative for Children and Youth (BCRCY) titled *Broken Promises* investigates the untimely death of Alex Gervais, an 18-year-old Métis teen who took his own life while in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The report calls to the attention of the BC government the urgent need to pursue permanency for youth in care who are unable to return to their biological families[1].

Research indicates that young people in and from care suffer from systemic marginalization and social exclusion (Stein, 2006); consequently, their voices are often left out of social change conversations. For instance, Abrams and colleagues (2016), found that child welfare social policy is often disconnected from the lived realities of the young people it impacts, and is often aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviours of clients rather than improving the system itself.

With these findings in mind, the focus of this collaborative research project is placed on incorporating and elevating the voices of youth who have 'aged out' of care on issues related to forming healthy, supportive and sustainable relationships with the people who matter to them. It is important to allow for youth from care to define the conceptualization

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[1] For further information on the report and the issue of permanence for youth in care, read the lead researcher's opinion piece published in Policy Options titled *Putting the care back into foster care*: http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/march-2017/putting-the-care-back-into-foster-care/

of supportive long-term relationships themselves, in addition to identifying the pathways they deem as key in establishing and maintaining these relationships.

A project proposal was prepared in spring 2017, in consultation with BCRCY and Vancouver Foundation staff, the Fostering Change Youth Advisory Circle (YAC), and the lead researcher's doctoral committee at McGill University. The proposal was successfully defended in June 2017, and an application to the McGill Research Ethics Board was approved in July 2017.

Given that the Vancouver Foundation has experience with photovoice-oriented projects, the lead researcher drew from the existing resources in the repertoire of the Vancouver Foundation and SCYBC. A list of community organizations to contact for participant recruitment was compiled based on Google searches as well as recommendations from various contacts within the Vancouver Foundation, SCYBC and other contacts within the lead researcher's professional network in Vancouver. The location for the project sessions, Lu'ma Native Housing Society, was recommended by the Vancouver Foundation staff based on affordability and accessibility. Transit tickets for the co-researchers were provided in bulk by the Vancouver Foundation, and access to the Vancouver Foundation office printer was also provided to the lead researcher for printing project materials.

Counselling services were secured from Broadway Youth Resources Centre (BYRC), Lu'ma Native Housing Society and Aunt Leah's Independent Living Skills Society prior to the start of the project, for the participants to access on an as-needed basis throughout the project. A professional photographer, who is familiar with the work of the Vancouver Foundation's Fostering Change Initiative and issues affecting youth 'aging out' of care, was hired to provide the photography training to the co-researchers at the beginning of the project.

The participatory and social justice-oriented methodology framing this project allowed for the lead researcher and young co-researchers to collaborate as a group on the thematic analysis of the photographs and development of concrete recommendations for change in policy, community and intervention approaches stemming from the results. As part of the community action component of the project, the lead researcher and interested co-researchers will continue to engage with the BC Representative for Children and Youth for follow-up on actions taken to implement the recommendations for change outlined in this report.

# LITERATURE REVIEW:

## Challenges associated with 'aging out' of the child welfare system

Research in the last 20 years in North America and other Western countries has shown that young people in the general population are progressively taking longer periods of time to transition to adulthood (e.g., Arnett & Schwab, 2012, 2013, 2014; Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). This phenomenon, termed by Arnett (2015) as 'emerging adulthood', is associated with young people transitioning to adulthood between the ages of 25 and 29. Research also illustrates that young people are becoming more interdependent on their support networks as opposed to independent from them - they continue to rely on their parents, friends and community for advice, support and comfort throughout their adult lives (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007; Molgat, 2007).

In contrast, youth in long-term government care who have not been adopted or reunited with their biological families are expected to transition to adulthood and become self-sufficient quite rapidly. This is due to provincial legislation across Canada mandating child welfare agencies to release youth from their care at the age of majority. (Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, 2011; Mulcahy & Trocmé, 2010; Reid & Dudding, 2006). According to national estimates, approximately 10% (6,700) of the youth in care population transitions out ('ages out'[2]) of the Canadian child welfare system every year (Flynn, 2003). In British Columbia, approximately 1,000 youth 'age out' of care on a yearly basis at age 19 (Vancouver Foundation, 2016).

The requirement for youth to leave state care at the age of majority and transition to adulthood is much earlier than the transition timeframe of most of their peers. This accelerated transition to adulthood has been shown to affect the ability of youth in care to self-focus, and limits their ability to build human and social capital[3] to support them throughout adulthood (Courtney, Hook & Lee, 2012; Singer & Berzin, 2015; Stein,

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[2] 'aged out/aging out' refers to youth who have reached the age of majority and are no longer eligible for government care (e.g., foster home, group home or a Youth Agreement for who those come into care after the age of 15). Although it is a label that is not applied to youth in the general population, it is a term that most people who are/have been in care understand, and is widely used in child welfare reports, peer-reviewed articles and in the media. 'Aging out' is in brackets throughout this report to de-normalize the term.

[3] Human capital refers to the skills, knowledge and experience an individual acquires through education and/or the workforce, while social capital refers to the networks of relationships individuals belongs to, which in turn help them function and thrive in society.

2006). According to Stein (2006), it also places an unrealistic expectation upon them of *instant adulthood*, one that many of their peers are not held to.

The following sections provide a summary of the research on key challenges associated with 'aging out' of the child welfare system:

- The outcomes of youth 'aging out' of care;
- The effectiveness of Independent Living Programs (ILPs);
- The institutionalization and lack of agency of youth 'aging out' of care;
- Human interdependence;
- The importance of long-term supportive relationships for youth 'aging out' of care;
- Linkages to social capital theory; and
- Supportive relationship types and dimensions.

## *Emancipation of youth in care at the age of majority: Too much, too soon*

Much of the research done to date on youth exiting care has showcased mixed outcomes of youth in care alumni in contrast to their peers (e.g., Courtney et al., 2011; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Pecora et al., 2006; Rutman, Barlow, Alusik, Hubberstey & Brown, 2003), as well as the efficacies and challenges of independent living programs offered by the child welfare system (e.g., Goyette, 2007; Greeson, Garcia, Kim & Courtney, 2015).

Evidence from North American studies over the past 27 years demonstrate that youth exiting care are at a much higher risk to face a multiplicity of challenges than their peers who are not in care, such as high rates of homelessness, under-education, unemployment or under-employment, poverty, mental health issues and post-traumatic stress, substance abuse and early pregnancy or parenthood. (Casey Family Programs, 2003; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty & Damashek, 2011; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Koegel, Melamidt & Burnam, 1995; Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012; Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007; Tessier, Flynn & Beaupré, 2014). International research in other Western Countries such as the UK (e.g., Stein, 2004; 2005; 2006), Scotland (e.g., Stein & Dixon, 2006), France (e.g., Stein & Dumaret, 2011) and Australia (e.g., Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Mendes, Baidawi & Snow, 2014;

Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004; 2006) reflect similar outcomes as those found in the North American context.

The issues youth face prior to and during their time in care take them a long time to begin to resolve, and pose significant challenges to their ability to transition to adulthood at the same pace as their peers in the general population. Longitudinal studies from the U.S., such as the Casey Family Programs Alumni Study (Pecora et al., 2003; White, Havalchak, Jackson, O'Brien & Pecora, 2007; White et al., 2011), the Northwest Alumni Study (Pecora et al., 2005; 2006; 2010) and the Midwest Alumni Study (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Courtney et al., 2005; 2007; 2011; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010), emphasize that the needs and issues of youth in care do not simply discontinue based on reaching the age of majority or exiting the child welfare system, and persist long after they leave care.

A forced exit from the child welfare system at the age of majority also pushes youth to deal with many drastic life changes all at once. Research demonstrates that youth who deal with the greatest number of life changes in a short timeframe have poorer outcomes than their peers (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Research also suggests that premature emancipation can result in poor outcomes in adulthood, and that an extended time in care may encourage more favourable outcomes (Courtney & Hook, 2015; Courtney et al., 2012; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Dworsky, 2005).

Daining and DePanfilis (2007) found that youth who left care at an earlier age had worse outcomes than those who could leave at a later age. Dworsky (2005) found that leaving care at a later age was associated with an increased likelihood of becoming employed, higher earnings, and a decreased reliance on public assistance. Recent analyses by Courtney and Hook (2015) showcase that, after controlling for a variety of youth characteristics, each additional year in care is associated with a 46% increase in odds for youth 'aging out' of care to achieve a further level of education.

Despite these findings, youth 'aging out' of care today remain at a high risk of experiencing multiple difficulties during this crucial transition time in their lives. Due to fragmented and limited services, many adolescents who have not found permanent placements during their time in care are left to fend for themselves once they leave, and in more than dire circumstances. Unlike their peers who can continue to seek assistance and support from their families throughout their young adult lives, youth who have left the child protection system do not have the option to return to the care of the state in times of difficulty.

# *Independent Living Programs (ILPs): Lack of focus on social support and relationships*

Impact studies of Independent Living Programs (ILPs) to date suggest that such programs are inadequate and do not produce the intended outcomes for youth leaving care (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, Thompson & Courtney, 2015; Greeson, Garcia, Kim & Courtney, 2015; Zinn & Courtney, 2015). For instance, Greeson, Garcia, Kim, Thompson and Courtney (2015) found that participants in a life skills training program in LA County, California experienced a reduction in social support over time, with the program having no positive impact on their social support trajectories.

In another study on the Outreach program for youth in intensive foster care in Massachusetts, MA, Greeson, Garcia, Kim and Courtney (2015) found no short or long term impacts of the program on participant outcomes. In their study of an employment assistance program in Kern County, California, Zinn and Courtney (2015) found no statistically significant program impacts on any of the employment and self-sufficiency outcomes of the participants.

Since outcomes studies demonstrate that under half of youth in care graduate from high school (OACAS, 2010; Rutman et al., 2007), it is no surprise that ILPs, which are most often offered in a classroom setting, demonstrate inadequate outcomes in relation to their impact goals. The literature suggests that classroom-based ILPs may not be an appropriate instructional approach to prepare youth in care for independent living, and more relationship-based services such as mentoring and social support are needed (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, Thompson & Courtney, 2015; Greeson, Garcia, Kim & Courtney, 2015; Zinn & Courtney, 2015).

It is also noteworthy that most ILP impact and evaluation studies do not incorporate the voices of youth in care, but rather focus on program components, staff experiences, and demographic and outcome measures (e.g., Dworksy & Perez, 2010; Georgiades, 2005; Lemon & Hines, 2006). These research approaches limit the ability of youth in care to define their own needs, goals and expectations of success related to their transition to adulthood. Of the limited ILP studies incorporating youth perspectives, youth in care often indicate that emotional support is a crucial need during the transition to adulthood and is often not the focus of ILPs (Rosenwald, McGhee & Notfall, 2013).

Most ILPs tend to focus on tangible self-sufficiency skills (e.g., cooking, cleaning, budgeting, CV writing), rather than on establishing and maintaining social support

networks for youth 'aging out' of care. Youth in and from care also express that ILPs alone are not sufficient to meet their needs, and that ideally support and training should be provided over an extended period by a parental figure (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Yet, policies on leaving care continue to focus on independence as a main target outcome and ILPs as the focus of transition planning for youth 'aging out' of care.

## *Institutionalization and lack of agency of youth 'aging out' of care*

The experience of growing up in and leaving care for youth is often stigmatized and de-normalized with labels such as 'aging out' and 'emancipation' – terms that are rarely applied to their peers. For youth leaving care, the institutionalization of their childhood results in the *'adultification'* (Burton, 2007) of their adolescence. They are expected to prepare for immediate independence upon leaving care and adopt adult responsibilities at a much earlier age than their peers. As previously outlined, the focus on independent living for youth exiting care is unrealistic, as most of their peers are not expected to become fully independent at the age of majority. Rather, they are interdependent – they continue to rely on their social support networks throughout their lives (Avery, 2010).

According to Abrams, Curry, Lalayants and Montero (2016), social policy can often be disconnected from the lived realities of the people it impacts, and is often aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviours of clients rather than the system itself. In turn, the policy context can influence the views of self-sufficiency for transition-age youth in care.

Abrams and colleagues (2016) examined two policy contexts in NYC and LA concerning extended foster care through focus groups with 21 youth in care between the ages of 18 and 22. The researchers found that in both contexts, youth identified self-sufficiency mainly as economic independence and planning for success; however, youth from NYC also indicated that self-sufficiency could be partly achieved through support networks, including social services. While youth in NYC seemed to adopt interdependency, youth from LA seemed to judge extended care as "enabling dependence on the child welfare system" (Abrams et al., 2016, p.10) and found pride in being able to exit care with minimal support. The researchers note that the differences in policy contexts may have influenced this difference in views on self-sufficiency, given that the implementation of extended care services up to age 21 had been recently implemented in LA in 2012, while NYC had implemented extended care in the early 2000s.

Current child welfare policies and practices targeted to youth 'aging out' of care are thus based on standards that their peers who are not in care are not held to, and institutionalize the process of 'growing up' in care. Researchers, policy decision-makers and practitioners need to ensure that the needs, expectations and standards of success are developed and defined by youth 'aging out' of care rather than imposed on them through policies and programs that are based on traditional ideals of the adult majority culture.

Youth in and from care should be encouraged and empowered to define their own success based on the unique context they are transitioning from. This can be supported by including them as decision-makers in their transition planning process, investing in advocacy and mentoring opportunities, involving them in the policy making process, and engaging them as co-researchers through emancipatory and social justice research approaches (Blanchet-Cohen, Linds, Mann-Feder & Yuen, 2013; Dupuis & Mann-Feder, 2013).

## *Reforming the exiting care policy framework: Shifting from independent living to <u>inter</u>dependent living*

As previously discussed, demographic and sociological research has shown that intergenerational interdependence has become the norm in most Western societies over the past 50 years (Beaujot, 2004). Propp and colleagues (2003) note that for much of the youth population, counting on others is considered normal and supports healthy growth and development into adulthood.

Recent discussions in the child welfare literature call for a paradigm shift that involves moving away from self-sufficiency for youth 'aging out' of care toward a more realistic approach focused on human interdependence (Antle, Johnson, Barbee & Sullivan, 2009; Goyette & Royer, 2009; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Propp et al., 2003). Interdependence incorporates values of connection, collaboration and empowerment, rather than complete independence and self-sufficiency (Propp et al., 2003). Although the concept of interdependence is inspired by feminist research and is not new - it has been applied to primary health care of disabled persons since the 1980s (e.g., Condeluci, 1991; Jaggar, 1983; Walmsley, 1993) - it has only recently surfaced in the child welfare literature on youth exiting care.

An approach based on interdependence aims to normalize the reliance of vulnerable populations - such as youth 'aging out' of care - on relationships and support networks during the transition to adulthood, rather than holding them to standards of self-sufficiency that their peers are not held to. A focus on interdependence also emphasizes the importance of both formal and informal support networks for youth exiting care. By providing a safety net in times of crisis, interdependent networks can help youth surmount challenges for which they may not possess sufficient skills, confidence or time to handle on their own (Propp et al., 2003).

According to Antle and colleagues (2009), positive relationships cultivated while in care and afterwards can act as a bridge for youth during the transition do adulthood phase, and can assist them in identifying their need areas and how to access services and supports. Although most youth leaving care tend to have limited support networks compared to their peers who are not in care (Goyette, 2010), they often report at least one person in their lives that they consider important to them (Goyette, 2011; Rutman et al., 2007).

Recent research illustrates the pivotal role social support networks play in the success of youth 'aging out' of care; they can either help reverse or further propagate youth's social exclusion. Daining and DePanfilis (2007) found that youth 'aging out' of care who had little to no support from friends and family were less resilient during and after their transition experience.

Goyette and Royer (2009) found that constructive interdependent relationships were the most likely to positively assist the transition to adulthood for youth exiting care in Quebec. The researchers defined constructive interdependence as youth being engaged in achieving constructive transition goals, with the support and guidance of pivotal informal relationships within their support network. This type of relational dynamic enabled youth to tap into their personal resources, as well as those made available to them by their case worker or other members of their personal support network. Constructive interdependent support networks also encouraged successful integration of youth 'aging out' of care into the professional, residential and family realms. In addition, this type of network was the most likely to produce lasting positive outcomes into adulthood.

However, Goyette and Royer (2009) stress that sufficient time must be allocated to properly develop quality social networks for youth exiting care. They found that only 36% of their sample experienced interdependent relational networks by the end of their

3-year study, which brings into question the timing and length of the transition to adulthood for youth leaving care.

The current dichotomy between the dependence of youth in care on formal caregiver relationships for support and the independence and self-sufficiency goals set by the child welfare system for their transition to adulthood sets them up for failure and further marginalizes their experience of becoming an adult (Singer, Berzin & Hokanson, 2013). A shift in societal attitudes about youth exiting care needs to occur, as they are often seen as underserving of continued support due to behavioural challenges and their distrust in authority figures (Munro et al., 2011).

Reliance on others is considered a normal and healthy part of human development throughout the life course for youth in the general population. Similarly, a focus on interdependence and an investment in sustainable relationships should become the central focus of prevention and intervention strategies for youth 'aging out' of care if we want them to have a fighting chance at experiencing the same level of positive outcomes during their transition to adulthood as their peers.

## *Relationships matter: Examining supportive long-term relationships for youth 'aging out' of care*

As part of the interdependence paradigm emerging in the child welfare literature, recent discussion papers have outlined the importance of seeking 'relational permanence' - or supportive long-term relationships - for youth 'aging out' of care (Samuels, 2009).

Currently, adoption or reunification with biological families are the only acceptable forms of permanence for youth in care, which focus on the "legal and physical aspects of permanence over more relational dimensions" (Barth, 1999 as in Samuels, 2009, p.1230). Relational permanence incorporates less traditional and non-legal relationships, and focuses on core values of "love, emotional support, belonging, safety, stability, and a commitment to life-long continuity in the relationship" (Freundlich, Avery, Munson & Gerstenzang, 2006, p.756). While relational permanence can include traditional and legal parental figures such as biological parents and foster parents, it also incorporates access to people who are important to youth in and from care such as siblings, friends, extended family, romantic partners, and mentors (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010).

According to Stott and Gustavsson (2010), enabling youth in care to develop connections naturally and pursuing and nurturing those connections could be a more effective approach in establishing relational permanence than the current approach of placing youth in potential permanent legal placements and hoping that healthy and permanent relationships will develop. A focus on legal and physical permanence can also result in perpetuating the displacement and impermanence cycle for youth in care, as this pursuit of permanence is often not balanced with the youth's need for stable and supportive relationships (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010).

Research illustrates that foster youth want permanence in their lives and want to feel connected to and supported by people who are genuine and provide them with unconditional love (Sanchez, 2004). In a qualitative study with 25 youth in and from care in California, Sanchez (2004) found that youth identified relational permanence as the "most important type of permanence one can achieve" (p.10) over physical and legal permanence, as they valued emotional stability over the legal recognition or status of a relationship. In addition, youth identified concerns and challenges associated with 'conditional permanence', in that their connections with most of the adults in their lives were on a conditional basis due to professional barriers and boundaries (Sanchez, 2004).

According to Samuels (2008), the perspectives of youth in and from care are often not considered in child welfare policy and permanency planning. Consequently, the current child welfare permanency paradigm generally does not incorporate alternative paths for establishing supportive and permanent relational networks for youth 'aging out' of care, especially those that do not fit within traditional and legal (biological or adoptive) family definitions (Samuels, 2008). As a result, youth who are unable to achieve permanent placement outcomes during their time in care are deprived of permanence in their lives, and are forced to leave care at the age of majority with little to no social support system.

Samuels (2009) highlights the need for research to "explore permanence as a multidimensional and complex construct" (p.1230) that includes relational permanence, and stresses the importance of including the perspectives of youth in and from care regarding their relational experiences and needs. This sentiment is echoed in Sanchez' (2004) study: participants expressed the importance of asking youth in and from care what they want and listening to their needs to empower them to achieve permanency.

Research findings illustrate the benefits of connecting marginalized youth to positive social supports and relationships, such as connections with their community, with peers, adult mentors and parent-like figures in their lives. For instance, Magson, Craven,

Munns and Yeung (2016) found that among disadvantaged youth, a feeling of community belonging was associated with a decrease in risk-taking behaviours.

As for peer relationships, studies have found that they play a substantive role in the development of identity, self-esteem and externalizing and internalizing behaviours of youth in and from care. Thompson, Wojcjak and Cooley (2016) found that positive and pro-social peer connections had a protective impact on youth in and from care; on the other hand, poor quality and deviant peer relationships had a negative impact on youth's adjustment.

