



Foster Forward

Real Connections Program

Strategies utilized by an AOI National Awards Program winner to help youth build and maintain relationships with caring, supportive adults who they can turn to as they age out of foster care

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About the AOI Relationships Award

The Aging Out Institute (AOI) National Awards Program recognizes organizations for the work that they are doing to help foster youth age out of foster care and into independence successfully. Relationship building is a key success factor for all youth, but because of their difficult childhood and the inherent challenges of being part of the foster care system, foster youth do not often have the role modeling or time to develop strong, stable relationships with adults who will support them in their transition to adulthood. In an effort to impact the challenges faced by foster youth, AOI celebrates and shares the strategies that are effective in helping youth build these strong, supporting relationships. This year, the AOI Award has been given to Foster Forward for helping youth build supportive relationships before they age out of foster care through its Real Connections program.





About Foster Forward's Real Connections Program

Program Overview

Foster Forward originated at the kitchen table of a local foster parent where foster parents gathered to share ideas and resources to better support the children in their care. Now, more than 20 years later, the organization has grown from a small network of foster parents to a leading social services organization of more than 25 highly trained professionals.

The group advocates for foster children and families while collaborating with other local and national agencies, including the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) and the Children's Bureau, to improve the child welfare system.

One of the services it provides is a program called Real Connections. Real Connections seeks to help stabilize youth currently in the foster care system by matching them with vetted and appropriate mentors who will guide them through the nuances of building adult relationships and setting life goals regarding education, employment, and offer emotional support. Prospective mentors can come from the youths existing network or as a recruit from the community.

Referrals to the program come from a variety of sources including self-referrals, parent/guardian, DCYF workers, courts/CASA, clinicians and probation officers. Once a referral is received, staff connects with the members of the youth's treatment team to introduce themselves, explain the process, and answer questions about the methods that will be used to explore connections.

An initial meeting is set up with the young person and an adult with whom he/she is comfortable. Real Connections staff reviews the application, explains the program, the process, and answers any questions the youth may have.

This a youth driven process and their participation in the program is voluntary.

Youth Participation Requirements:

The Real Connections program works with youth who are between the ages of 8 and 21 and who are involved in DCYF. Participants could be living in a group home, foster home, or in an independent living setting and lack permanent adult connections.

Program Structure & Roles

Core Strategies

Real Connections utilizes three core strategies to help identify potential supportive adults (mentors) from within that youth's network:

- **Eco-Mapping:** Youth visually represent their network of connections.
- **Record Mining:** The Real Connections staff will review case files to identify potential relatives or individuals formerly connected to the youth.
- **Online Search Techniques:** Access public records in order to locate identified connections related to the youth.

Potential mentors must submit to background checks, participate in a five-hour trauma informed training, and are individually interviewed in their home. Once approved, and matched with a youth a Youth Support Specialist helps guide and support the relationship.

Mentors and youth have regular check-ins with the Youth Support Specialist. Mentors and youth complete evaluations at six month and one-year intervals. Youth Support Specialists also attend school and treatment meetings to stay up-to-date on the needs of the youth and ongoing basis assess permanency needs and plans for their future.

Staffing

Title	Number of Positions	Details about Position
Program Coordinator	1	Oversees program operations and mentor screenings.
Youth Support Specialist	2	Direct youth workers.
BSW and MSW Intern	2	Students carry a small caseload
Recruitment Specialist	.5	Helps to do child specific recruitment, as well as community recruitment, for mentors to serve in Real Connections.
Senior Team Member	.1 (part time)	Supervises the Program Coordinator and provides clinical direction to the team.
Mentors	Approx. 80-110	Provide direct support to the youth through one-on-one relationships (volunteer position).

Partnerships

Real Connections works collaboratively with the youth's treatment team, including the DCYF case worker, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), attorneys, clinicians, foster parents, group home staff, and other agencies to address the permanency needs of the youth. Real Connections also works very closely with Mentor RI (an affiliate of Mentor: The National Mentoring Partnership) to recruit potential mentors from the community.

Staff Training/Preparation

Foster Forward's approach to the development and orientation of staff begins with fundamental training on adolescent development, an overview and training on the child welfare landscape, as well as issues that most impact the population served.

