

UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING THE TRANSITION TO ADULthood OF YOUTH  
INVOLVED IN CHILD WELFARE

SAMANTHA CHAN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN PSYCHOLOGY  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
TORONTO, ONTARIO

June 2024

© Samantha Chan, 2024

## ABSTRACT

The transition to adulthood is an important developmental stage that has a significant impact on a young person's growth and functioning. Many youth involved in child welfare, particularly those who are placed in out-of-home care settings do not have the option as most youth to reside with their family and receive parental support into their early adult years. Research consistently demonstrates that youth transitioning out of care are at high risk of poor outcomes as compared to their peers, suggesting that existing programs are insufficient in preparing them for the transition to adulthood. Recognizing the need to better support the transition to adulthood among youth involved in child welfare, Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions, an integrated child welfare agency, invited the Teen Relationships research team at York University to collaborate on two comprehensive studies in this dissertation. The overarching goal of this dissertation is to better understand and support the resilience of youth involved in child welfare during the critical period of transition to adulthood. Study 1 (Chapter 2) is a qualitative interview study of the experiences of young adults who have navigated the transition from care to adulthood to understand how they conceptualized their perceived readiness for transition to adulthood and identify the factors that promoted and hindered their readiness. Results indicate that while young adults experienced many challenges and reported not feeling fully supported by others and different from their peers, they persevered through the demands of adulthood by drawing on their desire and perceived capacity for autonomy and independence, as well as the support from some of their close relationships. Drawing on their lived experiences, they also provided recommendations to support the transition to adulthood of youth involved in child welfare. Study 2 (Chapter 3) is an exploratory, longitudinal, mixed-method evaluation of the Milestone Program, developed by foster parents to support care

providers in promoting youth's relationships and transition to adulthood outcomes while the youth are in out-of-home placement. Findings show that youth and care providers reported positive changes in their youth-care provider relationships, youth's perceived readiness for transition to adulthood, and care provider's confidence in supporting youth's transition to adulthood after participating in the program for six months. Youth and care providers also identified positive program experiences, as well as challenges in engaging with the program. This study offers preliminary evidence on the values of focusing on relationship development and skills building as part of promoting the successful transition to adulthood of youth in out-of-home care. It also highlights the opportunities and challenges of implementing a relationship-based transition program within a community-based setting. Overall, findings from this dissertation underscore that youth's resilience is shaped by the interplay between their individual strengths and characteristics and the supportive relationships in their environment. Clinical practice and policies for youth involved in child welfare should focus on capitalizing on youth's strengths and supporting them in developing transition-related skills, within the context of supportive relationships, to optimize their resilience during the transition to adulthood.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Jennine Rawana. Thank you so much for seeing my potential and making my dreams come true by welcoming me to your lab seven years ago. Your mentorship has been invaluable, and I am incredibly grateful for your endless support and encouragement in pursuing topics that I am passionate about.

To Dr. Jennifer Connolly, your passion and dedication to research to support the lives of many vulnerable children and youth is inspirational to me. I am so appreciative of your warm welcome to the many opportunities to work alongside you and more importantly, your invitation to be a part of this important project to pursue my interests in research that promote the resilience of youth in the child welfare system. Thank you so much for your devotion to my success and continued encouragement to engage in meaningful research and clinical work in this field. It was an absolute privilege and pleasure to have worked with you for my graduate career.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Heather Prime, Dr. Mary Desrocher, Dr. Amanda Noble, and Dr. Rebecca Bassett-Gunter. Your brilliant insights, thoughtful feedback, and encouraging words have been instrumental in this dissertation.

A big thank you to Amy Estill as this research would not have been possible without your contribution and support. I will forever be grateful for the many hours you dedicated to conducting and coding the interviews with me and for the many important insights you offered in the project. To the many incredible members of the Teen Relationships and Reach Lab, I am incredibly thankful for your tireless work to help coordinate the studies, collect the data, and transcribe the interviews. Thank you so much for all your insight, collaboration, and support along the way. To the community partners who dedicated their countless hours and support to this project, I am humbled by the incredible work you do every day. To all the youth, young

adults, foster parents, and child welfare workers who have participated and shaped this research, it was an honour to get to know your stories and I hope to have assisted in sharing your perspectives in a meaningful way.

To my amazing cohort, I feel grateful to have gone through this journey with you. Our friendships are one of the greatest gifts from my time in the program.

To my loving parents and my amazing brother, thank you for always believing in me and being my biggest cheerleaders. You are my constant source of support, wisdom, and encouragement and I am grateful for all you have done to help make my dreams possible.

To my husband, Gary Leung, there are not enough words to express my gratitude to you as you supported me through my 10+ years of undergraduate and graduate studies. I am extremely grateful for your unwavering love and encouragement, and especially your home-cooked meals on those late nights and long days of writing. Thank you for always bringing a smile on my face and grounding me through the ups and downs of my grad school journey. I truly would not be where I am today without you.

## **PUBLICATION DISCLOSURE**

The below work in this dissertation (Chapter 2) is under review for publication under the following citations:

Chan, S., Estill, A., Leidershnaider, L., Rawana, J.S., & Connolly, J. (Submitted).

Listening to the voices of youth previously in the care of child welfare to understand their readiness for transition from care to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review*.

## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
PUBLICATION DISCLOSURE.....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Canadian Youth in the Child Welfare System.....	2
Dual Transitions – “Aging Out” of Care and Transitioning to Emerging Adulthood.....	3
Resilience Among Youth Transitioning from Care to Adulthood.....	5
Transition Programs to Improve Youth Outcomes.....	7
Relationship-based Transition Programs .....	8
A New Transition Program Developed by Foster Parents .....	9
Theoretical Framework.....	12
Current Dissertation .....	15
References.....	17
Chapter 2: Study 1 – Listening to the voices of young adults who were previously in the care of child welfare to understand their readiness for transition to adulthood.....	28
Method .....	35
Results.....	41
Discussion.....	55
References.....	65
Chapter 3: Study 2 – A community-based program to support the transition to adulthood of youth involved in child welfare: An exploratory, mixed methods study of the perspectives of youth and their care providers .....	77
Method .....	86
Results.....	102
Discussion.....	114
References.....	124
Chapter 4: Discussion .....	132
Understanding the Resilience of Young Adults Who Navigated the Transition from Care to Adulthood: Study 1 .....	132
Evaluating a Relationship-Based Program to Support the Resilience and Transition to Adulthood of Youth Involved in Child Welfare: Study 2 .....	134
Integrative Synthesis and the Developmental Resilience Perspective.....	135
Practice and Policy Implications.....	139

Limitations and Future Directions .....	143
Conclusion .....	145
References.....	147
APPENDIX A.....	152
APPENDIX B.....	154
APPENDIX C.....	159



## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1</b> Participants Characteristics .....	37
<b>Table 2</b> Demographic Characteristics of Youth in the Baseline and Post-Intervention Samples. ....	91
<b>Table 3</b> Demographic Characteristics of Care Providers in the Baseline and Post-Intervention Samples. ....	93
<b>Table 4</b> Selection Criteria, Category Definition, And Level of Abstraction of Each Research Question .....	101
<b>Table 5</b> Content Analysis of the Youth's and Care Providers' Perceived Impact on the Youth-Care Provider Relationships .....	107
<b>Table 6</b> Content Analysis of the Youth's and Care Providers' Perceived Impact on the Youth's Readiness for Transition to Adulthood .....	110
<b>Table 7</b> Content Analysis of the Care Providers' Perceived Impact on Their Confidence in Supporting Youth's Transition to Adulthood .....	112
<b>Table 8</b> Content Analysis of the Youth's and Care Providers' Overall Experiences with the Milestone Program.....	114

**LIST OF FIGURES**

**Figure 1** Thematic Map of Young Adults' Perceptions of Their Readiness for Transition to Adulthood ..... 42

**Figure 2** Participants Flowchart ..... 89

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The transition to adulthood, also termed “emerging adulthood” presents many opportunities and challenges that have significant impacts on the lives of youth between the ages of 18 and 29 years (Tanner & Arnett, 2016). This developmental period is particularly difficult for youth involved with child welfare as they are often faced with a move out of supportive out-of-home care to independence (Berzin et al., 2014). Youth in out-of-home care are tasked with managing normative tasks associated with emerging adulthood, as well as the challenges of assuming adult responsibilities and living independently, without the support their peers typically receive from their families (Berzin et al., 2014; Morton, 2017). Research has documented that these youth often feel ill-prepared to thrive as adults and are at risk of many poor outcomes, such as homelessness, unemployment, and mental health difficulties (Gypen et al., 2017; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Despite the critical need, existing transition support programs are insufficient in mitigating youth’s risks and promoting their positive trajectory into adulthood (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021; Woodgate et al., 2017).

To address these issues, Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions, an integrated child welfare agency, invited the Teen Relationships research team at York University to incorporate the voices of lived experience in understanding and developing support for youth transitioning out of the child welfare system and into adulthood. This dissertation consists of two studies that are informed and guided by the developmental resilience perspective (Masten, 2001) and the community-based participatory research methodology (Israel et al., 2005). The main goal of this dissertation is to better understand the transition to adulthood experiences of youth involved with child welfare and provide evidence on a new relationship-based approach for promoting their successful transition from care to adulthood. Study 1 is a qualitative interview study that aims to

explore how young adults who have navigated the transition from care to adulthood conceptualized their readiness for transition, identify the experiences they believed have contributed to their readiness for transitions, and elicit their recommendations about the support that would be helpful for youth currently in the care of child welfare. Building on the knowledge from Study 1 and research on transition programs for youth involved in child welfare, the aim of Study 2 is to evaluate a new relationship-based transition program designed by foster parents based on their experiences with young people cared for in their home. The goal of the program is to promote youths' healthy transition to adulthood in the context of supportive relationships. This collaboration utilizes research expertise to support youth in out-of-home care, leading to a greater understanding of their transition to adulthood experiences and translating research to inform sustainable practices and policies that promote their resilience. In the following sections, I will outline the experiences and outcomes of youth involved with child welfare during the transition to adulthood, review research on existing transition programs for these youth, and discuss the current research program.

### **Canadian Youth in the Child Welfare System**

In Canada, the goal of the child welfare system is to ensure the safety and well-being of children and youth by safeguarding them from neglect, abuse, and maltreatment and instead providing them with appropriate and safe placements (Saint-Girons et al., 2020). When it is unsafe for youth to remain in the home with their families, they are placed in out-of-home care, including kinship care, foster care, group home or residential treatment, transitional living, or other forms of independent living (if they are age 16 and older; Saint-Girons et al., 2020). While there is a lack of comprehensive national statistical data on children and youth in the child welfare system, a recent estimate in 2022 indicated that there were 61,104 Canadian children in

out-of-home care, with the rate of children in out-of-home care at 0.82% of the general population (Government of Canada, 2024). Specifically, the rates were highest among youth aged 16 to 17 years, suggesting that many youth in out-of-home care are required to prepare for their transition to adulthood while in care (Government of Canada, 2024).

Out-of-home placements strive to provide youth with a stable and secure home until they are reunited with their families (Esposito et al., 2014). However, some youth remain in care until they have reached the upper limit of the province's age of protection, which ranges from 16 to 23 years across Canada (Charlesworth, 2020; Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services, 2023). The age of protection varies across the country as each local municipality in Canada has a child welfare agency that is governed by the jurisdiction of provincial and territorial authorities, with different legislations that outline the specifics of the support that is being offered (Jones et al., 2015; Mulcahy & Trocmé, 2010). While youth are eligible to receive transition support from the government, such as financial support for postsecondary education and access to community services and transition programs (Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services, 2021), they are generally expected to assume the responsibilities of living independently as they age out of care.

### **Dual Transitions – “Aging Out” of Care and Transitioning to Emerging Adulthood**

From a developmental perspective, youth involved with child welfare experience a “dual transition” as they simultaneously transition from adolescence to adulthood and from the care of the child welfare system to assume the responsibilities of independent living (Goodkind et al., 2011). Historically, adulthood is considered a developmental stage that occurs immediately after adolescence, during which youth are expected to leave home, get married, complete their education, and enter the workforce (Furstenberg, 2010). In recent years, the social and economic

shifts in Western countries have led to a more extended transition to adulthood as more young people are seeking post-secondary education and delaying entry to the workforce, marriage, and parenthood (Arnett, 2000). Arnett (2000) proposed a new developmental stage called “emerging adulthood” that occurs during the transition period from adolescence to adulthood between 18 and 29 years of age. Features that are prominent during emerging adulthood include identity explorations, instability in relationships, work, and place of residence, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and at the same time, a sense of possibilities and optimism for the future (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). With the transition to adulthood becoming longer, many young adults are living with their families past the age of 18 and have less urgency about becoming fully independent (Arnett, 2007). They are also commonly given more time and opportunities to explore their identities and take on adult responsibilities as they feel ready for them while receiving guidance, encouragement, and financial and housing support from their parents (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2007; Schoeni & Ross, 2005).

While these experiences are common for young adults in the general population, many youth involved with child welfare, particularly those in out-of-home placement, do not have access to supportive relationships and familial resources as do their peers (Arnett, 2007). Their transition to adulthood is further complicated by multiple intersecting factors, including the presence of early adversity and exposure to trauma, relational and placement instability, and a lack of continuity in education before and during care (Berzin et al., 2014; Havlicek, 2011). These experiences cumulatively limit their normative growth and development and create barriers for them to build trusting and long-lasting relationships with adults and peers (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Further, research has shown that many youth equate independence with being free from the child welfare system and are reluctant to accept the support that they need from the

system (Berzin et al., 2014). As such, many youth in out-of-home care, unlike their normative counterparts, experience the transition to emerging adulthood without trusted relationships, socio-emotional and financial support, and the necessary opportunities, skills, and knowledge to promote a successful future (Berzin et al., 2014; Courtney, Lee, et al., 2011).

### **Experiences and Outcomes of Youth Who Transitioned from Care into Adulthood**

Disruptions in family relationships, placement instability, and early emancipation present unique challenges to youth in out-of-home placement and expose them to higher levels of cumulative risk than their peers in the general population, particularly during the transition to adulthood (Miller et al., 2017). Youth have described their process of leaving care as “unprepared and unplanned,” characterized by the limited considerations of their voices in the decision-making process, and a sudden loss of support from trusted relationships (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Challenges related to independent living are prominent among youth who have left care, indicating that they are not equipped with the appropriate skills, knowledge, and supports for a successful transition process (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Poor outcomes among youth who aged out of care are well-established, wherein they have less favourable outcomes in housing, employment, and education as compared to same-age peers and those in other disadvantaged groups (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Day, A. et al., 2011; Gypen et al., 2017). These negative outcomes continue to be observed in adulthood among youth with prior involvement in child welfare (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011).

### **Resilience Among Youth Transitioning from Care to Adulthood**

Resilience is broadly considered as the developmental process or outcome wherein an individual is able to mobilize their individual assets and external resources to adapt to challenging life experiences (Yates & Grey, 2012). While negative outcomes among youth

leaving care are commonly documented, there are youth who “beat the odds” and show positive and “resilient” outcomes following their emancipation and entry into adulthood (Jones, 2012; Nuñez et al., 2022; Yates & Grey, 2012). For instance, many youth involved in child welfare report having at least one positive connection with adults and continue to attend school and pursue further education as they leave care (Jones, 2012). In another study, nearly half of the youth were considered “resilient” during the transition to adulthood, demonstrating positive outcomes in external domains, such as education, and internal domains, such as self-esteem (Yates & Grey, 2012). This rate of resilience were also comparable to those found by Shpiegel et al. (2021), with about 40% of youth aging out of foster care demonstrated resilient outcomes, such as connection to school or employment and avoidance of homelessness at ages 19 and 21. These studies provide evidence on the resilience of a sizable group of youth who are leaving the child welfare system and entering adulthood and reflect their ability to achieve positive outcomes during a critical period in their lives (Yates & Grey, 2012). However, these studies have largely focused on objective outcomes and adult achievements that are defined by society and there is limited understanding on the youth’s subjective perceptions of their success and resilience based on their own expectations and goals for the transition to adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018).

There is evidence that some youth report having optimistic views of their ability to live independently, feel hopeful about their future, and experience the transition to adulthood as a new beginning of life during their transition to adulthood, suggesting that they feel ready and confident about their transition to adulthood (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019). However, it is unclear about the factors that contribute to their perceived readiness for transition to adulthood, which is an important source of resilience (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019; Sulimani-Aidan, 2017). Youth’s positive expectations for themselves and their future may influence their willingness and



motivation to engage in behaviours that support their transition to adulthood (e.g., seeking out relationships, programs) and persevere through the obstacles that may present during the transition (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009; Sulimani-Aidan, 2015). Further, vulnerable youth with higher future orientation are more likely to attain young adulthood developmental milestones, such as acquiring independent living skills, securing employment, and having strong relationships (Oshri et al., 2018). Youth who have positive expectations for their future before leaving care also report more positive experiences after leaving care (Dutta, 2017) and experience significantly higher satisfaction with their housing, educational achievement, and financial status (Sulimani-Aidan, 2015). These evidences are consistent with research that suggest that the transition to adulthood may provide a “unique window of opportunity for strategic interventions” to promote positive outcomes among youth involved in child welfare (Masten et al., 2006, p. 186). Therefore, an important goal of this dissertation is to directly explore the perspectives of youth involved in child welfare, specifically focusing on how they perceive their transition to adulthood in the context of their personal strengths and resources. Understanding the youth’s perspectives is crucial to inform existing transitional support programs to better capitalize on their positive views about themselves and their future and ensure they are provided with the tools and resources to set goals and reach their aspirations for a successful adulthood (Dumont et al., 2022; Sulimani-Aidan, 2017).

### **Transition Programs to Improve Youth Outcomes**

Transitional support for youth in out-of-home care is typically delivered through Independent Living Programs (ILPs) that focus on teaching youth tangible life skills, such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting and providing support and services in the areas of employment, housing, and education (Doucet et al., 2022; Woodgate et al., 2017). These programs are based

on the assumption that youth's transition readiness is determined by their level of self-sufficiency, which is broadly referred to as the ability to live independently without financial and physical support from the government (Propp et al., 2003; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Relatedly, indicators of a successful transition to adulthood are tied to achieving measurable adult outcomes, such as securing stable housing, finding employment, and completing high school (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Existing evidence on the effectiveness of these ILPs is mixed, with some studies demonstrating improvement in youth outcomes, such as employment and housing stability while others show no impact in these areas and other domains, such as their levels of social support and educational attainment (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021). The poor outcomes documented among some youth involved with child welfare, along with these mixed evaluation findings, indicate that ILPs that focus solely on self-sufficiency are insufficient to mitigate their adverse outcomes and fully prepare them for a successful future (Doucet et al., 2022; Heerde et al., 2018). Expecting youth to live independently as they leave care leads them to experience an accelerated adulthood with significant pressure to establish self-sufficiency in a short amount of time (Morton, 2017). Further, it is normative that youth require ongoing support from their family, friends, and community during their transition to adulthood (Osgood et al., 2005; Propp et al., 2003). As such, there is a growing body of research that suggests rethinking the approach to support youth's transition from promoting *independence* to seeking *interdependence*, such that they are empowered to develop supportive relationships with trusted adults who will provide guidance throughout their journey to adulthood (Hokanson, 2020; Lee & Berrick, 2014; Propp et al., 2003).