In a study with foster youth, Germo, Farrugia, Greenberger and Chen (2011) found that those who were more securely attached to parental figures in their lives had more positive outcomes compared to less securely-attached youth, such as greater life satisfaction and fewer depressive symptoms. These findings are echoed by a study conducted by Duke, Farrugia and Germo (2017) with 99 youth from foster care in California who identified a non-parental adult in their lives who was very important to them. Youth expressed that the relationship helped prevent negative outcomes in their lives by providing them with opportunities for positive life turning points, and made the transition to adulthood easier and more successful due to the increased support received.

These studies on relationships for youth in and from care also support Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital, as supportive relationships may act as a buffer against many of the deleterious outcomes youth experience during and after their emancipation from the child welfare system, such as homelessness, substance abuse and involvement in the criminal justice system (Duke et al, 2017). The linkage between social capital theory and long-term supportive relationships for youth in and from care is further discussed in the following section.

Despite research findings illustrating the positive impacts of relationships and social support for youth in and from care, young people continue to leave care without long-term supportive relationships. In fact, research has shown that nearly half of youth 'aging out' of care do not have enduring relationships with supportive and caring adults (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Greeson, Usher & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010).

In addition, Shook, Vaughn, Litschge, Kolivoski and Schelbe (2009) found that youth in and from care are more likely to have deviant peer relationships, which are positively correlated with engagement in criminal behaviours, mental health issues and

unemployment. It is thus important not only to ensure young people in and from care are connected to the people that are important to them, but to also provide the necessary supports so that the relationships they form are positive, nurturing and enduring.

## *Theoretical framework: Social capital theory*

Coleman's (1988) social capital theory can help us understand the importance of relationships and interdependence for young people, and how those relationships can impact their adjustment and ability to acquire and develop skills (i.e., human capital) as they transition to adulthood.

According to social capital theory, close relationships are an important source of support and resources that can contribute to a young person's growth and adjustment throughout their life course (Duke, Farrugia & Germo, 2017). These relationships, typically grounded in the family context, provide resources such as information channels, establishing shared social norms and values, and creating trustworthy social environments where obligations and expectations are shared and met (Coleman, 1988). Close family relationships, when combined with other types of supportive relationships in the larger community, provide enhanced benefits for young people (Duke et al., 2017).

According to Barry (2011), there are three subtypes of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking. Bonding refers to familial bonds or shared identity; bridging refers to relationships with groups outside of the familial context such as with peers; and linking pertains to the connections established with community agencies that enable young people to access the resources they would have difficulty accessing on their own (Barry, 2011).

When examining social capital in the context of youth in care, research has shown that many youth 'aging out' of care have significant social capital deficits due to the lack of stable family relationships during their time in care (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). According to Avery and Freundlich (2009), the impact of those deficits is heightened when it is accompanied with a lack of support during the transition to adulthood.

While research stresses the importance of bonding social capital in young people's successful development during the transition to adulthood (Avery, 2010), many of the familial connections that youth have prior to and while in care are lacking trust and

reciprocity - core relational characteristics that are required for social capital to be obtained from such relationships (Barker, 2012). Thus, for youth in and from care, it is important to consider sources of social capital that are located outside of the familial context, such as peers, parent-like mentor figures, and community linkages. This collaborative research project aims to contribute to the existing literature by contextualizing social capital theory to the lived realities of youth 'aging out' of care.

## *Supportive relationship types and dimensions*

For youth 'aging out' of care, the transition period to adulthood signifies the ending of certain relationships, coming to terms with relationships from their past and forming new relationships. According to Smith (2011), this period can bring about high anxiety and uncertainty for youth exiting care about the longevity of their relationships, especially if they had limited contact with their biological families or had negative foster care experiences.

To understand relational longevity and the role of those relationships in supporting the transition to adulthood (i.e., ability to produce social capital), it is thus important to consider the various types of relationships that youth 'aging out' of care consider important to them, and the relational dimensions that accompany those relationships.

### Biological families

Research illustrates a range of trajectories or patterns in the relationships of youth 'aging out' of care with their biological families, including reunification, reconnection, and problematic reconnection or reunification (Collins, Paris & Ward, 2008; Wade, 2008). According to Collins and colleagues (2008), due to different definitions of 'family' used in various studies, between 17% to 50% of youth who 'age out' of care reunify with their family of origin after emancipation to assist them with achieving emotional and/or financial stability.

Courtney and colleagues (2010) also found that most youth who 'age out' of care reconnect and maintain connections with their biological families; 79% of youth in their study reported feeling very close to at least one family member 5 years after exiting care. Collins and colleagues (2008) found that youth who had 'aged out' of care had more frequent contact with their biological families than while they were in care, while Wade (2008) found that relationships with siblings and grandparents were stronger than those with biological parents.

However, for many youth who reunify or reconnect with their families after 'aging out', the relationship stressors and circumstances that led to their placement in care are still present, and the relationship can be quite frail. According to Smith (2011), the desire of former youth in care for parental and family connection is at high risk of being rejected, and can lead to a final and painful rupture in the relationship.

For instance, Wade (2008) found that 54% of former youth in care reported relational conflict with their family of origin due to dysfunctional parental behaviours; in some cases, the breakdown in relationship resulted in homelessness. The study also highlighted that former youth in care valued family counselling and mediation services even when not successful (Wade, 2008); however, this relational aspect is often not the focus of independent living programs and transition to adulthood planning.

## Caregivers

Former youth in care who keep contact with their foster parents or social workers have been found to have greater stability through higher employment rates, higher educational achievement, and increased supportive social support networks (Wade, 2008).

According to Smith (2011), caregivers should continue to serve as attachment figures and caring adults beyond childhood and adolescence, so they can provide security and reassurance to youth 'aging out' of care in times of stress or crisis. However, due to the legislated cut-off age for child protection services at the age of majority, most caregivers are unable to continue to provide support to youth after they 'age out' of care; if they choose to remain connected, it is without the support of the child welfare system.

## Peers

According to Smith (2011), peer relationships have a profound importance and meaning for youth 'aging out' of care, who often feel isolated and cut-off after emancipation. Wright and Cullen (2004) found that social environments such as school and work can introduce young people to new and different peers, which can offset previous deviant peer networks by replacing them with more positive ones.

However, Smith (2011) indicates that the social opportunities available to youth 'aging out' of care are often limited, which in turn influence the nature of potential peer

networks. For instance, a former youth in care who is homeless and unemployed will not have the same options for developing relationships with pro-social peers as would a youth who is employed or in post-secondary education (Smith, 2011).

## Natural mentors

Research indicates that the long-term presence of supporting and caring adults through natural mentoring can positively alter the life trajectories of youth exiting care (Ahrens et al., 2008; Britner, Randall, & Ahrens, 2013; Greeson et al., 2010; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). Natural mentoring is an approach that differs from traditional mentoring programs; formal programs tend to use artificial matching strategies between mentor and mentee and have been shown to have moderate positive impacts (Hass & Gradyon, 2009). Natural mentoring empowers marginalized youth by asking them to identify non-parental caring adults from within their naturally occurring social networks, such as neighbours, relatives, teachers, coaches and religious leaders (Britner et al., 2013).

The natural mentoring approach aims to use mentoring to teach independent living skills to youth exiting care in a nurturing manner over time, as parents do naturally with their children (Greeson & Thompson, 2016). This process allows for natural mentoring relationships to become permanent, "even if a court has not legally declared it so" (Greeson & Thompson, 2016, p.2).

Research on the benefits of natural mentoring have illustrated how it can potentially ameliorate some of the risks associated with 'aging out' of care, such as lower stress and depressive symptoms (Munson & McMillen, 2009), increased educational achievement, and decreased risk of homelessness (Collins et al., 2010). Longitudinal studies on natural mentoring during adolescence for youth in care also suggest that the benefits extend into adulthood (Ahrens et al., 2008; Greeson et al., 2010), including a positive impact on employment opportunities after exiting care (McDonald, Erickson, Johnson & Elder, 2007).

Qualitative studies have explored the perspectives of youth in and from care on natural mentoring relationships, including expectations and barriers to forming quality relationships with caring adults in their lives. Ahrens and colleagues (2011) found that former foster youth in their study reported shared interests and having a patient mentor as strengths in establishing effective natural mentoring relationships. Youth also reported that limitations of mentors' interpersonal skills and fears of getting hurt posed barriers to forming such relationships. Youth most often identified receiving support from

their natural mentors in the areas of guidance, emotional support, tangible support and parent-like support.

Other studies found that foster youth identified certain personality traits, such as being funny, honest and kind, and relationship qualities such as trust, love, empathy, authenticity, consistency, longevity, respect and adopting a parent/child approach as vital to a quality relationship with their natural mentor (Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott & Tracy, 2010).

However, research has identified considerable barriers to the facilitation of natural mentoring relationships for youth exiting care. For instance, Lenz-Rashid (2009) found that alumni of care report a general lack of support from their social workers in establishing permanent connections with natural mentors during their time in care. While child welfare workers and supervisors have been found to believe in the importance of natural mentoring relationships, they report that barriers such as their time-limited relationships with the youth they serve, case work turnover and competing responsibilities and duties, tend to take priority over establishing natural mentorships as part of the transition case plan (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase & Ali, 2015).

Potential natural adult mentors have also identified significant barriers that prevent them from engaging and remaining connected to youth exiting care. In a pilot feasibility study of a child-welfare based natural mentoring intervention, Greeson and Thompson (2016) found that while 12 youth in their study could identify natural mentors, only 4 natural mentors participated in the intervention due to lack of willingness or availability. Strikingly, 3 out of the 4 natural mentors identified by youth were professionals who were formerly paid to provide services to them. According to the natural mentors, the main obstacles to becoming engaged with youth consisted of scheduling conflicts, competing commitments, communication and lack of external supports such as transportation and child care (Greeson & Thompson, 2016). The researchers indicate that further research is needed to investigate the barriers and related supports that affect natural mentorship relationships with youth in care.

## Intimate relationships

According to Montgomery (2005), a crucial component of adult well-being is the capacity to have quality intimate relationships, as they support a sense of identity. The internal resources of a young person, as well as early attachment experiences, influence their ability to form and maintain quality intimate relationships (Smith, 2011). For youth 'aging out' of care, this can prove difficult due to trauma and attachment issues developed

before and during their time in care; they often desire and seek intimacy but have difficulty achieving it (Smith, 2011).

According to a study by Colman and Widom (2004), young people who have experienced maltreatment in their childhood have increased dysfunctional relationships compared to those who have not experienced maltreatment. Fears associated with attachment and intimacy can bring forth anxieties, dependency, jealousy, higher sexual risk taking behaviours and infidelity (Smith, 2011). In others, fears of intimacy can bring about avoidant and manipulative behaviours (Auslander & Rosenthal, 2010).

According to Smith (2011), early attachment issues commonly experienced by youth exiting care can lead them to misinterpret certain social cues as hostility or rejection, "resulting in behaviors that can undermine relationships" (p.208) such as withdrawal, hostility and blaming others. These same relational dynamics can also translate in the workplace and with peers, interfering with the ability of youth exiting care to build social capital (Smith, 2011).

While research has shown that young people exposed to family violence during their childhood are at a higher risk of experiencing partner violence (Colman & Widom, 2004), there is also evidence that strong social bonds during the transition to adulthood may reduce this risk. For instance, Lackey (2003) found that an increase in commitment to work or to a partner significantly mediated the negative impact of maltreatment on future partner violence. Another study found that 21% of youth lived with a partner one year after exiting care; however, participants indicated that relationship stability is difficult to achieve and that professional support would be useful in strengthening and improving intimate relationships (Wade, 2008).

## Moving forward

These studies provide an understanding of the risk factors, challenges and reduced outcomes for youth who must exit care without achieving a permanent support network, and indicate that the status quo is not working. These findings also support the argument that we need to think of relationships and the transition to adulthood for youth in care in a different way, by moving away from the current self-sufficiency paradigm to one focused on supportive long-term relationships and interdependence.

Holland (2009) points out that the understanding of key concepts and priorities by youth in care are often different from those reported by adults in their lives such as caregivers,

child protection practitioners and policy makers. Thus, it is important to first and foremost capture the perspectives of young people 'aging out' of care about the relationships that matter to them, as their own perceptions and experiences may vary from what adults might think youth in and from care are experiencing.

# PROJECT DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION

## Research methodology

This project focuses on a qualitative research methodology framework, grounded in phenomenology, to provide an in-depth analysis of the conceptualization of, and pathways to, supportive long-term relationships for youth 'aging out' of care.

Phenomenological analysis explores the lived experiences of a phenomenon, and delves into deeper meanings of the phenomenon through prolonged immersion with study participants who share a common life experience (e.g., youth who have 'aged out' of care) (Padgett, 2008). This approach entails multiple interviews to achieve required depth, which begin with broad and open-ended questioning to build rapport between the researcher and participants and encourage openness (Padgett, 2008). Thematic analysis of the data is conducted to find common themes in the experiences of research participants. According to Padgett (2008), phenomenological analysis is "uniquely suited to leave readers feeling as if they have "walked a mile in the shoes" of the participants" (p.36).

This project adopts a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, by incorporating youth engagement and consultation in all aspects of the research including design, data collection, analysis and dissemination. PAR requires collaboration with those who are affected by the issue being studied, with the aim to build advocacy capacity and affect social change (MacKinnon & Stephens, 2010; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). This approach is rooted in transformative research with oppressed and marginalized groups, and aligns with the objective of this research: to provide a powerful platform for the voices of marginalized youth from care in a social action context.

As a first step in the PAR process, the Fostering Change Youth Advisory Circle (YAC), comprised of former youth in care in the Greater Vancouver area, was consulted in the development of the research project proposal and design. The research proposal was presented at their May 15, 2017 committee meeting, where YAC members provided feedback on the draft proposal.

## *Photovoice (PV)*

Photovoice (PV) incorporates a PAR approach by giving power to the participants as co-researchers throughout the entire research project process. PV is a creative arts-based qualitative research method rooted in feminist theory, phenomenology, and social constructivism (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997). Drawing from documentary photography and filmmaking, PV employs photography and group dialogue - the fusion of images and words - as a means for marginalized individuals to deepen their understanding of a community issue or concern and explain their own experiences though critical reflection and dialogue (Palibroda, Krieg, Murdock, & Havelock, 2009).

This creative method is also an empowerment tool, through which marginalized individuals can work together to represent their own lived experiences rather than have their stories told and interpreted by others (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997). A specific photographic technique is utilized to teach marginalized individuals creative ways to show others the world through their eyes (Palibroda et al., 2009). The visual images and accompanying stories produced by a PV project are dissemination tools that can be used to reach and inform key stakeholders and policy decision-makers through various mediums, including an art exhibit (Palibroda et al., 2009; Wang & Burris, 1997). The aim of PV is to empower participants as co-researchers and advocates for change, and to encourage sustainable social change at the community level.

This research method is a particularly powerful approach in engaging youth who have 'aged out' of care, as they are often socially and politically disenfranchised, isolated and in need of connections to the larger community. While the purpose of PV is to examine serious issues, it also incorporates fun, creative and collaborative research approaches, which can be more fulfilling and encourage young people's willingness to participate (Blackman & Fairey, 2007).

The PV method and PAR approach also provide an opportunity for participant skill development through photography training, critical reflection, group dialogue and analysis, problem-solving, political engagement and advocacy, research, co-authorship, public speaking, as well as opportunities for personal growth (e.g., self-esteem, sense of belonging, self-expression) (Blackman & Fairey, 2007).

The participatory and social justice-oriented methodology of this research project aims to empower youth from care in using their voices, stories and eyes to bring about social change. Co-researchers were supported by the lead researcher in developing concrete

recommendations for change in policy, community and intervention approaches based on the themes that emerged from their photographs.

Also, PV employs creative and sustainable ways to disseminate research results that go beyond a traditional doctoral dissertation, and allows for the translation from research findings to social action to occur. For instance, PV allows for creating public awareness and sharing of research results via a photography exhibit in the community at which friends, family, community members, politicians and key decision-makers are invited to attend. The public, advocates, community stakeholders and key decision-makers are also engaged in the process of change following the exhibit, and co-researchers can choose to continue to work in the community after the PV project activities are completed to achieve a sustainable social impact (Palibroda et al., 2009).

## Study population and sampling framework

Snapshot statistical information provided by the Vancouver Foundation indicates that 305 young people in the Lower Mainland Service Delivery Areas[4] emancipated from government care in 2015, representing 43.6% of the nearly 700 youth who age of care annually in BC and 0.7% of all 18 year olds in the region (Vancouver Foundation, 2015). Since 2015, estimates of youth exiting care annually in BC have increased to nearly 1,000 (Vancouver Foundation, 2016).

This study focuses on young people between the ages of 19 and 29[5] who 'aged out' of care[6] and resided in the Greater Vancouver area at the time of project recruitment and implementation. A focus on a 10-year age range is intentional, to capture a variety of perspectives on supportive long-term relationships as it pertains to the transition to adulthood for youth 'aging out' of care.

Researchers suggest that a group of 7 to 10 participants is the ideal size for a PV research project, as it allows a sufficient variety of experiences and ideas while providing enough time for each participant to contribute to the project in a meaningful

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[4] The BC Lower Mainland is a name commonly applied to the region surrounding Vancouver and includes Vancouver, West Vancouver, North Vancouver, Burnaby, Richmond, New Westminster, Surrey, Delta, White Rock, Langley, Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Anmore, Pitt Meadows, Mapleridge, the University Endowment Lands (UBC) and the Fraser Valley area including Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Mission, Kent, Hope and Harrison Hot Springs.
[5] Age range of 'emerging adults' according to Arnett, 2015
[6] Including foster home, group home and/or Youth Agreement

way (Palibroda et al., 2009; Wang, 1999). A group this size also helps to create and nurture a safe space for participants to share and take part in discussions, as well as nurture a sense of belonging and group commitment (Palibroda et al., 2009). In terms of facilitation, a group this size helps to maintain sufficient time at each meeting to answer questions, address sensitive issues and accommodate diverse learning styles (Palibroda et al., 2009).

The Fostering Change YAC was consulted on August 27, 2017, regarding the sampling framework for this project. It was decided that a convenience sample would be ideal, given that participation in the project was on a voluntary basis. It was also recommended that additional front line recruitment efforts be made through outreach presentations to youth groups and drop-in programs at various youth-serving community organizations in the Greater Vancouver area.

## Recruitment process and sample

This study aimed to recruit a minimum of 7 co-researchers, up to a maximum of 10. Through various meetings and email discussions with community contacts, a comprehensive list of youth-serving organizations and agencies was compiled and used as the base for email recruitment. After obtaining ethics approval from McGill to move forward with the project on July 31, 2017, a recruitment poster[7] was developed with the assistance of a graphics designer, and was circulated electronically via email starting on August 8, 2017 until the end of September. The poster was also regularly circulated on social media (Twitter and Facebook) by the lead researcher as well as Fostering Change and BCRCY.

The lead researcher was featured in an interview on the Fostering Change blog[8] the first week of September 2017 to promote the project and recruitment poster, which was widely circulated on social media. In addition, presentations about the project were given by the lead researcher in early September to youth in care alumni groups at Lu'ma Native Housing Society, BYRC, and Aunt Leah's. The lead researcher also posted recruitment posters at various Community Centres and community-based organizations in the Greater Vancouver Area.

Following an extensive 6-week recruitment process, a 2-hour project information session was held with interested participants at Creekside Community Centre on the

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[7] See Appendix A: Relationships Matter Project Recruitment Poster
[8] http://www.fosteringchange.ca/melanie_doucet

afternoon of Saturday September 23, 2017. Ten young people from care were in attendance, and 9 additional youth expressed interest via email or phone. To ensure interested participants were informed on the social action process of the project, all were asked to attend a full-day Policy Strategy Session hosted by the Vancouver Foundation on September 30, 2017. The Vancouver Foundation provided transportation, child care and food for interested participants, and the day focused on providing information on how policy and government works, what changes are already in place, and managing expectations for change. Out of the 19 interested participants, 9 attended the Fostering Change session, and the lead researcher met with 3 other interested participants who were unable to attend the following week to bring them up to speed.

Based on interested participants' availabilities, the first project session was held the afternoon of Saturday, October 7, 2017 at Lu'ma Native Housing Society. The first session focused on explaining in further detail the expectations of the project, the implementation plan, and informed consent process. In addition, a local counsellor from Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC) came to talk to the group about the importance of self-care and debriefing, due to the sensitive topics that would be discussed throughout the project. 11 interested participants were in attendance, and all provided informed consent and signed consent forms to participate in the project as co-researchers[9].

