



Safe Families for Children

PLUS Program

Strategies utilized by an AOI 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) 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 time or desire to develop strong, stable relationships with adults who will support them in their transition to adulthood. This year, Safe Families for Children was selected to receive the AOI Relationships Award for helping youth build supportive relationships with mentors as they age out of foster care through its PLUS (Providing Lasting Unconditional Support) program.





The Problem

A significant percentage of youth in the child welfare system will never be placed in a permanent home and will age out of foster care with few supports or opportunities. They will be on their own without the emotional, financial, or social support of family or older adults. Without the skills needed to navigate adulthood, these are the young people most at risk for human trafficking, gangs, homelessness, credit fraud, substance abuse, and unplanned pregnancy.

The Organization: Safe Families for Children

Safe Families for Children was initially developed as a program of Lydia Home Association, a nonprofit child welfare agency in Chicago that has provided a home for abused and neglected children since 1916. In 2003, a woman called Lydia Home needing someone to watch her children while she took care of an immediate emergency. Lydia Home's Executive Director began to recruit volunteers who would provide assistance in these situations. Since then, Safe Families for Children has grown to become an international model of caring for children from families in crisis.

Because of the tremendous growth of this movement, the Safe Families for Children Alliance became a separately incorporated 501(c)(3) nonprofit agency. The Alliance provides training and assistance to sites that are running the Safe Families model internationally. This includes resources (e.g., training materials, secure database, website) and ongoing support (e.g., phone calls, connections with other sites, assistance with fundraising). The Alliance employs 29 full-time and 34 part-time staff across the country.

The mission of the Safe Families for Children Alliance is to guide a national movement of compassion that gives hope to families in crisis. Safe, loving homes are provided to youth by volunteers with a goal of family support, stabilization, and prevention of child abuse and neglect. In many cases, this happens while the youth's parents work to restore stability in their lives.

Nationally, over 7,000 volunteers have been approved and over 30,000 hosting arrangements for children have been facilitated. The Safe Families model has also expanded into 112 locations throughout the U.S., four locations in Canada, and 14 locations in the U.K., Kenya, and China.

The Program: Providing Lasting Unconditional Support (PLUS)

Safe Families PLUS is a program of Safe Families for Children Alliance. Safe Families PLUS mentors are key partners in helping older youth successfully transition to adulthood. Mentors are paired with a youth or young adult between the ages of 14 to 21, close to aging out of the foster care system, or who has just aged out. Mentors and youth are expected to commit to meeting on a regular basis for at least a year. Mentors often serve as “anchor families” to youth, providing a safety net for youth to fall back on after leaving the child welfare system.

Through consistent, one-on-one contact, mentors help youth explore their self-identity, talents, strengths, and career interests. These relationships open the youths’ eyes to new experiences, teach them basic life skills and know-how to help them survive as an adult in the ‘real world,’ and create a network of support that ensures the youth is not alone and does not feel alone.

Mentoring can include (but is not limited to) the following activities:

- Going out for a meal;
- Exploring the city or nature;
- Phone calls and emails to check in;
- Celebrating holidays and birthdays;
- Teaching life skills such as banking;
- Educational and career exploration;
- Providing transportation;
- Parenting support; and
- Serving as an emergency contact.



Each mentor has the support of a Mentor Coach who provides training and advice to help the mentors make positive, effective decisions when providing guidance to the youth with whom they are paired.

The Program Experience

When someone is interested in joining Safe Families PLUS, the prospective mentor attends a day-long training and has background checks and fingerprinting done. The training covers many issues pertinent to mentoring youth, teens, or young adults with a background of trauma. After this, a pool of mentors is compiled.

The Illinois Department of Child and Family Services partners with Safe Families PLUS in recommending youth who are aging out of the system and would benefit from this program and sharing the program with foster parents.

A young person interested in partnering with a mentor receives the profiles of different mentors and chooses the person they feel would be the best fit.

After that, an initial meeting is set up to go over expectations, set goals, and discuss what the mentee would like to see happen as a result of this relationship. Regular meetings are then scheduled, and staff members for Safe Families PLUS organize monthly and bi-monthly social and periodic training sessions on different topics for mentors and mentees. These events range from open-mic fun nights, to cooking and financial budgeting classes, to sessions on how to succeed at a job interview.



Mentors are encouraged to involve mentees in their families and in fun and real-life activities like meals at home. Mentors envelope mentees into their families and include them so they feel a part of a support system and not isolated.

As mentioned, the mentoring relationship will last at least one year and all parties commit to that length of time up front. However, many mentoring relationships continue (unofficially) beyond that time frame.

Youth Participation Requirements:

In 2016, Safe Families PLUS launched in order to address the specific needs of youth about to age of foster care, and for those young adults who have recently aged out and have little other support.