### **Relationship-based Transition Programs**

A relationship with a supportive, caring adult can provide corrective relational experiences and a positive role model to youth whose family relationships are often disrupted (Bonella et al., 2020; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Further, there is growing interest in supporting youth involved in child welfare in developing a sense of control over their future and meeting their own subjective goals (Blakeslee et al., 2020; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). Within the safety nets provided by their supportive adults, youth are empowered to learn skills, make mistakes, and explore their priorities related to their transition to adulthood (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). A small number of formal and informal programs have been developed to promote youth's successful transition to adulthood through social support and mentoring relationships (e.g., Bonella et al., 2020; Greeson & Thompson, 2017). For instance, Greeson and Thompson's (2017) study provided evidence on the positive experiences of both older youth in foster care and their natural mentors in the relationship-based transition program and demonstrated how youth utilized the natural mentoring relationships to work on life skills development. Promising results have also been documented on the importance of naturally occurring mentoring relationships, with a systematic review showing the positive association between the presence of a supportive, adult mentor during adulthood and positive well-being outcomes among youth in care (Thompson et al., 2016). Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of prioritizing interdependence over independence in the conceptualization of youth's readiness for transition to adulthood, as well as in support for youth's transition to adulthood (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019; Propp et al., 2003).

### **A New Transition Program Developed by Foster Parents**

In Spring 2021, Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions, a community-based integrated child welfare agency, requested the support of the research team at York University to evaluate

the Milestone Program, a program developed by two foster parents affiliated with Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions to support youth's transition from care to adulthood. The child welfare agency and the research team have an existing partnership in conducting research to promote the resilience of youth involved with child welfare since 2017. The conceptualization and development of the Milestone Program was informed by the foster parents' ten years of experience in supporting youth in out-of-home care and consultations with youth involved with child welfare, foster parents and families, and child welfare workers.

The Milestone Program is the first web-based application in Canada that aims to 1) strengthen the relationship between the youth involved in child welfare and their care providers, such as their foster parents and child welfare workers, and 2) support youth in preparing for their transition to adulthood. The Milestone Program is a novel transition program that is designed by individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system and emphasizes the development of transition skills within the supportive relationships youth have with their care providers while they are living in out-of-home care. According to Masten's research on "ordinary magic" (2001, p. 28), having positive relationships with caring and competent adults are sufficient to promote resilience and positive development among youth who have experienced adversity. In other words, resilience does not require extraordinary resources and nurturing the youth's relationships should be one of the top priorities in interventions for promoting their resilience (Masten, 2001). Consistent with this concept, care providers in the Milestone Program are encouraged to cultivate their relationship with the youth during their time in care through everyday conversations and activities. Specifically, the Milestone Program capitalizes on the emotional connections between the youth and their care providers and guides care providers to involve youth in discussions about their transition to adulthood and assist them in setting and achieving "milestones" relevant

to their future goals. The Milestone Program includes a list of over 150 developmental milestones identified by the above-mentioned community stakeholders as the essential skills and knowledge that are crucial for youth's successful transition to adulthood. These milestones overlap with the developmental assets identified in research that foster resilience (Scales et al., 2000) and are organized into seven domains: 1) education, 2) life independence skills, 3) health and well-being, 4) identity and culture, 5) social presentation, 6) emotional and behavioural, and 7) self-care skills and transitioning to adulthood. As the care providers support the youth in identifying and achieving these milestones, these interactions will therefore strengthen the youth-care provider relationship and provide the youth with hands on opportunities to prepare for their transition to adulthood. Specially, the Milestone Program offers care providers with prompts and resources to provide tangible and intangible support specific to their youth's transition needs through the organic interactions that take place in their everyday lives. This process is similar to how youth in the general population learn independent living skills, such as setting up a doctor's appointment, cooking, and doing laundry from their parents and caregivers. The ultimate goal of the Milestone Program is to prepare youth for their transition to adulthood while they are in care and ensure they are equipped with the assets and resources, including strong relationships with caring adults, as well as the skills and knowledge required for a successful transition and future.

The initial validation of the Milestone Program involved an agency-led proof-of-concept study to engage community stakeholders to collect feedback on the Milestone Program in Spring 2021. Preliminary validation of the Milestone Program demonstrated the potential of the program in supporting care providers to assist youth in their preparation for the transition into adulthood and the acquisition of relevant skills and knowledge. Through consultations with the working group, the program was modified based on the feedback from the community

stakeholders. An important goal of this dissertation is to evaluate the impact of the program in promoting positive outcomes among youth in out-of-home care.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Overview***

In this dissertation, the developmental resilience perspective (Masten, 2021) is used as the theoretical framework to understand the role of supportive relationships and resilience factors in promoting youth's transition from care to adulthood. Given youth and families involved with child welfare are often excluded from the co-creation of knowledge to inform clinical practices, the community-based participatory research (Israel et al., 2005) approach is also incorporated to engage child welfare communities in the research process to ensure the relevance of this dissertation for youth and families involved with child welfare (Jacquez et al., 2013).

### ***Resilience Theory***

From a developmental systems perspective, resilience is defined as “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to challenges that threaten the function, survival, or development of the system” (p. 115, Masten, 2021). This perspective draws heavily from Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and emphasizes the role of context in the development of an individual (Masten, 2021). Specifically, a youth is embedded in many interdependent systems, such as family, school, and communities that interact to shape their functioning and development (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). The resilience of youth depends on the dynamic of these complex interacting systems and changes as the youth develops (Masten & Monn, 2015). The developmental resilience perspective is relevant to this dissertation because it emphasizes how youth's individual characteristics and experiences interact with their direct environment and how these interactions impact their positive outcomes (Masten, 2021).

Resilience research on children and youth suggests that one way to promote their resilience is through increasing their assets and resources to promote their positive developmental outcomes in the face of adversity (Masten et al., 2009; Nuñez et al., 2022). Assets refer to factors within an individual, such as independent living skills, whereas resources refer to factors outside of the individual, such as family support (Nuñez et al., 2022). Youth's ability to achieve positive developmental outcomes depends largely on their social network to provide opportunities to accumulate assets and resources, thereby promoting their resilience and reducing their vulnerability to risk factors (Masten et al., 2009; Ungar, 2013). Efforts to enhance the capacity of youth's social network, such as the quality of their caregiving relationships are important as they provide a meaningful context to nurture youth's resilience (Masten, 2021).

Another important tenet of this framework is that resilience, described as “ordinary magic”, emerges from ordinary, positive experiences and does not require any extraordinary resources (Masten, 2001; Masten & Monn, 2015). Close relationships with caring and supportive adults is a powerful factor that promotes positive adaptation in the context of adversity and risk (Masten, 2014). While youth in out-of-home care may not have a close, supportive relationship with their biological parents, out-of-home care providers, child welfare workers, and other trusted adults (e.g., teachers, mentors, community leaders) can offer the nurturing relationships and positive experiences known to promote resilience (Anderson & Williams, 2018). Given a youth's resilience changes as their protective systems change, providing them with nurturance and support through their systems, including their relationships with their out-of-home care providers, is crucial for promoting their resilience (Greeson, 2013). My dissertation first focuses on understanding the resilience of youth previously involved with child welfare, including the assets and resources that were and were not available to them as they transitioned into adulthood

(Study 1). This understanding will then inform the evaluation of the Milestone Program that aims to promote youth's resilience, particularly their readiness for transition to adulthood through supportive relationships with their care providers (Study 2).

### ***Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)***

In child welfare, the perspectives of youth and families in the system are often excluded from decisions in research and practices that are relevant to them (Abrams et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2007). Given the majority of youth do not receive adequate support and face challenges during their transition to adulthood, incorporating the voices of those involved in child welfare may have the potential to learn about their experiences and develop practices that have a greater impact on youth outcomes (Ruff & Harrison, 2020). Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a collaborative research methodology that emphasizes equitable partnerships between community members and academic partners, harnessing the unique strengths and knowledge that each member exchanges in the research process (Jacquez et al., 2013; Viswanathan et al., 2004). Compared to traditional research where academics are considered "experts" who design and implement all research activities, the CBPR approach values the shared decision-making between academics and individuals with lived experience at each step of the research process (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011). More importantly, CBPR empowers marginalized individuals, such as youth and families involved with child welfare to express their needs and concerns and contribute their subjective experience in knowledge co-construction (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011). As such, the knowledge generated from CBPR directly addresses the needs and issues relevant to the community and can be more readily translated into actions that have a substantial impact on the community (Jacquez et al., 2013). While specific CBPR research methods vary widely, CBPR typically involves an iterative process of planning, reflecting, and implementing



changes across the research process and the dissemination of research findings to all partners (Israel et al., 2005). CBPR is an important framework in guiding the collaborations between researchers, individuals with lived experiences, and community partners in the current study. Specifically, we created a working group which involves two foster parents who developed the Milestone Program, child welfare staff at Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions, and the research team from York University to facilitate the shared decision-making process related to the planning and implementation of the two studies involved in this dissertation.

### **Current Dissertation**

This dissertation project builds upon an existing partnership between Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions and the research team at York University. Our shared goal is to better understand the transition to adulthood of youth involved with child welfare. We addressed this goal through two studies in this dissertation. The first study (Chapter 2) is a qualitative interview study of the experiences of young adults who have transitioned out of the child welfare system and into adulthood. We are interested in how they conceptualized their readiness for transition to adulthood, the experiences they believed have contributed to or hindered their transition, and their recommendations to support youth's transition from care to adulthood (Chan et al., submitted). Findings from these interviews will shed light on the individual assets and external resources that promote youth's perceived readiness for transition to adulthood. The second study (Chapter 3) is a mixed-method, longitudinal evaluation study of the Milestone Program and describes the experiences and outcomes of youth and their care providers who participated in the program over six months. Outcomes of interest include the youth-care provider relationship, the youth's readiness for transition to adulthood, the care provider's confidence in supporting the youth's transition, and the youth's and care providers' overall experiences with the program,

from the perspective of the youth themselves and their care providers. Findings from Study 1 and 2 are summarized and integrated in the final chapter (Chapter 4) and are discussed in the context of the study implications on clinical practice and policies, limitations of the larger study, as well as directions for future research.

## References

- Abrams, L. S., Curry, S. R., Lalayants, M., & Montero, L. (2017). The Influence of Policy Context on Transition Age Foster Youths' Views of Self-Sufficiency. *Journal of Social Service Research, 43*(1), 37–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2016.1217579>
- Anderson, B. L., & Williams, A. L. (2018). Defining success: The perspective of emerging adults with foster care experience. *Journal of Social Service Research, 44*(5), 643–655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2018.1477697>
- Aquilino, W. S. (2006). Family Relationships and Support Systems in Emerging Adulthood. In J. J. Arnett (Ed.), *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century*. (pp. 193–217, Chapter xxii, 340 Pages). American Psychological Association (Washington, DC, US). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/11381-008>
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55*(5), 469.
- Arnett, J. J. (2007). Afterword: Aging out of care—Toward realizing the possibilities of emerging adulthood. *New Directions for Youth Development, 2007*(113), 151–161. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.207>
- Arnett, J. J., & Mitra, D. (2020). Are the Features of Emerging Adulthood Developmentally Distinctive? A Comparison of Ages 18–60 in the United States. *Emerging Adulthood, 8*(5), 412–419. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696818810073>
- Benbenishty, R., & Schiff, M. (2009). Perceptions of readiness to leave care among adolescents in foster care in Israel. *Children and Youth Services Review, 31*(6), 662–669. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.01.001>

- Berzin, S. C., Singer, E., & Hokanson, K. (2014). Emerging Versus Emancipating: The Transition to Adulthood for Youth in Foster Care. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 29*(5), 616–638. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558414528977>
- Blakeslee, J. E., & Best, J. I. (2019). Understanding support network capacity during the transition from foster care: Youth-identified barriers, facilitators, and enhancement strategies. *Children and Youth Services Review, 96*, 220–230. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2018.11.049>
- Blakeslee, J. E., Powers, L. E., Geenen, S., Schmidt, J., Nelson, M., Fullerton, A., George, K., McHugh, E., & Bryant, M. (2020). Evaluating the My Life self-determination model for older youth in foster care: Establishing efficacy and exploring moderation of response to intervention. *Children and Youth Services Review, 119*, 105419. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105419>
- Bonella, B., Beirwolf, K., Coleman, L., Sterger, C., Pulli, K., Anguiano, C., & Barton, K. (2020). Mixed Methods Evaluation of Formal Mentoring: Journey UP for Aging out of Foster Care. *Global Social Welfare, 7*(2), 121–130. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-019-00157-0>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press.
- Chan, S., Estill, A., Leidershnaider, L., Rawana, J. S., & Connolly, J. (submitted). Listening to the voices of former youth-in-care to understand their readiness for transition from care to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review*.
- Charlesworth, J. (2020). *A Parent's Duty: Government's Obligation to Youth transitioning into Adulthood*. The Office of the Representative for Children and Youth.

- Courtney, M. E. & Dworsky, A. (2006). Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA. *Child and Family Social Work, 11*, 209–219.
- Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- Courtney, M. E., & Heuring, D. H. (2005). The Transition to Adulthood for Youth “Aging Out” of the Foster Care System. In *On your own without a net: The transition to adulthood for vulnerable populations* (pp. 27–67). The University of Chicago Press.
- Courtney, M. E., Lee, J., & Perez, A. (2011). Receipt of help acquiring life skills and predictors of help receipt among current and former foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(12), 2442–2451. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.08.026>
- Day, A., Dworsky, A., Fogarty, K., & Damashek, A. (2011). An examination of post-secondary retention and graduation among foster care youth enrolled in a four-year university. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(11), 2335–2341. - Google Search. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*, 2335–2341.
- Doucet, M. M., Greeson, J. K. P., & Eldeeb, N. (2022). Independent living programs and services for youth “aging out” of care in Canada and the U.S.: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 142*, 106630. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106630>
- Dumont, A., Lanctôt, N., & Paquette, G. (2022). “I had a shitty past; I want a great future.”: Hopes and fears of vulnerable adolescent girls aging out of care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 134*, 106374. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106374>
- Dutta, S. (2017). Life after leaving care: Experiences of young Indian girls. *Children and Youth Services Review, 73*(C), 266–273.

- Esposito, T., Trocmé, N., Chabot, M., Collin-Vézina, D., Shlonsky, A., & Sinha, V. (2014). The stability of child protection placements in Québec, Canada. *Children and Youth Services Review, 42*, 10–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.03.015>
- Furstenberg, F. F. Jr. (2010). On a New Schedule: Transitions to Adulthood and Family Change. *The Future of Children, 20*(1), 67–87. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0038>
- Goodkind, S., Schelbe, L. A., & Shook, J. J. (2011). Why youth leave care: Understandings of adulthood and transition successes and challenges among youth aging out of child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(6), 1039–1048. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.01.010>
- Government of Canada. (2024, February 14). *Rates of out-of-home care among children in Canada: An analysis of national administrative child welfare data* [Research]. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/reports-publications/health-promotion-chronic-disease-prevention-canada-research-policy-practice/vol-44-no-4-2024/rates-out-of-home-care-children-canada-analysis-national-administrative-child-welfare-dat.html>
- Greeson, J. K. P. (2013). Foster Youth and the Transition to Adulthood: The Theoretical and Conceptual Basis for Natural Mentoring. *Emerging Adulthood, 1*(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696812467780>
- Greeson, J. K. P., & Thompson, A. E. (2017). Development, Feasibility, and Piloting of a Novel Natural Mentoring Intervention for Older Youth in Foster Care. *Journal of Social Service Research, 43*(2), 205–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2016.1248269>
- Gunawardena, N., & Stich, C. (2021). Interventions for young people aging out of the child welfare system: A systematic literature review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 127*, 106076. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106076>

- Gypen, L., Vanderfaeillie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Holen, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic-review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 76*, 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2017.02.035>
- Häggman-Laitila, A., Saloekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2018). Transition to adult life of young people leaving foster care: A qualitative systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 95*, 134–143. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2018.08.017>
- Häggman-Laitila, A., Saloekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2019). Young People’s Preparedness for Adult Life and Coping After Foster Care: A Systematic Review of Perceptions and Experiences in the Transition Period. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 48*(5), 633–661. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-019-09499-4>
- Havlicek, J. (2011). Lives in motion: A review of former foster youth in the context of their experiences in the child welfare system. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(7), 1090–1100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2011.02.007>
- Heerde, J. A., Hemphill, S. A., & Scholes-Balog, K. E. (2018). The impact of transitional programmes on post-transition outcomes for youth leaving out-of-home care: A meta-analysis. *Health & Social Care in the Community, 26*(1), e15–e30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12348>
- Hokanson, K. (2020). ‘Not Independent Enough’: Exploring the Tension Between Independence and Interdependence among Former Youth in Foster Care who are Emerging Adults. *Child Welfare, 97*(5), 17.
- Israel, B. A., Eng, E., Schulz, A. J., & Parker, E. A. (2005). *Methods in Community-Based Participatory Research for Health*. John Wiley & Sons.

