“Make it seem like we’re regular kids”

Youth and young adult perceptions of restrictiveness in out of home care

Child Welfare Training and Research Programs
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24th Annual Children’s Mental Health Research & Policy Conference
March 21, 2011
Acknowledgements

• Facilitators
  – Ivory Bennett, Shauna Reinhart, and Justin Lee

• Support
  – Steve Eidson, Wendy Unger and Cindy Gore
  – Independent Living coordinators – recruiting, transporting, and space

4/1/11
Acknowledgements

• **Funders**
  – Casey Family Programs—Funder, School of Social Work

• **Research Assistance**
  – University of Pittsburgh-Rachel Fusco Ph.D and Lisa Schelbe:
    – Boystown -Jonathon Huefner, Ph.D.

• **Youth**
Introduction

Where a youth lives in his/her out of home placement has been linked to:

- Educational achievement (Mech & Fung, 1999)
- Independent living skills (Mech et al., 1994)
- Types of services received (Nobel-Breeland et al., 2005)
Introduction

- Two measures of living environment restrictiveness in use:
  - ROLES (Hawkins, Almeida, Fabry & Reitz, 1992)—Restrictiveness of Living Environment
  - REM-Y Restrictiveness Evaluation Measure, Youth (Rauktis et al., 2009). This is a revision of the ROLES
ROLES

- Jail
- State mental Hospital
- County detention center
- Youth correctional center
- Intensive treatment unit
- Drug-alcohol rehabilitation center (inpatient)
- Medical hospital (inpatient)
- Wilderness camp (24-hour, year-round)
- Residential treatment center
- Group emergency shelter
- Residential Job Corps center
- Group home

- Foster-family-based treatment home
- Individual-home emergency shelter
- Specialized foster care
- Regular foster care
- Supervised independent living
- Home of a family friend
- Adoptive home
- Home of a relative
- School dormitory
- Home of natural parents (for a child)
- Home of natural parents (18+)
- Independent living with friend
- Independent living by self
Introduction

REM-Y uses an adult perspective in the Conceptual Definition

“Restrictiveness is the way in which adults in a youth’s life have anticipated that limits need to be made for the youth’s safety, developmental and therapeutic needs”
Introduction

REM-Y uses an adult perspective in the Operational Definition:

Limits on what a youth can do, where a youth can go, who the youth can be with & “burdens” of the setting
Restrictiveness Evaluation Measure (REM-Y)

SECTION II
Instructions: Please think about the living environment of the specific child in question. Please answer the following questions in terms of what is typically true for the child. Fill in the circle above the option that is typical for that child. These questions all relate to the degree of freedom or level of restriction for the child in his or her living environment. It may help to read all response options before answering each item.

Activity Restrictions – (Limits on what the child can do)

|   | TELEVISION |   | MUSIC |   | COMMUNICATION |   | INTERNET |   | RECREATION |   | EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES |   | CLOTHING |   | DECOR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Can watch TV and can watch whatever she wants | Can watch TV and shares with others the control over TV viewing | Can watch TV and has little say over what is seen on TV | Can watch TV only occasionally, and then is extremely limited in viewing choices | Is not allowed to watch TV | Can listen to whatever music he or she wants | Can listen to music and shares with others the control over music listening | Can listen to music but has little say over what music is heard | Can listen to music only occasionally, and then is extremely limited in music selection | Is not allowed to listen to music | Has no limits placed on communication | Has only a few guidelines about communication | Some limitations on communication access, and more rules e.g., time limits | Extremely limited access, many rules about communication | Has virtually no access to communicating via telephone or internet |
| 2 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 3 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
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| 5 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 6 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 7 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 8 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

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Introduction

These measures of restriction are from an adult perspective

• Lack youth voice
• Lack youth perspective
Research Questions

• Do youth agree or disagree with this definition of restriction?

• What is youth definition of restriction or a restrictive environment?