To participate in the PLUS program, youth must be 14-21 and be part of the foster care system currently or recently aged out without a possibility of being adopted.

In a year's time, Safe Families PLUS serves about 80 youth.

Staffing

Title	Number of Positions	Details about Position
Youth Mentor	80	The Youth Mentor is a volunteer position. Each mentor develops a relationship with one youth mentee. Mentors provide voluntary extended family support and guidance for youth to help them meet their goals and prepare for life beyond the foster care system.
Director of Safe Families PLUS	1	The Director of Safe Families PLUS oversees the training of mentors and preparing youth for mentoring arrangement. He or she also plans or appoints others to arrange monthly gatherings, trainings, educational seminars, and fun events.
Program Coordinator	1	The Program Coordinator prepares mentors and manages the referrals of youth.
Mentorship Coordinator	1	The Mentorship Coordinator recruits and coaches the mentor/mentee relationships, addressing any issues that might arise, helping with challenges, matching people, marketing, and finding mentors.

Staff Training/Preparation

Trauma informed care training is very important and all of the mentors are trained and educated on this topic prior to being matched with a mentee. Staff and mentors also receive training in adolescent brain development, the effects of childhood trauma, the importance of active listening and suspending judgement, and best practices for connecting with youth navigating the child welfare system. Mentors are also trained on recognizing the boundary between mentoring and when a youth needs additional help or professional counseling. All mentors must go through a full day of training on these topics and strategies for connecting with mentees, including different ideas for activities and classes that can be offered to prepare youth for life.

Ongoing support is offered to the mentor and the youth by a case coach who provides assistance with:

- Identifying extended family relationships
- Housing assistance
- Career development resources
- Independent living skills
- Financial literacy
- Housing supplies
- Educational support
- Counseling
- Social/recreational activities
- Networking & community resources
- Mentors
- Tutoring
- Positive interpersonal relationships

Research Foundation

Safe Families for Children directly integrates the Five Protective Factors, an evidence-based framework by the Center for the Study of Social Policy that supports the concept that when certain factors are present in a family, the likelihood of abuse and neglect diminish. These factors include:

1. Parent resilience
2. Knowledge of parenting and child development
3. Social and emotional competence of children
4. Social connections
5. Concrete support in times of need

Research also shows that these factors create healthy environments for the optimal development of all children and youth. These protective factors have been completely integrated into the program design, training components, and evaluation plan. This is not a study that Safe Families performed, but rather it is evidence-based research that has been applied to many situations that Safe Families PLUS utilizes.

The Five Protective Factors have been completely integrated into Safe Families PLUS in that they provide the foundation for why emotional resilience, safety, addressing trauma, and social connection all connect to being a healthy adult. When these Five Protective Factors are absent, it accounts for many of the issues older children, teens, and young adults with backgrounds of trauma encounter. As Safe Families PLUS volunteers address and build relationships with youth aging out of foster care, these criteria for building emotionally healthy, stable young adults are vital.

Positive Intangible Skills

Safe Families PLUS begins by carefully screening and training volunteers that are identified as people of integrity and character who can model these characteristics for their mentees. Through classes that address life skills such as budgeting and cooking, Safe Families PLUS builds skills that will help youth care for themselves well. Safe Families PLUS also encourages mentors to carefully and intentionally question mentees to find areas where the most support is needed and work together to address those areas in ways that best fit the needs of that particular mentee.



Mentors are encouraged to work with youth to set goals and use those goals to guide their regular meetings. Through the PLUS-planned monthly get togethers, youth learn how to connect socially, intellectually, make friends with peers, and build a healthy relationship with an adult. Through deep commitment and follow-through, mentors guide mentees in the development of skills and characteristics such as decision-making, perseverance, self-awareness, trust, and confidence.

Marketing

Youth: Through the partnership with DCFS, communication about the program typically occurs from foster parents to youth still in care who are below the age of 18. Names of youth who have previously aged out—but could still benefit from the program—are notified directly by DCFS.

Mentors: Mentors are usually found through referrals and the organization’s online presence. Interested mentors can find out more about the program by visiting the Safe Families PLUS website.

Be a Safe Families PLUS Mentor



Visit our new website to learn more about this **Chicago/Cook County** program for youth aging out of foster care.

<https://www.SafeFamiliesPLUS.org/>

Measures of Youth Success

During the Program

Safe Families PLUS encourages mentors to help youth identify goals they'd like to work on with their mentor. At the very first meeting between mentors and mentees, the youth is asked to identify 3-5 goals they currently have with which their mentor would be able to support. These goals are 100% determined by the youth. The youth get to define what success means for them and the mentor's job is to help them reach those goals. Mentors don't suggest or tell youth what their goals should look like. Instead, they meet the youth wherever they are and encourage them to practice autonomy in choosing the things they'd like to focus on in their lives.