- Jacquez, F., Vaughn, L. M., & Wagner, E. (2013). Youth as Partners, Participants or Passive Recipients: A Review of Children and Adolescents in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *51*(1–2), 176–189. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9533-7>
- Jones, A., Sinha, V., & Trocmé, N. (2015). *Children and Youth in Out-of-Home Care in the Canadian Provinces. CWRP Information Sheet #167E*. Centre for Research on Children and Families, McGill University.
- Jones, L. (2012). Measuring Resiliency and Its Predictors in Recently Discharged Foster Youth. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *29*(6), 515–533. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-012-0275-z>
- Lee, C., & Berrick, J. D. (2014). Experiences of youth who transition to adulthood out of care: Developing a theoretical framework. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *46*, 78–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.08.005>
- Martin, S., Pittman, K., & Ferber, T. (2007). Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide To Engaging Youth In Policy Making. In *Forum for Youth Investment*. Forum for Youth Investment.
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, *56*(3), 227–238. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.227>
- Masten, A. S. (2014). Ordinary magic. *Resilience in Development*. New York, London: Guilford.
- Masten, A. S. (2021). Resilience in developmental systems: Principles, pathways, and protective processes in research and practice. In *Multisystemic resilience: Adaptation and transformation in contexts of change* (pp. 113–134). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190095888.003.0007>



- Masten, A. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2016). Resilience in development: Progress and transformation. In *Developmental psychopathology: Risk, resilience, and intervention, Vol. 4, 3rd ed* (pp. 271–333). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119125556.devpsy406>
- Masten, A. S., Cutuli, J. J., Herbers, J. E., & Reed, M.-G. J. (2009). Resilience in development. In *Oxford handbook of positive psychology, 2nd ed* (pp. 117–131). Oxford University Press.
- Masten, A. S., & Monn, A. R. (2015). Child and family resilience: A call for integrated science, practice, and professional training. *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies, 64*(1), 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12103>
- Masten, A. S., Obradović, J., & Burt, K. B. (2006). Resilience in Emerging Adulthood: Developmental Perspectives on Continuity and Transformation. In *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century* (pp. 173–190). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11381-007>
- Miller, E. A., Paschall, K. W., & Azar, S. T. (2017). Latent classes of older foster youth: Prospective associations with outcomes and exits from the foster care system during the transition to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 79*, 495–505. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.06.047>
- Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services. (2021). *Support for youth in the child welfare system*. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/support-youth-child-welfare-system>
- Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services. (2023). *Ontario Connecting Youth Leaving Care with Supports to Succeed*. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1002724/ontario-connecting-youth-leaving-care-with-supports-to-succeed>

- Minkler, M., & Wallerstein, N. (2011). *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health: From Process to Outcomes*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Morton, B. M. (2017). Growing up fast: Implications for foster youth when independence and early adulthood collide. *Children and Youth Services Review, 82*, 156–161.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2017.09.028>
- Mulcahy, M., & Trocmé, N. (2010). *CECW Information Sheet #78. Children and Youth in Out-of-Home Care in Canada*. Centre for Research on Children and Families, McGill University.
- Nesmith, A., & Christophersen, K. (2014). Smoothing the transition to adulthood: Creating ongoing supportive relationships among foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 37*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2013.11.028>
- Núñez, M., Beal, S. J., & Jacquez, F. (2022). Resilience factors in youth transitioning out of foster care: A systematic review. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 14*(S1), S72–S81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001096>
- Osgood, D. W., Foster, E. M., Flanagan, C., & Ruth, G. R. (2005). *On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*. University of Chicago Press.
- Oshri, A., Duprey, E. B., Kogan, S. M., Carlson, M., & Liu, S. (2018). Growth Patterns of Future Orientation Among Maltreated Youth: A Prospective Examination of the Emergence of Resilience. *Developmental Psychology, 54*(8), 1456–1471.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000528>
- Propp, J., Ortega, D. M., & NewHeart, F. (2003). Independence or Interdependence: Rethinking the Transition from “Ward of the Court” to Adulthood. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 84*(2), 259–266. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.102>

- Ruff, S. C., & Harrison, K. (2020). “Ask Me What Want”: Community-based participatory research to explore transition-age foster Youth’s use of support services. *Children and Youth Services Review, 108*, 104608. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104608>
- Saint-Girons, M., Trocmé, N., Esposito, T., & Fallon, B. (2020). *Children in Out-of-Home Care in Canada in 2019. CWRP Information Sheet #211E* (p. 7). Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.
- Samuels, G. M., & Pryce, J. M. (2008). “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”: Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(10), 1198–1210.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.03.005>
- Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., Leffert, N., & Blyth, D. A. (2000). Contribution of Developmental Assets to the Prediction of Thriving Among Adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science, 4*(1), 27–46. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0401\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0401_3)
- Schoeni, R. F., & Ross, K. E. (2005). Material Assistance from Families during the Transition to Adulthood. In *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 396–416). The University of Chicago Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226748924.003.0012>
- Shpiegel, S., Simmel, C., Sapiro, B., & Ramirez Quiroz, S. (2021). Resilient Outcomes among Youth Aging-Out of Foster Care: Findings from the National Youth in Transition Database. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 1*–24.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2021.1899098>
- Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2015). Do they get what they expect?: The connection between young adults’ future expectations before leaving care and outcomes after leaving care. *Children*

- and Youth Services Review*, 55, 193–200.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2015.06.006>
- Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2017). Future expectations as a source of resilience among young people leaving care. *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(4), 1111–1127.
- Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2018). Assets and pathways in achieving future goals of residential care alumni. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 89, 71–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2018.04.023>
- Tanner, J. L., & Arnett, J. J. (2016). *The emergence of emerging adulthood: The new life stage between adolescence and young adulthood* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Thompson, A. E., Greeson, J. K. P., & Brunsink, A. M. (2016). Natural mentoring among older youth in and aging out of foster care: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 61, 40–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2015.12.006>
- Ungar, M. (2013). Resilience, trauma, context, and culture. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 14(3), 255–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838013487805>
- Viswanathan, M., Ammerman, A., Eng, E., Garlehner, G., Lohr, K. N., Griffith, D., Rhodes, S., Samuel-Hodge, C., Maty, S., Lux, L., Webb, L., Sutton, S. F., Swinson, T., Jackman, A., & Whitener, L. (2004). Community-Based Participatory Research: Assessing the Evidence: Summary. In *AHRQ Evidence Report Summaries*. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/books/NBK11852/>
- Woodgate, R. L., Morakinyo, O., & Martin, K. M. (2017). Interventions for youth aging out of care: A scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 82, 280–300.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2017.09.031>

Yates, T. M., & Grey, I. K. (2012). Adapting to aging out: Profiles of risk and resilience among emancipated foster youth. *Development and Psychopathology*, *24*(2), 475–492.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579412000107>

## **Chapter 2: Study 1 – Listening to the voices of young adults who were previously in the care of child welfare to understand their readiness for transition to adulthood**

Emerging adulthood is conceptualized as a distinct and significant developmental stage between the ages of 18 to 29 years (Arnett, 2023). With the support of their parents and families, emerging adults in the general population have the opportunity to explore their future careers and relationships, gradually emerge into their stable adult roles, and become self-sufficient as they feel ready for them (Arnett, 2007). However, certain populations of marginalized youth in society, particularly youth involved in the child welfare system, may experience emerging adulthood as a period of stress and uncertainty (Munson et al., 2013). Youth who are placed in out-of-home care settings, such as foster homes, kinship care, group homes, and residential placement through child protective services “age out” of their placement services typically between the ages of 18 and 21 (Jones, 2014; Mann-Feder, 2023). While these youth may continue to receive after-care support and funding from child protective services, they inevitably face an abrupt transition from supportive care to independence, as well as a simultaneous developmental transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood (Goodkind et al., 2011; Leal-Ferman et al., 2023; Mann-Feder, 2023). Many of these youth become independent and assume all adult responsibilities, regardless of whether they feel ready and prepared to manage these tasks (Rome & Raskin, 2019). The complexity of their trauma history and placement instability, along with the limited financial and social support needed to slowly emerge into adult roles, also exacerbate the challenges they face (Munson et al., 2013). Unsurprisingly, research has consistently demonstrated that emerging adults who have recently left the child welfare system are at a higher risk of negative outcomes, such as homelessness, unemployment, and mental health disorders (Osgood et al., 2010). While research has focused on youth’s challenges and

poorer outcomes in emerging adulthood following their exit from the child welfare system, a resilience approach would be especially helpful in understanding the factors that facilitate youth's readiness for transition to adulthood. Youth's readiness for transition to adulthood is an important outcome as it is often targeted in transitional support programs for youth in child welfare (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021; Woodgate et al., 2017). Adequately preparing youth for the transition to adulthood will reduce their vulnerability to poor outcomes, as well as increase their likelihood of a smooth and successful move from adolescence to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2005). The goals of the study are to understand how young adults who have navigated the transition from care to adulthood conceptualized their readiness for transition to adulthood, and to identify the experiences that contributed to their perceived readiness for transition. Given the need to better support the transition to adulthood of youth involved in child welfare, our study also aims to elicit their perspectives and recommendations directly to help guide interventions and support for this vulnerable population.

### **Emerging Adulthood**

The transition to adulthood is traditionally viewed as a period that takes place immediately after adolescence when young people assume adult roles and accomplish major life milestones, such as leaving home and getting married (Shanahan, 2000; Shanahan et al., 2005). In recent years, there has been a shift towards an extended transition to adulthood, during which young people are delaying adult milestones and taking a longer time to prepare for full adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This extended transition to adulthood is termed "emerging adulthood" and is considered a new developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000). During this stage, it is common for youth to experience a lack of a stable identity, self-focus, feeling in between, and at the same time a broad sense of possibilities and optimism (Arnett,

2000). As such, emerging adults are presented with many new opportunities and challenges that allow them to develop assets, accumulate resources, and create a strong and stable foundation for a successful transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Masten et al., 2006). The extensive help from parents and families offered to many youth beyond the age of 18 is crucial to their transition to adulthood (Schoeni & Ross, 2005; Settersten & Ray, 2010; Swartz et al., 2011). Many youth in the general population receive some form of financial assistance from their parents and relatives, with youth from a more advantaged background more likely to receive a much larger amount of financial assistance (Wightman et al., 2012). Many youth also remain in their homes until they reach a stable living situation and have the option to return home in times of need (Arnett, 2007). Parents not only serve as financial and housing support for youth; they also serve as their safety net to minimize any setbacks during this life stage (Swartz et al., 2011).

### **Youth Involved in Child Welfare and the Transition to Emerging Adulthood**

The transition to emerging adulthood is markedly different for youth involved in child welfare as they experience a “dual transition”, in which their move from adolescence to adulthood is simultaneously accompanied by their move from the care of the child welfare system to assume the responsibilities of living independently (Goodkind et al., 2011). Youth leave the child welfare system when they exceed the age of protection in their jurisdiction, typically between the ages of 16 to 21 years and are no longer eligible to receive many support and services from their child welfare agencies (Charlesworth, 2020; Shewchuk, 2020). This process of exiting the child welfare system is commonly referred to as “aging out”, “emancipating”, or “transitioning out of care”. For these youth, aging out of the child welfare system is usually based on their age rather than their readiness to effectively provide for themselves as independent adults (Arnett, 2019). With limited caregiver support or preparation,



youth in the child welfare system are often required to live on their own soon after leaving care and are not aware of the resources that are still available to them (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Singer & Berzin, 2015; Stein, 2008). Their transition is compounded by their experiences of pre-care traumas, placement instability when in care, and few significant relationships with supportive adults maintained post-care (Greeson, 2013; Singer & Berzin, 2015). Many youth in the child welfare system feel doubly unprepared and unsupported for their transition to adulthood and have a more difficult experience in emerging adulthood than those in the general population (Courtney et al., 2001; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Munson et al., 2013). Risk for poor outcomes among youth who aged out of care are well-established, with former youth in care having less favourable outcomes in many areas such as housing, employment, and education, as compared to same-age peers, including those in other disadvantaged groups (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Day, A. et al., 2011; Gypen et al., 2017). These disparities persist into adulthood, with many youth continuing to fare poorly compared to their peers (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011; Gypen et al., 2017).

### **Efforts to Support Youth's Transition from Care to Adulthood**

Over the past decade, efforts to support youth's move to independence have typically been through independent living programs, which provide youth with life skills training, as well as support in education, employment, and housing (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021; Woodgate et al., 2017). Many of the independent living programs do not have sufficient evidence to establish effectiveness, partly due to variabilities in program description and implementation, limited input from youth in the child welfare system themselves, and a lack of rigor in evaluation methods (Greeson et al., 2020; Woodgate et al., 2017). Among the programs that have been evaluated, research showed that the results of these programs are mixed (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021;

Woodgate et al., 2017). While studies have shown positive results for some outcomes, including employment, housing stability, and education (Courtney et al., 2019; Georgiades, 2005; Montgomery et al., 2006), there are other studies which reported limited improvement in youth's positive adaptation (Greeson, Garcia, et al., 2015; Schwartz-Tayri & Spiro, 2017). Independent living skills are undoubtedly crucial assets for youth who have limited familial support (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). However, the mixed findings suggest that these programs, alone, are insufficient in mitigating the risks for adverse outcomes and fully preparing youth for a successful future (Gypen et al., 2017; Heerde et al., 2018). Additionally, there is a limited understanding of the key components within these programs that lead to positive outcomes (Woodgate et al., 2017). The combination of limited research on the factors that promote youth's readiness for transition from care to adulthood, along with a lack of consideration of their voices and lived experiences, creates barriers in developing interventions that are effective for this population (Dixon et al., 2019; Jones, 2011; Vorhies et al., 2009). This reality underscores the need to solicit youth's perspectives on their readiness for transition to adulthood to enhance services for youth involved in child welfare (Dinisman & Zeira, 2011; Dixon et al., 2019). In this research, we adopt a resilience perspective and directly explore youth's views of the opportunities as well as the challenges of leaving care and transitioning to adulthood.

### **Resilience Among Youth Transitioning from Care to Adulthood**

Resilience theory provides a conceptual framework to understand how youth involved with child welfare can develop along more positive trajectories in the context of significant risk and adversity (Zimmerman, 2013). The promotion of resilience depends on the individual's internal assets, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy skills, as well as external resources, such as supportive relationships and community involvement that outweigh the impact of risk exposure

and facilitate positive adaptation (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). The concept of resilience is particularly important for youth transitioning to adulthood as this is a developmental stage that presents a potential “window of opportunity” for a shift to a positive trajectory of development (Masten et al., 2006, p. 186).

Research on youth involved with child welfare most often focuses on their experiences to adulthood as unplanned and accelerated (Stein, 2012). It is established that many youth often experience the transition with insecurity about their future and lack many practical and socio-emotional skills required for self-sufficiency (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). On the contrary, research on emerging adulthood for youth involved with child welfare has rarely focused on their readiness for adulthood and the factors to support them to face the challenges, despite it being a goal for many independent living programs (García-Alba et al., 2022). For instance, emerging research has shown that youth’s perceived readiness for transition to adulthood, such as having optimistic views of their ability to live independently and have a positive future, is a potential factor that impacts their motivation and ability to accomplish their goals and a source of resilience for their successful transition (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019; Sulimani-Aidan, 2015). Consistent with this, studies show that having positive expectations for one’s future is a protective factor against negative outcomes, and is associated with higher satisfaction with youth’s housing, financial, and educational achievements following their transition out of care (Olate et al., 2012; Robbins & Bryan, 2004; Stoddard et al., 2011; Sulimani-Aidan, 2015). Fostering positive self-perceptions and optimism among youth during their time in care could potentially lead to greater success in different developmental domains and an overall smoother transition to adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan, 2015).

This study addresses these gaps by asking young adults themselves about their readiness for transition to adulthood and the factors they considered when evaluating their abilities to be adults. Eliciting youth's perspectives directly is crucial as they may conceptualize their readiness for transition to adulthood differently than researchers, policymakers, and clinicians (Anderson & Williams, 2018). Furthermore, their perceptions may vary from how youth in the general population define and experience their transition to adulthood (Berzin et al., 2014; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Munson et al., 2013). Listening to how youth previously in the care of child welfare make meaning of their transition experiences in the context of their past experiences, current life situations, and utilization of their assets and resources will offer new understanding in developing interventions that address their needs and prepare them to transition to adulthood successfully (Dinisman & Zeira, 2011).

### **Study Goals**

The goal of this study is to understand how young adults who have transitioned out of the child welfare system and into adulthood conceptualized their readiness for transition and identify the experiences they believed have contributed to or hindered their transition. We were interested in recruiting individuals who were "doing well" (e.g., staying connected with the worker, being involved in advocacy groups) in their post-care experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that particularly promoted their transition to adulthood, and this was reflected in the groups we contacted during participant recruitment. As youth involved in child welfare represents a vulnerable and stigmatized group whose voices are often not incorporated in research and policies, a second goal of the study is to elicit recommendations from these young adults about the support that they believed is needed to promote youth's successful transition from care to adulthood.

## **Method**

### **Study Design**

This study was conducted as the first step of a larger study to refine and evaluate a newly developed program to promote the transition to adulthood of youth involved in child welfare. The study was designed through collaborative efforts between Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions, a local child welfare agency in Canada and the Teen Relationships research team at York University. Following a community-based participatory research framework (Viswanathan et al., 2004), we initiated a working group with individuals with lived experience (e.g., foster parents), service provision staff (e.g., child in care manager), decision makers (e.g., child welfare agency director), and researchers in March 2021. The goal of the working group was to address issues pertinent to supporting youth's transition to adulthood through research, policy, and practice. Through regular monthly meetings, the working group collaboratively agreed to learn more about the experiences of youth who had previously transitioned out of care and into adulthood, as a first step to informing the refinement and evaluation of a new program to better support the transition to adulthood of youth involved with child welfare. As such, we adopted a qualitative, semi-structured interview design to directly obtain the voices of young adults with previous involvement in child welfare on these topics. This study was reviewed and approved by the York University Research Ethics Board and Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions.

### **Participants**

We used a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) to obtain a diverse perspective from individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system and who recently transitioned to independence as an adult in Canada (Mann-Feder, 2023). Participants were recruited through our partnership with Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions, as well as two provincial and

national advocacy groups led by current and former youth in care. The inclusion criteria included participants who were previously under the care of a child welfare agency and who had transitioned out of the child welfare system. Given we were interested in the experiences of young adults who had recently transitioned out of the child welfare system, participants who were older than 29 years or were still in the care of the child welfare system were excluded from the study.

The study sample included 16 young adults. Their mean age was 24.9 years ( $SD = 2.7$ , Range = 18 – 29 years). The majority of the participants identified as female (75%) and White (62%). Over half of the participants were single (62.5%). Half of the participants completed college or university (50%) and close to half of the participants were working part-time (43.8%). A quarter of the participants were still in school. On average, participants had been in care for 8.9 years ( $SD = 4.5$ ) and left care at age 19.2 years ( $SD = 2.10$ ). More than half of the participants had been in non-kin foster care (81%) and had experienced two to six placements (78%). Based on these demographics, our sample consisted of young adults who showed markers of a successful transition to adulthood given most of them had attended or completed college and university and were employed at the time of the study. These are the criteria that are typically used in research to define having a “successful” or “positive” transition to adulthood in studies of youth previously involved with child welfare (Hedenstrom, 2021). See Table 1 for participant demographics characteristics.