The co-researcher sample at the start of the project consisted of 5 females, 5 males, and 1 gender non-binary youth. Three youth were aged 19, 2 youth aged 24, and others aged 21, 22, 23, 26, 27 and 30 respectively. While the intended age range for participants was 19 to 29 years, an exception[10] was made for the participant aged 30 given their expressed interest in the project. Six of the 11 youth identify as LGBTQ2+, including one openly trans participant. In terms of ethnicity, 3 youth identify as Indigenous, one as mixed Iraqi and Indigenous background, one as mixed ancestry, one as Jewish (Ashkenazi), one as African-Canadian, and one as Caucasian.

Throughout the project, the lead researcher took the time to meet with some of the co-researchers who were experiencing challenges in maintaining their engagement in the project to provide peer support, listen to their concerns, and work on establishing a trusting relationship. These meetings took place in a public setting, at coffee shops and eateries close to the youth.

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[9] Participants who signed consent forms are referred to as co-researchers throughout the report, as this was a collaborative research project and the youth were engaged as experts.
[10] This exception was discussed and approved by the lead researcher's doctoral supervisor at McGill University prior to the first project session.

In addition, three local counsellors from Lu'ma Native Housing Society, BYRC and Aunt Leah's were available to the co-researchers who wanted to debrief further about any thoughts and feelings arising from the project group discussions and assigned work. This information was communicated at the first session on October 7.

After the first session, the lead researcher decided to book the Amenity Room at Lu'ma Native Housing Society for an additional hour prior to the start of the sessions and an additional hour after the end of the sessions, to allow time for co-researchers to drop by early or stay after the sessions and ask any questions, share concerns, or just hang out.

Despite these ongoing engagement efforts, 3 out of the 11 co-researchers (all Indigenous, one female age 30, two males age 24, one identifying as LGTBQ2+) decided to withdraw their participation from the project after being involved for 6 weeks. The final sample consists of 8 young co-researchers[11].

## Data collection and analysis process

The data analysis process overlaps with the data collection phase, as it takes place throughout the project in a participatory group approach, and continues after the end of the project implementation/data collection phase for further in-depth analysis by the lead researcher. The data collection process began at the second group session on October 14th with the co-researchers who had signed consent forms at the first session on October 7th.

Eleven weekly group sessions in total were audio recorded using a Zoom M5 digital multitrack recorder; co-researchers were informed before the audio recording process began at each session. The lead researcher and co-researchers convened for 2 to 3 hours every Saturday afternoon to examine and discuss the photographs and connect them to the research question and areas of inquiry. An agenda was developed by the lead researcher before the start of each session to keep the discussion on track.

Each weekly group session was transcribed by the lead researcher each week to inform the continuation of the discussion at the following session. Participatory thematic

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[11] Final sample breakdown - Race/Ethnicity: 3 Indigenous, 1 mixed Iraqi/Indigenous, 1 mixed ancestry, 1 Ashkenazi Jewish, 1 African Canadian, 1 Caucasian. Gender: 4 females, 3 males, 1 gender non-binary. Age: 19 (3), 21 (1), 22 (1), 23 (1), 26 (1), 27 (1). 5 of the 8 youth identified as LGBTQ2+, including an openly trans co-researcher.

analyses were completed with the co-researchers during group discussions and throughout the photo selection and analysis process, which have been incorporated in this research report.

Co-researchers were given journals with a lock and key at the beginning of the second session. In this journal, the co-researchers could doodle during sessions to counter anxiety, write and sketch their ideas around the central theme of the project, the photographs they wanted to take to accompany those ideas, and their interpretations of their photographs. Journal entries were shared orally during group discussion sessions at the discretion of each co-researcher, to encourage quieter members to include their voices in the discussion. To respect trust boundaries and the privacy of the co-researchers, the journals remained with the youth at the end of the project and were not collected by the lead researcher.

A check-in exercise was incorporated into each session using a journal with quotes and accompanying questions called *Live in Wonder: A journal of quests, quotes, & questions to jumpstart your journey*. The idea to use this journal check-in exercise came from the Fostering Change YAC, which also used the journal at the beginning of meetings. The lead researcher participated in the check-in exercise with the YAC and found the experience to be profound and powerful.

A check-out exercise was also incorporated into the sessions based on a check-out facilitation exercise commonly used at focus group sessions called *Head, Heart, & Feet*. This exercise entails participant to answer and share with the group, on a voluntary basis, the following three questions: *Right now, what's in your head? What's in your heart? And what are your feet taking away from this session?*

A community agreement was developed during the second session as a group, to establish ground rules for creating a healthy group dynamic and a respectful discussion environment; the agreement was finalized by the third session[12]. This process proved to be a challenge due to varying personalities in the group; while some considered the community agreement to be a valid exercise, some found it oppressive or overly sensitive. After holding discussions about the agreement over two sessions, the lead researcher accommodated concerns by revising some of the wording and making the statements more suggestive rather than directive. For future projects, it would be beneficial to explore incorporating a structured anti-oppressive framework into the project design and training for co-researchers at the start of the project.

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[12] See Appendix B for Relationships Matter Project Community Agreement & Safer Space Guidelines

The photography process began after the second session, where the co-researchers received photography and photovoice training from a local professional photographer. The photographer had prior experience working with youth in and from care, and had an ongoing community presence at various youth in care advocacy events. The co-researchers were given a week to take practice photos, and at the third session the group individually and collectively practiced the photo selection and analysis process[13]. The professional photographer returned at the fourth session to provide feedback and insights on the photographs the co-researchers had taken to date, which the youth found helpful. Co-researchers continued to hand in photographs each week, until session 9.

The project photo selection, contextualization and analysis process began at session 6, and was completed by session 9. Preparation for the community photo exhibit event began at session 5 and continued until session 11. Preliminary thematic coding and analysis of the photographs were completed as a group during session 10[14].

Based on the themes that emerged during session 10, co-researchers decided that they would prepare recommendations for action and change to present to the audience at the photo exhibit; 6 out of the 8 co-researchers volunteered to speak at the event. These recommendations were developed with the assistance of the lead researcher and are included in this report.

The photo exhibit event took place the evening of Monday, December 18, 2017 at Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre. Guest books were provided at the event for each co-researcher/artist, which were located beside their respective gallery wall showcasing their photography work. Attendees could leave feedback for each artist, after providing consent for the use of their comments for the purposes of the research project. The content of the guest books was transcribed by the lead researcher upon returning to Montreal, and the books were returned to the co-researchers via mail.

In addition, a videographer was hired to record the photo exhibit event and develop a project video. After obtaining informed consent, each participant was interviewed on camera, as well as a few attendees from key community organizations and government. These interviews were transcribed by the lead researcher and are included in the results section of this report.

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[13] See Appendix C for Photo Selection, Contextualization & Analysis Process
[14] See Appendix D for Preliminary Group Thematic Coding and Analysis of Photographs

A final group session was held on Thursday, December 21st, 2017 a few days after the photo exhibit event to debrief and conclude the project, as well as to celebrate the accomplishments of the group. Co-researchers provided feedback on the event and overall project, and could read through the comments left in their guest books.

In addition to the audio recordings of the group sessions and video recording of the photo exhibit event, the lead researcher wrote weekly entries in a research journal to keep track of experiences and lessons learned. Upon the recommendation of the co-researcher group for the lead researcher to also participate in the photovoice process, the researcher took photographs and included one photo per journal entry with an accompanying caption reflecting the theme(s) of the weekly entry. This additional data will be analyzed as part of the dissertation writing process.

Co-researchers were also provided with the opportunity to participate in optional individual one-on-one interviews with the lead researcher. This was an option for co-researchers who did not feel comfortable exploring certain topics in a group setting and/or wished to further discuss one-on-one. Three co-researchers opted for the one-on-one interview, which were audio recorded and conducted in a study room at the Vancouver Central Public Library. While the results from these interviews are not included in this report, the data will be analyzed by the lead researcher as part of the dissertation writing process.

## Research ethics

Free, informed and ongoing consent was incorporated into the recruitment and participation processes, and participation was on a voluntary basis. None of the youth opted to remain anonymous, and explicit permission to release participants' identities was obtained for the co-researchers to be publicly recognized for their contributions, be publicly part of the exhibit and engaged in subsequent community and social action activities.

An application to the McGill University Research Ethics Board (REB II) was approved on July 31, 2017. Three additional ethics amendment requests were submitted to the McGill REB II and approved for 1) an amendment to the original participant consent form to include the optional one-on-one interview (approval August 29, 2017); 2) an amendment to the original proposal regarding consent of project co-researchers and photo exhibit attendees to participate in the project video and photographs (approval December 6, 2017); and 3) an amendment to the original proposal regarding the

consent of photo exhibit attendees to use their guest book comments as part of the research results (approval December 6, 2017).

Co-researchers were compensated for their time and contributions to the project with a $10 President's Choice gift card, a catered meal and transit cards at each session they attended, and were gifted digital cameras (Nikon Coolpix), photo canvasses of their photography work and USB keys to store project-related documents and files.

## Project Implementation Plan

The project entailed a significant planning and implementation workload, as the lead researcher undertook most of those tasks in addition to research responsibilities. This included administrative responsibilities such as booking catering for each session, finding and booking a meeting room for the information session and project sessions, finding and reserving the art gallery, planning and coordinating the photo exhibit event, and community and media outreach.

The project implementation planning began in spring 2017 with the development of the proposal and meetings between stakeholders, and continued until the end of the recruitment process (end of September 2017). The project sessions began on Saturday, October 7th and continued each Saturday over the course of 12 weeks until the final debrief session on Thursday, December 21st. The photo exhibit planning[15] occurred throughout the 12-week project timeline, and the event took place on Monday December 18th, 2017.

The lead researcher returned to Montreal on December 24th, and began working on the report in March 2018. For further details on the implementation plan and deliverables, see Appendix G: Project Implementation Plan.

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[15] See Appendix E for Photo Exhibit Poster; and Appendix F for Photo Exhibit Program Pamphlet.

# RESEARCH QUESTION & AREAS OF INQUIRY

## Research Question

> *What kind of relationships are perceived by youth who have 'aged out' of care as supportive of their transition to adulthood, and how can those relationships be developed and nurtured in the long term?*

## Areas of Inquiry

This study, especially the data gathering process, is guided by the following areas of inquiry:

- What do supportive long-term relationships mean to youth who have 'aged' out of care?
- Who do youth who have 'aged out' of care identify as important and supportive people in their lives, and why?
- What are the expectations of youth who have 'aged out' of care pertaining to establishing lasting and supportive relationships with those who are important to them, and why?
- What are some of the barriers and required supports identified by youth who have 'aged out' of care to be able to connect them to and sustain these important and supportive relationships?
- What are some of the strengths identified by youth who have 'aged out' of care in establishing and maintaining these important and supportive relationships?

# Research Objectives

1. To examine how youth who have 'aged out' of care view, define and conceptualize supportive and lasting relationships;
2. To identify key supportive relationships in the lives of youth who have 'aged out' of care;
3. To examine potential pathways and strategies in establishing lasting and supportive relationships;
4. To cultivate a sense of belonging and project ownership of research participants by engaging them as co-researchers;
5. To have an impact on policy and practice by engaging key community and government decision-makers;
6. To encourage long-term sustainability of the co-researchers' social change efforts.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

## Preliminary Thematic Framework

The Fostering Change YAC was consulted on August 27, 2017, prior to the first information session with interested participants, to brainstorm ideas for the thematic framework of this study. Initial themes outlined in the theoretical framework section of the literature review, related to important and supportive relationship types and dimensions for youth 'aging out' of care, were presented to the YAC as a starting point for exploration of ideas.

Relationship types (e.g., parental, family, peers, mentors, caregivers, significant others) and relationship dimensions[16] (e.g., nurturing, emotional support, financial support, instrumental support, intimacy) were examined, in addition to potential strengths (e.g., patience, respect, communication, vulnerability) and barriers (e.g., trauma, attachment issues, interpersonal conflict) in establishing and maintaining supportive relationships. The ideas obtained from this consultation were used as a starting point for guided group discussions with the co-researchers.

A brainstorm exercise was incorporated into the second group session on October 14, 2017 to discuss themes pertaining to long-term supportive relationships. The co-researchers further developed the thematic framework brainstormed by the YAC by incorporating additional relationship types, dimensions, barriers and strengths in establishing and maintaining supportive relationships. The co-researchers also recommended that a category of 'lessons learned' be added to the thematic framework, to account for the intricacies of relationships and the grey areas surrounding certain relationship types[17]. The thematic framework will be further refined and finalized as part of the dissertation writing process.

## Themes Emerging from Participatory Photography Selection and Analysis Process

Twelve common themes emerged during the group analysis and thematic coding of the photographs. The photographs featured in this section were not featured in the photo exhibit, but were selected by the co-researchers as part of the photography selection and analysis process. The photographs that were selected by the co-researchers to be featured in the

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[16] i.e., the need the relationship fulfills
[17] See Appendix H for Preliminary Thematic Framework on Long-Term Supportive Relationships.

photo exhibit with accompanying titles and captions are included in the *Relationships Matter Photo E-Book*, and reflect the themes discussed in the following sub-sections[18].

## Animal companions: more than just pets



Photo credit: Tahsina Al-aibi

Nearly half of the co-researchers shared photographs of their pets, referring to them as family.

> ''As a youth in care, I didn't get a lot of time with people because I don't like people, in fact I hate people. I hate everyone equally. Unless you're on my good side, then I like you. But with animals, they give you such unconditional love and it's always going to be unconditional. Like it doesn't matter if I change the type of food she's eating or if I don't give her pets one day or I accidentally step on her tail - yes, she's going to be mad at me if I step on her tail, but in the end, she still going to love me because she's that type of cat. She's a therapy animal, she's my service animal. She means the world to me, and she's my baby and I love her."

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[18] *Relationships Matter Photo E-Book*: https://www.yumpu.com/document/view/59918518/relationships-matter-e-book

"I feel like I can relate to the animals when they're rescues because I was kind of a rescue, you know. Like, if I wasn't put into the foster home I was in, I would probably not be here today. They're like my little kids […]. […] It's like super important - family. […] They're [my foster family] kind of going through a hard time right now so I feel a little bit alone, but the animals really help a lot. I feel like I've created a new family for myself."

Another youth voiced frustration with wanting to have a pet companion, but not being able to due to housing restrictions.

"So, growing up I never really had that much pets. Obviously, a common story [for youth in care]. We did have some really nice pets but it didn't last very long. I was asking my landlord if I could have a puppy and he said no. And then I was just like 'okay then'. […] And he was like 'oh well those [stuffed animals] are the kind of pets that we allow, they're quiet and don't make a mess' […]. And I was like kind of mad, you know […]."

## Accessible, affordable and safe housing



Photo credit: Raina Jules

All co-researchers had experienced or were currently experiencing housing instability due to the lack of accessible, affordable and safe housing in the Greater Vancouver area. Given the incredibly low rental vacancy rate (0.8% in 2017[19]), co-researchers often had to compromise their safety to secure affordable housing. Many had experienced homelessness; one co-researcher was staying in temporary housing waiting for assisted housing to become available, and one co-researcher had moved into a shelter with their pets.

One co-researcher had a fire break out in the apartment building next door to their building, which made them question their own safety and housing stability.

> "My apartment […], I took it because it's right downtown, I took the offer because it was affordable. And also, the building that I'm living at is hella old, it's like 100 years old or something and it could easily go up in flames […]. So [we have] limited options for affordable housing, that adds to housing instability. [I'm] having to wonder, am I going to be in this place long term? This event [the fire] made me think about the instability of my neighbourhood and living situation, but not to the point for me to decide that I'm not going to live here, because I have so little options. Like I'm not going to spend $1,200 just for my own small little space, like the place I'm renting is $800 and it's like right downtown - for downtown that's kind of cheap. It's a one-bedroom, so that's why I've ended up just taking it, because well this is the best it's going to get. I'm not going to wait around longer and try to couch surf or whatever. […] There needs to be more safe and affordable housing options for youth aging of care, so that we have a stable place to stay. Housing stability affects and impacts relationships, because it impacts how are we're able to connect with our neighbourhood, to the community."

Concerns regarding discrimination by landlords toward former youth in care and those with pets were also expressed by most co-researchers. Many felt that proper housing was even less accessible to them due to this discrimination, which increased their risk of experiencing homelessness.

> "I want them [the landlords] to know that just because I'm a former youth in care and I have an animal, doesn't mean that you shouldn't rent to me. Because legally they can't charge me for her [my pet], they can't say I that I'm not allowed to rent their house if I have a cat that is registered as a service animal, I've got all the papers and everything. But they'll still discriminate against me because I have an animal. And it's so hard to find housing when the rental rate, the vacancy rate in Vancouver, is [so low]."

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[19] https://www.thestar.com/vancouver/2018/04/23/vancouver-expects-to-collect-30m-from-empty-homes-tax-in-2018.html

"They are the first pets I ever had, and they definitely improved my quality of life. […] They are not supposed to be in the building I live in […]. You can have fish, but that's pretty much it. So, I haven't told anyone that I have [them] yet."

# Connection to the land, culture and spirituality



Photo credit: Ronda Merrill-Parkin

More than half of the youth, particularly Indigenous and racialized youth, expressed the need to be connected to their culture and their history. According to them, this is often a relationship component that is missing in their case plans during their time in care, and highly impacts their sense of belonging and identity.

"[…] For me, culture is really important in my life, it's helped me build a sense of identity and feel connected. I have been working with [local Indigenous organization], I also work for them - since I was 24. After I aged out, we did a really good program where it would help me transition, so that introduced culture into my life. My daughter - being able to pass on some teachings that I've had […] myself, for her to be introduced into culture and spirituality means a lot to me, because I never had that growing up. […] Growing up in care, my mom after she went to residential school, she didn't experience any of her culture or spirituality because it was not allowed. […] Being able to pass [culture] along to the next generation is something that's important to me, which is cultural identity and spirituality. It just makes me feel calm and it helps out with finding myself."

"I was just thinking about it when I was looking at it [the sunrise] the other day, like how our ancestors would get up that early to do what they needed to do to start the day. [...] You have to get up to survive, and that's the first step. [...] I don't even know my grandparents [...]. Just seeing that [sunrise] made me think of them. [...] But I didn't know [my elders while I was in care] [...]."

In addition, most had been placed in foster placements that were not culturally matched to their own backgrounds.

"[...] I had been in some programs when I was younger, so they did try to nurture my culture, just a little bit of - like I learned how to smudge, and I learned a different language. It wasn't my own traditional practices and protocols, [...] but it had a lot of meaning in my life growing up. I had an Aboriginal support worker, but I was learning the local Cree nation [language and culture] [...]."

"[...] [I had] a lack of culture growing up in care, and a lack of relationships with my own culture and with people who also share the same culture. [...] Growing up in a situation where I was surrounded by kids who had their families to teach them the cultures that they were born to, and had access to programs to educate them about their culture and provide some sort of inner stability for people. Especially for me, going to school and always hearing announcements about [cultural] group lunches or field trips [...], I would always be really happy that that was happening to them but also very very sad, because there wasn't anything like that for my culture [...]. And since I never had anything to belong to, I was always moving from house to house, from family to family, and none of them really connected."

"When I was in care my social worker and foster parents didn't really understand what my religion meant or what it was. So, I didn't really get to practice much and I didn't really get to connect with other people much. Because they were like 'oh you can just do what we do, it's fine'. And I was like 'that's not really what I do'. When I did go and start connecting with people [of the same faith as me], it kind of made my life more significant [...]."

One Indigenous youth also shared how important connecting to the land is to them, as part of their spiritual and cultural development:

"I always have been drawn to being on the land, I really enjoy it, that's where I'm most at peace, I'm most calm. [...] I think we're so colonized now that a lot of us forget our relationship with the land and how important it is to connect with the land. In Aboriginal culture and spirituality, it's really important to protect the land."

# Nurturing relationships with siblings, extended family and parent-like mentors

Most of the co-researchers had siblings and extended family they used to be close to, and were separated from once they entered care. The separation significantly impacted their relationship, as it was not nurtured during their time in care. Many felt they were left to pick up the pieces of a relationship damaged by the system after they had 'aged out'.