At each monthly, quarterly, and bi-annual check-in, the mentors follow up on the progress being made toward these goals. These meetings are not meant to rush the youth into achieving their goals, but rather they are focused on determining if the goals are still relevant and if there are any ways the mentors can better support them.

The program also measures progress of the quality of the mentoring relationships. Every three months, both mentors and mentees are asked to complete satisfaction surveys that inquire about a few key factors: the quality of the relationship with their mentor, ability to set and achieve goals, number of social supports, hopefulness about the future, self-esteem, and if the youth still have anxiety about aging/transitioning out of care. These surveys let the program leaders know what areas need to be focused on and they circle back to the mentors to address them.

At the end of the mentoring year, the youth are provided with an opportunity to evaluate their own progress. They are asked questions like "Did they meet their goals?" and "In what areas did they experience growth?" They also evaluate their mentor and whether they feel that they got something out of the relationship. Mentors are also given the chance to evaluate the youth and share their insights on progress and growth they saw throughout the year.

These surveys are created to allow youth and mentors to provide open and honest feedback. Their opinions are what matter in making sure Safe Families for Children is running a solid, effective program.

After the Program

After youth become Safe Families PLUS alumni, the program staff keep in touch with them every quarter to see if the youth are still in touch with their mentors. They also ask about their progress on things like employment, secure housing, and parenting.



Program Results

The main measure of overall program success is longevity. Are mentors and mentees maintaining their relationship for the 12-month time period they commit to at the first meeting? The goal is that at least 80% of relationships do not end before that time. The program keeps track of the number of mentors and mentees that do and do not make it to the one-year mark.

Success is also measured by the number of alumni relationships that continue after the young person ages out of care. The goal is that at least 80% of relationships continue after the youth is emancipated at 21. This is tracked by contacting mentor/mentee pairs quarterly to ask about their relationship since the youth's 21st birthday.

Over the last three years, the youth have definitely helped Safe Families PLUS reshape what success looks like for the program. In the beginning, they wanted to measure success by the number of goals each youth met by the end of the 12-month period, but the youth helped them realize how unfair that was. The youth are constantly growing and evolving, and their goals change quite often. So, instead of tracking the things they were checking off a changing list, they shifted their focus to encouraging the youth to maintain contact and keep their commitment to spending time with a new person in their life.

Continual Program Improvement

As the Safe Families PLUS program is state-funded, they are under a lot of scrutiny related to program success. They submit bi-weekly progress reports to their Contract Monitor from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. This report details the number of mentor/mentee matches they have, the number of new mentor applications received, and the number of events hosted for mentors and mentees.

There is also an annual audit during which the state reviews files, case notes, personnel records, survey data, and all other administrative documents to make sure the program is following the program plan.

Lastly, there is a Community Satisfaction Survey that is sent to caseworkers, child welfare agencies, and residential staff that specifically asks about their experience with the Safe Families PLUS program and any suggestions they have about how the program can improve. They use that data to reflect on how their stakeholders are experiencing the program and make adjustments to improve that experience.

Challenges

The greatest challenge has been recruiting male volunteers who are willing to commit to being mentors. Several larger mentoring organizations they benchmarked with said the same thing: there is a lack of male mentors in Chicago. Half of the youth referrals received are for males, so the program leaders have had to be strategic about how to solve this issue and specifically target male mentors. They have tried a number of different angles, from attending male Bible study groups to community council meetings, and even having a table outside of a popular fitness center with a huge basketball court for members.

The second challenge has been youth unexpectedly leaving a placement or going on the run from their residential home. It has been difficult trying to find answers when this occurs and keeping the mentors motivated not to give up on their youth.

Sometimes mentors get discouraged when youth are placed in a different home—especially one that's further away—and they often feel like they're the ones that have been wronged. The program leaders try to coach the mentors to see things from their mentee's point of view and imagine how difficult it must be to have a placement end suddenly and be forced to leave everything you once knew for something you have no control over. This can help, but it doesn't always keep the mentors engaged.

Lessons Leaned

Through Safe Families PLUS, the program leaders have learned that their youth are sometimes afraid to open up to a mentor because they've been hurt by almost every other person in their life who was supposed to love, guide, and protect them. This can make youth reluctant to answer a mentor's call or even join that very first mentor/mentee meeting. Relationship building takes time and cannot be rushed.

In addition, the best mentors are the ones who leave their expectations open and don't come in with a picture in their head of the perfect mentee.

Lastly, the Safe Families PLUS program is most effective with any youth who realizes that you can only take away from relationships what you are willing to put into them.



*L-R: Sondrea Singleton, Program Coordinator; Brittani Kindle, Program Director;
Zach Mundy, Mentorship Coordinator*



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

VISION: To improve 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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