**Table 1***Participants Characteristics*

<b>Demographic Variables</b>	<b>n (%)</b>
Gender	
Male	4 (25.0%)
Female	12 (75%)
Ethno-cultural background	
Black	1 (6.3%)
Persons of mixed origin	2 (12.5%)
South Asian	1 (6.3%)
South East Asian	1 (6.3%)
White/Caucasian	10 (62.5%)
Other	1 (6.3%)
Highest level of education	
Some high school	1 (6.3%)
Some college/university	6 (37.5%)
Completed college/university	8 (50.0%)
Some graduate education	1 (6.3%)
Completed graduate education	0
Professional degrees	0
Current employment status	
Full-time employment	4 (25.0%)
Part-time employment	7 (43.8%)
Unemployed	1 (6.3%)
Student	4 (25.0%)
Marital Status	
Single, never married	10 (62.5%)
In a domestic partnership	4 (25.0)
Separated	1 (6.3%)
Type of placement lived in	
Non-relative foster care	13 (81.3%)
Relative foster care (kinship)	5 (31.3%)
Group home/residential treatment	4 (25.0%)
Independent living	4 (25%)
Others (e.g., with adoptive family)	0
Number of placements setting experienced	
1 setting	3 (18.8%)
2-3 setting	6 (37.5%)
4-6 setting	6 (37.5%)
7 or more setting	1 (6.3%)

## **Procedure**

Following ethics approval, the manager at Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions, who was involved in our working group, introduced the study using a standardized script to all caseworkers. He then met with the caseworkers individually to identify young adults who had personal contact with their caseworkers and who were eligible to participate in the study. As recommended by the working group, caseworkers who were familiar with the young adults, instead of the researchers made first contact with the potential participants to share information about the study. The director of Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions also introduced the researchers to the two child welfare advocacy groups. Potential participants from the two advocacy groups learned about the study either through a virtual meeting led by the research team or a standardized recruitment email. The research team emailed each potential participants who had provided consent to be contacted with more information about the study. Overall, 27 individuals agreed to be contacted by the research team. Of the 27 individuals, 24 individuals completed the online consent form on Qualtrics and participated in the study. Sixteen young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 years old met the inclusion and exclusion criteria and were included in the current study.

## **Data Collection**

Before the interview, all participants attended or watched a one-hour virtual information session on a new program to promote youth's transition from care to adulthood. Following the session, all participants completed an online demographic questionnaire and a virtual interview. Four graduate-level researchers conducted the interviews. The interview had two parts. The first part of the interview focused on participants' experiences transitioning to adulthood, with specific questions about their perceived readiness, challenges, and the support they received and



wished to have received. The second part of the interview aimed to elicit participants' feedback on the new program. Participants' feedback was used to revise the new program and was not included in this study. The interview was conducted online using a video conferencing platform, and they were 20 to 70 minutes in length. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants, who were recruited from the child welfare agency and one advocacy group, received a \$100 gift card as an honorarium for their time, as was recommended by the working group and youth previously involved in child welfare. Participants from another advocacy group were given the opportunity to enter a prize draw for a \$100 gift card, as was recommended by the advocacy group director. Data collection took place from December 2021 to January 2022.

### *Measures*

**Demographics.** Participants responded to survey questions about their age, gender, ethno-cultural background, marital status, highest education level completed, and current employment status.

**Experiences in care.** Participants responded to survey questions about when they entered and left the child welfare system, how long they had been involved with the system, and the number and types of placements that they had experienced.

**Semi-structured interview guide.** In the semi-structured interview (see Appendix A), participants first described how prepared they felt when they transitioned out of care and into adulthood. They were asked to identify any assets, resources, and experiences that helped them with their transition. Following this, they were asked to describe any challenges they encountered. They also described their broader experiences with education, employment, housing, relationships, self-care, and well-being. As part of the interview, they also answered

questions about the people who helped them prepare for the transition, how they helped them, and any extra support that they wished they could have received or that they believed would be helpful for youth currently in care.

### **Data Analysis**

Following Braun and Clark (2006)'s guidelines, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify, analyze, and report themes in the participants' accounts of their transition experiences to adulthood. The analysis was completed in six phases: 1) gaining familiarity with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. We used ATLAS.ti Web (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH., 2023) to analyze the interviews. To begin, the first author listened to the interview recording and reviewed all transcripts to check transcripts for accuracy and gain familiarity with the interview data. The second author from the working group and the third author also read and became familiar with all the transcripts. All three researchers took note of initial trends in the data and identified aspects of the data that might be important or interesting. Based on the notes and discussions, the three researchers coded three interviews simultaneously to develop appropriate codes and establish a preliminary codebook. The preliminary codebook provided detailed descriptions of the codes, which were created by staying as close to the participants' language as possible. The data was also coded inclusively to include a full sentence or entire paragraph to preserve the relevant context. The three researchers used the codebook to guide the coding of the remaining 13 interviews. Each interview was independently coded by the first author and one other researcher, with regular meetings after three to four interviews to discuss the coding approach and to update the codebook. All updates to the codebook were

agreed upon through discussions and were tracked in a spreadsheet. We also re-examined all previous interviews to ensure the additional and modified codes were reflected in the interviews.

In the third phase, we collaboratively collapsed relevant codes, searched for themes and subthemes, and created a preliminary thematic map with one meta-theme and four themes. In the fourth phase, we examined the themes in relation to the coded data and the entire dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness among the themes. To assist with this process, the senior author and an undergraduate-level research assistant provided feedback on the categorization of themes and subthemes. The updated thematic map was presented to the working group to interpret the data within the context of the experiences of youth involved with child welfare. In the fifth phase, the first author defined the themes and subthemes, selected the extracts that described the narratives of the themes and subthemes, and created the final thematic map. The thematic map and the naming of each theme and subtheme were reviewed and refined once again by the senior author and working group to ensure the analysis was reflective of participants' experiences. In the final phase, the first author established the order of the themes, interpreted the analysis in the context of the research questions, and wrote up the results.

## **Results**

The thematic analysis results identified one meta-theme and four themes that encompassed young adults' transition experiences from care to adulthood. The meta-theme "I feel ready and I don't feel ready" highlighted the inevitable need for the young adults to transition out of the child welfare system to adulthood, regardless of how ready or prepared they felt about the transition. The participants spoke about both supportive and detracting factors within and outside of themselves that contributed to their varying levels of readiness for transition to adulthood. Thus, the four identified themes described the assets and resources that

helped them through the transitions as well as challenges and limitations they encountered (see Figure 1). Specifically, there were two themes that highlighted the factors that led the young adults to feel ready and prepared for their transition to adulthood: “Desire and capability for autonomy and independence” and “Feeling supported by the people in my life”. On the other hand, there were two themes that highlighted their challenges and the factors that led them to not feel ready for the transition: “You have the weight of the world on your shoulders” and “Feeling different and unsupported”. Rather than feeling fully ready or not ready for the transition to adulthood, the four identified themes represent the participants’ intertwined perspectives regarding the experiences that fostered their resilience (i.e., Theme 1 and 2), as well as the hardships they encountered (i.e., Theme 3 and 4) while navigating the transition to adulthood. As such, the participants were not divided into two groups based on their levels of resilience and perceived readiness for transition to adulthood to reflect their mixed feelings, as well as the supports and challenges they concurrently expressed in their interviews. Drawing on their lived experiences, participants also provided recommendations for improving the transition process for youth currently in the care of child welfare. These recommendations involved supporting youth in building their assets and expanding the capacity of the child welfare system to address their unique needs.

### **Figure 1**

Thematic Map of Young Adults’ Perceptions of Their Readiness for Transition to Adulthood



### **Meta-Theme: I Feel Ready and I Don't Feel Ready**

When participants were asked about their transition to adulthood, they described being different ages, ranging from 16 to 21 years, and life stages, such as being in school and working full time. However, participants largely considered their transition to adulthood to begin when they started to assume the responsibility of living on their own. While some participants initiated the transition out of the child welfare system and reported feeling ready and supported for some parts of their transition, they also simultaneously faced challenges during their transition and left the system with limited support and preparation. In responses to interview prompts about the experiences that led them to feel ready and not ready for the transition to adulthood, participants emphasized that the decisions to leave care were largely based on their life circumstances and the child welfare system's policies, rather than their level of readiness and preparedness. As such, the meta-theme, "I feel ready and I don't feel ready" highlights the perceived inevitability of them leaving the child welfare system and living on their own when they reached the end of adolescence, regardless of whether they feel ready or prepared for adulthood or not. Despite being faced with an accelerated move from adolescence to adulthood, it was found that the hardships young adults encountered were intertwined with how they drew on their personal

strengths and resources to take care of themselves, leading to the two positive and two negative themes describing their transition experiences.

### **Theme 1: Desire and Capability for Autonomy and Independence**

Participants' reported desire and perceived capability for autonomy and independence contributed to their readiness for transition to adulthood: "I was able to be on my own. I loved being on my own" (016, age 22). Participants viewed their transition to adulthood as a way to gain control and consistency over their lives and not have anyone "dragging [them] along for the ride" (014, age 29). Although participants had different experiences in care, they were commonly expected to rely on themselves and do things on their own growing up. These experiences allowed them to develop skills and confidence that helped them to navigate the transition to adulthood. Three subthemes were identified within this theme.

#### ***1.1 "I Want to Be Out on My Own" (014, age 29)***

Participants expressed a desire and excitement for independence, which led some of them to voluntarily leave the child welfare system when they reached the age of majority. Given their placement instability and other negative experiences (e.g., having strict rules in their placement, not being respected) in the child welfare system, they expressed wanting more control and stability in their lives and to be free from the system. As one participant explained, "I found that I kept getting moved and nobody ever really tried to like, stick it out with me. And so that's why I ended up living on my own like, sooner, because essentially since they said to me I could leave, I left. And so I found that the real work kind of came when I was on my own, because I finally like, there wasn't anybody giving up on me and I was moving to a whole different city, I had stability, and I was able to kind of create stability for myself..." (006, age 24). Participants also

wanted to assert their independence and conveyed confidence in counting on themselves: “I was excited to move out of my own, and see what it was like” (001, age 20).

### ***1.2 I Had Some Skills to Be on My Own***

While not all participants reported feeling ready for their transition to adulthood, they all identified having some skills and personal strengths that they believed had helped them through their transition. Most of the skills were relevant to independent living, such as budgeting, cleaning, cooking, navigating transportation, managing medication and appointments, applying for jobs, seeking resources and support etc. Participants emphasized the importance of opportunities to learn and practice these skills while they were in the child welfare system, rather than having things done for them by their workers and foster parents. They also spoke about developing a high level of self-reliance because of their experiences before and during care, as one participant noted, “I didn’t have much help back then, so most of it was me finding out myself” (008, age 26). These experiences led participants to feel ready for their transition to adulthood as they had always been tasked with caring for their own needs.

### ***1.3 I Had Resources and Goals for The Future***

Participants talked about mobilizing their resources and support from their networks to build a new life. Participants referenced being able to secure accommodations either on their own or with the support of others, such as money from their child welfare agency, which facilitated a smoother transition to adulthood. They also attended and benefitted from workshops and courses offered by their child welfare agency. Despite the struggles of balancing school and work, participants talked about starting to work at a young age, which helped them to make money, gain life experiences, build social and networking skills, and make connections with people who were supportive of them. Overall, participants expressed a sense of “wanting a

better everything for myself” (023, age 26). They took pride in their independence during their transition to adulthood, which motivated them to take the initiative to learn and seek out resources to figure things out on their own. Becoming a parent was also an “awakening moment” (006, age 24) for some participants, as they realized they needed to work hard to provide for themselves and their children. During the interview, participants talked about persevering through their journey to adulthood, with the hope of eventually achieving their goals, such as buying a house, completing postsecondary education, and being successful in the future.

## **Theme 2: Feeling Supported by The People in My Life**

When discussing their perspectives about the role other people played in supporting their transition to adulthood, participants talked about feeling supported by people in their life, specifically, their foster families, their workers, and their child welfare agencies. In addition, participants felt supported and connected with other individuals outside of the child welfare system. Receiving tangible and intangible support from close others was frequently cited by participants as a factor that helped with their transition to adulthood. Three subthemes were identified within this theme.

### ***2.1 “They [Foster Parents] Supported Me Through Everything” (005, Age 26)***

Participants endorsed a strong sense of feeling supported by their care providers as they prepared for their transitions to adulthood and even beyond their transitions to adulthood. They described receiving a wide range of support from their foster families, as one participant noted, “They [foster family] supported me through everything, like, everything from school, growing up and becoming a teen mom” (005, age 26). Participants described having an “open, honest, and trusting relationship” (009, age 29) with their care providers, which facilitated their strong sense of connection and empowerment to make their own decisions. Participants stressed the



importance of receiving scaffolding support from their foster parents, who provided opportunities for them to learn, model, and practice transition skills at their placements. The emotional and problem-solving support from their foster parents was also instrumental for the participants when they faced challenges. Participants were also able to take advantage of the financial and housing supports that were offered by some foster families to gradually assume the responsibilities of living on their own.

### ***2.2 My Worker Understood and Supported Me***

Participants' child welfare workers taught them many independent living skills, provided guidance and assistance to help them secure housing and employment, and motivated them to stay on track with their education. Living on their own for the first time was overwhelming for many participants; however, these experiences provided them with some basic skills and resources to support themselves and showed them that their workers cared about them. Participants emphasized the consistency, trust, and understanding in their relationships with their workers, which encouraged them to ask for and accept help during the transition: "My social worker was consistent and that was the most beneficial for me. If I struggled or needed something, she did understand. And if I wanted help in an area, she really did try and reach out for me. So like, I learned to grow my voice" (017, age 28). Participants noted the emotional support from their workers also helped them to ease into their adult roles and problem-solve difficulties in daily life. Participants shared that it was also challenging when they lost their worker's support as they left the child welfare system.

### ***2.3 "I Always Knew I Could Call Somebody If I Needed To" (016, Age 22)***

Beyond their foster families and workers, participants received support from different individuals who helped them through their transition to adulthood. As one participant shared, "I

had really good connection with a guidance counsellor, friends, I had a boyfriend, um I really done good at like, creating my own support system.” (014, age 29). Participants’ support systems included their biological parents, siblings, friends, significant others, and other non-parental significant adults, such as teachers, school personnel, and mentors. They checked in regularly with the participants, provided housing and financial support, modelled basic life and social skills, offered guidance around education, and helped them “stay on track” in general (020, age 22). Connecting with individuals who had similar experiences also facilitated participants’ transition to adulthood as they shared their contacts and resources, helping participants achieve their personal goals, and instilling a sense of community.

### **Theme 3: “You Have the Weight of The World on Your Shoulders” (022, Age 25)**

While participants reported feeling ready and supported through their transition to adulthood, they also conveyed many challenges in their capacity to support themselves. They felt “the weight of the world on [their] shoulders” as they were trying to survive and take care of themselves. Three subthemes were identified within this theme.

#### ***3.1 “I Didn’t Know What the Heck Was Going On” (006, Age 24)***

Participants shared that they had to leave the child welfare system at short notice due to reaching the age of majority or their negative experiences within the child welfare system. Participants also reflected that their transitions were more difficult than they had anticipated. They reported “[knowing] nothing about adulthood and the real world” (018) and felt ill-prepared for many aspects of independent living. As one participant shared, “I didn’t even really know how to cook, I didn’t know how to really do laundry, I didn’t know how to do taxes. Like, I didn’t know anything. Um...which was kind of really stressful because I was just like, I don’t—you know, how do I do this?” (018, age 24). Participants felt frustrated that “no one really

taught [them] anything” (023, age 26) as they were not presented with many opportunities to learn and consolidate the skills required for a successful transition to adulthood.

### ***3.2 “I Was Just So Busy Trying to Survive” (014)***

Achieving self-sufficiency during the transition was a central challenge in many participants’ lives. With the sudden expectations to be self-sufficient and limited-to-no support from their families and child welfare agencies, maintaining financial stability as participants built their lives “from scratch” (023, age 26) emerged as one of the biggest challenges in their transition to adult life. Participants experienced this transition while being in school, which exacerbated their stress to make ends meet and manifested in their experiences of being in survival mode to balance all their responsibilities. They persevered through their emotional exhaustion, working part-time or full-time to make money while completing their education. For example, one participant stated, “Like so, I went to high school from 8:30, like 8 o clock in the morning, till 2:30. Then I walked to work from three to 11, and then I worked all weekend long. So, like, and that was so that I could eat, get my laundry done, have a roof over my head, um, because my apartment alone was like almost \$800 month. And then you have internet so you can do school work, and you have a phone so that you have access to getting a hold of people, like every month it was a struggle, even though I was working all the time, because I was what, making like, I think minimum wage, which was like 8-9 dollars back then. So, I was always just scraping by.” (014, age 29).

### ***3.3 I Was Dealing with Trauma and Was Depressed and Anxious***

Participants spoke about experiencing trauma and adversities before, during, and after they were involved with the child welfare system. These experiences led participants to feel “abandoned by [their] parents and the system” and miss many opportunities to develop healthy

coping skills. Further, participants shared that many foster parents were not fully equipped to support their mental health as they often mistook their struggles as behavioural issues. When participants transitioned to adulthood, their mental health was compounded by their past traumas, worries about living independently, and persistent feelings of sadness and loneliness. As one participant noted, “It was overwhelming because you had to exist with, like, the burden of being an adult when you're still, like, a kid. So, it was very confusing” (006, age 24). Given participants needed to prioritize their basic needs of survival, “a lot of other things kept getting pushed aside” (006, age 24), including their well-being. For those who did receive mental health support, they noted the support was not enough and highlighted their difficulties, such as having limited money and time to fully engage with these supports. During the interviews, participants noted that they continued to struggle with their mental health and emphasized the need for continued therapy during and after their transition to adulthood to “sort [their] life out” (006, age 24).

#### **Theme 4: Feeling Different and Unsupported**

Participants perceived a lack of support, which left them feeling unprepared, lonely, and different from their peers as they navigated the transition to adulthood. Three subthemes were identified within this theme.

##### ***4.1 I Wished My Child Welfare Agency Prepared Me More***

Participants were disappointed about the limited transition support they received from their workers and child welfare agencies. One young adult remarked that the transition to adulthood was like being “booted out the door...welcome to the real world” (018, age 24) as they left care with limited discussions and preparation for independent living from their workers. Participants also felt that their workers struggled to understand them and did not follow up

enough during their transition. While some participants acknowledged the support, such as the financial literacy course and resume workshop they received was helpful, this support was far from being sufficient to fully equip them with the basic skills for adulthood. As one participant shared, “They just gave us a big binder and said “here you go”, and that’s all they did with us and I didn’t learn anything there, to be honest” (005, age 26). Despite feeling disappointed about the support they received, participants expressed an appreciation and understanding for their workers, explaining that their workers “were doing the best that they could with the situation” (014, age 29). Participants felt that their agency should have done more; however, they also recognized the barriers that made it challenging for their workers to support, such as their workers’ high workload and the long distance between where the participants and workers were located.

#### ***4.2 I Didn’t Have Anyone to Fall Back On***

Participants reported lacking the supportive relationships that they very desperately desired while in care and during their transition to adulthood. Building healthy relationships with peers and trusted adults was challenging for many participants, partly due to their negative relational experiences with their biological families, placement instability, difficulties with their foster families, and being away from their siblings. Participants talked about “being alone a lot” (014, age 29), as they were living on their own and not having their families, friends, and workers there for them. Participants acknowledged their lack of trust and healthy models of relationships made it difficult for them to “put [themselves] in right situations at times or decide what is right or what I should do” (017, age 28). For instance, one participant stated, “you essentially start looking for relationships that may be toxic or negative, just to have somebody around. Because you’re lonely and you feel like you don’t really have support” (014, age 29).