"It's [family] too precious; you have to embrace the ones that you have. While I was in care, I didn't get the opportunities to bond with my family, I did it on my own. My cousin, she was not allowed to be around us while she was in care and she got moved on the island. Growing up, she kind of had this grudge against us thinking that we didn't want to see her, because I'm pretty sure that her foster family would tell her that 'they don't come to visit you because they don't want to. Why aren't they here now?', that kind of thing. […] Completely not true. […] Being provided the opportunity to connect with your family to build those relationships while in care is important."

"They [social workers] ruin relationships that they're supposed to try to help with. […] I got into care after my younger brother, and we weren't able to communicate while we were apart, so he had grudges against me, and the social worker pushed that further."

"[…] Because growing up [in care] alone, feeling like you're alone in a family that's not yours and not having your siblings, it's so isolating. It's really isolating, and it's like you close off all your emotions because you're afraid […], you are not sure how to love those people because they're not your family. […] It's adding another layer of trauma, because it's not only were you ripped away from your family, you're also ripped away from your siblings - it's just adding layers of trauma, and that impacts how you're able to form trusting relationships later in life."

One of the co-researchers was able maintain a relationship with their sibling while in care, but felt it was not nurtured in an organic way - this also negatively impacted their relationship.

"[…] The problem when you see your sibling when you're both in care, you get a lot of surveillance by social workers and other workers, so you don't really get organic relationship stuff to develop. I kind of waited until I aged out to actually go back and be like 'hey, so do you want to […] see each other?' Because I didn't want to have a relationship [while we were in the system] - our relationship was constantly monitored and scheduled, when we can see our brother or sister, and when they can do these things with you. So, it's like 'where do you want to go outside of this room that we booked for you to stay in' - it's awkward. So, the system puts barriers in place, even when they try to keep you connected with your siblings, because it's not organic. I think they try to connect

most siblings together, but not in the way every [normal] relationship goes. Kids who are not in care don't have to ask their parents if they can spend time to hang out with their brothers and sisters. So, they are institutionalizing the sibling relationship."

Another co-researcher shared their frustration with the system's definition of who fits in their definition of 'family', as it limited their ability to spend time with positive parent-like adults in their lives who they considered as family.

"It [my relationship with my godfather] was really rocky in my time in care, I went years without seeing him and then I just started seeing him again when I was 20 […]. And because of that he lost so much time with me. […] We do have visits, we're allowed visits with family [while in care], but we're not allowed visits with people that aren't family but can still mean the world to us. My godfather is not written on my birth certificate as 'this is [my] godfather', he's just become one over time."

## Breaking the cycle of intergenerational foster care



Photo credit: Ronda Merrill-Parkin

For one participant, who was also a young Indigenous parent, the issue of intergenerational foster care was very real. They had their children taken into care in the past, when they were under the jurisdiction of another province, and were now parenting two young children on their own in BC. The participant expressed frustrations with the inherent bias they experienced from child protection front line workers intervening with a young person from care who has their own children and does not have the proper tools and resources to be successful. In their view, this contributed to perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational foster care, and was a completely avoidable process had they been given the right supports without judgement.

> "[…] In [the other province], I would have never had a fighting chance to ever keep my children. And they made that very clear as soon as I turned 18. […] I found that after 'aging out' that the system kinda wants to stay in your life, and not necessarily in a good way if you have children. […] Like me running away a lot when I was younger had a really big impact, because they didn't know where I was or what I had been doing for years, and when I came back they opened a file immediately. And they weren't supportive because they had this idea in their mind that I wasn't able to parent, because we don't know what you've been doing for all these years, right, so how do we know if you're able to do this. […] I felt that I was being discriminated against for growing up in care, even though they were the ones that were, in a sense, in charge of my upbringing. […] Because I felt like I was more or less shamed because I didn't have my medication and I didn't have housing. They could have helped me with that, I was young enough at the time that they could've reopened my file, […] and they could have reopened it."

## Mental health, alternative medicine and therapies, and healing

All youth emphasized the importance of healing from the displacement, losses and trauma experienced during and after their time in care. Many expressed frustration with the lack of available alternative therapies and treatments, and having to conform to a one-size-fits-all approach to access mental health services. For many, conventional services and treatments were not effective, and often aggravated their condition.

"In care and even out of care, I'd had a lot of friends, not just friends but also family, pass away. I don't have the time to mourn, I don't have the time to grieve properly because I got to keep going. I was never given a grief counsellor, I was never given - I don't personally know how to grieve other than to just keep going and push everything off to the side. And because of that I don't form a lot of close bonds or closeness with people that are around me. It's definitely an issue around long-term support, around my own thing with death. Not having to have a barrier when it comes to applying for counselling services, even unconventional counselling services. Like for me, I can't just sit around in an office and just be like 'yeah so, this is how I'm feeling today'. 'Okay so how does that make you feel?' 'Oh, I don't know, I don't know I fucking feel.' Like for me things that really help are like art therapy - it's drawing, it's writing poetry. [Having a service animal] - I love my service animal. […] Making sure that you have time to grieve instead of forcing someone to just continue on sometimes."

Some would self-medicate with substances such as cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana due to the lack of available effective treatments. This would connect them with others who were experiencing the same coping issues.

"There's not really a lot of resources for mental health in the system while you're in care and after, and coping substances can be a point of connection with others. […] Coping through self-medication […] impacts our spirits and how we're able to move forward."

One co-researcher was frustrated with the stigma and lack of understanding associated with alternative medicines, such as marijuana. For them, this form of treatment was effective in addressing their anxiety and self-harm issues, but was viewed in a negative way by the people in their life.

"Weed has always been like, I guess it's not always been positive, but I always smoked weed throughout high school and stuff. And everyone was always hating on it - especially my foster parents were like 'why are you always smoking stuff?' I tried to take antidepressants and stuff like that, but it never really helped. I wasn't supposed to smoke weed while I took antidepressants so, when I did I would have fainting spells. I used to self-harm, and when I started smoking weed I stopped. I didn't even realize [that's what weed did for me] until years later. It's just been a big part of my life. I work at a dispensary, and it helped me get through a lot in my life. I like to think of it as my medicine. There is definitely a stigma attached to it, even still today when it's about to get legalized."

# Trauma-informed practices

All co-researchers identified the need for trauma-informed practices across all systems providing services to children and youth in care, and expressed frustrations with current institutional approaches. One youth described the experience of removal from their family as a traumatic apprehension by the police rather than a sense of being taken to a safer place.

> "We first went into the police car and picked up my siblings from school, and then we went to our parents' place and picked up our toothbrushes - we only had two minutes to get in there and out. […] It's funny, as a youth going into the system your first encounter is with the police. […] It's funny, you meet the police right away, you kind of feel like a criminal. […] The whole night and the whole day it just went by so fast in a blur, you meet all those different people who are transferring you - it's someone's job to do just that. This was a long time ago, I can't really remember too much but you meet someone like a transition social worker, who you only meet for half an hour; they just take you from point A to point B, and that's it. And then they give you their card, it's kind of a blur of an experience. […] The system feels kind of institutional, and I think there is a close relationship with - or kind of a pipeline between - youth in care and prison as well."

Several co-researchers had experienced having their honesty used against them, especially as it related to their trauma and mental health issues. Many felt misunderstood by workers who were not properly trained to understand and recognize the impacts and signs of trauma. Some felt they had to be inauthentic to access the services they needed, and often did not seek help due to the risk of being involuntarily admitted to a psychiatric unit.

> "I remember going through those doors [MCFD office], and you're always being interrogated by the social workers, and everything you say will be used against you. […] Youth can be perceived as not worthy of supports. Some people I know who've gone there, like my siblings, since they were a bit younger - I'm a bit more rebellious and less forthcoming - they wouldn't be treated that well actually. I kind of knew how to play their game; these adults […] they like to impose their values on you and don't listen to what you say you need, so you have to appeal to their values in some sense and then they'll see you as someone who is 'good'. I knew what was happening so I just played their game. I was able to get what I needed from the system, but I know that one of my siblings wasn't able to do that because they were very honest with the issues they were having with the ministry, and because of that they were deemed as a problem and as a high-risk youth. And so, the more high risk youth you are, the less support you get."

# Youth-centered decision-making

All co-researchers felt they did not have a lot of power to control their own situations during their removal from their homes, while they were in care and during their transition to adulthood, and were often not involved in decision-making processes that affected their lives. Most felt that current policies, interventions and decision-making processes were systems-centered and paternalistic, rather than youth-centered. This significantly impacted their experiences in care, as most felt they could not openly voice their needs to their workers, and felt unacknowledged and undervalued.

> "[…] We [me and my siblings] didn't have any input on being able to choose ourselves. They [front line workers] didn't ask for our input."

> "Personally, I found it very hard to rely on social workers, because they're supposed to be your guides, your guardians, but it was really hard for me to communicate if something was wrong or something was right, because they're not really there for me. They're kind of there for whatever they need to do for their work."

# Investing in interests, talents and strengths

Nearly all co-researchers voiced their frustrations regarding the child welfare system's constant focus on problems and crises, rather than focusing on the positive aspects of their lives and their interests. Most felt that their potential was rarely acknowledged, and their strengths and talents were too often overshadowed by a focus on what was going wrong in their lives during their time in care.

> "Throughout my time in foster care, I wasn't allowed to work on vehicles. It was only when I was out of foster care that I would be allowed to with my dad, and then I would be put back in [foster care] and it would just be this mess of a situation. So, I really wish that I [had been] allowed to hone my skills and just be myself [during my time in care] […]. I really wish that I had maintained that relationship with my interests, because then […] I probably wouldn't be in the situation I am in now where I don't have a very good job. I could have been going to school for something [in mechanics] or getting a scholarship for it."

Several co-researchers shared that their experience in care forced them to grow up too quickly due to having to learn how to survive continuous crises with little to no supports. This left no space and time to be a child and play, and many felt robbed of their childhood and adolescence.

"It's important to nurture the child, to nurture the child within, and not just ask us to grow up. Because when we grow up too fast, we lose a lot. We miss those years of innocence and that time [and space] to play. It really impacts us as adults, like it really impacts us. I also find myself wanting to play and I don't know how. So, I have to relearn that."

"Having to fight a battle as a child in the system, without being provided the proper tools by the people who should be providing us the right tools to survive. […] Being a kid, […] you pretty much lose your childhood in care, because you're taught to do all these things to survive, to fight. […] We should be provided with the proper tools while we are in care, but at the same time we shouldn't have to feel like we are at war. Children shouldn't have to fight during their childhood to be able to survive and live their lives."

"I think we all feel like we have to grow up fast, you have to go do this, you have to be […] independent. And especially even before I was in care, people would be like 'oh you're so mature, you're taking care of your [siblings]' and I was like 12 or 13. So I think relearning that it's okay if you're not always mature and stuff like that, it was a big progression for me."

# Peer-led advocacy and support

While several co-researchers had been previously engaged in the youth in care advocacy community, others had not had such opportunities until their involvement in the project. For many, connections with other former youth in care only occurred after they had 'aged out' and due to the support of youth-serving community organizations they became involved with. Being connected to others with similar lived experience was expressed as important for youth in and from care, as it can be difficult for them to connect with others who have a more privileged way of life.

"She's [peer support worker] been supporting me since [a few years after I aged out], and she's been helping me with different opportunities to advocate for youth aging out of foster care. […] Even though it was after I aged out, it was something that I built and she has helped me reconnect to culture, and I find that really big in my life. […] Sometimes it's members of the community, even after aging out - they can be the supportive long-term relationships that you build."

" […] [At the Victoria rally] it was the first time for me organizing with other former youth in care. And I met a lot of people who shared similar experiences, and we connected over that. […] It felt like I was part of a bigger thing, so that really helped me because usually I feel a lot of isolation. […] It's been really difficult for me to connect with other youth in care, because my social worker really never connected me with resources and stuff like that. I was talking to a person yesterday, and they were like 'what happens, where are you going to go if all this fails?' and I'm like 'well I don't know, I don't know anybody, I don't know anybody who's told me about anything'. So, it's like this moment [connecting with other former youth in care] was a big significant change for me, because it's not like there's nobody or nothing out there. It's really cool to see people connect and work under a common goal. Because it helps me sort of contribute to others and others contribute to me. So, having opportunities to engage in peer support and advocacy is really important."

"[…] I find that certain people I can connect with more. People, maybe they are able to access more of their humanity whenever they've gone through hardships."

Most of the co-researchers felt there were a lack of peer-led and peer-driven life skills training programs, and that most of the survival skills they learned were self-taught after they left care. One participant had taken on the role of peer mentor for their little sisters to teach them basic skills such as cooking on a very modest budget. Their siblings were also in care, but they had been placed separately in different towns.

"My younger sisters should already know those skills, they should have been taught how to cook and take care of themselves while they were in care, but they weren't. For me, I didn't learn those skills while I was in care, I had to learn how to survive by myself. So that's something that should be taught while you're in care, because if you don't know how to cook for yourself after you age out, it's going to be tough. […] But I always try to show my sisters little ways how to do stuff, because I've been learning on my own since I could remember, and especially helping them, to guide them."

# Expanding the definition of community
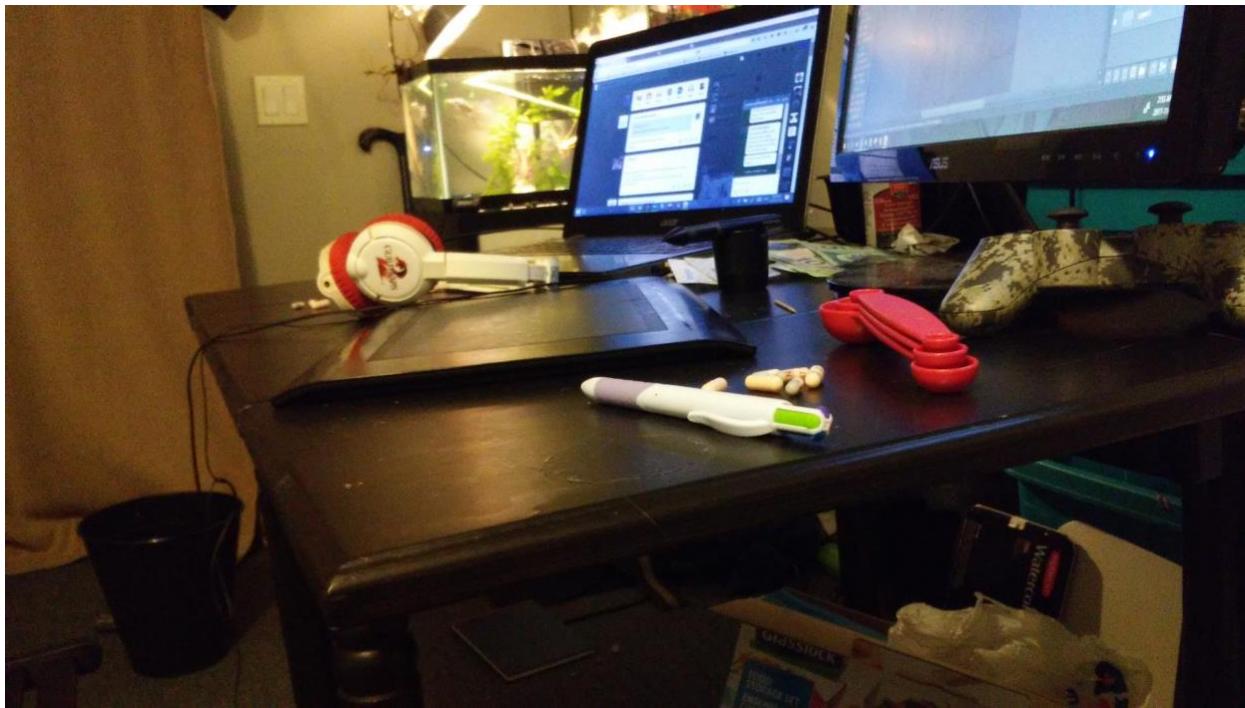


Photo credit: Sabien Vanderwal

Several co-researchers emphasized the importance of including non-conventional forms of connection, such as relationships developed online and via social media, within the definition of 'community' for youth in and from care. Some indicated that several of their close and long-term relationships had been developed and nurtured online, and those forms of connection were not considered as a priority or a right by front line workers and foster parents during their time in care. For one co-researcher, online forms of connection were the only way they could find a sense of belonging to a community, as they experienced social anxiety. It was also a way for them to build their identity and develop a support system they could access in times of crisis.

"So, for me, a lot of my long-term relationships are online. I maintain my online relationships through the use of Tumblr, the use of doing commissions for people, the use of cooking […]. And as a former youth in care, that was the only way I was able to maintain those relationships, was through the use of the Internet, through the use of being online and being a presence online. Again, a lot of my world is online, because that's where I have most of my relationships. I don't get out of the house very often because I am terrified to leave the house. So, for me I guess I perceive a lot of the world online, and because of that I have a very interesting way of speaking to people or like interacting with people in a physical and also online presence. […] While I was in care, I had access to the internet. That was the only reason why I have friends that I've known for like 8-9 years. And they are still my friends, we talk on Discord, like I just got out of a Discord call with them last night. So, I mean, it was also one of the ways I would date people. […] But yeah

that's just the way it is. I've always had access to the Internet, and when I don't, I panic. The Internet community is more of a community to me than the physical community. […] Online is also a form of community. It definitely is for me. I'm not sure a lot of people necessarily think about that."



Photo credit: Harrison Pratt

For others, having accessible spaces within the larger community to meet new people who share similar interests, and being able to nurture those relationships, was identified as important. Co-researchers shared their frustrations with the gentrification of their neighbourhoods, resulting in many of their beloved community spaces being destroyed to make room for residential condos. These condos would be sold to middle- and upper-class residents, pushing poor and struggling residents out of their own neighbourhoods. A lack of accessible spaces to connect was also perceived as impacting local culture, and opportunities for youth in and from care to explore their interests and talents.

"I grew up in the city, and so I've seen it change a lot, even in just the past odd years. It's hard to connect with people in general with the dominant culture, it's not really accessible and we don't really share the same values. When you're in an urban setting, it's quite isolating to begin with, so you have to connect with different people and sometimes it's by chance or whatnot. What seems more accessible is places that offer spaces for meets, like for young artists or what not. And you can really have life-changing experiences by meeting people, even in small places like on the Drive - on Commercial Drive for example where you have Café du Soleil and they have poetry nights there, and you can even have open mic nights to play music if that's what you're into. But I think those things are really important places for our development, and

the city is known for destroying art, like grassroots art, because of the lack of affordable spaces. […] And I've just been watching how these different neighbourhoods have been changing all the time because the city is just allowing developers to rip down places that are perfectly fine, so that people with lots of money can move in there. It's kind of unfortunate, because you really do feel the shift of energy. There is culture everywhere, our lives are culture and we are embedded within space and time and with all the relationships that we encounter. […] This relates to youth in care because I think we gravitate towards art, affordable spaces. And without them [accessible community spaces], you may not necessarily have the opportunities to meet other people that make your life worth living. […] There was a lot of life in that place too [coffee shop that was demolished in picture], and it supported a lot of people. And it's been replaced by concrete."

## Long-term unconditional support and nurturing

All co-researchers expressed frustration with the cut-off of supports at the age of majority. They emphasized that the lack of guidance and support received during their time in care in preparation for their transition to adulthood negatively affected their lives after 'aging out' of the system. Many felt a sense of loss and isolation after leaving care, as they had no continued support system despite still being at risk of experiencing significant difficulties.

> "I remember being in care and seeing youth getting taken out every week for a movie or other outing, and I asked if I could have that too. They told me I wasn't "at risk" enough to get a support worker. I'm at risk now. And I'm too grown up for my age, but I'm also still just a kid who wants someone to take me out for hot chocolate and skating. Where is that support?"

> "[….] Kids in care, or aging out of care, quickly and easily lose close relationships that they had with their counsellors, or just people that they knew and grew close to like [in] group homes. […] It's very one-dimensional, when you're raised in care you really only have a few options for long-term relationships because when you live in an environment with people who are just as toxic as you are - or at least that's been my experience - you can't build any relationships except for maybe - small chance maybe - with the people who run the establishment or with the support you are given by your social worker or other things. And you can't hold onto those [relationships] either because you're going to lose them."

All co-researchers voiced their concerns regarding the abrupt transition to adulthood, which often occurred on their 19th birthday. Rather than looking forward to turning of age and having a birthday celebration with friends and family, most considered it as a dreaded and traumatic deadline.