All staff members in the Real Connections Program hold degrees in Social Work and continue to attend training opportunities to stay current with best practices in child welfare. Staff members have also been trained using the [*Families Thrive Curriculum*](#) from the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

Staff members go through a train-the-trainer program so that they can provide the 5-hour training for mentors that detail adolescent development, as well as an understanding of the psychological implications and brain development concerning children who have experienced abuse, trauma and neglect.



The Student Experience

Knowledge/Skills

Real Connections offers many opportunities for youth to gain knowledge and build skills. Below are several examples:

Decision Making: Real Connections mentoring program is a youth-driven program. Youth voluntarily participate in the mentoring program and ultimately decide whether to be matched with a mentor or not. Youth are encouraged to set goals and pursue a variety of activities and interests. Mentors encourage the youth to take the lead in this area.

Goal Setting: Real Connections encourages all matches to focus on goals. Upon entry into the program, youth identify areas in which they need support. At the match meeting, goals are discussed, as well as ways a mentor can assist.

Handling Failure: Mentors help youth learn different coping mechanisms to deal with disappointment or failure. Mentors help youth explore constructive means of expressing their feelings. Mentors may introduce their mentees to yoga, meditation, journal writing, and various forms of exercise. These coping mechanisms provide positive outlets for energy, but also develop more interests and higher self-esteem.

Learning Balance:

Active Learning = 90%

Passive Learning = 10%

Leadership: Youth are encouraged to participate in helping develop program events, participating in (YALP) the youth leadership development program, serving on our agencies youth Advocacy Board or in opportunities within their school and communities.

Self-Control: By building relationships, mentors help the youth develop skills to be patient and tolerant in situations that may be challenging.

Willpower: Mentors encourage youth to exhibit willpower through role modeling and helping them to develop healthy decision making skills.



Characteristics/Attitudes

Along with knowledge and skills, the activities that students engage in as part of the Real Connections program helps to build personal character and positive attitudes. Below are a few examples:

Confidence: Real Connections mentors help their mentees explore their strengths and interests, providing them with opportunities that help build their self-esteem and confidence.

Creativity: Through their mentoring relationships and participation in the program, youth are encouraged to participate in activities, including paint nights, poetry workshops, art classes, photography classes, and textile design that allow them to be creative. Youth are given the opportunity to plan activities for other mentors and mentees to participate in. Mentoring relationships are encouraged to identify and participate in a wide array of activities that help youth develop this area.

Desire for Learning: Mentors encourage mentees' educational efforts in school and through community involvement. Mentors provide increased opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities, as well to challenge youth to explore new areas of interest.

Integrity: Mentors help model what integrity means in their actions and words and help youth identify and define their core values.

Optimism: Mentors help to engage youth to think positively about themselves, to engage in positive relationships and to offer optimism about the future.

Patience: Mentors aid youth in developing this skill primarily through role modeling.

Perseverance: Mentors help build this skill in youth by encouraging them to try new experiences and activities and when frustrated by a new task mentors help the youth to persevere.

Relationship Building: Youth are supported from the onset of their participation in the program. Mentors are supported to build a relationship with the youth at a pace that works for the youth. Staff members are consistently checking in with youth, mentors, and the treatment team to ensure that the relationship is developing in a positive way.

Resilience: Mentoring relationships help build resilience in children who have experienced trauma by providing them with a supportive, caring adult who helps them build connections to a larger community.

Self-Awareness: Mentoring relationships build self-awareness by allowing youth to explore and participate in activities that help them identify their interests. This enables youth to become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and gives them an ability to develop their own identity.

Self-Reliance: Mentors help provide opportunities that allow youth to develop skills that are needed as the youth reach adulthood.

Funding

Funder	Annual Amount	Purpose
Private Family Endowment	45,000	Money dedicated to one FTE for a Youth Support Specialist to work with younger youth and helps build educational goal achievement.
RI DCYF Consolidated Youth Services Contract	Amount varies	Core operating support that includes the Coordinator and one Youth Support Specialist, as well as other direct and indirect program expenses.
Annual Fundraiser	Amount varies	Funding to support mentor training and mentor/mentee activities.