Participants also reflected that they were not receptive to their foster parents' and workers' attempts to prepare for their transition because "[they] just think [they] know everything" (014, age 29) as teenagers. The strained relationships with their foster parents and workers also made it challenging for participants to accept their advice and support.

### ***4.3 I Felt Different from My Peers***

Participants were very aware of the differences between themselves and their peers because of their involvement with the child welfare system: "Most youth I knew didn't even know anything about being in foster care or even what that was." (018, age 24). These differences become more prominent when they were navigating the transition to adulthood. As one participant shared, "My peers didn't understand where I was coming from. Because they still lived at home, they had their parents doing everything for them, so it, it kind of felt like I was at a completely different level. Even in grade 12. And beyond that." (022, age 25). Participants also expressed a sense of dejection about the unfair expectations for them to take care of themselves as a child and assume the maturity and responsibility of a self-sufficient adult at the age of 18 when their peers were not expected to do the same. As one participant stated, "okay, other kids around me are not ready, so how come I have to be ready before them. It felt like I had to grow up before them almost" (016, age 22).

### **Recommendations to Better Support the Transition to Adulthood of Youth in the Care of Child Welfare**

The thematic analysis identified four themes among the recommendations offered by the participants to better support the successful transition to adulthood of youth in the care of child welfare.

#### ***Recommendation 1: Teaching and Providing Opportunities to Practice Transition Skills***

Participants emphasized the importance of having early conversations with youth to “help [them] realize what it was like living on [their] own” (002, age 25). They felt that these conversations should “go more into [the] depth of like the reality of living on your own” (002, age 25) and it would be helpful to hear from others, such as their foster parents and other youth involved in child welfare, about how they navigated their transition to adulthood. Alongside this, it is crucial to help youth identify the skills that they need to learn and provide opportunities to continue to strengthen these skills. While participants referenced some workshops and resources that were helpful, they felt that it would have been more helpful to have more hands-on opportunities to practice skills, such as managing money, cooking, doing laundry, and booking doctor’s appointments.

***Recommendation 2: Providing Socio-Emotional Support and Skills Training***

Participants advocated for more formal mental health supports, such as therapy and informal emotional support, to address their past trauma and stress during their transition to adulthood. As one young adult stated: “I needed counselling. I’ve literally been through a very traumatic thing that like, would stop any person, even an adult, in their tracks, and [I do] not know how to deal with that” (014, age 29). Participants stated that youth may not be aware of what their mental health needs are as teenagers and may have limited capacity to prioritize their mental health as they encounter many challenges during their transition to adulthood. Participants emphasized the need for their foster families and workers to identify their youth’s mental health needs and provide support specific to their needs. Participants also highlighted the importance of strengthening youth’s skills in the areas of self-care, healthy relationships, self-esteem, and self-confidence, so that they feel supported and empowered to advocate for their needs.

***Recommendation 3: Having A Support Person During the Transition to Adulthood***

Participants valued “having someone along the way” (005, age 26) to support them as they transitioned to adulthood “because [youth] might not have people to talk to about those things or might not feel comfortable sharing those goals with the people that they do know” (016, age 22). They varied in their opinions about who the support person should be.

Recommended individuals included the youth’s workers, mentors, counsellors, etc. However, a key task of the support person is to proactively build connections with the youth before they leave care so that they have someone to whom they feel comfortable to reach out for support while building their independence. Participants stressed that the responsibility to prepare youth for their transition to adulthood should lie within child welfare agencies. They advocated for child welfare agencies to offer more support, such as connecting youth with a housing worker, offering more workshops to teach and practice transition skills, and facilitating easier access to mental health support.

***Recommendation 4: Recognizing the Unique Experiences and Needs of Youth***

Participants affirmed the need to recognize “what’s going on behind the scenes” (014, age 29) for youth, regardless of whether they present well or struggle with behavioural issues. For example, youth may be struggling at school because of their learning and attentional difficulties, but it could also be attributed to their longstanding history of trauma, placement instability, relational difficulties, etc. Participants emphasized the importance of collaborating with youth to better understand their unique experiences and needs from their own perspectives, so that resources specific to the youth’s needs can be provided in a timely manner. As one youth stated: “I think, some of the things could’ve included [was] actually working one on one with my children’s aid society worker and identifying what things need to be accomplished, like in terms



of skills and knowledge to have when transitioning into adulthood would've been nice" (010, age 22).

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of transitioning from care to adulthood from the perspective of 16 young adults. Drawing from the young adults' lived experiences, this study sought to increase our understanding of the factors that promoted or hindered this group of youth in their transition to adulthood and to elicit suggestions from them about the transition support that would have been helpful. While young adults in our study experienced an abrupt transition out of care and felt unprepared for many of life's challenges (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Refaeli, 2017), they also demonstrated their resilience and reported feeling ready for some parts of adulthood. As such, young adults' accounts of their life circumstances reflect their dual perspective on both the experiences that they believed have fostered and those that have hindered their perceived readiness for transition to adulthood. Further, our study findings shed lights on the young adults' mixed feelings toward the inevitable milestone of moving out of care and being on their own. Central findings from this study highlight that young adults' perceived readiness for transition to adulthood was challenged mainly by their expectations for self-sufficiency and its impact on their mental health and stress, as well as their feelings of not being supported by others and a sense of not belonging. On the contrary, their desire and capability for autonomy and independence, and relationships with some supportive others, emerged as some of the most significant assets and resources that contributed to their positive views of their perceived readiness for adulthood.

An important asset that facilitated the young adults' transition to adulthood was their desire and capability for autonomy and independence. Consistent with the literature, some young

adults in the study equated independence to being free from the child welfare system, and the concept of self-sufficiency was discussed in both positive and negative ways (Hokanson, 2020; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Research has shown that older youth often feel frustrated with the constraints of the child welfare system and want their voices to be heard and respected (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Goodkind et al., 2011). While young adults in our study felt an early sense of being on their own and having to grow up fast, these experiences inadvertently made them feel that they had long been prepared for the transition to adulthood and contributed to their determination for autonomy. Consistent with a recent review pointing to the positive future orientation of care leavers (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019), all young adults in the study perceived themselves as having some personal strengths (e.g., being resourceful) and life skills (e.g., managing finances) that they acquired while in care, which facilitated their ability to assume at least some of the responsibilities of independent living. Young adults in the study were also aware of the challenges they experienced during the transition to adulthood and spoke about tirelessly setting goals and taking steps to achieve their desirable future. Despite their early adversities and difficulties during care, these young adults demonstrated their abilities to persevere through the challenges during their transitions to adulthood (Refaeli, 2017).

While past research has shown that youth's self-reliant identities and fears of being dependent prevent them from seeking and accepting help (Hokanson, 2020; Samuels & Pryce, 2008), this was not the case for the young adults in our study. Indeed, young adults identified the receipt of both formal and informal support as important resources in contributing to their readiness for transition to adulthood. Consistent with past literature (Augsberger & Swenson, 2015; Hokanson et al., 2020), they greatly appreciated the qualities such as consistency, trust, and understanding in their relationships with their foster parents and child welfare workers who

helped them through the transition. Despite not feeling fully ready to deal with the expectations of independent living, these strong connections provided them with scaffolding opportunities to learn transition skills and prepare for leaving care, empowered them to make decisions for themselves, and leveraged the resources, such as financial and housing support, that were offered to them. Given that many youth have limited opportunities to form strong relationships with their parents and biological family, child welfare workers and foster parents are uniquely positioned to understand their experiences in care, provide them with positive relational experiences, and offer guidance, support, and encouragement that will help them weather any challenges (Augsberger & Swenson, 2015; Greeson, Garcia, et al., 2015; Hokanson et al., 2020). Beyond the individuals involved in the child welfare system, young adults in the study also reported building and maintaining a network of supportive people. While the young adults were trying to assert their independence, they were able to recognize their needs for help and capitalize on these strong relationships to offer an array of support that meets their needs. This finding supports Propp and colleagues' (2003) conceptualization of interdependence of being able to "count on others" (p. 263) and affirms the robust body of literature that supports the significant benefits of having at least one supportive caring adult in promoting youth's smooth transition from care to adulthood (Greeson, Garcia, et al., 2015; Hokanson et al., 2020). Our findings add to the literature by highlighting that youth's ability to recognize their needs for support, openness to receiving help, and the positive qualities in these relationships are crucial for them to take advantage of these relationships during their transition to adulthood (Burt & Paysnick, 2012; Katz & Geiger, 2019; Morton, 2017). As such, normalizing counting on others and exploring ways for youth to maintain these important connections during and beyond their transition to adulthood will be crucial in promoting their transition to adulthood (Pryce et al., 2017).

While young adults in the study demonstrated their resilience during the transition to adulthood, they simultaneously felt unprepared for the difficulties associated with the abrupt transition to adulthood (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Goodkind et al., 2011). Their readiness for transition to adulthood was largely dependent on their perceived ability to successfully engage in key tasks, such as having stable housing that are typically used to define adulthood. In line with the literature (Goodkind et al., 2011; Sulimani-Aidan, 2020), economic hardship and mental health challenges emerged as two of the biggest areas that they felt the most unprepared for. While young people in the general population have family members who can share financial knowledge with them and have opportunities to practice their financial literacy skills, youth involved in child welfare often have poor socioeconomic history, limited earning potential at a young age, and inadequate financial literacy skills and support (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014). Their perceived readiness for transition to adulthood was also negatively affected by their experiences of being forced into a “survival mode”, as they juggled multiple responsibilities to meet their basic needs of survival. Research has shown that youth’s daily struggles to survive can narrow their capacity to build emotional connections, plan for their future goals and aspirations, and attend to their well-being (Storer et al., 2012; Sulimani-Aidan, 2017, 2020). Indeed, young adults in our study clearly expressed that their mental health needs were largely not addressed throughout their childhood and adolescence and the new challenges of navigating the transition to adulthood further exacerbated their levels of stress and mental health difficulties. In line with this, a previous study has shown that youth involved with child welfare reported increased depression, anxiety, and substance use problems when they have limited access to material resources as they transition to adulthood, even when they endorsed using positive coping strategies (Grey et al., 2015). Faced with the sudden expectations to achieve self-sufficiency and

struggles to ensure their survival needs are met, it is understandable that youth transitioning to adulthood do not feel that they have adequate mental capacity and material resources to seek and utilize mental health services consistently (Pryce et al., 2017). Given that emerging adulthood presents a “window of opportunity” into the process of resilience (Masten et al., 2006, p. 186), it is important to improve our understanding of how to support youth in accumulating and mobilizing their resources to prioritize their mental health while they are in care and as they emerge into adulthood.

A lack of preparation for their life beyond care and a sense of loneliness and isolation were additional factors that undermined their readiness for transition to adulthood among the young adults in our study. While information about the participants’ involvement in transition support was not collected, the study findings support studies (Morton, 2017; Sulimani-Aidan, 2020; Tyrell & Yates, 2018) that showed that young adults were disappointed by the amount and qualities of transition support they received from their child welfare agency. Research has suggested that youth’s perception of support inadequacy might deter them from accessing transitional support even though they desperately need those services (Doucet et al., 2022). Nonetheless, several young adults in the study expressed appreciation for their workers for “doing their best” to support them in the context of different systemic challenges. Such appreciation likely stemmed from the young adults’ current understanding of the child welfare system based on their personal contacts with their workers, their involvement in the child welfare advocacy groups, as well as their employment in the child welfare system. Further, we found that their limited child welfare support was compounded by the lack of supportive relationships as young adults transitioned to adulthood in our study, leading to their feelings of loneliness and not belonging. Given the transitory living arrangement of many youth involved in child welfare,

they may not have regular interactions with a consistent caregiver (Duke et al., 2017). Their past relational experiences also impact their ability to trust others and develop expectations and standards surrounding healthy relationships (Forenza et al., 2018), which create barriers for young adults in the study to seek and receive support. Further, similar to those in the general population, young adults in the present study expressed their desires to fit in and feel accepted by their peers (Strayhorn, 2018). However, their feelings of not belonging and not being accepted were exacerbated during their transition as they were well aware of the higher expectation for self-sufficiency that was forced on them, as well as the limited options to rely on their families or have regular connection with their biological families compared to their peers (Arnett, 2007; Singer & Berzin, 2015). Several participants also endorsed similar concerns reported in studies about being judged and stigmatized by their peers and teachers for being a “foster youth”, which led them to conceal their involvement with the child welfare system from others (Johnson et al., 2020). These findings demonstrated that having positive relationships with individuals within and outside of the child welfare system impacts youth’s readiness for transition from care to adulthood. While it is well-established in the literature about the importance of having access to at least one supportive adult for youth involved with child welfare, our findings expand previous research by highlighting the factors that contribute to youth’s challenges in developing and sustaining these positive relationships as they prepare for their transition to adulthood.

Transitioning out of care and into adulthood is an inevitable milestone for youth involved in the child welfare system. Regardless of whether youth feel ready or not, they are faced with an accelerated move from supportive care to establishing themselves as an independent adult (Rome & Raskin, 2019). The present study shows that young adults’ conceptualization of their level of perceived readiness for transition to adulthood was largely dependent on a combination of their

desire and capability for independence and the presence of supportive relationships to provide formal and informal support. In the context of major changes and responsibilities involved in the transition to adulthood, young adults in the study experienced their transition with high levels of unpreparedness and inadequate support. However, these young adults' accounts also reflected their efforts to respond to these challenges in adaptive and meaningful ways, such as drawing on their positive views of themselves and their future, as well as depending on close others who provided instrumental, practical, and emotional support. Further, young adults' lived experiences were reflected in the four recommendations they provided to support youth in the care of child welfare. Based on the recommendations, youth's readiness for transition to adulthood can be promoted in the context of interdependence (Propp et al., 2003), where they are provided with opportunities to learn and practice independent living and socio-emotional skills and have consistent access to at least one supportive person who would listen and collaborate with them during and after they leave care.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations are important to note. First, the sample included a group of relatively successful, White young adults who maintained personal contact with their workers in a single agency and/or who were involved with child welfare advocacy groups. This small sample is likely not representative of the larger child welfare population in Canada, where there is an overrepresentation of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized children and youth involved in child welfare (Pollock et al., 2024). The experiences of young adults who were less connected with formal support, had fewer resources and capacity to participate in advocacy groups, or were more vulnerable in general were also not reflected in this study. For instance, young adults, particularly those from marginalized groups who experience multiple intersecting systemic and

structural factors, such as racial discrimination and income inequality likely experience additional challenges and limitations during their transition to adulthood and may report different factors that contribute to and hinder their resilience during this critical period of development (Cénat et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2013). Future research is needed to capture the diverse experiences of youth involved in child welfare with different backgrounds, experiences in care, access to resources, and levels of “success” (Hokanson, 2020). Second, young adults in the study were not involved in the interpretation of data and identification of themes due to time constraints. While the working group which included individuals with different experiences and expertise in the child welfare system supported the interpretation of data within the context of the participants’ experiences, future research will benefit from reviewing and reflecting the data with young adults themselves to ensure the results accurately capture their perspectives. Finally, the semi-structured interview was conducted after the participants received information about the program developed to promote the relationships and readiness for transition to adulthood of youth involved with child welfare. The information from the program might have primed participants to reflect on their transition to adulthood in the areas highlighted by the program, such as their independent living skills and support from their foster parents. As such, the findings might not capture young adults’ full range of experiences and the factors that they considered when assessing their readiness for transition to adulthood. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods would allow researchers to explore the factors that youth considered when estimating their readiness for transition more widely and in-depth. Longitudinal mixed-method studies are also needed to examine how youth and young adults’ perceived readiness for transition to adulthood changes as they receive transitional support and its potential effect on their actual transition outcomes.



## **Study Implications**

The study results have implications regarding programming for youth transitioning out of care to adulthood. Youth's perceived readiness for transition to adulthood largely depends on their ability to successfully engage in tasks relevant to independent living, which highlights the importance of providing them with opportunities to learn and practice independent living skills with the support of their foster parents and child welfare workers during care. Additionally, there is a clear need to provide more accessible and consistent socio-emotional support, including mental health services, and support in building relationships with youth, to foster youth's positive well-being and alleviate their sense of loneliness and isolation during the transition. However, the findings suggest that youth would not be able to fully benefit from these supports without access to resources to meet their basic needs, such as housing and finances. Finally, young adults differ in their perceived readiness for transition to adulthood and present with diverse and unique needs as they leave care. The study findings identified several factors, such as youth's capability for autonomy and the presence of supportive relationships that are crucial assets and resources that support youth in preparing for their transition to adulthood. Early and effective transition planning and preparation, which involve the youth and at least one supportive, caring adult from the child welfare system, and the promotion of these protective factors, is essential to identify youth's needs and preferences, capitalize on their strengths, and ensure their transitions to adulthood are supported within the context of high-quality relationships.

## **Conclusion**

Recognizing that many youth in child welfare are not receiving the support that is integral for their transition to adulthood, the current study expanded on previous research by increasing

our understanding of young adults' conceptualization of their readiness for transition from care to adulthood. The findings provided valuable insights into the key factors that either supported or hindered youth's transition to adulthood and offered recommendations to support youth who are currently in the care of child welfare, directly from the perspectives of young adults who had navigated this transition.