"[…] It should just be like 'it's a birthday, great' - you don't need to feel like it's going to be your last one. The 19th birthday seems to be a thing for everything right now, and it's just like, 'come on guys. It doesn't end there, I'm alive now. Are you also going to be there after my 19th birthday?'"

## *Supports and connections during the holidays*
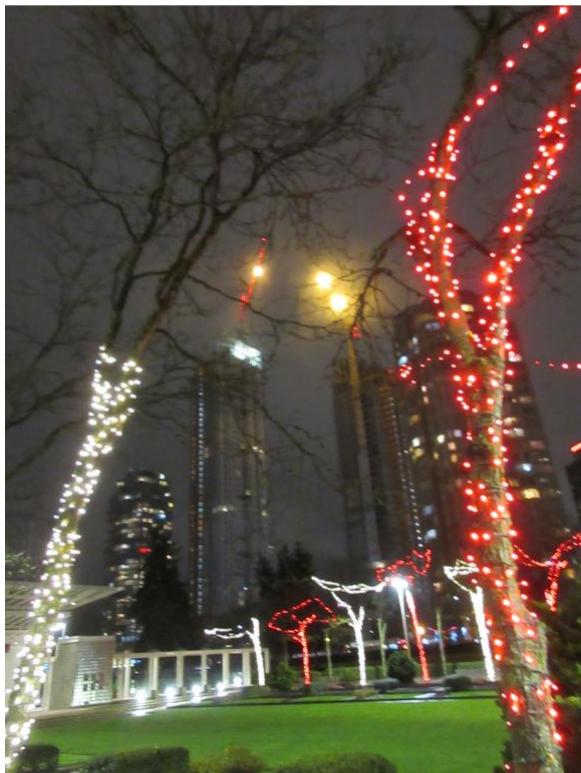

Photo credit: Jordan Read

Several co-researchers shared that the holidays were particularly difficult times of the year for them, given the lack of connections and community support. Many did not have positive holiday memories during their time in care due to multiple placements and a lack of connection to their foster family or group home. Several indicated they were struggling to turn the holidays into a positive experience for themselves after 'aging out', and had to put in extra effort on their own to establish connections they could rely on during the holidays.

"[…] My second one [foster placement], it was really awkward for a lot of years, it was just like really weird. So, I'm trying to make my own Christmas [now] because I want it to be a positive experience again, not like before when I was uncomfortable and always wanted to go to my room and didn't feel like eating really. […] And like the second foster home, they were just like rich and I don't know, they would just like shit-talk their own family […], they were just mean, they were not very nice people. Christmas there was super uncomfortable and I was […] with my siblings and we would all just kind of like stay together, […] because

everyone was sort of just […] doing whatever, and their kids didn't really like us. So yeah, I'm just trying to […] make it positive again because I don't really want to have a negative Christmas. […] I feel like I'm definitely not the only one that had a negative holiday experience in care, it's uncomfortable for a lot of kids in care. It's definitely about family, and a lot of us don't have a sense of family, and the holidays can be kind of weird."

"[…] I hated the holidays growing up in care. At a younger age, it was just because I felt separated from everyone else […]. As I was coming closer to aging out I realized that instead of just being angry because I couldn't have that same experience as other kids not in care, that I should rebuild relationships that I had lost. And to my luck, I succeeded. […] So, for me the holidays are [now] more about pushing my guilt away rather than reminiscing about what I had lost. So, since aging out, I have redesigned the way I view the holidays. So, I went from being angry because it's something I didn't have any more, to being angry that it's been turned into something that nobody values, to now creating something that I can value from it. I was able to rebuild a relationship with my biological mom and my foster mom."

## *Investing in interdependence vs. independence*
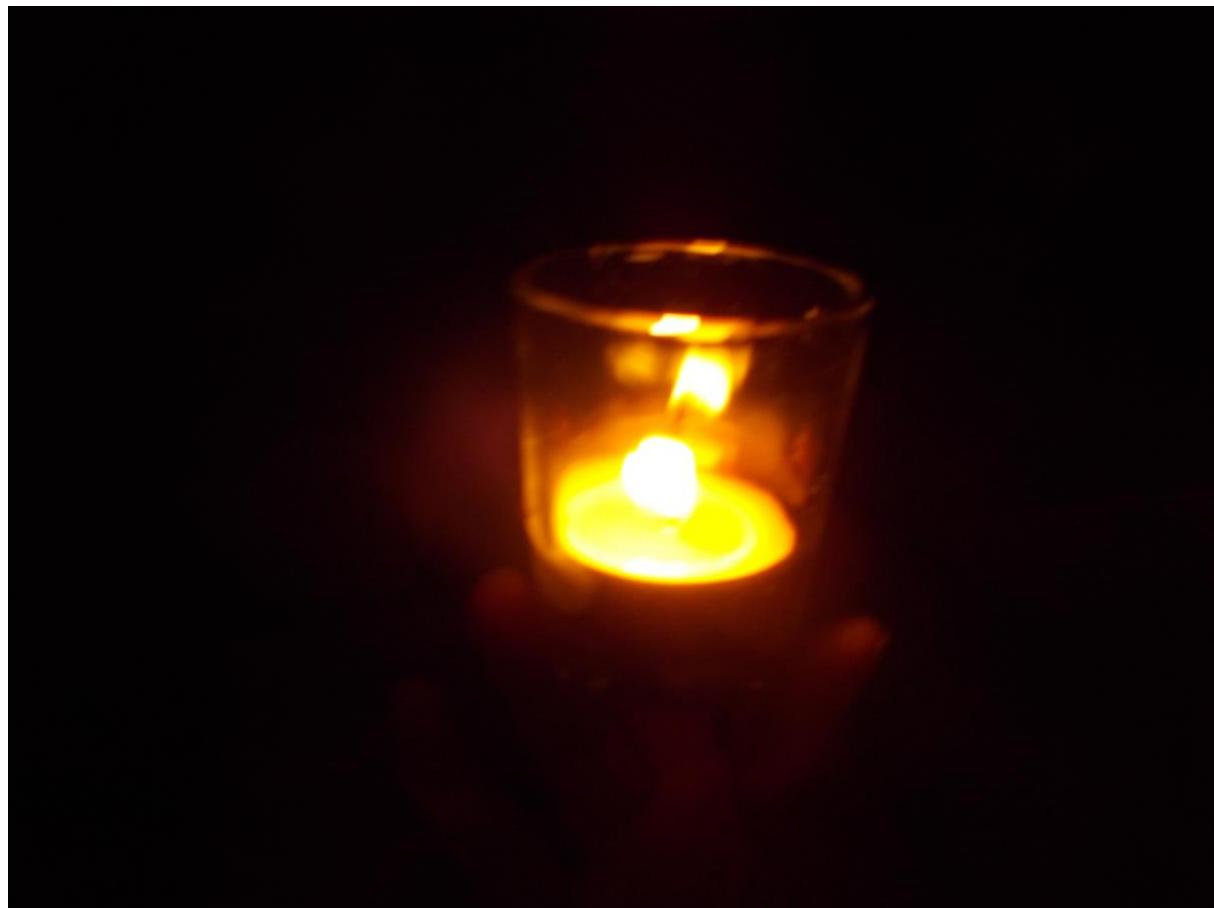


Photo credit: Martha Dzhenganin

All co-researchers expressed that the child welfare system's sole focus on independent living prevents youth 'aging out' of care to form lasting and healthy relationships, and forces them into isolation and to grow up too fast. While learning life skills such as budgeting, cooking and cleaning were deemed important to a young person's functioning, being connected to others who can provide continuous mentoring, support and nurturing throughout adulthood was considered equally as important.

> "As long as I can remember I've always viewed candles and fire as a human life source, it's a perfect symbol of how delicate the balance of life is. The smallest gust of wind won't put it out, but it has to be nurtured, you have to tend to it. […] Because of the way the aging out system works, they teach you to be self-sufficient and independent. And again, because you're under that much stress and nobody is giving you direction, and you're being isolated as you get older, you end up protecting your own candle with all you've got left, which makes it burnout faster. Which in turn makes it seem a little bit more dim. […] Because of how spiritual human beings are, being completely alone is not a thing that we're built to do. Just like a fire can't just start by itself - someone has to start it. We need connection to keep the flame going, we are all interconnected."

# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER PHOTO EXHIBIT

## Audience feedback of photo exhibit

A videographer was hired to capture the photo exhibit event, and attendees were asked - on a voluntary basis and with informed consent - to provide their feedback on the exhibit event and the featured work of the co-researchers. A few key government and community organization representatives agreed to talk about their insights on camera.

*"I have to say it's very touching, the pieces are really inspirational and the youth really shared their stories through art. And I think that this is very powerful. So, what would I take away? I think for me, you know, some things I already knew - the importance of sibling connections. And I think also the importance of pets - that was one of the things, and how they create families. So, just really helpful to think about it and hear from the youth and their own personal experiences."*

- Karen Blackman
Executive Director of Services
Ministry of Children and Family Development

*"My takeaway is there's an incredibly powerful set of messages of hope and change, and I really appreciate the young people's courage and willingness to share their talent and skill, in both the images they took and the captions that they wrote. The takeaway is there's lots to think about and in many ways, lots to reflect upon from what they've shared here at this fantastic exhibition. And my commitment is to take what I heard and what I saw back to my colleagues in the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions for them to reflect on moving forward."*

- Jonny Morris
Director, Planning & Strategic Priorities
Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions

"I'm here because A) I'm here to support Melanie and her dissertation work, […] I think it's a really interesting dissertation project, and I also just like the angle that she's taking with her research in terms of speaking about things in terms of interdependence and [how] that whole idea of self-sufficiency and independency is not asked out of anybody else in society - so why do we ask that out of youth from care? And it's kind of nice to see her sort of manifest that idea through art, so it's nice. […] You know, I've been working in this field for a while, and the one thing I'm taking away just from this sample of art is: pets matter man, pets are really important. And I don't know how I missed that, like I have a dog myself, and like how, why am I missing that, why am I being surprised right now, right? So, and I think that's why it's important, why […] art matters, why participation matters, why just asking questions and asking people to say what matters - why that matters."

- Drew Stewart
Director of Development
Aunt Leah's Place

People in attendance at the photo exhibit were also offered the opportunity to provide written feedback for each co-researcher's photography work in a guest book designated to each artist. The feedback was transcribed by the lead researcher, and the guest books returned to each co-researcher via mail.

## Some excerpts of guest book comments:

"Home is a Person, Not a Place" - these words really resonate - thank you. Yes, if not for our relations, home is an empty word. And home as person really makes me think about the idea in a deeper way."
- Hiromi Goto

"Thank you for sharing the stories behind the photos with me. They're beautiful & important."
- Adriene Montani

"I will forever now refer to my puppy as a 'service animal'! Emotional security is a great 'service'. Thank you."
- Drew Stewart

*"Compliance - I was really struck by your thought and presentation in that piece of work - it certainly strike[s] a note that how on one hand we strive to be [a] relationship/connection-based society - shopkeeper will greet you with hello & ask how you are doing, yet when "raw" & "forthcoming" emotion that's not "smiling" means it is not worthy of connecting. Thanks for sharing."*

- Lok On Lam

*"Hari Sun, the photography and text are very insightful and so strong. Fantastic work, and thank you for sharing your thoughts. I feel this project would be great required reading for MCFD/CLBC social workers."*

- Jules André-Brown

*"Whoa. Radical, poetic truth! The blending of MCFD & graveyard is jaw-dropping yo"*

- Valeen Jules

*"May you find other flames to join your powerful fire. Powerful words + Lens. <3"*

- Meredith Graham

*"Thank you for sharing your photos, words + highlighting the impacts of isolation. ☺"*

- Ashley

*"Thank you for sharing your visual diary - you have come from a long journey of change: I salute you for your creative way of doing life. - you have a great future."*

- Kent Danielson

*"Keeshana - thank you for sharing the talent and skill you brought to your photography. Life is no highway is powerful and key in thinking about how to make the path forward more clear - and easy to navigate for young people."*

- Jonny

*"Congratulations, sincerely. That was a punch straight to my heart! Thank you so much for sharing a bit of your life. Keep on shining! ☺"*

- Coralie

*"I'm so proud of you Keesh! You have come such a long way from the time I have met you to where you are today! You are an amazingly strong young woman, who is a fighter, who is honest and is an example to other youth in care!!! oxox"*

- Kathy C.

*"Good presentation, it is bravery to open up one's art + heart, your strength is growing!"*

- Jen Catte

*"thank-you for the great insight for children out of the program"*

- Vaughan Lim

*"Très belle expo. Les angles et prises de vues sont bien trouvés. Le message est clair: on a envie de les aider! Bravo. Très belle année 2018!.."*

- Valérie

*Translation: Very beautiful exhibit. The angles and points of view are well placed. The message is clear: we have the desire to help them! Bravo. [Wishing you] a very good 2018! - Valerie*

*"The "child protection system with no protection…" sums up being a ward of the crown perfectly. At least my mother loves me, in 'care' I suffered far more abuse and neglect every month than I would have endured over that entire 12 years if I'd been with my addict mother."*

- Jim

*"Thanks for sharing the story of your new friend/stuffy. Your message about the dull tools given to survive was powerful Stand tall, You are a Warrior."*

- Grace D

*"Thank you for sharing your work. I enjoyed the connections between the pictures and your story and how stirring it is altogether (for me)."*

- Thea Megas

*"Weed got me thru my young adolescence to adulthood, use without shame as it can mend the traumas we have faced. Thank you for sharing your art, words and family <3."*

- Savannah

*"love the sense of humor on the pothead photos and the pet picture."*

- Sky

*"Thought provoking!"*

-Tony Penikett

# Co-researcher feedback on the photo exhibit and research project

Co-researchers were also asked - on a voluntary basis and with informed consent - to provide their feedback on the exhibit event and the overall project on camera during the photo exhibit event. All eight co-researchers agreed to talk about their insights on camera, and are identified by name in recognition of their contributions to the project.

> **On why they chose to get involved in the project and its importance:**

## Martha:

"I think this project specifically is a cool way to look at research - instead of numbers, looking at photos. I think it's overall a big step towards realizing more of what needs to be done, as well as celebrating what we've accomplished and what youth have gone through."

## Ronda:

"The reason I wanted to participate in this project is it covers a topic that I hold dear to my heart, as I also advocate for youth aging out of foster care. This project is really important because it helps the next generation to succeed by maybe possibly allowing the ministry to follow our recommendations so they can learn from our own experiences."

## Keeshana:

"I chose to participate in this project because it meant a lot to me, voice wise - I needed to get my voice out there. And for my entire life, I have not been able to get my voice out, it's been silenced - intentionally and unintentionally. And so, something like this is really important to highlight those things and to get voices from a youth's perspective. […] Personally, the project is important to me because it really came along at a perfect time. When I heard about it, it was a time where I was starting to kind of tumble down the hill, in the sense that I really felt that ok, no matter what I'm saying it's never going anywhere, no matter what I'm doing it's never going anywhere. And I really just felt hopeless. And especially for me, I'm a very ambitious girl - so if I'm not moving forward towards something, I feel like I'm lost, like I'm not living. So that's why it was really important for me to do this."

## Tahsina:

"I kind of wanted a better understanding of [...] what I wanted to recommend and what I wanted to change in the foster system. [And] I made some new friends and connections."

## Raina:

"I thought it was a great opportunity to express myself and have time for self-care and healing, because it's important to work on yourself. I think it just gave me some, a little bit of closure for my 'aging out' of care. Just to be able to slowly stitch up that past and learn from it continuously, and I believe this is one way to enhance more skills and develop more relationships - which is important."

## Sabien:

"This project means a lot to me. Mostly just because as a former youth in care, I had a hard time building relationships and building trust with people, so this is just a really good way to show that we need to support youth aging out of care to get a better hold on life and have interdependent relationships. It's important to me because of the community engagement and the fact that we are showcasing some of our most vulnerable pieces, but it still makes people think and that's what I want people to do. Maybe they don't take a lot away, maybe they're just like wow that was some beautiful artwork. But I want them to think, and I want them to acknowledge that this is happening and that we deserve the same rights [as them]."

## Harri:

"Well I wanted to meet former youth in care who have gone through the system, and I wanted to participate in something that can make changes, in our discussion about youth in care. This event for me is really important because it's an opportunity to engage with the public, to network, and also to meet friends again, strengthen those relationships and to build a movement towards change obviously. This whole project is important for me because our experiences that we have through our life, we have them in isolation. There's an opportunity to actually speak about our stories, and having the opportunity to come together with youth in care with a shared experience, we can relate to each other - which is very uncommon. And we also have an outlet for our stories. So, this active creative expression has an audience, and that in itself is a process of healing."

## Jordan:

"Well I mean, SCYBC photovoice had a separate event last year that I was part of. So, I mean, it was fun last year, but I figured hey what the hell, I may as well, I mean it's another great opportunity. And photography has been my passion ever since a couple of years ago, so I mean I just love the idea of taking something you're really passionate about and sharing it with just about anybody, and to leave it open ended enough for them to come up with their own ideas. […] Art is my passion. I draw, I paint - not very well, but I paint [laughs]. I love photography, for me I consider it the easiest medium but it's not really - it's just easier for me. I like the idea that anything that I can see, someone else can see through my eyes, and also see it from their perspective as well. Art is subjective and it's supposed to be. I find that if you have solid headings that tell you 'this is what this is', that limits your perspective, but if you leave it opened ended - same things in poetry - it leaves [room] for the viewer's interpretation. And that's what you want, you want everything that you make and everything you show to people to affect them from their own experiences."

**On how their photography showcase connects to long-term relationships:**

## Jordan:

"Most of them talk about loss. And like you know, not having anything to do with yourself. For example, the first one that's labelled *Isolated*, that was how I felt when my mom just kind of left me in my cousin's lap. […] I felt abandoned - you know, the last person in the world that I had a lifeline to disappeared. And you know, there wasn't really anybody I could turn to, because the family that she left me with was very abusive. And I know that they know that now, but they didn't at the time - everybody was just super not healthy. So, I mean I took it on myself to put myself into foster care because I was just done with it.

And that's where the second [photo] comes in, which is the *Road to Remorse*. Where you look back after you've taken your leave out of a toxic situation and then you're stuck there thinking about what you could've done to make it better. Even though you know it's not within your power, right. So, I waited for about five years just staring at the walls and thinking about how I'm going to make everything better. And I came up with a plan, and it took years to plan and it's finally worked, but […] after some of the relationships that I fought so hard for started coming back together, I realized that there were some that just weren't worth repairing. So, I just had to burn those bridges, right.

So that's where that third [photo, *Burning Bridges*] comes in, you know. I'm taking notice of those relationships that damaged my life and the people around it, and I just said, 'I'm still here, but I'm not going to go out of my way to help you because you've clearly shown me that there's nothing that I can do to make anything better for you - on top of that, you don't even care.' Well I mean, that's just for some of the cases, right.

So, and then that last [photo, *The Light in Our Hearts*] is about human life, because the candle signifies the passion for someone's will to live and one's will to share their experiences with one another. Because a candle on its own is dim, it doesn't brighten up much other than the person who is holding it. And when you put a candle in a box, it suffocates because it's burning up all the oxygen it has. When you put candles together, they create a brighter light. You know, everything just seems a little bit brighter. And for those sad few who are left alone on a pile of cinders, they grow out of control and hurt other people. So, it's that delicate balance of keeping everything you've been through in check, and using all that negativity to help somebody else and grow your community and your relationships with close family.

I wanted to find four pictures that I could basically tell the story of my life with, but also have it relatable to everyone else. Because in order to move on from isolation, you need to walk down the road of regret, and in order to move on from regret, you need to burn the bridges of the people who are holding you back. And to improve those relationships that you still have, you need to come together and, you know, recognize that your differences are always going to be differences, but [...] bond with the things that you have in common. And use those commonalities to reach out to other people."

## Harri:

"My photos, I have four photos out today. One of them is of my pet, called *Companion*. So, it's about a relationship that's really about nurturance. So that was important, because youth in care need a nurturing environment and nurturing relationships, and I think that sometimes pets are the only way to get that.

So, I have another photo that's about *Commonality*, it's talking about mental health and how to cope with mental health, and I mean that's a common theme for youth in care because there's a lot of trauma that's experienced and there isn't a lot of resources or opportunities for healing.

I have another one called *Compliance* - so it's about going to the MCFD office and about the politics of trying to manage your impressions of going in. And the problem with interacting with social workers, is that there is a power dynamic in place, and youth who are not aware of this or can't navigate those politics that well tend to not get the services that they need. So, you're compelled to act in a certain way, otherwise you might just fall through the cracks.