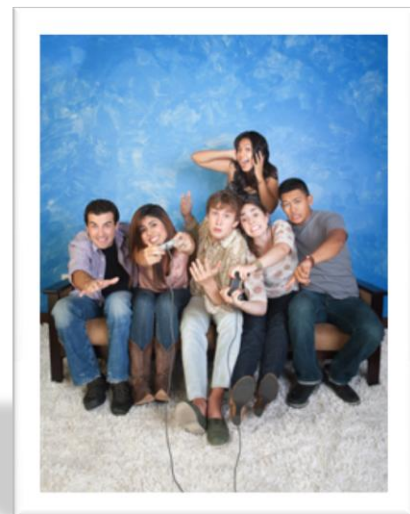
Marketing

Real Connections has a full time Recruitment Specialist who promotes the need for mentors at events, fairs, and with other organizations or businesses that show interest. The program informs youth about the option to have a mentor through contact with DCYF, group homes, and other non-profit organizations that work with foster youth. Real Connections also uses digital marketing, social media, and a website to recruit for the programs and increase awareness of the program in the Rhode Island market.

Measures of Youth Success

During Program

Progress is tracked through both formal and informal assessments. Each youth is assigned to a Youth Support Specialist who tracks the youth's progress and participation. Youth Support Specialists attend treatment related meetings to stay up to date on the needs of the youth.



After being matched with a mentor, youth are surveyed formally at six month and one year intervals to assess relationship strengths and areas for growth. Matches that last past the one-year mark are surveyed on a yearly basis for the duration of the match being supported by the program.

Youth also self-assess on the relationship throughout the process. Individual meetings are held with the youth to talk about how the relationship is progressing and where additional support is needed. Staff is also in constant communication with the teams that surround the youth to gauge progress.

After Program

Currently, there is no formal process for following up after a youth completes the program. Some youth remain in contact as they participate in other programs offered by Foster Forward. Mentors also continue to check-in with the program to provide updates on relationship longevity.

Results:

The chart below displays data from the "Support Indicator" section of the Youth Connections Scale. Real Connections participants complete the scale when they enter the program and follow-up one year later. In this section of the scale, youth indicate yes or no if they have an adult in their life that they would be able to count on for each indicator listed after they leave foster care. Youth report higher levels of support across a number of indicators at follow-up.

Support Indicator:	Baseline	Follow Up
Providing a home to go to for the holidays	75%	79%
Providing an emergency place to stay	71%	82%
Providing cash in times of emergency	57%	71%
Help with job search assistance or career counseling	61%	79%
Help with school (homework, applications)	82%	89%
Providing storage space during transition times	54%	71%
Emotional support	89%	93%
Checking in on youth regularly	82%	89%
A home to go for occasional family meals	64%	79%

Continual Program Improvement

Real Connections has continued to adapt the program structure and practice to meet the needs of youth and the child welfare system. Training has been changed over the years to align with best practices within child welfare as staff members seek out evidence-based, research informed tools.

Challenges

Achieving consistent communication with child welfare workers and the teams that surround the youth remains a challenge. Lack of information surrounding educational concerns, permanency plans, and treatment goals impact the ability of the mentor to help advocate for and support the youth.

Funding shortages have resulted in fewer staff members to support the work and, in turn, resulted in higher caseloads. Real Connections continues to explore collaborations with other non-profits and grant funding opportunities.

Lessons Learned

Real Connections has had to adapt its approach to the ever-evolving child welfare system in Rhode Island, requiring the program to remain very flexible and creative. The program has adapted to particular needs of mentors with a preexisting relationship with the youth to ensure the match can still occur, given the availability of the mentor.

We recognized the need and benefit of using an evidenced based tool to assess the level of connectedness between mentor and mentee. We began using The Youth Connections Scale in 2016.

Mentors who can be flexible in their approach and activities are most effective. The program constantly assesses mentors for their capacity to help support permanency needs of each youth. Mentors who show a capacity to foster or adopt are connected with the Family Support Program to help explore that option.



L-R: Kate Bronner, Real Connections Coordinator and Lisa Guillette, Executive Director

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We also want to thank the individuals who donated toward the fundraiser that enabled us to launch our awards program in 2018:

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THANK YOU!

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The Relationships category sponsor that took a chance on a new awards program because they saw the need to come together to help foster youth who are aging out of care:



<https://www.jplcreative.com/>

And a special thank you to all the organization representatives who took the time to fill out an award application and let us know about the great work they are doing!





MISSION: AOI promotes resources and strategies that help youth age out of foster care and into adulthood successfully.

VISION: To improve national outcomes for youth aging out of care by identifying, sharing and encouraging the widespread use of effective strategies for helping foster youth transition to adulthood.

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