## References

- Anderson, B. L., & Williams, A. L. (2018). Defining success: The perspective of emerging adults with foster care experience. *Journal of Social Service Research, 44*(5), 643–655.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2018.1477697>
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55*(5), 469.
- Arnett, J. J. (2007). Afterword: Aging out of care—Toward realizing the possibilities of emerging adulthood. *New Directions for Youth Development, 2007*(113), 151–161.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.207>
- Arnett, J. J. (2019). Foreword. In V. Mann-Feder & M. Goyette (Eds.), *Leaving care and the transition to adulthood: International contributions to theory, research, and practice* (pp. xiii–xx). Oxford University Press.
- Arnett, J. J. (2023). *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*. Oxford University Press.
- ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH. (2023). *ATLAS.ti Web* [Computer software].  
<https://atlasti.com>
- Augsberger, A., & Swenson, E. (2015). “My Worker Was There When it Really Mattered”: Foster care youths’ perceptions and experiences of their relationships with child welfare workers. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 96*(4), 234–240. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.2015.96.34>
- Berzin, S. C., Singer, E., & Hokanson, K. (2014). Emerging Versus Emancipating: The Transition to Adulthood for Youth in Foster Care. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 29*(5), 616–638. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558414528977>

- Burt, K. B., & Paysnick, A. A. (2012). Resilience in the transition to adulthood. *Development and Psychopathology, 24*(2), 493–505. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579412000119>
- Charlesworth, J. (2020). *A Parent's Duty: Government's Obligation to Youth transitioning into Adulthood*. The Office of the Representative for Children and Youth.
- Courtney, M. E. & Dworsky, A. (2006). Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA. *Child and Family Social Work, 11*, 209–219.
- Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Ruth, G. R., Keller, T., Havlicek, J., & Bost, N. (2005). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- Courtney, M. E., & Heuring, D. H. (2005). The Transition to Adulthood for Youth “Aging Out” of the Foster Care System. In *On your own without a net: The transition to adulthood for vulnerable populations* (pp. 27–67). The University of Chicago Press.
- Courtney, M. E., Piliavin, I., Grogan-Kaylor, A., & Nesmith, A. (2001). Foster youth transitions to adulthood: A longitudinal view of youth leaving care. *Child Welfare, 80*(6), 685–717.
- Courtney, M. E., Valentine, E. J., & Skemer, M. (2019). Experimental evaluation of transitional living services for system-involved youth: Implications for policy and practice. *Children and Youth Services Review, 96*, 396–408.
- <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.11.031>

- Cunningham, M. J., & Diversi, M. (2013). Aging out: Youths' perspectives on foster care and the transition to independence. *Qualitative Social Work, 12*(5), 587–602.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325012445833>
- Day, A., Dworsky, A., Fogarty, K., & Damashek, A. (2011). An examination of post-secondary retention and graduation among foster care youth enrolled in a four-year university. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(11), 2335–2341. - Google Search. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*, 2335–2341.
- Dinisman, T., & Zeira, A. (2011). The Contribution of Individual, Social Support and Institutional Characteristics to Perceived Readiness to Leave Care in Israel: An Ecological Perspective. *British Journal of Social Work, 41*(8), 1442–1458.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr034>
- Dixon, J., Ward, J., & Blower, S. (2019). “They sat and actually listened to what we think about the care system”: The use of participation, consultation, peer research and co-production to raise the voices of young people in and leaving care in England. *Child Care in Practice, 25*(1), 6–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2018.1521380>
- Doucet, M. M., Greeson, J. K. P., & Eldeeb, N. (2022). Independent living programs and services for youth “aging out” of care in Canada and the U.S.: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 142*, 106630. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106630>
- Duke, T., Farruggia, S. P., & Germino, G. R. (2017). “I don’t know where I would be right now if it wasn’t for them”: Emancipated foster care youth and their important non-parental adults. *Children and Youth Services Review, 76*, 65–73.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.02.015>

- Fergus, S., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2005). Adolescent resilience: A framework for understanding healthy development in the face of risk. *Annual Review of Public Health, 26*, 399–419. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.26.021304.144357>
- Forenza, B., Bermea, A., & Rogers, B. (2018). Ideals and Reality: Perceptions of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships Among Foster Youth. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 35*(3), 221–230. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-017-0523-3>
- García-Alba, L., Gullo, F., & del Valle, J. F. (2022). Readiness for independent living of youth in residential childcare: A comparative study. *Child & Family Social Work, n/a*(n/a). <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12951>
- Geenen, S., & Powers, L. E. (2007). “Tomorrow is another problem”: The experiences of youth in foster care during their transition into adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*, 1085–1101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2007.04.008>
- Georgiades, S. (2005). A Multi-Outcome Evaluation of an Independent Living Program. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 22*(5), 417–439. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-005-0020-y>
- Goodkind, S., Schelbe, L. A., & Shook, J. J. (2011). Why youth leave care: Understandings of adulthood and transition successes and challenges among youth aging out of child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(6), 1039–1048. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.01.010>
- Greeson, J. K. P. (2013). Foster Youth and the Transition to Adulthood: The Theoretical and Conceptual Basis for Natural Mentoring. *Emerging Adulthood, 1*(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696812467780>

- Greeson, J. K. P., Garcia, A. R., Kim, M., Thompson, A. E., & Courtney, M. E. (2015). Development & maintenance of social support among aged out foster youth who received independent living services: Results from the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *53*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2015.03.016>
- Greeson, J. K. P., Garcia, A. R., Tan, F., Chacon, A., & Ortiz, A. J. (2020). Interventions for youth aging out of foster care: A state of the science review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *113*, 105005. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105005>
- Grey, I. K., Berzenski, S. R., & Yates, T. M. (2015). Coping in Context: Associations Between Resource Availability and Coping Effectiveness Among Emancipated Foster Youth. *Emerging Adulthood*, *3*(5), 295–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696815576457>
- Gunawardena, N., & Stich, C. (2021). Interventions for young people aging out of the child welfare system: A systematic literature review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *127*, 106076. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2021.106076>
- Gypen, L., Vanderfaeillie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Holen, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic-review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *76*, 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2017.02.035>
- Häggman-Laitila, A., Salohekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2018). Transition to adult life of young people leaving foster care: A qualitative systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *95*, 134–143. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2018.08.017>
- Häggman-Laitila, A., Salohekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2019). Young People's Preparedness for Adult Life and Coping After Foster Care: A Systematic Review of Perceptions and Experiences

- in the Transition Period. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 48(5), 633–661.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-019-09499-4>
- Hedenstrom, M. (2021). Aging out of foster care: The experiences of former foster youth who successfully navigated this transition. *Developmental Child Welfare*, 3(2), 166–181.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/25161032211019411>
- Heerde, J. A., Hemphill, S. A., & Scholes-Balog, K. E. (2018). The impact of transitional programmes on post-transition outcomes for youth leaving out-of-home care: A meta-analysis. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 26(1), e15–e30.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12348>
- Höjer, I., & Sjöblom, Y. (2014). Voices of 65 Young People Leaving Care in Sweden: “There Is So Much I Need to Know!” *Australian Social Work*, 67(1), 71–87.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2013.863957>
- Hokanson, K. (2020). ‘Not Independent Enough’: Exploring the Tension Between Independence and Interdependence among Former Youth in Foster Care who are Emerging Adults. *Child Welfare*, 97(5), 17.
- Hokanson, K., Neville, S., Teixeira, S., Singer, E., & Berzin, S. (2020). “There are a Lot of Good Things that Come Out of it at the End”: Voices of Resilience in Youth Formerly in Foster Care During Emerging Adulthood. *Child Welfare*, 97, 233–249.
- Johnson, R. M., Strayhorn, T. L., & Parler, B. (2020). “I just want to be a regular kid:” A qualitative study of sense of belonging among high school youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 111, 104832.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104832>



- Jones, L. (2011). The Impact of Transitional Housing on the Post-Discharge Functioning of Former Foster Youth. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth*, 28(1), 17–38.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0886571X.2011.541843>
- Jones, L. P. (2014). Former Foster Youth’s Perspectives on Independent Living Preparation Six Months After Discharge. *Child Welfare*, 93(1), 99–126.
- Katz, C. C., & Geiger, J. M. (2019). ‘We Need That Person That Doesn’t Give up on Us’: The Role of Social Support in the Pursuit of Post-Secondary Education for Youth with Foster Care Experience who are Transition-Aged. *Child Welfare*, 97(6).
- Leal-Ferman, P. A., Weight, C., & Latimer, E. (2023). PROGRAMS AND SERVICES OFFERED TO YOUNG PEOPLE TRANSITIONING OUT OF CARE IN CANADA: A LITERATURE REVIEW. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 14(1), 7–29. <https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs141202321282>
- Mann-Feder, V. R. (2023). Editorial: The transition to adulthood from care in Canada. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 14(1), 1–6.  
<https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs141202321281>
- Masten, A. S., Obradović, J., & Burt, K. B. (2006). Resilience in Emerging Adulthood: Developmental Perspectives on Continuity and Transformation. In *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century* (pp. 173–190). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11381-007>
- Montgomery, P., Donkoh, C., & Underhill, K. (2006). Independent living programs for young people leaving the care system: The state of the evidence. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28(12), 1435–1448. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2006.03.002>

- Morton, B. M. (2017). Growing up fast: Implications for foster youth when independence and early adulthood collide. *Children and Youth Services Review, 82*, 156–161.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.09.028>
- Munson, M. R., Lee, B. R., Miller, D., Cole, A., & Nedelcu, C. (2013). Emerging adulthood among former system youth: The ideal versus the real. *Children and Youth Services Review, 35*(6), 923–929. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.03.003>
- Olate, R., Salas-Wright, C., & Vaughn, M. G. (2012). Predictors of violence and delinquency among high risk youth and youth gang members in San Salvador, El Salvador. *International Social Work, 55*(3), 383–401. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872812437227>
- Osgood, D. W., Foster, E. M., & Courtney, M. E. (2010). Vulnerable populations and the transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children, 20*(1), 209–229.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0047>
- Propp, J., Ortega, D. M., & NewHeart, F. (2003). Independence or Interdependence: Rethinking the Transition from “Ward of the Court” to Adulthood. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 84*(2), 259–266. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.102>
- Pryce, J., Napolitano, L., & Samuels, G. M. (2017). Transition to Adulthood of Former Foster Youth: Multilevel Challenges to the Help-Seeking Process. *Emerging Adulthood, 5*(5), 311–321. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696816685231>
- Refaeli, T. (2017). Narratives of care leavers: What promotes resilience in transitions to independent lives? *Children and Youth Services Review, 79*, 1–9.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.05.023>

- Robbins, R. N., & Bryan, A. (2004). Relationships Between Future Orientation, Impulsive Sensation Seeking, and Risk Behavior Among Adjudicated Adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 19*(4), 428–445. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558403258860>
- Rome, S. H., & Raskin, M. (2019). Transitioning Out of Foster Care: The First 12 Months. *Youth & Society, 51*(4), 529–547. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X17694968>
- Samuels, G. M., & Pryce, J. M. (2008). “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”: Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(10), 1198–1210. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2008.03.005>
- Schoeni, R. F., & Ross, K. E. (2005). Material Assistance from Families during the Transition to Adulthood. In *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 396–416). The University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226748924.003.0012>
- Schwartz-Tayri, T. M., & Spiro, S. E. (2017). The Other Side of the Bridge: A Follow-Up Study of Israeli Young Adults Who Participated in A Transitional Housing Program after Aging Out from Care. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth, 34*(3–4), 311–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0886571X.2017.1334164>
- Settersten, R. A., & Ray, B. (2010). What’s going on with young people today? The long and twisting path to adulthood. *The Future of Children, 20*(1), 19–41. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0044>
- Shanahan, M. J. (2000). Pathways to Adulthood in Changing Societies: Variability and Mechanisms in Life Course Perspective. *Annual Review of Sociology, 26*(1), 667–692. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.667>

- Shanahan, M. J., Porfeli, E. J., Mortimer, J. T., & Erickson, L. D. (2005). Subjective Age Identity and the Transition to Adulthood: When Do Adolescents Become Adults? In *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy*. (pp. 225–255). The University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226748924.003.0007>
- Shewchuk, S. (2020). *Transition Supports to Prevent Homelessness for Youth Leaving Out-of-Home Care*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, A Way Home.
- Singer, E. R., & Berzin, S. C. (2015). Early Adult Identification Among Youth With Foster Care Experience: Implications for Emerging Adulthood. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 9(1), 65–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2014.983290>
- Stein, M. (2008). Resilience and Young People Leaving Care. *Child Care in Practice*, 14(1), 35–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575270701733682>
- Stein, M. (2012). *Young People Leaving Care: Supporting Pathways to Adulthood*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Stoddard, S. A., Zimmerman, M. A., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2011). Thinking about the future as a way to succeed in the present: A longitudinal study of future orientation and violent behaviors among African American youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 48(3–4), 238–246. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9383-0>
- Storer, H. L., Barkan, S. E., Sherman, E. L., Haggerty, K. P., & Mattos, L. M. (2012). Promoting relationship building and connection: Adapting an evidence-based parenting program for families involved in the child welfare system. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(9), 1853–1861. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.05.017>
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*. Routledge.

- Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2015). Do they get what they expect?: The connection between young adults' future expectations before leaving care and outcomes after leaving care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 55*, 193–200.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2015.06.006>
- Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2017). Barriers and resources in transition to adulthood among at-risk young adults. *Children and Youth Services Review, 77*, 147–152.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2017.04.015>
- Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2020). Challenges in the transition to adulthood of young-adult Arabs who graduated from residential facilities in Israel. *Children and Youth Services Review, 113*, 104967. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.104967>
- Swartz, T. T., Kim, M., Uno, M., Mortimer, J., & O'Brien, K. B. (2011). Safety Nets and Scaffolds: Parental Support in the Transition to Adulthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 73*(2), 414–429. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00815.x>
- Tyrell, F. A., & Yates, T. M. (2018). Emancipated foster youth's experiences and perceptions of the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Youth Studies, 21*(8), 1011–1028.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1441983>
- Viswanathan, M., Ammerman, A., Eng, E., Garlehner, G., Lohr, K. N., Griffith, D., Rhodes, S., Samuel-Hodge, C., Maty, S., Lux, L., Webb, L., Sutton, S. F., Swinson, T., Jackman, A., & Whitener, L. (2004). Community-Based Participatory Research: Assessing the Evidence: Summary. In *AHRQ Evidence Report Summaries*. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/books/NBK11852/>
- Vorhies, V., Glover, C. M., Davis, K., Hardin, T., Krzyzanowski, A., Harris, M., Fagan, M., & Wilkness, S. (2009). Improving outcomes for pregnant and parenting foster care youth

with severe mental illness: An evaluation of a transitional living program. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 33, 115–124. <https://doi.org/10.2975/33.2.2009.115.124>

Wightman, P., Robinson, K., & Schoeni, R. F. (2012). *Familial financial assistance to young adults*. National Poverty Center Ann Arbor, MI.

Woodgate, R. L., Morakinyo, O., & Martin, K. M. (2017). Interventions for youth aging out of care: A scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 82, 280–300.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.09.031>

Zimmerman, M. A. (2013). Resiliency Theory: A Strengths-Based Approach to Research and Practice for Adolescent Health. *Health Education & Behavior*, 40(4), 381–383.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198113493782>

**Chapter 3: Study 2 – A community-based program to support the transition to adulthood of youth involved in child welfare: An exploratory, mixed methods study of the perspectives of youth and their care providers**

The transition to adulthood is considered a significant developmental stage when young people face multiple opportunities and challenges that can have significant impacts on their growth and well-being (Arnett, 2000; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). Youth involved in child welfare may encounter additional hardships and struggle to negotiate the transition successfully due to the adversities they have experienced before and during their involvement with the child welfare system (Konijn et al., 2019). Further, youth who “age out” of care typically at age 18 are required to leave their out-of-home placement and live on their own, most often with limited preparation and adult support (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Recognizing the challenges faced by youth aging out of care, two foster parents collaborated with a community-based child welfare agency to develop a web-based application called the Milestone Program. The Milestone Program is designed for care providers, including foster parents and child welfare workers, to strengthen their relationships with youth in out-of-home care and promote their readiness for transition to adulthood while they are in care and approaching the age of transition. Building on an existing partnership, this study was initiated by the community-based child welfare agency which invited the research team to collaborate on evaluating the Milestone Program. Rooted in resilience principles (Masten, 2001) and community-based participatory design (CBPR) methodology (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011), this study addresses the needs of our community partner by exploring the perceived changes in youth-care provider relationships, youth’s perceived readiness for transition to adulthood, care providers’ levels of confidence in supporting

youth's transition, and youth's and care providers' overall experiences and satisfaction with the program.

### **Youth's Transition from Care to Emerging Adulthood**

The transition to adulthood is a developmental period when young people slowly emerge into their adult roles and responsibilities while receiving continued support from their families (Arnett, 2000; Wightman et al., 2012). Vulnerable youth, particularly youth who grow up in out-of-home care are confronted with normative emerging adulthood tasks, as well as the challenges of an abrupt transition to adulthood without the support and resources that their peers receive from their families (Greeson, 2013; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Many youth in out-of-home care also experience trauma, multiple care placements, housing instability, and separation from caregivers, all of which limit their opportunities to build developmental assets that are crucial for the transition to adulthood (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). More importantly, these difficulties hinder youth's ability to build healthy relationships with caring adults, which in turn creates significant barriers for them to identify and receive support during the transition (Greeson, 2013; Stein, 2008). Research across countries consistently underscores poor outcomes for youth aging out of care, including lower levels of educational attainment and employment rates, as well as higher rates of mental health difficulties, homelessness, and criminal justice involvement than their peers in the general population (Gypen et al., 2017; Havlicek et al., 2013).

### **Programs to Support the Transition to Adulthood Among Youth in Out-of-home Care**

In order to prepare youth's move from care to adulthood, programs have been developed to promote their positive outcomes during this critical transition (Doucet et al., 2022). The most common intervention for youth aging out of care is independent living programs and their associated services (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021; Woodgate et al., 2017). These programs



generally aim to teach youth tangible life skills important for adulthood and provide support in post-secondary education, housing, and employment right before or shortly after they transition out of care (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021; Woodgate et al., 2017). The goals of these programs are to promote youth's "self-sufficiency" to live independently without external assistance, a marker that has been traditionally viewed as the desired outcome for youth aging out of care (Propp et al., 2003; Woodgate et al., 2017). Supporting youth in developing critical yet intangible skills such as socio-emotional skills and positive future orientation, is not the focus of these programs (Propp et al., 2003). Evaluation of independent living programs shows that these programs have a mixed impact on youth's transition to adulthood outcomes, including preparedness, education, employment, and housing stability (Doucet et al., 2022; Gunawardena & Stich, 2021). As such, researchers have argued that existing independent living programs may not offer sufficient hands-on opportunities to youth to develop the necessary skills needed for a successful transition to adulthood, as well as social resources to promote their healthy relationships, sense of agency, and positive well-being (Courtney et al., 2001; Lee & Berrick, 2014). Indeed, youth involved in child welfare often report not feeling prepared to leave care and a lack of support in managing the traumatic experiences that brought them to care, as well as the stress associated with the transition to adulthood (Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012). Feelings of loneliness and isolation are also frequently reported by youth involved in child welfare as they have limited opportunities to develop and maintain positive relationships and do not have anyone to rely on as they transition to adulthood (Chan et al., submitted; Tyrell & Yates, 2018). Hence, these mixed intervention results, coupled with the continued hardships and outcomes documented among youth involved in child welfare suggest that these independent living programs and services alone are insufficient in meeting the needs of current youth in care.