The last one - it's called *Comprehension*. So, it's about being apprehended, the process of being apprehended into the system and how that in itself can be a traumatic experience. First

of all, you're taken away by the cops and it's like a blur - it happens so fast. One moment you're in the cop car, next moment you're in your place for 2 minutes getting your stuff - maybe just a toothbrush - and then that's it. So, if that's the way that the youth get into the system - it's through the cops - that tends to be not the last time that youth interact with cops."

## Sabien:

"Well one of my photos is called *Home Is a Person Not a Place*, and it represents my online connections with people. Where I first met my girlfriend, we still know each other, it's been 10 long years - oh dear god it's been 10 years [laughs]. So, but yeah, that photo means a lot to me because it shows that while I didn't connect with a lot of people physically, I'm still able to connect with people emotionally.

My second photo, is *Raise a Glass to Freedom*. I quoted Hamilton, and that one was really important to me because it represents that after 19, they say we're free, but we're really not. We have a lot of struggles that we have to get through and it's not fair for us to go through those alone.

My third photo, *Fat Rolls* [laughs], is my service animal Ms. Hudson - she is my baby girl, I love her to pieces. She is 15. And it was really important to me to showcase it because she is a major relationship in my life, I've had her since she was 6. Man, I've had her since she was 6 - oh my god, that's another 10 years [laughs]. But […] yeah, she's just really important to me, she's been with me through hell and back and I love her.

And the [last] photo, *Mechanical Ingenious*, it represents the things that I wanted to do as a child but wasn't able to do while I was in foster care. I wasn't able to nurture the same relationships that most of my peers would have, to be able to get into the places that I wanted to."

## Raina:

"I think most of the photos connect through my ancestors and the next generations, that's kind of my goal actually is to project a voice for other former young adults that were in ministry care, and I just want them to reach out and not be afraid to demand answers."

## Tahsina:

"Most of them, well, are pets, my mom and my friend, so yeah […] they're all kind of important to me in that way."

### Keeshana:

"So, the photos, they represent various things. So, some of them represent a relationship with myself and how I've grown through life. Other ones, they represent support that I've gotten through care. I'm really lucky to have found multiple people who really care about me, and they all showed - not all, but a lot of them showed up here [at the exhibit], and I've been talking to them here on and off, and it's been such a great experience."

### Ronda:

"Well one of my photos, called *Friends for Life*, it's about sibling relationships and the fact that when I was in care I was ripped away from the rest of my family, so I didn't get a chance to really get to know my siblings, so when I aged out I lost that connection. So, even to this day, I'm not connected to them, and I found that nurturing sibling relationships is important during care so it can help you with the transition after care."

### Martha:

"I think through my photography I'm showing a lot of desire for connections with more people, and especially I think I've showed connections to my siblings as well as to friends that I've met throughout my time in care."

> **Their hopes about the impact of the project and exhibit on the larger community:**

### Martha:

"I hope that people really, after this exhibit, realize that foster youth are also living, breathing people that have personalities."

### Ronda:

"I'm hoping that people will think deeply about the importance of nurturing long-term relationships through our photos."

### Keeshana:

"So, my main role in every piece of artwork that I do, whether [it's] painting, photography, signing, it's to make sure that people understand perspective - it's to make sure that they're not looking at things from a one-track view and to open their minds to things and to possibilities as well, you know. I mean it can be risky, but it's necessary to move forward."

### Tahsina:
"[…] A better understanding of myself and the relationships I feel are important to me."

### Raina:
"Well I feel like the government and the system, they don't - they always brush us aside and they don't take enough time to invest in our youth. And especially being in care, that's the most precious times in childhood, and I want people to take a look at the picture - literally."

### Sabien:
"I want them to learn that we - as resilient as foster kids are - we aren't ready for the world when we're 19. I want them to see that we are still kids. We learn to grow up really quickly, and we still deserve to have the same relationships and to have the same experiences that someone that isn't in our shoes has."

### Harri:
"What I'm excited about with this whole project is that we're able to look and give perspectives through photography and our experiences, and how we contextualize those experiences with our stories. So, I hope that people can take away our experiences in the way that we're presenting them. And I think we all have a common shared experience that have many similarities, there may be some differences as well, but nonetheless it's all about trying to share our stories so that people can know, so that we can actually change things."

### Jordan:
"I honestly hope people go into shock - I really do. Because I believe if you're going to absorb anything, it really needs to get to you - it really needs to touch you in places where you think you've closed off. Most people who have been through that kind of stuff like I have, walled off their hearts to any kind of anything. So, it's like, if you want to make any sort of progress, you need to find somebody, something or will yourself to open up to allow yourself to feel those kinds of pains. Because after all the shit, right, after your shitstorm - you start to see little things that piece together, things that give your life direction, and it's something to pursue and you'll find happiness out of it. You can't just sit on your ass and pray to god that everything is going to be fine, right. But even if you do pray for something like that or you wish on a star, those wishes are not going to come true if you don't actually pursue them at the same time."

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The following 34 recommendations were developed as a group and presented at the photo exhibit event on December 18, 2017. The recommendations are in first person plural, to reflect the collective perspectives of the co-researchers. Some individual quotes are included to reinforce the importance of the recommendation.

## Animal companions: more than just pets

Youth in care often feel a lack of connection to family, as being placed in a home with strangers does not always translate into a feeling of being part of a family. When we 'age out', we often want to create our own families through animal companions, as they can be our only source of unconditional love and emotional support.

1. *The traditional definition of 'family' for youth in and from care does not include pets, and should be expanded to include animal companions.*

For youth in and from care, animal companions are far more than just pets; they take on the role of healers for our traumas and PTSD. Unfortunately, the current application processes to get your animal companion certified as a service or therapy animal are extremely complicated, and are often restricted to dogs and for people with physical disabilities.

2. *The child protection system needs to facilitate certification of service and therapy animals for youth in and from care, and policy barriers to obtain certification, as well as housing, need to be removed.*

> "A therapy animal is more like a support companion, they don't have the same rights as a service animal does. So, you can't bring them in stores, you can't take them on transit, you can't fly with them and if you do, you have to pay for another seat for them, that type of thing. Whereas a service animal, because they have the certificate saying they are a service animal, you can legally fly with them right beside you without having to pay for another seat. And she [service animal] can come into a restaurant with me if I wanted to, I can take her into hospitals. Whereas a therapy animal, you can't take them to hospitals unless they are registered under the Red Cross Association. It's complicated. With therapy animals, you can still get charged a pet deposit, a damage deposit [for housing]; service animals you can't because they are specifically trained not to destroy furniture or anything.

[…] But I couldn't go through the Red Cross [for service animal certification] because they only do dogs, they only do service animals for the blind and the deaf, they do not do posttraumatic stress."

# Accessible, affordable and safe housing

Youth in care are often unable to have pets due to placement instability. When we 'age out', we often yearn for a connection to animal companions as they can be our only source of unconditional love. Animals can allow us to develop our capacity to nurture ourselves and others, and are beneficial for our mental health. When we search for housing upon aging out, we often get **discriminated against for having been in care and having an animal**. Housing restrictions in BC often prevent former youth in care from being able to have pets, despite evidence showing that animal companions can help us heal from trauma and PTSD.

### 3. *BC housing and tenancy laws need to be revised* so that youth from care do not have to choose between affordable housing and a pet.

"This is the first time in my life where I could have a pet, because before that I was kind of bouncing everywhere. […] It's really hard to find stable housing, and when you find one [an apartment], it doesn't guarantee that you can have a pet either. In the place I have right now, I'm not supposed to have a pet, but I just hide her. […] It's the first time I've had a pet and it feels really good. I think it's beneficial for people to have animals around, it's good for their health. […] These [housing] legislations [restricting pets] are imposed despite the resistance of most people. So, I kind of wanted to illustrate how the laws imposed on these lands are in favour of certain people, of a certain class and demographic - it's kind of arbitrary and it's unnecessary. So, it's kind of addressing a policy issue that can easily be changed to allow pets. And generally, in BC, the laws for tenancy and the laws for landlords, it's usually in favour of landlords. […]"

Also, youth 'aging out' of care often have **limited options for affordable housing**, and this **perpetuates the placement instability** many experience while in care. Housing stability impacts our relationships and how we can connect to our neighbourhoods and our communities.

**4. Often, youth 'aging out' of care must choose between affordable housing and safe housing, as most affordable places are run down and old. We need more *housing options that are both affordable and safe* so that we have a stable place to live.**

## Connection to the land and culture

In Indigenous culture and spirituality, it is important to be connected to the land and to protect it. When Indigenous children and youth get placed into care, they are often placed into communities that are not connected to their cultural heritage. This perpetuates intergenerational trauma, and separates us from our elders and the teachings that they can pass on to us. Canadian society is very colonized, in that we have forgotten our relationship with the land and our ancestors, and this affects Indigenous youth in and from care on a deep level.

**5. *Opportunities to (re)connect with the land and our ancestors through cultural programs and retreats* are important, so that Indigenous youth in and from care can find moments of peace and grounding during times of crisis and transition.**

This can help to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma and colonization, and enhance the connection between young parent(s) and their children.

> "[…] I didn't access these types of programs until I aged out of care. And they [community organization] actually extended the age range for me […]. And they still are like 'oh do you want to come? […] We really want you there.' So, they allow my children to come too, so that's really big."

**6. For those of us who are also young parents, it is important that we be given *opportunities to participate in cultural programs and events with our children*, so we can pass on the teachings to the next generation.**

Being connected to cultural practices and traditions can be a source of strength and healing for Indigenous and racialized children and youth. Being connected to culture can also connect you to your cultural community, and in turn give you access to people who can be mentors in your life as you 'age out' of care.

7. It is important to *nurture cultural connections before youth 'age out'*, because those relationships can act as a buffer for the challenges we face when we suddenly must transition from care at the young age of 19.

"Culture is really important in my life, and I found that I'm only succeeding because of it. Because I find when I'm struggling or anything like that, I can always go to the […] Centre, or you know, go seek out my mentors, and they don't really care what time of day it is - if I have a need or anything like that, or I just need a smudge, or if I just need to go out for coffee or anything like that, they'll always be there for me. And I find that with the ministry I didn't get that - once your file closes, it's done. They're the type to tell you 'oh I'm not working right now', and you're like 'wow, who am I supposed to talk to?' So, it's more or less to start nurturing those relationships before youth age out, because those can be really big in a youth's life […]."

8. Indigenous and racialized children and youth should be placed in *culturally appropriate placements and receive services by culturally competent workers* that allow for them to remain connected to their spirituality, their cultural identity and community during their time in care.

"[…] because wherever you end up, you end up being changed and influenced by the people around you in so many different ways, culturally too."

## Nurturing relationships with siblings, extended family and parent-like mentors

Siblings can help support each other through the traumatic experience of being removed from our homes, and help us naturally develop coping and life skills. When the ministry makes every effort to keep siblings together, the outcomes can be much more positive for youth in and from care.

9. When children and youth are placed into care, *preserving the family unit as much as possible by placing siblings together* can have a profound and lasting impact on our lives.

"[...] All four of the sisters, we all got moved to another home together, the ministry pushed so hard to keep us all together. Because we never really knew anything different, so the four sisters got to stay together. There were four brothers and they got split up [...]. I kind of had a different experience in foster care I guess [because I got to stay with my sisters]. [...]. We got lots of counselling and family counselling for us girls, and there was a lot of help and resources that we had. [...] The ministry did everything that they could, and I think they should continue to treat foster kids that way, because they did a lot for us."

Unfortunately, siblings often get separated while in care. This can instill a profound sense of loss and grief due to the lost time and lost opportunities to bond with family. Often, **Indigenous siblings are placed in homes outside of their communities**, which creates another barrier in sibling relationships, as it can be difficult to relate with a family member who is disconnected from their own culture. This loss affects us deeply as we struggle with **impacts of colonization and displacement**.

**10. It is important for us to be able to develop and nurture relationships with our families during and after care, including extended family members and parent-like mentors, so that we can start the process of healing and break the cycle of intergenerational trauma. The *definition of family* also needs to be *revised to include those who youth consider as family*, but may not be related by blood.**

"And I think it makes a big difference too, the whole [sibling] separation thing, it makes a huge impact on your relations with your family. Me and my brother, [...] we share more similarities now because we stayed together more than the rest of my siblings. [...] So, I think my siblings, my sisters, are a lot more assimilated into dominant mainstream culture. And I tried to connect with one of my sisters, she's the youngest, she seems to be more open-minded. But my other sister, I can't even talk to her because she has a lot of resentments, and she has a way of dealing with it and it's not talking about things. And I can see that they're suffering too, because they're not really resisting with assimilation and that kind of thing. So, I think those practices need to change, because I think those policies are intentional for breaking up families. And sometimes it may be necessary depending on the situation obviously, [...] but we didn't have any input on being able to choose ourselves. They didn't ask for our input."

When we do get to spend time with our siblings while in care, any time spent together is closely monitored from the confines of a meeting room; the relationship then becomes institutionalized.

## 11. It is very important for us to be able to *develop natural relationships with our siblings over time*, because they last longer than paid relationships ever will.

"I think it's also important to have naturally developed relationships, because they last longer than paid relationship last. And it's super important for youth in care, because you're transitioning all the time, there's always some things changing. And to even have biological family to stick around for you, like, I think that's important. […] I have friends who have families that they can always rely on, and they don't see that 'oh this good thing is going to leave, so I might as well not get too attached because it may be gone tomorrow'. I think that's only a mentality that youth in care can have. I think the system itself is instilling it in children, it conditions you to always wait for the next shoe to drop when something is going well. […] Fast-forward a few years, and they [youth in and from care] can't build a relationship because they have walls built around them and they can't trust."

## Breaking the cycle of intergenerational foster care

Youth from care who are also **young parents** often **struggle to receive the supports they need**, and can be **discriminated against** for having been in care. This can result in their children being placed in the system and perpetuates the **cycle of intergenerational foster care**. Young parents from care need to be given a fighting chance to successfully parent their own children, rather than be shamed for the supports and connections they do not have.

## 12. Given that the system oversees our upbringing, it is important for government to *provide the supports and services young parents from care need so they can support the next generation and succeed*. These services need to be provided without bias or judgement.

"Support the next generation to succeed. Some of our young parents, sometimes they're not getting a fighting chance. And you don't want to have the next generation in the system once again. It's like a never-ending cycle - let's scoop and start over, let's scoop and start over. Being more supportive and making sure that a youth who is aging out or who has aged out has all the supports they need instead of shaming them for the supports that they don't have. […] So, the system itself can either contribute to perpetuating the cycle or contribute to breaking it. […] I believe that if a worker is working with youth, like in my situation, my social worker apprehended my children and I think there should have been a different social worker involved, not one that had dealt with me growing up. I think that was inappropriate because she was biased."

# Mental health, alternative medicine and therapies, and healing

Children and youth coming into care are carrying significant traumas and feelings of abandonment with them. This impacts our ability to properly communicate with others and build healthy relationships. Many children and youth do not get the proper counselling and mental health services they need during their time in care, and continue to carry the trauma in their lives after 'aging out'. However, it is important that any mental health related decisions and interventions are done in a youth-centered way, as we are often forced to take part of interventions before we are ready.

**13. All children and youth being removed from their homes should be *encouraged and supported* to undergo a *mental health and well-being assessment* to assess their needs, and *more funding and investment in mental health resources* is required.**

We should also be given **opportunities and supports to properly heal** during and after our time in care, so that we can move on from our traumatic experiences **and focus on ourselves in a healthy way.** This includes connections to positive role models who can help us build a positive sense of self and identity.

**14. We should also be given the opportunity, as part of our healing journey, to *make connections with people who will add positivity to our lives and build us up* rather than tear us down. This includes connections to *mentors from the LGBTQ2+ community* for those of us who identify as LGBTQ2+ and/or are struggling with our identities.**

For some of us, marijuana and other forms of alternative medicines positively impact our mental health and well-being, which in turn impacts our ability to develop healthy relationships with ourselves and others.

**15. Youth in and from care are not all the same; we process things differently and thus *treatments and interventions cannot be 'one size fits all'*. For some of us who have anxiety or depression, antidepressants do not always work, and we need to be able to have *alternative forms of medicine* available to us *without judgements and stereotypes*.**

In addition, being forced to undergo therapy approaches that do not mesh with us can cause more harm than good, especially when we are in a state of trauma and crisis.

**16. Youth in and from care need to be *provided with resources for healing that works for them*, such as art therapy and other forms of unconventional interventions. Front line workers need to listen to what we say we need and believe us.**

## Trauma-informed practices

When children and youth enter care, their first point of contact is often a police officer. We are told to gather our lives and our things in just a few short minutes, and are whisked away from our homes in a police cruiser. Some of us are even placed in hotels under the guise of temporary emergency placements. The **removal process is devoid of the nurturing and humanity we crucially need** during this traumatic and abrupt transition, and **makes us feel like we are criminals**.

> "[…] A hotel is not a home. There are also people who experience this [being in a hotel] long-term […], it's just not a good place to be. There is nothing nurturing about a hotel room. I think the whole apprehension process needs to be looked at, and we need to consider the effects of how that process is going to impact youth who get into the system. Because it's not a smooth transition, it's really abrupt."

There is a need for **change in education and awareness** when it comes to adults and professionals forming relationships with youth in and from care, so that our relationships with the system are not devoid of warmth and understanding. There also needs to be more awareness and training on the **realities youth 'aging out' of care face**, and the **challenges and barriers** we experience when we are **pursuing post-secondary education**.

> "It's also kind of frustrating because I was talking to my counsellor the other week and I was explaining what was going on, and she was like 'wow […], you're really in crisis', and I'm like 'yeah, this is terrifying!'. And she's like 'do you have any resources that you can reach out to? Do you know anybody?' 'No, I don't know anybody.' She's like 'really? Are you

sure? It sounds strange.' And I'm like 'what's strange?' […] She doesn't understand the realities of 'aging out' of care and pursuing postsecondary. So, there is a lack of awareness and training.

*17. Training for professionals* working in the child protection system, in public institutions and in the community, needs to come *from a trauma-informed perspective*, and the types of *supports* youth in and from care receive need to be *provided within a trauma-informed context.*

## Youth-centered decision-making

Children and youth in care are rarely asked for their input when the decision to remove them from their homes and their families of origin is made. We have no options to choose for ourselves, and have no control over the direction our life is taking. These practices need to change.

*18. Children and youth in and from care need to be involved in all decision-making discussions.* We need to be *seen and heard as valid contributors and stakeholders.*

It is also difficult to develop trusting relationships when there is a lack of honesty and transparency and constant broken promises, and this mistrust carries on with us throughout adulthood.

*19.* Youth in and from care also need *transparency and honesty* in the decisions that affect them.

Currently, youth in and from care who are in crisis and are honest and forthcoming with their trauma can be assessed as not qualifying for assistance. The higher risk or 'problematic' you are deemed to be, it seems the less support you tend to get. **All youth in and from care should be supported**, and **should not have to prove they are worthy of care and support**. We should not have to constantly prove that we are struggling and that we know what we need and want, over what you think is best for us.

*20. Paternalistic forms of intervention need to be replaced with youth-centered practices.* Front line workers need to *listen* to what youth in and from care say they need, *believe them, and advocate for them.*

# Investing in interests, talents and strengths

Children and youth in and from care have many talents, gifts and strengths; unfortunately, **most of our time in care is focused on our problems rather than our potential**. Investing in young people's talents and strengths while they are in care can help determine their life and career paths later in life.

> **21. Whether it is photography, mechanics, engineering, art, dance or creative writing, we should be provided with *opportunities* while we are in care and after *to explore our interests and hone our talents* so we can be the best that we can be.**

Youth in and from care have **amazing things to offer** to the world and their **communities if given the time and the right mentorship**. This includes mentors from the LGBTQ2+ community, as youth in and from care require role models they can identify with. Long-term mentorship relationships play a crucial role in the lives of youth from care, and a lack of those relationships creates emotional instability that can last a lifetime. Currently, mentorship resources are scarce, which can have a negative impact on the psyche of youth from care.

> **22. Increased *investment in long-term mentorship programs and resources* is required for youth while they are still in care. These relationships need to be continuously nurtured and supported, even after youth exit the care system.**

# Peer-led advocacy and support

Youth in and from care can often find it difficult to relate to people who have not experienced hardships. Having opportunities during and after care to **connect with others who share our struggle** and engage in **peer-led advocacy and support** is important for our personal growth and our sense of belonging.