• What have youth experienced as “restrictive” in out of home placements?
  – Is this different from that for “typical” youth living at home?
Method

- Focus groups conducted in six regions of Pennsylvania
  - Allegheny
  - North West (Mercer, Erie, Lawrence Crawford)
  - Central (Franklin, Lancaster, Dauphin)
  - South West (Fayette, Greene, Washington)
  - North East (Scranton, Bethlehem)
  - Philadelphia

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Method

- Youth recruited through IL Coordinators
- $25 gift card incentive
- Youth had to be 18 and older and have had at least one out of home placement
- Typically 10 to 12 were recruited and 6 to 7 youth participated
Method

- Groups recorded and transcribed
- Read repeatedly to determine themes and codes
  - Youth Ambassador/YAB member
- Codes were grounded in the data as well as prior research
- NVIVO 8 used to assist with analysis
Findings

• 40 youth participated
• Ages 18 to 20
• 62% were African-American
• 64% female
• 47% were in foster care (kin or nonkin); 22% on their own; 13% in SIL; 13% with a family member or former foster parent
• 39% had been in care 4 years or less; 42% had been in care 9-15 years
Findings

• Unanimous agreement that the definition of restriction was wrong
  – “It’s terrible. Why would they try to say something like that”
  – “I can’t agree with that statement”
  – (laughter) “That’s funny”
  – “I think it should just be thrown away”
  – “That’s a bunch of crap”
Findings—Youth Definition of Restrictiveness

- “Restrictiveness is the way in which adults in a youth’s life control them...big fat power trip”
- “Basically...what you can do and what you can’t do. That’s it...”
- “Like about the definition? So many people like, you know, that make the rules and stuff like that are like “these youth need restrictions because they need rules”
Findings—Youth Definition of Restrictiveness

- The youth definition of restriction is synonymous with **rules**
  
  *Y1:* What do you mean by restrictiveness?  
  *Y2:* Like you can’t have a cell phone. You have to have a curfew.  
  *Y3:* Rules
The Rules

- **What you can/can’t do:**
  - Cell phone ownership and use
  - Driving /riding in a car
  - Computer e.g. Internet use for email social networking
  - Clothing
  - Money
  - Worship
  - What you can eat & when

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The Rules

• **Who** you can/ can’t be with:
  – Going to parties
  – Hanging with friends
  – Access to family e.g. siblings
  – Selecting friends
The Rules

• **Where** you can/cannot go:
  – On grounds or off grounds for school or socializing
  – In your room; out of your room
  – Friends’ homes for sleep-overs
  – Out of state to visit family
Examples

Y1 I couldn’t ride in the car with friends

Y2 Exactly!

Y1 That made me so mad! Yeah, and the only way that you could spend the night at your friends house is if their parents got clearances. That always made me mad!
Examples

• “I respect most of the rules. I had my own cell phone that I paid for, that they took away....I didn’t understand why they had to take that away”

• “..some of them you could only speak to family..some of them restricted phone calls, some wouldn’t let you have contact with certain people”....
Examples

• “like my one foster family where I was at, you had to go to church..you still always had to go to church”

• “I don’t feel the need to explain what I do with my money. If the money is being taken out and being put back in there, there shouldn’t be no explanation of what I do with my money”
Characteristics & Intentions of the Rules

• Positive Characteristics
  • Helpful
  • Individualized /flexible
  • Fairly applied across foster children and birth children

Positive Intentions
• Teach values or new behaviors
• Help youth meet current or future goals
Positive Characteristics, Positive Intentions

“But apparently outside wasn’t working for us. Apparently uh, having a curfew wasn’t working for us. So now don’t get mad cause I can’t go outside. Of course I used to, I’m a teenager. But in the same sense it helped me in the long run. I tell them like “Y’all not looking at the long run”....

“I’ve lived with the same foster parents for like all 4 years....it’s like me and the two other kids, so like they try to be fair to everybody. They like teach us based on their morals, traditions and values. ..they have a son..they treat him the same as they treat us”.

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Characteristics & Intentions of the Rules

Negative Characteristics
- Arbitrary & nonsensical
- Inconsistent & changing
- Non individualized & inflexible

Negative Intentions
- Compliance
- Control
- Punishment
- Avoidance of liability
Negative Characteristics, Negative Intentions

• “It’s just weird rules, like in one foster home I was allowed to have a cell phone and in another I wasn’t allowed to. In one house, I had a curfew. The other house they didn’t care when I got back....”