## **Importance of Supportive Relationships for Youth's Transition from Care to Adulthood**

Addressing the concrete needs related to living independently, namely housing, employment, and education, among youth involved in child welfare is certainly crucial as they often have limited earning potentials at a young age and limited access to support and resources (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). However, ensuring they have established strong and supportive relationships with non-parental care-giving adults while in care is also important for their adult well-being and functioning given their maltreatment histories and increased need for secure relationships (Collins et al., 2010). Having supportive relationships with caring adults is normative for young adult development and is particularly protective for vulnerable and at-risk youth (Beam et al., 2002; Werner, 2004). As such, researchers and policymakers have suggested rethinking the approach of solely promoting youth's self-sufficiency post-care (Hokanson, 2020; Lee & Berrick, 2014; Propp et al., 2003). Specifically, they argued that it would be important to support youth in leveraging their positive relationships with caring adults while they are still in care to develop the necessary tangible and intangible skills for a successful transition (Hokanson, 2020; Lee & Berrick, 2014; Propp et al., 2003). Consequently, a small number of relationship-based programs have been developed to promote youth's transition skills, as well as "soft skills" through social support and mentoring relationships (Greeson & Thompson, 2017; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Spencer et al., 2018).

While youth in out-of-home care may not have their biological parents to support them, research has shown that they are able to receive tangible and intangible support from their existing social network, including their care providers in the child welfare system and adults in their extended families and communities (Augsberger & Swenson, 2015; Collins et al., 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009). Youth involved in child welfare report that these caring adults are

uniquely positioned to assume the role of their parents and provide them with an adult role model that they look up to (Ahrens et al., 2011). These relationships also provide important corrective relational experiences where they could learn and practice healthy relationship skills, particularly among youth involved in child welfare who often have limited opportunities to build secure and safe connections (Ahrens et al., 2011). The informal nature of these relationships is different from mentoring relationships developed in formal programs as they emerge more naturally within the youth's existing social networks (Ahrens et al., 2011). This is particularly important for youth involved in child welfare as their involvement in the system may contribute to their difficulty trusting adults and accepting support from professionals or adults who are unknown to them (Ahrens et al., 2008, 2011). Further, these adults may have a more stable presence given that they are already in the youth's lives and are less prone to barriers that are inherent to formal programming, such as the termination of the relationship when the program ends (Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson, 2013). Compared to studies on formal mentoring programs, research has consistently documented that youth with naturally occurring relationships who provide support, guidance, and encouragement report improved health, educational attainment, and employment outcomes and reduced suicidal risk, involvement with the law, and homelessness (Ahrens et al., 2008; Collins et al., 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009). As a result, several relationship-based programs that aim to strengthen the relationship between a youth and a caring adult mentor from the youth's existing social networks have been developed for youth transitioning out of care (Thompson et al., 2016). Through their meaningful relationship with the youth, mentors are believed to be well positioned to promote the youth's socio-emotional, cognitive, and identity development and support them in developing their interdependence and meeting their desired adulthood goals (Greeson, 2013; Spencer et al., 2018). Further, a systematic review showed

preliminary promising results of these naturally-occurring mentoring relationships, with evidence highlighting a positive association between the presence of a natural mentor and improved psychosocial, behavioural, or academic outcomes during the youth's transition to adulthood, as well as when they are in adulthood (Thompson et al., 2016). As such, nurturing meaningful relationships with caring adults is an important aspect of promoting the successful transition to adulthood among youth in out-of-home care and may be a useful addition to existing independent living programs (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

### **The Milestone Program**

Align with existing relationship-based programs for youth involved in child welfare, the Milestone Program is a web-based application that offers youth support within their out-of-home placements to acquire transition-related skills and knowledge through their everyday interactions with their care providers while they are still in the child welfare system. The Milestone Program has been developed by foster parents in collaboration with a community-based child welfare agency and child welfare stakeholders, including former and current youth involved in child welfare, child welfare workers, and foster parents and families. A unique component of the Milestone Program is the opportunities it offered to youth to strengthen their existing relationships with their care providers, including their foster parents and child welfare workers through engagement in collaborative planning of adult skills. Care providers are well-positioned to promote youth's positive relationships with adults and support their transition to adulthood as they spend time with them within their out-of-home placement.

The Milestone Program is grounded in the lived experiences of individuals involved in the child welfare system, and aligns with the concept of resilience, defined as the capacity of a system to adapt positively in the presence of adversity (Masten, 2014). From a developmental

resilience perspective (Masten & Barnes, 2018), the Milestone Program aims to cultivate the resilience of youth in out-of-home care by enhancing their internal assets (e.g., readiness for transition to adulthood) and external resources (e.g., close relationships with care providers), thereby promoting their positive outcomes and reducing their vulnerability to negative outcomes (Masten et al., 2009; Nuñez et al., 2022). Specifically, resilience relies on ordinary, everyday positive experiences and supportive relationships and does not require any extraordinary resources—a phenomenon referred to as the “ordinary magic” of resilience (Masten, 2001; Masten & Monn, 2015). While youth in out-of-home care may not experience these learning opportunities with their biological family, out-of-home care providers and other trusted adults in the youth’s life can offer supportive relationships and positive experiences known to promote resilience (Anderson & Williams, 2018; Masten, 2014). In line with this, the Milestone Program prioritizes providing youth with opportunities to build relationships and accumulate developmental assets and resources that are crucial for their successful transition to adulthood.

The Milestone Program identified a list of developmental “milestones” defined as transition-related skills and knowledge organized into seven domains: 1) education, 2) life independence skills, 3) health and well-being, 4) identity and culture, 5) social presentation, 6) emotional and behavioural, and 7) self-care skills and transitioning to adulthood. Through everyday conversations and activities, the goal of the Milestone Program is to encourage care providers to guide the youth in identifying their strengths and goals and offer relational, practical, and informational support specific to their developmental and transition-related needs. Through these activities, youth have the opportunities to strengthen their relationship with their care providers, as well as gain hands-on experiences to develop their transition skills and prepare for their transition to adulthood. The Milestone Program is different from traditional independent

living program as it prioritizes building relational connectedness and empowering youth to achieve their own goals, rather than focusing on their self-sufficiency during the transition to adulthood (Doucet et al., 2022).

Following the development of the Milestone Program in Spring 2011, the child welfare agency, together with the working group utilized an iterative process to revise the Milestone Program based on the community stakeholders' feedback. In Phase 1, the child welfare agency recruited a group of two youth who were ages 14 and 16 years, four care providers including foster and adoptive parents, and three child welfare workers with over 10 years of experiences working in the child welfare system to pilot the Milestone Program for a two-week period. The youth, care providers, and child welfare workers shared their experiences with the Milestone Program in a series of focus group interviews. The agency collected information on 1) participants' first impression of the Milestone Program, 2) their perspective on the useability and user-friendliness of the program, 3) changes they would make to the program, and 4) their suggestions on how to encourage youth and care providers to use the program. Preliminary results demonstrated the potential of the program in supporting care providers to assist youth in their preparation for the transition into adulthood and the acquisition of skills and knowledge required for a successful future. Based on the youth's, care providers', and workers' feedback, the developers and the child welfare agency also made revisions to the Milestone Program in five areas, including: 1) format of the program, 2) instructions on goal-setting, 3) technical functionality, 4) expected use of the program, and 5) training and support.

In Phase 2, the working group decided to conduct a research study and recruit a group of young adults who have recently transitioned from care to adulthood to better understand their transition experiences and to elicit their feedback on the revised Milestone Program. Sixteen

young adults participated in the study between December 2021 and January 2022. The transition experiences of these young adults are summarized and reported in Chan et al. (submitted). With respect to the Milestone Program, all participants spoke positively about the program and thought the program would have helped them prepare for their transition to adulthood, if it had been available to them at that time. They also provided suggestions to make the Milestone Program more youth-friendly and to engage youth and care providers in the Milestone Program, as well as the research study to evaluate the program. Revisions were made to the Milestone Program based on the participants' feedback, which resulted in the final version of the Milestone Program evaluated in the current study.

### **The Current Study**

Following two phases of revision of the Milestone Program, the developers of the program and the child welfare agency believed that it was timely and crucial to seek outside assistance to evaluate its effectiveness. As a result, the Teen Relationships research team at York University, which had a pre-existing relationship with the child welfare agency was invited to collaborate on evaluating the Milestone Program. Together with the child welfare agency, we continued to utilize the CBPR method to involve members from child welfare service provision (e.g., frontline staff), decision-makers (e.g., agency director), individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system (e.g., foster parents), and researchers in all phases of the research process (Holkup et al., 2004; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011). Through this collaboration, we ensured the research questions were driven by community priorities and engaged key stakeholders in developing a research process that informs effective support for youth in out-of-home care.

Guided by the developmental resilience framework, the present exploratory, mixed-method, longitudinal study aims to examine youth's resilient outcomes, care providers' confidence in supporting youth's readiness, and youth's and care providers' experiences with the Milestone Program following their participation in the program over six months. Specific research questions included: 1) what was the perceived impact of the Milestone Program on the youth-care provider relationships?, 2) what was the perceived impact of the Milestone Program on youth's readiness for transition to adulthood?, 3) what was the perceived impact of the Milestone Program on care providers' confidence in supporting youth's readiness for transition to adulthood?, and 4) what were the youth's and care providers' overall experiences with the Milestone Program?. Given that this program evaluation was exploratory in nature, a mixed-method approach was determined as the most appropriate first step to explore quantitative changes in the study outcomes as youth and care providers trialed the Milestone Program and understand youth's and care providers' lived experiences with the program, directly from their perspectives. The strengths of this mixed-method approach are also consistent with the developmental resilience framework, which allows for the consideration of the individual complexity of the lives of youth involved out-of-home placement and the real-world applications of the Milestone Program (Ungar, 2003).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

As per the program description, youth in out-of-home care were encouraged to participate in the study with their care provider. The care provider could be any trusted adult in the youth's life who was living with them and willing to support them in the program. The youth were eligible to participate in the study if they were between the ages of 14 and 20. This age range was



selected with the intent to promote youth's relationship-building with their care providers and support youth in early planning and decision-making about their transition to adulthood. Other inclusion criteria included the youth having the local child welfare agency as their legal guardian, having been in the home with their care providers for at least two months, and having one care provider and one child welfare worker who would fully support them in the study. If there were two or more care providers in the youth's homes, only the primary care provider was asked to participate in the study. Youth who would age out of care during the duration of the study were excluded. The eligible criteria were later revised due to feedback from child welfare workers that there were youth who were interested in the study, but their care providers were unable to or not interested in participating in the study. The inclusion criteria were expanded to allow youth to participate in the study solely with their worker, who assumed the role of the care provider in the study. The term "care providers" is used to refer to anyone who assumed the care provider role in the study hereafter.

Between March and May 2022, the agency identified 148 youth between the ages of 14 and 20 who were in their care. Of those 148 youth, 79 youth were not contacted about the study for several reasons deemed by their workers, including the youth being self-sufficient and not requiring support from the Milestone Program, the youth having mental health, behavioural, and/or other difficulties which may prevent them from benefiting from the program, the youth were in crisis, the youth would be discharged from care during the duration of the study, and the youth had prior experiences with the Milestone Program. The workers invited 67 youth and their care providers to attend one of two virtual information sessions about the Milestone program and the research. The research team also presented the Milestone Program at the monthly meeting for foster parents involved with the agency. Of the 67 youth that were introduced to the study, 48

youth declined to participate in the study due to not being interested in the program and not having time to participate in the study. Of the 19 youth who agreed to hear more about the study, 17 youth provided consent to participate in the study (see Figure 2). Their care providers and/or workers were also invited to participate in the study. Only youth and care providers who completed the baseline and post-intervention measures were included in the current study.

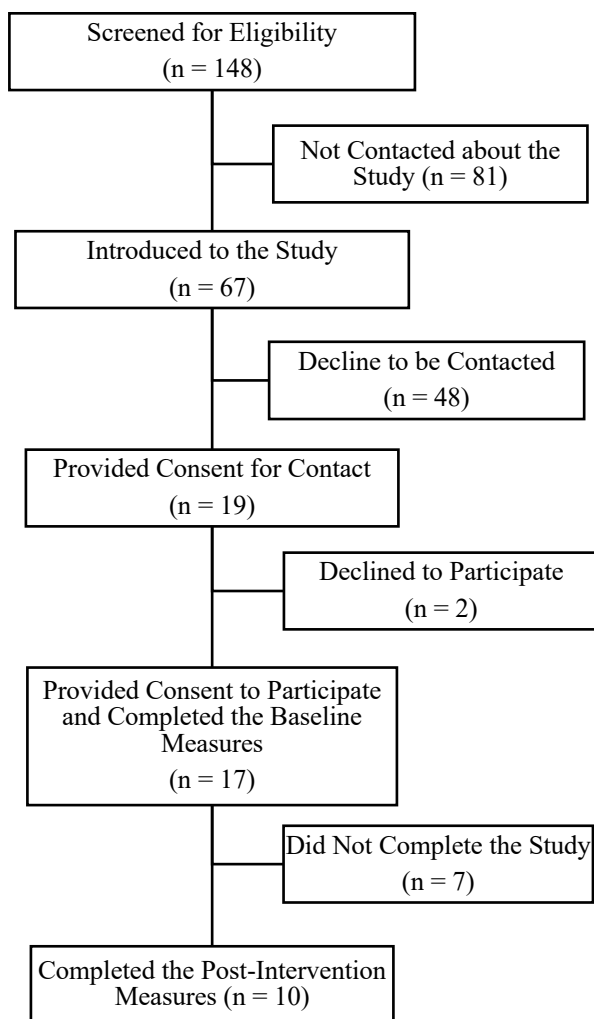
**Figure 2****Participants Flowchart****Sample Characteristics*****Youth Participants***

Table 2 shows the demographics of youth at baseline and post-intervention. Of the 17 youth who enrolled in the study, their mean age was 17.2 ( $SD = 2.0$ ; Range = 14 - 20) years,

41.2% were in older adolescence (ages 18-20), 41.2% identified as female, and 64.7% identified as White/Caucasian. Most of the youth were enrolled in school (76.5%) and not working (47.1%). The youth entered care at an average age of 13.0 ( $SD = 3.92$ , Range = 5-17) years. They have been involved with the care providers who participated in the study with them for an average of 20.2 ( $SD = 30.9$ , Range = 1 - 132) months. Their current care placements were non-relative foster care ( $n = 7$ , 41.2%), group home/residential treatment ( $n = 2$ , 11.8%), and independent living ( $n = 8$ , 47.1%).

The post-intervention sample consists of 10 youth. Their mean age was 17.3 ( $SD = 2.1$ , Range = 15 – 20) years. Efforts to engage the other seven youths were unsuccessful since they had: moved, did not respond, or declined to participate in the post-intervention survey and interview. The attrition rate was 41.2%, which could be expected given the youth's life circumstances. Among the 10 youth, 40.0% were older adolescents, 40.0% identified as female, and 70.0% identified as White/Caucasian. More than half of the youth were enrolled in school (80.0%), not working (50.0%), and living in non-relative foster care (60.0%). The youth entered care at an average age of 12.3 ( $SD = 4.16$ , Range = 5-17) years. They have been involved with the care providers who participated in the study with them for an average of 23.1 ( $SD = 38.8$ , Range = 2 - 132) months.

**Table 2**

Demographic Characteristics of Youth in the Baseline and Post-Intervention Samples.

	Baseline Sample	Post-Intervention Sample
	n (%)	n (%)
	(N = 17)	(N = 10)
<b>Age Range</b>		
Early adolescence (age 12-15)	5 (29.4%)	3 (30.0%)
Middle adolescence (age 16-17)	5 (29.4%)	3 (30.0%)
Older adolescence (age 18-20)	7 (41.2%)	4 (40.0%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	7 (41.2%)	4 (40.0%)
Male	7 (41.2%)	4 (40.0%)
Non-binary	1 (5.9%)	0
Self-described	2 (11.8%)	2 (20.0%)
<b>Ethno-cultural background</b>		
Black	1 (5.9%)	0
Persons of mixed origin	3 (17.7%)	1 (10.0%)
South Asian	2 (11.8%)	2 (20.0%)
White/Caucasian	11 (64.7%)	7 (70.0%)
<b>Enrolled in School</b>		
Yes	13 (76.5%)	8 (80.0%)
No	3 (17.6%)	1 (10.0%)
Prefer not to answer	1 (5.9%)	1 (10.0%)
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Working full-time	1 (5.9%)	1 (10.0%)
Working part-time	5 (29.4%)	2 (20.0%)
Working causally	1 (5.9%)	0
Other	2 (11.8%)	2 (20.0%)
Not working	8 (47.1%)	5 (50.0%)

### Care Provider Participants

Table 3 shows the demographics of care providers at baseline and post-intervention. Of the 16 care providers who participated in the study, 11 of them were the adults living with the youth and five were the youth's child welfare workers. Their mean age was 46.8 ( $SD = 13.7$ , Range = 20 – 78) years. The majority of the care providers identified as female (81.3%) and White (87.5%). More than half of the care providers had completed college/university (62.5%) and were working full-time (52.3%). They had been a care provider in the child welfare system for an average of 6.8 years ( $SD = 5.60$ , Range = .33-18).

The post-intervention sample included 11 care providers, seven were adults living with the youth and four were the youth's workers. The attrition rate was 31%. Two family friends declined to participate in the post-intervention data collection as their youths were in crisis, one worker had left the agency, and one worker declined to participate as their youth had dropped out of the study. The mean age of the care providers in the post-intervention sample was 46.5 ( $SD = 8.5$ , Range = 35 – 67) years. The majority of the care providers identified as female (90.0%). The care providers mostly identified as White (81.8%), had completed college/university (72.7%), and were working full-time (72.7%). They had been a care provider for an average of 8.27 years ( $SD = 6.18$ , Range = .33-18).

**Table 3**

Demographic Characteristics of Care Providers in the Baseline and Post-Intervention Samples.

	Baseline Sample n (%) (N = 16)*	Post-Intervention Sample n (%) (N = 11)*
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	13 (81.3%)	10 (90.9%)
Male	3 (18.8%)	1 (9%)
<b>Ethno-Cultural Background</b>		
White/Caucasian	14 (87.5%)	9 (81.8%)
Indigenous	2 (12.5%)	2 (18.2%)
<b>Highest Level of Education</b>		
Completed high school	2 (12.5%)	0
Some college/university	1 (6.3%)	1 (9.1%)
Completed college/university	10 (62.5%)	8 (72.7%)
Completed graduate education	1 (6.3%)	0
Professional degrees	2 (12.5%)	2 (18.2%)
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Working full-time	9 (56.3%)	8 (72.7%)
Working part-time	3 (18.8%)	2 (18.2%)
Unemployed	1 (6.3%)	0
Retired	2 (12.5%)	1 (9.1%)
Unable to work	1 (6.3%)	0

\*One participant assumed the care provider's role for two youths in the study and was only counted once

## **Design**

This study employed a mixed-method, multi-informant, longitudinal evaluation design. Specifically, a convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analyzed independently (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The quantitative and qualitative data from the youth and their care providers were subsequently integrated to gain a comprehensive understanding of their perceived impact of the Milestone Program (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Consistent with the CBPR methodology, shared decision-making between the research team and key stakeholders (e.g., foster parents, child welfare staff) was undertaken at each step of the research process, including participant recruitment, study planning, questionnaire and interview design, and the interpretation of results (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011). This study was reviewed and approved by the child welfare agency and the York University Research Ethics Board.