"When you age out of care, you don't have those long-term supportive relationships. I know for me personally, like if it wasn't for the [community organization], I wouldn't have gotten the chance […] to do a lot of the things I've done and now, only because I was the one that kind of forced myself to do that whole thing with the Youth Advisory Committee. […] Advocating for extended peer relationships past 19 is really important."

*23. Front line workers should make connections to peer-led advocacy* for us, and support for us during and after care so that we have the opportunity to create enriching relationships and not feel so alone.

Many youth in and from care turn to alcohol and hard substances to self-medicate, especially when their mental health needs are not being met. This can often create a toxic environment for forming peer relationships, and can be very stressful because you are often afraid that you are going to lose your friends to an overdose.

"I think it's important to make friends with people that are sober and don't do drugs, because you can lose a lot of people to drugs. I guess with [my new friend] I realize that I don't have to always be friends with someone who does drugs, and I don't always have to be afraid that they're going to die - because of fentanyl and that kind of stuff. […] I think something that people don't really realize, in care sometimes there's a lot of addictions to drugs. But yeah, you can make your own life and have your own people that support you and aren't going to make you feel uncool for [not] doing drugs."

24. Youth in and from care need *opportunities to connect with peers who are sober and involved in pro-social interests,* to counteract traumatic relationship aspects and encourage us to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

Many youth 'aging out' of care do not have the basic skills to know how to survive with very little resources, as they were not properly taught those skills while in care. It is hard to be able to thrive when you are barely surviving, when you are living in poverty and have nothing to eat.

**25.** During our time in care, we should be *taught how to cook, how to clean and how to survive on a small budget.* Those skills also need to be *taught in an organic and nurturing way* - not in a classroom, but *by peer mentors* who have been through it and have survived.

## Expanding the definition of community

For some youth in and from care, connecting with people can be difficult due to social anxiety or difficulty trusting others. It can be difficult for us to feel a sense of belonging and community. Connecting with people online can be an alternative way for us to connect and open up to others who share similar interests and experiences.

**26.** *Online forms of connection need to be included in the definition of 'community'* for youth in and from care. For youth in and from care, *a sense of community and identity can be built online*, and relationships can be nurtured long-term this way.

Unfortunately, **internet access** for youth in and from care **is currently not considered as a necessity**, and is **often heavily controlled and monitored** during our time in care which prevents us from forming and nurturing online relationships in an organic way.

> "[…] The internet was my support system. […] In some group homes, you're not allowed to have access to the Internet. One of them was you're not allowed on the Internet after 10 PM, you're only allowed to be - like they have restrictions on the websites you can use. You can only have a certain amount of [electronic] devices, and you have to check in and give them your devices if you're coming back into the group home."

**27.** *Internet access should be considered as a vital resource for our mental health and well-being and a right rather than a privilege*, both during and after care. Internet access needs to be *less rigorously controlled and monitored* during our time in care to allow us to form and nurture online relationships in an organic way.

In addition, accessible spaces where young people in and from care can connect to culture, art, and other interests with others are vital components of a local community. These spaces are currently being destroyed, despite being up to code and thriving hubs of local culture, to create space for condominiums and cater to the middle- to upper-class. This results in young people from care being pushed outside of their own neighbourhoods, and limits our opportunities to build lasting connections with others who share similar interests.

> **28.** *Accessible spaces* need to be considered as an *important part of the community* for youth in and from care, *and protected from gentrification* so that young people have a place to connect and explore their interests and talents.

## Long-term unconditional support and nurturing

As youth 'aging out' of care, we often perceive our 19th birthday as yet another dramatic and traumatic life transition, rather than a positive milestone. Many of the **long-term relationships** we have worked so hard to build during our time in care **have an expiration date,** and must suddenly end once we reach the age of majority. This is due to **arbitrary policies** that **focus on making us self-sufficient and independent** rather than continuing connections to the people in our lives that support us. It is difficult to be able to develop close and long-term relationships when you are constantly grieving the loss of important connections in your life, and are told you can no longer maintain a close relationship because you reached the age of majority. Our life should not feel like it ends at the age of 19, nor like we are being thrown out alone into a battlefield without the proper supports to survive.

> **29.** Youth 'aging out' of care need to be able to *maintain supportive relationships long-term*, so that we can *experience permanency* and thrive during our transition to adulthood.

"I believe that there should be some sort of ceremony, there should be something. Because when you turn 19, what do you get? You get a closed file. And there should be something bigger instead of just a closed file. Because that would be a lot more meaningful, you know. When some people turn 16 they have a big birthday bash. They should have like a ball for these youth that are aging out. I think that would make it a lot more easier to transition, or something so that they can have a happier memory. It can kind of alleviate that feeling of being pushed out. It could be more of a celebration rather than something they're not looking forward to. Because they could be like 'oh yeah, when I turned 19 there was this amazing party' instead of 'oh well they closed my file'. You know, that was it, that was all. Some kids are able to get their files open until 21 but some don't get that."

**30. Youth 'aging out' of care *deserve to celebrate their 19th birthday in a positive way*, just like their peers who are not in care do. A *celebration ceremony* should be put in place for all youth in care who reach the age of majority.**

Youth in and from care also need the **opportunity to slow things down in times of crisis and transition**, to learn through trial and error, and surmount obstacles in a slow and steady way so that we can get through hardships without getting broken.

**31. Youth in care need more time to transition to adulthood, and the *age of transition should be extended until at least age 25*.**

"There needs to be speed bumps for [foster] kids, in life, as they're moving through the system. Right now, they're kinda just putting kids into wheelbarrows and letting them fall down a hill, and there's nothing to slow them down - there's no brakes, no controls, no nothing. It's just like 'okay, well here you go!' right, because everything's just been done for you [before aging out]. And so there needs to be more supports, more speed bumps I guess in this sense. […] So, the opportunity to slow down, get over the obstacle in a slow way so that you don't break. For example, if you are in a car and you're speeding, speeding, and you just fly over a speedbump - you got over the speedbump, but you probably broke your wheel doing it. So now, on the next speedbump, are you going to be able to get over it properly? Probably not, because one of your wheels is broken."

Also, the support we get while in care and after is always conditional - we only get the support and acceptance if we are doing good. We need people in our lives that will **support us and guide us** no matter what and in the long-term, **unconditionally** - we are all deserving of care, nurturing and support.

**32. Currently, youth in and from care who seek the support that they need often must meet an array of eligibility criteria. This causes many of us who are unable to meet these conditions to fall through the cracks. *Supports for youth in and from care need to be provided unconditionally.***

"Support should be automatically provided, you should always be protected and loved and cared for. Yet, growing up in care you're still finding ways to protect yourself, because you just always have to."

"[….] Beauty can come out of a person when they are fully supported. And also the ability to walk forward as well […]. Like you're walking towards something brighter than where you are. […] All that fullness and warmth and comfort, it's what I want in my life and what I see being a possibility in my life had I been given - or if I will be given in the future - the proper supports to get to this point."

## *Supports and connections during the holidays*

The holidays can be a difficult and isolating time for youth in and from care, as it can be a reminder of the family and relationships that have been lost.

### 33. Rather than focusing solely on material gifts, *the holidays are a time of year where the focus should be placed on providing youth in and from care with the relationships they need, and the opportunities to take part of community activities* so they can feel connected.

"The world views the holidays as a way to make a profit, or to brag about what they've offered their kids because they have more money than anybody else. It's turned into a competition. I honestly think that foster homes should focus more on community activities with those placed in foster homes or group homes. Because typically what they do is that they take the lazy route, it's like 'here's a gift card for the mall, Merry Christmas' or whatever. They spend so much time doing their job that they don't focus on what the kids may actually need, which is actual relationships."

## *Investing in interdependence vs. independence*

Youth in and from care have a **basic need for connection to others**, just like their peers who are not in care do. As human beings, **we cannot - and should not have to - exist self-sufficiently and independently** from others. Our peers who are not in care are not expected to 'age out' of their families at the age of majority, and continue to rely on their friends, families and communities for guidance and support throughout their adulthood - this is simply a normal part of life for them. However, we are **taught to become self-sufficient** as we prepare to 'age out' of the system, and this imposes a lot of stress on us as we deal with yet another drastic transition in our lives.

To keep our inner fire alive, we **need to be interconnected to others** who can help us fuel our flame and thrive within our communities. We need to be provided with the same level of

**ongoing care, support and love that our peers receive** so we can get a fighting chance to thrive, and not just survive. Government and policy decision-makers need to understand that **if they support young people, they profit in the end - you must invest in the youth first and foremost to get the positive outcomes.**

> **34.** *Policies and practices targeted to youth 'aging out' of care* need to be reframed and shift from an *approach focused on* independent living to one focused on *interdependent living*. This means *building and nurturing lasting communities of connection* while young people are still in care, so they have a support system that will follow them throughout their entire adult lives.

# PROJECT DISSEMINATION DELIVERABLES & NEXT STEPS

## Project Dissemination Deliverables

The aim of photovoice (PV) is to empower participants as co-researchers and advocates for change, and to encourage sustainable social change at the community level. The visual images and accompanying stories produced by a PV project can be used as dissemination tools to reach and inform academics, practitioners, policy decision-makers and the public through various creative mediums. One of the deliverables of this project included a community art exhibit at which friends, family, community members, politicians and key decision-makers were invited to attend. This event was held at the Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre in Vancouver, BC the evening of Monday, December 18, 2017.

To promote the exhibit event and the project, the lead researcher and three co-researchers were featured in an article in the Tyee on Friday, December 15, 2017 titled *Creating Connections Through Photography*[20]. On Monday morning, the lead researcher did an interview in French with Radio Canada Vancouver's *Phare Ouest* program[21], and a second interview with two other co-researchers with CBC Radio Vancouver's *On the Coast* program[22] in the afternoon to promote the photo exhibit event. Over 100 people attended the photo exhibit event to witness the talents and expertise of the co-researchers. A professional photographer was hired to take photos of the exhibit event, which were featured on the Fostering Change website and Facebook page on January 3, 2018[23].

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[20] https://thetyee.ca/News/2017/12/15/Creating-Connections-Through-Photography/
[21] https://ici.radio-canada.ca/premiere/emissions/phare-ouest/segments/entrevue/51867/melanie-doucet-tutelle-photographie
[22] Interview starts at 1:27:56: http://www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/on-the-coast/episode/15239593
[23] Relationships Matter for Youth 'Aging Out' of Care Photo Exhibit Event: http://www.fosteringchange.ca/relationships_matter_for_youth_event
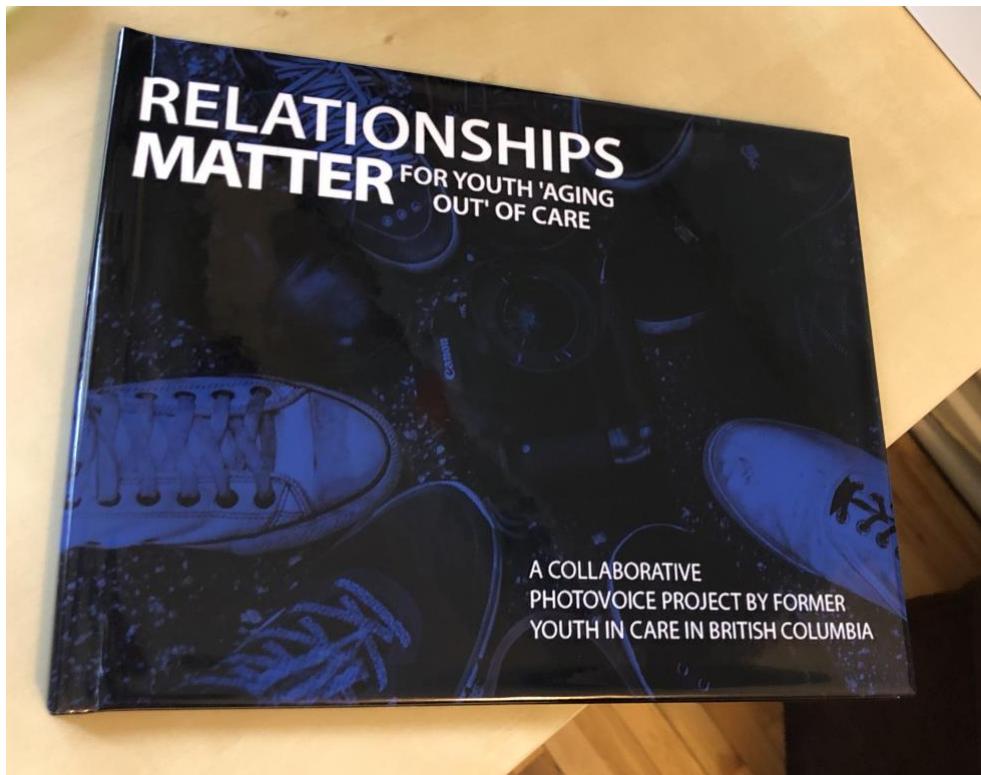
Two copies of the *Relationships Matter* photo book were printed via the Davie Street London Drugs Photo Lab. The book features the co-researchers' artist bios, photographs and accompanying titles and captions that were featured at the photo exhibit event. A copy was sent to the lead researcher, and another copy was picked up by one of the co-researchers, which will be shared amongst the co-researcher group for presentation purposes. A project video was developed by the videographer hired to film the photo exhibit event, and an e-book version of the photo book was developed to accompany the project video. The Relationships Matter project video and e-photo book were publicly released via the Fostering Change website[24] on June 6, 2018 as part of BC Children and Youth in Care Week, and were featured in First Call BC's *The Child and Youth Advocate* June 2018 newsletter.

Since the new year, several co-researchers have continued their engagement in project dissemination activities. Co-researcher Martha Dzhenganin's photography and accompanying tiles and captions are currently featured at the new Aunt Leah's Place location in downtown Vancouver, and they were featured in an article in Aunt Leah's Spring 2018 newsletter titled *There Isn't Just One Narrative of Foster Care*[25]. Also, the lead researcher and co-researcher Harrison Pratt collaborated on an opinion piece about the foster care to youth criminal justice system pipeline, which was featured in *Policy Options* on April 18, 2018[26].

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[24] *Relationships Matter Highlights Project Video*: http://www.fosteringchange.ca/relationships_matter_highlights
[25] https://auntleahs.org/enewsletter2018/
[26] *Breaking the cycle for "crossover youth"*: http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/april-2018/breaking-cycle-crossover-youth/

# Next Steps



The lead researcher and several of the co-researchers presented the findings outlined in this report to the BC Representative for Children and Youth staff on August 21st, 2018 in Burnaby, BC. In line with the participatory and social justice-oriented methodology framing this project, the lead researcher and interested co-researchers will continue to engage with the BC Representative for Children and Youth for follow-up on actions taken to implement the recommendations for change outlined in this report. To achieve a sustainable social impact, interested co-researchers are also encouraged to continue their engagement within the youth in care advocacy community, through involvement in existing community-based committees and groups. Co-researchers can also choose to continue engaging with the larger community by doing presentations, lectures and workshops on the findings of this project and exhibiting their photography work. The lead researcher will also continue to engage the co-researchers in the dissertation writing process, as well as any presentation and publication opportunities that may arise in the future.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Relationships Matter Project Recruitment Poster



**McGill**

# Relationships Matter

**A Collaborative Photovoice Research Project with young people who have 'aged out' of care**

REB #98-0717

Are you an individual between the ages of 19 and 29 that 'aged out' of the child welfare system?

Are you passionate about making a difference in the lives of youth in and from care?

Are you interested in sharing your story?

Are you currently living in the Greater Vancouver area?

My name is Melanie Doucet, I am a PhD student at the McGill University School of Social Work and a former youth in care. I am seeking 7 to 10 young adults residing in the Greater Vancouver area who have 'aged out' of care to take part of a collaborative photovoice project for my doctoral research. The project aims to take a closer look at supportive relationships in the lives of young people from care and how those relationships can be developed and supported over time. This is also a great opportunity for you to share your valuable experience - through your own eyes - with some of your peers and with the community!

This project will engage you as a co-researcher, and will be created in a supportive community setting in the Greater Vancouver area. It will feature 12 weekly group sessions starting in the fall of 2017 where you will have the opportunity to share your experiences and receive training on photography techniques, storytelling, and how policy change works just to name a few! Digital cameras will be provided, which you will be able to keep at the end of the project. A photography exhibit of your work will be organized at a location in the Greater Vancouver area, which will take place towards the end of the project. The exhibit will be an opportunity to engage friends, family, people in the community and key decision-makers about the importance of supportive long-term relationships for youth in care and the actions that need to be taken together to support those relationships.

Food and beverages will be provided at each weekly session, public transportation will be covered and compensation will be offered for your participation!

**Interested? Please send me and email at melanie.doucet@mcgill.ca or call me at 438-871-3777 expressing your interest or with any questions. All calls and emails will be kept confidential.**

This project is funded by the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the BC Representative for Children and Youth and the Vancouver Foundation's Fostering Change Initiative.

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada

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# Appendix B: Relationships Matter Project Community Agreement & Safer Space Guidelines

- Calling people 'in', instead of calling people 'out' - trying to address interpersonal issues one-on-one as much as possible
  - If it is an immediate threat and affects the group environment, it can be appropriate to call out immediately as a group (e.g., racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, etc.)
  - If it is not an immediate threat, trying to address it after the session one-on-one with the person, or with the researcher if uncomfortable with person
- Respecting confidentiality - what is said in this room, should stay in this room
- Being transparent about your own judgements and prejudices as much as possible
- Being open-minded and considerate
- Taking what you need, giving you what you can
- Being respectful of time - showing up on time for the sessions at least 15 minutes early
- Being engaged
- Being present - putting cell phones on silent
- Making room for everyone to have the opportunity to speak
- Being mindful of triggers - giving 'content warnings' before sharing traumatic experiences
- Having the right to pass on answering questions or sharing with the group
- Leaving assumptions at the door as much as possible
- DBAD (Don't Be A Douche!)
- Contributing to a calm environment conducive to learning and sharing - being mindful of people who are sensitive to background noise
- If someone is wearing headphones during eating time - it is to block the background noise
- Being respectful of 'on air' time (audio recorded time) - speaking one at a time
- Being mindful of sharing space and power - giving the opportunity for everyone to participate
- Being respectful when someone is speaking to the group - importance of active listening
- Creating a safe group environment for sharing ideas and asking questions - there are no 'stupid' ideas or questions
- Having FUN!
- Treating others with kindness
- Words matter - being mindful of the words you use during discussions

# Appendix C: Photo Selection, Contextualization & Analysis Process

**Starting November 11th session until December 16th session (6 sessions)**

## 1. photo selection (individual)

- In total, each participant selects 5 to 7 of their favourite photographs that they wish to share with the group and have considered for the photo exhibit.
- At each session from Nov 11 to Nov 25, each participant will be giving the opportunity to select and share 2 of those photos to be considered for the photo exhibit; On December 2, people will submit one last photo to be considered as part of the exhibit; we will then move on to the group photo coding process.
- Photos are most often selected based on personal instinct

## 2. photo contextualization (individual)

- Each participant shares with the group the stories, meaning, experiences, and connections of the photos to the research themes and issues

- The photographer answers the following questions for each picture:

  ➢ What do the photographs mean to you? Why are these photos in particular most significant to you?

  ➢ How do you see these photos as a reflection of the issue of supportive long-term relationships - and one that is relevant to you as a former youth in care in your community?

  ➢ What is the relationship between the content of the photos and how you perceive the community/the world around you?

## 3. photo coding (group)

- This process starts once all photos to be considered for the exhibit have been shared and analyzed.