• “It’s like she knows what she’s doing and how she’s doing it. Like she’ll take my sister’s phone for like a whole month. And then she’ll be like, even though my sister paid for it, she’ll like, ‘oh well, she got a C on her last paper’ and try and make it look like she’s pushing her to do better. But it’s just cause she was talking on her phone”
Youth Emotional Response to the Rules

**Positive**
- Neutral
- Grateful
- Empathy/understanding

**Negative**
- Stigmatized, labeled
- Isolated
- Invaded
- Anger & resentment
- “ego down” or low self-esteem
- “lack of ease”—high stress
- Boredom (group home)
Examples of Emotional Responses to the Rules

• “Because we are in the system, why do we have to feel like we are not normal? We have all these restrictions and stuff. It makes us feel like we have foster care stamped on our head because we have to get all of these different rules and regulations”

• “...There is always constant questioning. You feel like you have nothing. You're just nobody.”

• “but the rules don’t bother me, like no matter how different, no matter how restrictive or how obviously I don’t like them, but because I've been in so many different situations, so many different homes, like I’m able to adapt because of what I’ve gone through....”
Organized Systems of Rules—Behavior Management

- Described as occurring in group homes (rather than foster care)
- Rule system in which points are awarded & levels achieved
- Points are given for certain behaviors or taken away
- Points lead to a level of privilege
- Intention of the behavior management system is primarily to ensure youth compliance of behavior
Example

“they had a point system, basic level, level one, level two and three. Basic level you had an 8.30 bedtime and you had room restrictions, one hour in, one hour out, and you had to sit at a different table. Level one, you got to go to bed at 9.30. I think you couldn’t be on the computer and you had a certain amount of phone calls. Basic, you got three phone calls a week. Level 1 you got 4 calls...”
Consequences

• Breaking rules~ punishment

(foster care) “they don’t tell you the rules. You go in and they don’t tell you what you are not and you are allowed to do. And when you mess up, they just kick you out. And you didn’t even know that you weren’t supposed to do that”

(group home) “we’re staff, you’re a resident. We work here. You're just here because you are bad. If you don’t do it the way we tell you to, you're just going to get into trouble for it”
Context

Several important contextual or background factors against which youth understand restrictions aka “rules”

- Normal and normalization of residential setting
- Rules in the context of relationships

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Normal

• A great deal of talk about “normal”
  “You feel separated from other people that are normal”
  “That we don’t have so many restrictions so we could actually be normal or feel normal and not feel as though we have a label because we have all these different rules and regulations”
Normal

Youth determine “normal” from what they see their peers experiencing and this may be a little unrealistic at times. Past life experiences influence the perception of normal — much of their life before care was not “normal” e.g. parenting siblings, no supervision or curfew.
Normalization of Residential Setting

Defined as the extent to which a residential setting provides “as many normal experiences as possible” (Lyman & Campbell, 1996, p. 49)

“You know you’re in lock up whenever you have to line up before you eat”

“When I was at respite with one foster parent, like their foster kids had separate food from their own kids...like I thought that was really stupid”
Relationships

Rules and restriction are carried out within the relationship—and both the youth and adult have to build the relationship

- “If you can build upon, if you can stay at a certain placement, and build upon the relationship with that one foster parent, or that one staff, I think it makes the placement a lot easier to live and then everything goes a little smoother”

- “she trusts me with stuff and that’s the thing. You have to do things right. You need to get people to trust you by doing things right...and being honest”
Relationship

“I couldn’t really stand the rules or how things were done, like they had a lot of family over all the time and they had the grandkids that were younger, and the stuff like that, and I didn’t really like it cause it was just like uneven, the rules and stuff, but and the way that they went about things was kind of wrong, but in the end, I still keep in touch with them because, they like, I felt accepted there and they did help me out a lot and stuff”

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Conclusions: From the Youth Perspective

• Restrictiveness is perceived as rules
• Similar to what is measured in the REMY, there are rules what you can do, where you can go, who you can talk or be with
  – These are similar to what youth in “typical families” report as sources of conflicts.
Conclusions: From the Youth Perspective

• Youth describe the rules as negative, positive and they infer intentions behind the rules

• Emotional responses to the rules which may be moderated by the nature of the relationship with the individuals who are making or enforcing the rules; and youth perspective of “normal” (which may not be “normal”).
What is Next?

Healthy socialization to adulthood requires connection, regulation and autonomy

Much of what we found in this study suggests environments of high regulation, low connection and few opportunities for autonomy

• What policies and will procedures support a positive emotional climate?

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What is Next?

- **Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act**
- Improve well-being of youth in care
- Increases young person’s opportunities to successfully transition to adulthood

How can we meet the intentions of the Fostering Connections Act based on what we have learned in this study?
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