- The group selects 4 of the photographs shared by each participant, and sorts the photographs into topic groups to cluster categories of ideas, issues, themes or theories based on the accompanying stories and meaning assigned to them

- Use VOICE approach (Voicing our Individual and Collective Experiences)

  – Think not only about own life experiences, but also about shared life experiences and conditions

  – Helps to understand the impact of public policies on own life and those of others, and sets the stage for collective action

- Group makes final decisions on photos to be included in exhibit and accompanying captions on December 9 - deadline to be able to submit photos for canvassing for exhibit

- Group also develops recommendations/desired outcomes for social change based on the issues identified in the photos (this will be finalized on Dec 16)

# Appendix D: Preliminary Group Thematic Coding & Analysis of Photographs

# Recommendations:

## Common themes:

- → pets
- → housing
- → mental health ✓ + healing
- → siblings
- → extended family + unconditional
- → Extended support + nurturing
  - ↳ long-term mentorship
- → Alternative medicine + therapy
- → Youth-centered decision making + transparent
- → trauma-informed practice
  - ↳ education + awareness
- → expand definition of family
  - ↳ everyone can speak to this
- → high risk youth

- → land + culture
  - competency training, placements, foster parents, sw
- → interdependence
- → relationship stability
- → peer advocacy + support
  - ↳ pro-social peers
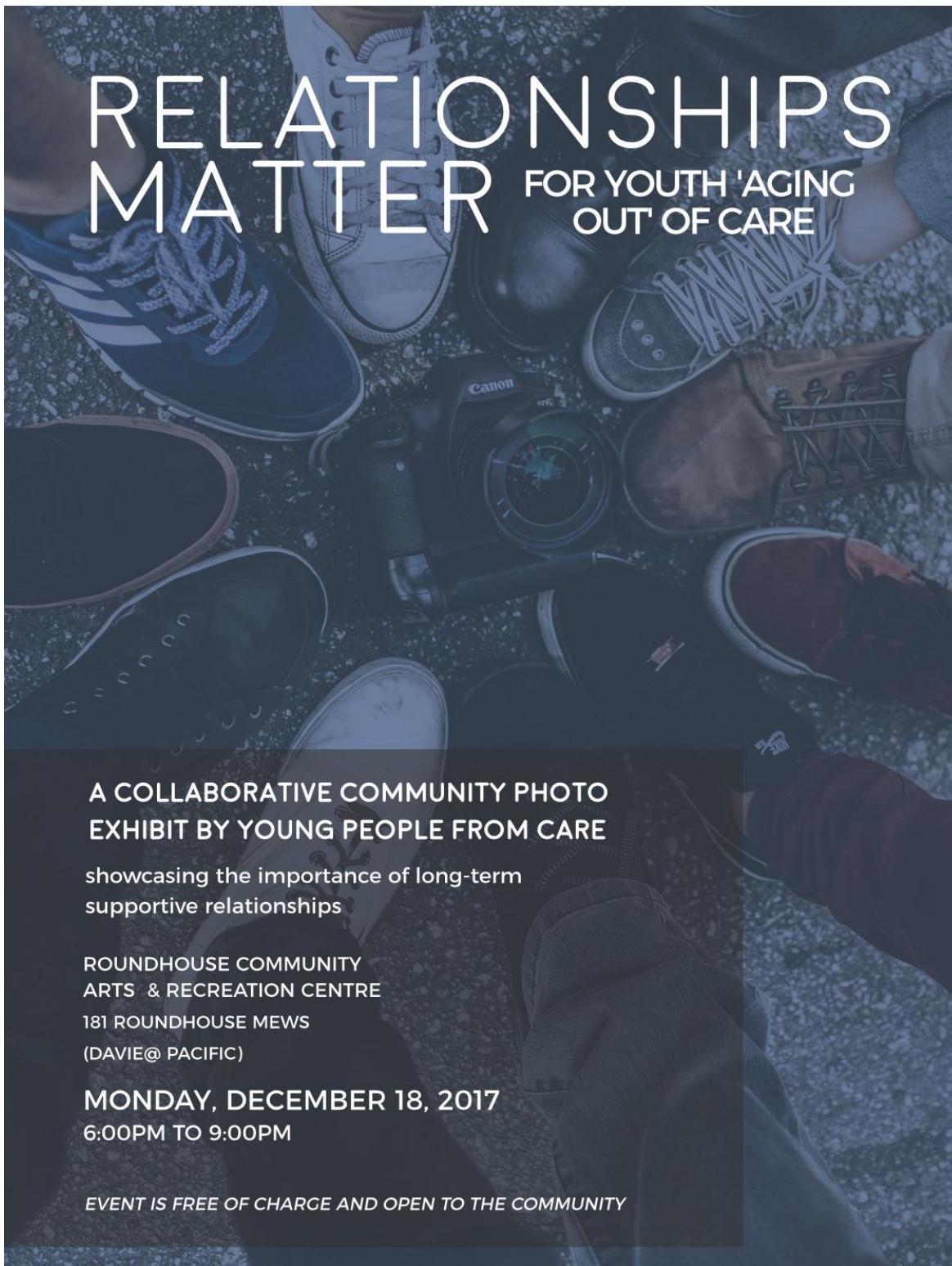
**RELATIONSHIPS MATTER** FOR YOUTH 'AGING OUT' OF CARE

**COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY PHOTO EXHIBIT**

By young people from care, showcasing the importance of long-term supportive relationships

**ROUNDHOUSE COMMUNITY CENTRE**
Monday, December 18, 2017
6:00pm-9:00pm

# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER FOR YOUTH 'AGING OUT' OF CARE

This photo exhibit showcases the work of 8 young people in the Greater Vancouver area who have 'aged out' of care, as part of a collaborative photovoice project with McGill University, The Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Vancouver Foundation's Fostering Change Initiative and the BC Representative for Children and Youth.

The exhibit aims to take a closer look - through the power of images and accompanying captions - *at supportive relationships in the lives of young people from care and how those relationships can be developed and nurtured over time.* The photography intends to challenge the viewer and the greater public to reflect on the realities youth 'aging out' of care face, and how long-term supportive connections can play a crucial role in their lives.

We thank you for coming to witness the valuable experiences, expertise and advocacy work of youth from care in BC.

## Program

**6:00 pm** Doors open
**7:00 pm** Welcome & Speakers

Welcome and opening prayer by **Elder Aline LaFlamme**

**Words of support from:**

**Meredith Graham**,
Fostering Change Youth Advisory Circle

**Linda Hughes,**
Chief Investigator, BC Representative for Children & Youth

**Recommendations and call for action by featured artists**

**7:30 pm** Mingle with the artists & viewing of exhibit
**8:55 pm** Thank you and good night

## FEATURED ARTISTS

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|---|---|
| Martha Dzhenganin | Raina Jules |
| Hari Sun (Harrison Pratt) | Ronda Merrill-Parkin |
| Jordan Read | Sabien Vanderwall |
| Keeshana Emmanuel | Tahsina Al-aibi (Fish) |

**EVENT PHOTOGRAPHER**
Sarah Race Photography

**EVENT VIDEOGRAPHER**
Raul Campued JR.

**MUSIC BY**
DJ Luke Native

With support from principal researcher
Melanie Doucet, former youth in care and PhD Candidate

*Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Scholar,
SSHRC Doctoral Fellow, School of Social Work, McGill University*

# Appendix G: Project Implementation Plan

**Orientation & Information Session:**

Two weeks prior to the start of the project sessions, a 2-hour orientation and information session with interested and prospective participants was held, so they could learn in more detail about the photovoice process, the focus of the project, the role of participants as co-researchers and required time commitments. Interested participants were asked to weigh the risks and benefits of their participation in the project, and advised that the project entailed a willingness to work with others and do group problem-solving. Those who could dedicate the required time and were still interested in being part of the photovoice project were asked to attend a free full day training session the following weekend on public policy reform organized by the Vancouver Foundation's Fostering Change Initiative. This session provided information to interested participants regarding advocacy and affecting policy change, including managing expectations for change, information on what changes are already in place, how policy and government works, and strategic sharing. Transportation, child care and food were provided by the Vancouver Foundation. Those who were still committed to participating in the project were also invited to attend the first project session the week following the Fostering Change Policy Strategy session, to provide informed consent for their participation as co-researchers in the project and to sign the project consent form.

The photovoice project took place over 12 weekly sessions as follows:

**Session 1:** *(3 hours)* After introductions and an icebreaker activity, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality were explained and interested participants were asked to sign consent forms. Only those who provided written consent could continue to participate for the remainder of the session. The group started to develop a community agreement/code of conduct for the remainder of the project, which was finalized during session 2. Co-researchers were also provided with a locked journal where they could write and sketch their ideas around the central theme of the project (i.e., long-term supportive relationships) and the photographs they wanted to take to accompany those ideas. A counsellor from a local youth-serving community organization came to talk to the co-researchers for the last portion of the session, to discuss the importance of self-care, debriefing and accessing counselling services when traumas resurface throughout the project.

**Session 2:** *(3 hours)* After finalizing the community agreement, a brainstorm exercise was facilitated with the group to identify relationship types, dimensions, barriers and strengths related to long-term supportive relationships. The ideas arising from the brainstorm session informed the project's thematic framework on long-term supportive relationships[27]. For the second part of the session, a local photographer provided training regarding the use of the

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[27] For further details on the outcome of the brainstorm session, see Appendix I.

digital cameras (e.g., flash, advancing to next picture, storage) and photography techniques (e.g., perspective, lighting, balance, contrast) that would help co-researchers to represent their experiences, strengths and struggles through photographs. The photographer also provided training on how to link the photograph's subject matter with the research theme (e.g., how to arrange photos to represent ideas, how to capture unplanned and natural images to represent an experience, symbolism of images and content of pictures).

Issues related to photograph copyright, methods for sharing photographs, underlying risks and ethical concerns surrounding camera use, and how those risks could be minimized were also discussed. For instance, participants were asked to not put themselves or others in danger to take a 'good photo' and were provided with example scenarios of dangerous situations to avoid. The process of informed consent of subjects in photographs (if photographs included other subjects) and details of the Third-Party Release and Acknowledgement Consent form were also discussed, and Third-Party Release consent forms were distributed to co-researchers. Digital cameras were distributed and co-researchers were given one week to take practice pictures.

**Session 3:** *(2 hours)* Co-researchers were advised to sign-up for an account with Datto Drive, the secure digital storage site for the remainder of the project. Co-researchers could access all the photos they handed in over the course of the project and any project documents. Practice digital pictures were collected, and each co-researcher discussed their experiences and feelings about taking pictures, and shared any challenges they may have encountered. For the second part of the session, co-researchers practiced photo selection and contextualization by selecting one practice picture to share with the group, and contextualized their photo in an open-ended way to stimulate ideas about connecting the photographs with the research question. At the end of the session, a due date was set by the group for all photographs to be handed in; it was decided that the photography process would be extended until session 9 to provide co-researchers with increased opportunities to capture meaningful photographs. This entailed an overlap with the beginning of the photo selection and contextualization process, which began at session 6 and continued until session 9. It was also decided as a group that in addition to using the digital cameras provided for the project, co-researchers could use other digital photography mediums available to them to take photographs (e.g., iPhone, own digital cameras).

**Sessions 4 & 5:** *(2 hours)* Weekly meetings were scheduled as a check-in so that co-researchers could hand in their digital pictures and support each other in the photography process. Participants could use these sessions as an opportunity to ask questions, discuss what they had learned so far, and share tips and tricks for taking photographs. This process helped to build a group relationship and improve photography skills and confidence. The professional photographer who provided training during session 2 was invited back for session 4 to provide feedback on the photographs the co-researchers had handed in to date, answer any questions and give additional tips for capturing meaningful photographs. At session 5, co-researchers were explained the photo selection and analysis process in further detail, and given the assignment to select two photos to share with the group the following week to be submitted for consideration for the photo exhibit event.

**Session 6:** *(3 hours)* This session focused on the start of the photo selection and contextualization process[28]. Each co-researcher was asked to share one or two photos with the group, to be considered for the photo exhibit event, and asked to contextualize each photo in connection to the research question as per the directives outlined in the Photo Selection & Contextualization document. Preliminary planning for the photo exhibit event also began; the event would take place between sessions 11 and 12.

**Session 7:** *(3 hours)* The photo selection and contextualization process continued; each co-researcher was asked to share one or two additional photos with the group, to be considered for the photo exhibit event, and asked to contextualize each photo in connection to the research question as per the directives outlined in the Photo Selection & Contextualization document. Planning for the photo exhibit event continued.

**Sessions 8 through 9:** *(3 hours)* The photo selection and contextualization process continued, and ended at session 9. Each co-researcher was asked to share one or two additional photos with the group at each session, up to a maximum of 5 to 7 photographs shared throughout the photo selection and contextualization process. These photographs were also to be considered for the photo exhibit event, and each co-researcher was asked to contextualize each photo in connection to the research question as per the directives outlined in the Photo Selection & Contextualization document. The group continued to prepare for the photo exhibit. At the end of session 9, co-researchers were given photo selection and contextualization transcripts for each photograph they had shared with the group, and were asked to reflect on which 4 of their photographs they wanted to be featured at the exhibit, keeping in mind the themes that emerged from the entirety of the photographs shared by the group during the photo selection and contextualization process. Co-researchers were asked to do photo editing work (optional and if desired) to those 4 photographs, work on accompanying titles and captions, and develop their artist bios during the following week.

**Session 10** *(3 hours)* Co-researchers identified which 4 of the photographs they had shared throughout the photo selection and contextualization process they wanted featured at the exhibit event, and handed in their edited photos, if any. Preliminary thematic coding of common themes emerging from the photographs selected for the exhibit was done as a group, using colour-coded post-it notes and flipchart paper[29] and as outlined in the Group Coding process in Appendix C. Co-researchers were asked to hand in their artist bios, headshots, as well as accompanying titles and captions for their exhibit photographs by the end of the session; some had not had the time to finish their assignment and were given an extension of a few days.

**Session 11** *(2 hours)* This session focused on developing recommendations based on the overarching common themes that emerged during the group photo coding exercise in session

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[28] For further details on the individual photo selection and contextualization process, see Appendix C.
[29] See Appendix D for further details.

10. A draft of the recommendations was compiled by the lead researcher based on the session transcripts of the photo contextualization process, which was shared with the group during the session for review, feedback and approval. Co-researchers volunteered to present the recommendations at the exhibit, and it was decided amongst the presenters who would be assigned specific recommendation themes to present at the event. Informed consent for the photo exhibit event video and photos was discussed, and co-researchers signed consent forms. In the evening, the lead researcher sent the final draft of the recommendations to the co-researchers, based on the input provided during the session. Co-researchers were instructed to provide final approval for the recommendations by the end of the next day.

*The photo exhibit event was held between sessions 11 and 12.

**Session 12:** *(3 hours)* This session focused on debriefing as a group about the photo exhibit event, including thoughts and feedback about the experience. Co-researchers could read the feedback left in their artist guest books, and the pictures that were taken of the event were also shared with the group. Co-researchers also shared their thoughts and feedback on the overall project. A guest speaker from a local youth-serving community organization dropped by for a short meet and greet with the co-researchers, to gather any interest in participating in a potential research project connected to relationships for youth 'aging out' of care in the new year. Potential next steps were discussed, and gifts were handed to the co-researchers as a final thank you for their commitment and engagement. The remainder of the session was spent enjoying food and socializing.

# Appendix H: Preliminary Thematic Framework on Long-Term Supportive Relationships

Relationship types, dimensions, barriers and strengths:

| Relationship Types | Relationship Dimensions (what need(s) does this relationship fulfill?) | Barriers | Strengths | Lessons learned |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Biological families (e.g., parents, siblings, extended family, own children) | Emotional/healing<br><br>Unconditional love<br><br>Financial<br><br>Instrumental | Sometimes the youth becomes the parent to bio parents/extended family after re-connecting (role reversal)<br><br>Ask for money from you<br><br>Can be the biggest enablers (e.g., triggering addiction) and disablers (e.g., don't do anything to help)<br><br>Healing process has not begun or is not advanced enough to have a healthy relationship | Own children provide unconditional love | |

| Relationship Types | Relationship Dimensions (what need(s) does this relationship fulfill?) | Barriers | Strengths | Lessons learned |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Caregivers/Paid relationships (e.g., foster parents, social workers, youth workers) | Instrumental<br><br>Financial<br><br>Clinical | Paid and time limited - impacts emotional quality of relationship<br><br>Focus on independence rather than interdependence<br><br>Conditional support<br><br>Cultural insensitivity of foster parents and placements<br><br>Favoritism of bio children over foster children in foster placements | Trauma-informed practice<br><br>Transparency<br><br>Following through on promises<br><br>Being on our side and standing up for us | |

| Relationship Types | Relationship Dimensions (what need(s) does this relationship fulfill?) | Barriers | Strengths | Lessons learned |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Peers/friends | Identity forming, developing sense of personal agency<br><br>Enjoyment/fun (recreational and emotional) | Not everyone understands your life experience<br><br>Social exclusion due to being in care - labels and stereotypes attached to being a foster kid<br><br>Legal/policy barriers (e.g., needing 3-day advance permission for sleepovers and do background checks on parents; cannot post pictures on social media)<br><br>Labels and stereotypes attached to being a foster kid<br><br>Racism and cultural insensitivity<br><br>Getting into trouble for standing up for yourself when you're being bullied | Shared purpose and passions (e.g., advocacy, policy reform, activism)<br><br>Sense of belonging<br><br>Deep understanding and relating with others who have been in care (empathy) | |

| Relationship Types | Relationship Dimensions (what need(s) does this relationship fulfill?) | Barriers | Strengths | Lessons learned |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Natural mentors (e.g., coaches, teachers) | Instrumental (making linkages and broadening network): connecting to other people and resources for continuity of support; linkages to possibilities and opportunities<br><br>Enjoyment/fun (recreational and emotional) | Environment-driven; skill dependent<br><br>Don't want to deal with crisis situations | Mutual learning<br><br>Understanding of foster care system | |
| Intimate/romantic | Intimacy<br><br>Emotional support<br><br>Financial support | Attachment issues may cause a person to stay in an abusive relationship | Can help you come to deeper self-realizations and change your life path | |
| Pets | Unconditional love<br><br>Therapeutic support | Difficult getting housing with pet<br><br>Long process to get pet registered as therapy pet | ` | |

| Relationship Types | Relationship Dimensions (what need(s) does this relationship fulfill?) | Barriers | Strengths | Lessons learned |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Community organizations/groups (e.g., BCFYICN, BYRC, YAC) | Identity forming (sense of belonging)<br><br>cultural/spiritual<br><br>Financial support | | Structure/foundation is already there<br><br>Do not need to constantly prove yourself and that you belong there - can be yourself and automatically belong to a group (e.g., identifying as part of a LGBTQ2+ group) | |
| Yourself | Sense of identity | Over focusing on self-preservation<br><br>Difficult to make realizations about yourself | Acceptance and coming to terms with oneself - dealing with the past<br><br>Introspection | |
| Spiritual entities (e.g., the Creator, Spirits) | | | | |

| Relationship Types | Relationship Dimensions (what need(s) does this relationship fulfill?) | Barriers | Strengths | Lessons learned |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sentimental items (e.g., pictures, gifts from bio family) | Sense of identity<br><br>Emotional | Items that have emotional value are often taken away and thrown out by social worker or foster parents<br><br>Barely any photos get taken while in care - impacts sense of belonging and identity<br><br>Is not a priority for caregivers when it is a priority for you - don't realize the impact of those sentimental pieces have | Provides attachment to where we you come from, where you started | |
| Authority figures (e.g., police officers, judges) | | Authority issues<br><br>Entitlement<br><br>Profiling and entrapment<br><br>The list goes on…. | | |

*Lessons learned:*

- Important to add this theme/category as not every relationship is black and white/negative or positive in terms of strengths and barriers, there are a lot of grey areas, intricacies and experiences.
- Sometimes a negative experience can become a positive experience through lessons learned

*General dimensions:*

- Lifetime longevity (does not necessarily equate to regular contact, but more so a relationship that stands the test of time and despite periods of no contact)
- Interdependence (give and take, mutually beneficial)
- Nurturing

*General barriers\*:*

*There are interpersonal barriers and systemic barriers - need to differentiate the two

*A) Systemic barriers:*

- Visiting hours (if hospitalized or in residential centre)
- Conditional support
- Lack of safe spaces to meet
- Lack of transparency
- Financial barriers (restricts mobility and ability to do activities)

*B) Interpersonal barriers:*

- Lack of self-worth
- Internalized guilt, shame and punishment
- Boundaries or unclear boundaries
- Unspoken conditions (lack of communication and transparency)
- Lack of honesty
- Attachment issues (either aloof or desperate)
- Trauma/PTSD

*General strengths:*

- Patience
- Respect
- Communication
- Relationship feels special
- Forgiveness
- Vulnerability
- Ability to have different types of personal expression across relationships (each relationship serves its own purpose)
- Provides opportunities for being yourself and expressing yourself
- Flexibility in mode of communication (e.g., texting, online chatting, Skype)
- Understanding of foster care system
- Being open-minded
- Following through on promises
- Transparency
- Strong sense of humour
- Lack of fear
- Empathy
- Tools and accessibility (e.g., cell phone, transit/rides covered)
- Empathy