## **Procedure**

A collaborative research approach informed the procedure of the study, where the working group, along with a group of youth and care providers involved in child welfare were consulted about each step of the study, as well as the honorarium provided to the participants in the study. Youth and care providers completed the study between March 2022 and Jan 2023. At baseline (Step 1), youth and care providers completed an online baseline survey and participated in a virtual baseline interview with the research team. At Step 2, youth and care providers attended a 2-hour virtual training on the Milestone Program led by the foster parents who developed the program. The training was optional for youth, aligning with the suggestions from youth and young adults involved in child welfare and care providers to minimize the youth's time commitments to encourage participation. In Step 3, youth and care providers reviewed a list



of milestones, identified the milestones that the youth has already demonstrated, and chose at least one milestone within each of the seven domains to focus on over six months. This step was expected to be completed over two weeks to allow sufficient time for youth and care providers to explore the Milestone Program website, discuss the above tasks, make plans to achieve each prioritized milestone, and troubleshoot any technical difficulties. At Step 4, youth and care providers engaged with the Milestone Program, tracking the youth's progress on the website and completing a brief monthly check-in survey for six months. In Step 5, youth and care providers completed a post-intervention survey and interview virtually six months after the training. All interviews were conducted by a team of four graduate-level researchers with knowledge about the Milestone Program and experience doing clinical interviews and working with vulnerable youth. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Youth and their care providers, except the child welfare workers, each received a total of \$575 if they completed all stages of the study. If the participants withdrew from the study, they would receive the incentive up to the stage that they participated in, regardless of whether they completed the stage or not. Workers received time off from their workday to participate in the study and a certificate of recognition. The frequent data collection allowed us to monitor the participants' progress with the Milestone Program.

### **Data Collection and Measures**

There were three sources of data in the study, including the baseline quantitative survey and the post-intervention quantitative survey and semi-structured qualitative interview.

#### **Baseline and Post-Intervention Survey**

At baseline, youth and care providers responded to questions about their demographics, involvement in the child welfare system, and their perspectives on the youth-care provider

relationships and youth's readiness for transition to adulthood. At post-intervention, youth and care providers once again answered questions about their perspective on the youth-care provider relationships and youth's readiness for transition to adulthood, as well as additional questions about their experiences and the impact of the Milestone Program. There is no existing standardized measure to measure the desired outcomes of the Milestone Program, except for the youth-care provider relationships variable. As such, we collaborated with the working group to design the baseline and post-intervention surveys, with some items adapted from the After-School Initiative's Toolkit for Evaluating Positive Youth Development (The Colorado Trust, 2004). All surveys were hosted on Qualtrics. Key constructs and measures involved in the study are described below. The baseline and post-intervention survey questions are outlined in Appendix B.

### ***Demographics***

Youth and care providers responded to survey questions about their age, gender, ethno-cultural identities, employment status, and level of education at baseline. Youth also answered additional questions about their experiences in care. Care providers also answered additional questions about their experiences being a care provider to their youth.

### ***Youth-Care Provider Relationships***

**Positive and Negative Relationship Quality.** The Network of Relationship Inventory – Social Provision Version Short Form (NRI – SPV Short Form; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) was used to measure the quality of the relationship between the youth and their care provider at baseline and post-intervention. Only the youth's perspective is included as the items are not relevant to the care providers. This scale consists of 13 items: seven items measure the level of support and six items measure the level of negative interaction in the relationship. Youth

indicated how often each item occurred in their relationship on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Little or none*) to 5 (*The most*). We created the baseline and post-intervention support and negative interaction scores by averaging their respective subscale scores. Higher subscale scores indicate a greater level of support or negative interactions in the relationship experienced by the youth. All subscales at baseline and post-intervention showed acceptable to excellent internal consistency in the current study (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranged from .63 to .86).

**Youth's Perceived Support.** At post-intervention, youth and care providers responded to a single item by rating the extent to which they believed the Milestone Program helped the youth feel more supported by their care providers on a 3-point scale with options: *Not Really* (1), *Kind of* (2), and *Yes* (3). This item was created by the working group.

#### ***Youth's Perceived Readiness for Transition to Adulthood***

At baseline and post-intervention, youth and care providers reported how ready they and their youth feel about becoming an adult in the future on a scale of 1 (*Not at all ready*) to 5 (*Extremely ready*). At post-intervention, youth and care providers also indicated the extent to which they believed the Milestone Program had helped the youth in several areas related to the youth's perceived readiness for transition to adulthood on a 3-point scale with options including *Not Really* (1), *Kind of* (2), and *Yes* (3). Two items assessed youth's perceived preparedness for their transition to adulthood (e.g., "Being in the Milestone Program has helped me prepare for a successful transition to adulthood") and four items assessed their feelings about themselves and their future (e.g., "Being in the Milestone Program has helped me feel better about myself"). All items were created by the working group, except the six items about the youth's feelings about themselves and their future were adapted from the After-School Initiative's Toolkit for Evaluating Positive Youth Development (The Colorado Trust, 2004).

### ***Care Providers' Confidence in Supporting Youth's Readiness for Transition to Adulthood.***

At post-intervention, care providers rated the extent to which they believed the Milestone Program helped them feel more confident in supporting their youth's transition to adulthood on a 3-point scale: *Not Really* (1), *Kind of* (2), and *Yes* (3). This single item was created by the working group.

### ***Overall Experiences with the Milestone Program***

At post-intervention, youth and care providers rated the extent to which they enjoy the program and would recommend the program on a 3-point scale: *Not Really* (1), *Kind of* (2), and *Yes* (3). They also rated their overall experiences with the Milestone Program on a scale of 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). These items were created by the working group.

### **Post-Intervention Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

We developed a semi-structured interview (Appendix C) to gather participants' experiences with the Milestone Program. We included questions and follow-up probes to elicit the youth's and care provider's perspectives on the impact of the Milestone Program on the 1) youth-care provider relationships, including their feelings and experiences about working with their youth/care providers on the Milestone Program and 2) youth's perceived readiness for transition to adulthood, including the skills the youth worked on and their feelings about themselves and their future. They also answered questions about how the youth and care providers interact with the Milestone Program, the youth's and care providers' levels of motivation to use the program, barriers to participation, and overall experiences with the program. Care providers also answered questions about the impact of the Milestone Program on their understanding and confidence in supporting youth's transition to adulthood.

### **Data Analysis**

### ***Baseline and Post-Intervention Quantitative Survey Data***

Due to the small sample size, we used paired sample t-tests to compare differences in the youth's and care providers' perceptions of the study outcomes at baseline and post-intervention. Bonferroni correction was used to reduce the risk of Type 1 error when conducting multiple comparisons. For the questions that were only asked in the post-intervention survey, we presented the descriptive statistics and/or the frequency of participants who endorsed each response. All analyses were conducted using SPSS, version 28.

### ***Post-Intervention Interview Data***

An inductive qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014) was used to explore and summarize the youth's and care providers' experiences with the Milestone Program. Qualitative content analysis was a process in which categories are first assigned to the interviews, followed by the quantitative analysis of category frequencies across the interview and thematic analysis of the interview data that are grouped under each category (Mayring, 2014). This approach was appropriate as there is limited literature on similar transition programs as the Milestone Program and it allows us to explore participants' perspectives on the four study outcomes that are of interests to our community partner.

Data analysis was completed by two graduate-level researchers, who used the qualitative data management software, ATLAS.ti Web (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH., 2023) to organize and code the data. Following Mayring, we first formulated the selection criteria for each research question. Within the texts that meet the selection criteria, we induced categories and defined the level of abstraction that characterizes the transcript as near as possible. For all interviews, we coded each transcript separately and reviewed each transcript line-by-line together to compare our codes and resolve any disagreement after every three

interviews. Following this procedure, we first worked through three out of the 22 interviews (14%) line by line, assigning texts to existing categories or creating new categories to capture new ideas. We also revised the categories and abstractions to ensure their logic is clear and adequately captures the information that is required to answer the research questions. Next, we analyzed the remaining 19 transcripts line-by-line and followed a recursive process of organizing texts into existing categories or new categories, defining and refining new and existing categories, and returning to previous transcripts to update the codes. Once all the transcripts were coded, we reviewed the final list of categories and grouped the categories into higher-level main categories that aligned with the research questions and quantified the number of youth and care providers who endorsed each category. Finally, we conducted a thematic qualitative analysis of the interview data that is grouped under each identified category to describe and summarize the youth's and care providers' perspectives for each research question. Table 4 presents the research questions and the category definition and level of abstraction for each research question.

**Table 4**

Selection Criteria, Category Definition, And Level of Abstraction of Each Research Question

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Selection Criteria</b>	
	<b>Category Definition</b>	<b>Level of Abstraction</b>
What were the perceived impacts of the Milestone Program on the youth-care provider relationships?	Interviewees reported any interactions between the youth and their care providers and/or changes in their relationships during the time they worked on the Milestone Program	Description of specific changes to the interactions between the youth and care providers and/or general feelings on their relationships
What was the perceived impacts of the Milestone Program on youth's readiness for transition to adulthood?	Interviewees reported any learning and/or changes on how the youth think or feel about their readiness for transition to adulthood during the time they worked on the Milestone Program	Description of specific skills or general lesson learned and/or changes in attitude, thinking, and feelings towards the youth's readiness for transition to adulthood
What were the perceived impacts of the Milestone Program on care providers' confidence in supporting youth's readiness for transition to adulthood?	Interviewees reported any changes in how they feel about supporting youth's readiness for transition to adulthood	Description of changes in care providers' knowledge, thinking, and feeling related to the youth's readiness for transition to adulthood
What were the youth's and care providers' overall experiences with the Milestone Program?	Interviewees reported any positive and negative experiences with the Milestone Program	Description of what youth and care providers liked or not liked about being involved in the Milestone Program. Could be related to the program content and usability, as well as their personal feelings and experiences.

## Results

### Quantitative Findings

This section summarizes the quantitative data analysis results that compared the youth's and care providers' responses at baseline and post-intervention, as well as the descriptive data on their experiences with the Milestone Program post-intervention.

#### Youth-Care Provider Relationship Quality at Baseline and Post-Intervention

Paired sample t-test results showed that youth reported significantly higher levels of support in their relationship with their care providers at post-intervention ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = .58$ ) than at baseline ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = .71$ ),  $t(7) = -2.96$ ,  $p = .021$ . Youth did not report significantly different levels of negative interactions in their relationship at baseline and post-intervention. In the post-intervention survey, 80.0% of the youth ( $n = 8$ ) and 66.6% of the care providers ( $n = 8$ ) reported that the Milestone Program helped the youth feel more supported by their care providers to some extent (i.e., indicated "kind of" and "yes" to the statement).

#### Youth's Perceived Readiness for Transition to Adulthood at Baseline and Post-Intervention

Paired sample t-test results showed that the youth did not report significantly different levels of readiness about becoming an adult in the future at post-intervention ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ) than at baseline ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ),  $t(8) = -.67$ ,  $p = .524$ . However, 100% of youth ( $n = 10$ ) reported in the post-intervention survey that participating in the Milestone Program helped them gain useful skills and knowledge to support their transition to adulthood. Most of the youth also reported that the Milestone Program helped them feel more ready ( $n = 9$ , 90%) and prepared for a successful transition to adulthood ( $n = 10$ , 100%) to some extent. The majority of the youth ( $n = 8$ , 80%) also reported that the Milestone Program helped them to feel better about themselves, feel that they have more control over things that happen to them, learn that they can



do things they didn't think they could do before, and feel better about their future in the post-intervention survey.

Similar to the youth reports, paired sample t-test results showed that the care providers did not report significantly different levels of youth's readiness about becoming an adult in the future at post-intervention ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) than at baseline ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = .82$ ),  $t(9) = -.36$ ,  $p = .726$ . In the post-intervention survey, while most care providers believed the Milestone Program helped their youth gain skills ( $n = 11$ , 91.7%) and knowledge ( $n = 10$ , 83.3%) that are useful for their transition to adulthood, only slightly more than half of the care providers ( $n = 8$ , 66.7%) believed that the Milestone Program helped their youth feel more ready and prepare for a successful transition to adulthood to some extent. Most of the care providers believed that the Milestone Program helped their youth feel that they have more control over things that happen to them ( $n = 11$ , 91.7%), feel better about their future ( $n = 10$ , 83.3%), feel better about themselves ( $n = 9$ , 75.0%), and learn they could do things they didn't think they could do before ( $n = 9$ , 75.0%).

### **Care Providers' Confidence in Supporting Youth's Readiness for Transition to Adulthood at Post-Intervention.**

At post-intervention, over half of the care providers ( $n = 7$ , 58.3%) reported participating in the Milestone Program improved their confidence in supporting the youth's transition to adulthood to some extent.

### **Overall Experiences and Satisfaction with the Milestone Program.**

At post-intervention, all youth reported that they enjoyed the Milestone Program and would recommend the program to some extent. Ninety percent of the youth ( $n = 9$ ) rated their overall experience with the Milestone Program as "Good", "Very Good", or "Excellent". One

youth rated their experience as “Fair”. For the care providers, 66.6% (n = 8) of the sample reported that they enjoyed the program and 81.8% (n = 9) of the sample would recommend the Milestone Program. Less than half of the care providers (n = 5, 41.7%) rated their overall experience with the Milestone Program as “Good”, “Very Good”, or “Excellent”. Six care providers rated their experience as “Fair” and one care provider rated their experience as “Poor”.

### **Qualitative Findings**

The qualitative content analysis results are divided into four sections summarizing the results relevant to the four study outcomes. For each study outcome, we quantified the number of youth and care providers who endorsed each identified categories to highlight the perceived impacts and experiences that were most commonly reported by participants in the program. We also presented a summary of the youth’s and care providers’ responses within each identified categories to shed light on the nuances of their program experiences. Overall, there was alignment in the ways youth and care providers spoke about their perceived program impact on the study outcomes and experiences with the Milestone Program. However, the care providers’ accounts revealed more challenges and dissatisfaction with the program, which corroborated the quantitative results noted above. Youth and care providers also provided some neutral responses in the interview and the results below reflect the themes that are most salient to the four study outcomes.

#### ***Perceived Impact on the youth-care provider relationships***

Youth’s and care providers’ discussions of the perceived impact on the youth-care provider relationships were summarized into four main categories (Table 5).

**Increased Collaboration and Communication.** Ten youth (100.0%) and eleven care providers (91.7%) described how the program activities fostered collaboration and

communication in their youth-care provider relationships. For instance, the youth talked about having conversations with their care providers about what goals they would like to focus on and why different goals were important to them, helping them and their care providers to be on the same page. As one youth stated: “we were able to like discuss goals and have like conversations about that. And I was, I felt able to like, ask questions about things, like about, like you know, preparing for adult lives...” (Y-002). Even in situations where the youth and care providers might not agree with each other on their goals, the care providers noted that participating in the Milestone Program had helped them and their youth to communicate more and understand each other’s perspectives. As one care provider shared: “it was like a good way to kind of open the door to conversations about some of the things that she did or didn’t know how to do” (C-006). Further, the care providers felt that the Milestone Program promoted early conversations about the transition to adulthood with their youth and served as a review of the goals they have identified and accomplished during the study.

**Opportunities for Support and Connection.** Nine youth (90.0%) and eleven care providers (91.7%) indicated that the Milestone Program provided opportunities for support and connection within their relationships. From the youth’s perspective, the Milestone Program generally “helped their relationships [with their care providers] get better” (Y-001). Specifically, the youth talked about the program providing opportunities to “work together” (Y-001) and creating consistent “me and her [care provider] time” (Y-001) to connect and do things. It also allowed the care providers to guide them through the goal-setting process and offered tailored support as they learned and practiced different skills. Similarly, the care providers spoke about providing the youth with hands-on teaching and modelling, verbal reminders as well as emotional and motivational support. For instance, care providers talked about sitting down with

their youth to pick courses that align with their career plan, booking and taking them to doctor's appointments, and helping them get a bank card. As one care provider shared: "So it was just kind of doing a step-by-step list [and] her following it. You know, she called me yesterday, "I'm at the pharmacy, I was able to transfer my stuff". Like she couldn't do that before." (C-012).

Some care providers also discussed reflecting and sharing their own experiences transitioning to adulthood to help youth think about how they would like to take care of themselves and manage adult responsibilities in the future.

**Showed Youth that Their Care Providers Care About and Believe in Them.** Three youth (30.0%) and three care providers (25.0%) spoke about how the activities in the Milestone Program helped the youth understand that their care providers "wanted to work with [them] and do it with [them]" (Y-001) and "celebrate all [their] little achievements" (C-006). Further, youth believed that seeing their care providers' commitment in supporting them helped built their motivation and confidence in working through the Milestone Program: "my worker and my care provider and other people in like the community, teachers, etc, always had like positive things to say on my progress. And they genuinely believed that I would achieve these goals anyways. So there was definitely like influences [on my] motivation as well" (Y-002). Similarly, care providers believed their involvement in the Milestone Program allowed the youth to "know that we are here to really help her and we really do want to see her succeed in life, no matter where she goes, and that we only ever wanted the best of her" (C-001).

**The Program Challenged Our Relationship.** Three care providers (25.0%) noted that their efforts to engage youth in the Milestone Program were not always successful, which placed strains on their relationships. For instance, a care provider stated: "it seemed like a fight. There wasn't as much engagement from her as I wish there had been. So, it was more of like me

prompting and probing [her] rather than her being in a more leadership role” (C-006). Care providers also discussed difficulty connecting with the youth and the pressures they felt for not being able to engage the youth in the program.

**Table 5**

*Content Analysis of the Youth's and Care Providers' Perceived Impact on the Youth-Care Provider Relationships*

<b>Identified Categories</b>	<b>Frequency of youth (%) N = 10</b>	<b>Frequency of care providers (%) N = 12</b>
1. Increased collaboration and communication	10 (100%)	11 (91.7%)
2. Opportunities for support and connection	9 (90.0%)	11 (91.7%)
3. Showed youth that their care providers care about and believe in them	3 (30.0 %)	3 (25.0%)
4. The program challenged our relationship	0	3 (25.0%)

***Perceived Impact on Youth's Readiness for Transition to Adulthood***

Youth's and care providers' discussions of the perceived impact of the Milestone Program on the youth's readiness for transition to adulthood were summarized into four main categories (Table 6).

**Learning Skills and Knowledge That Are Important for The Transition to Adulthood.** Throughout the interview, all youth (100.0%) discussed learning skills and gaining knowledge that are relevant to their transition to adulthood, with the support of their care providers. As one youth stated: “[The Milestone Program] helped us, helped us with putting down goals and actually doing them and trying to do them” (Y-001). Many of the skills the youth learned were centered around independent living, such as cooking, managing finances, making doctor's appointments, and securing employment. The youth also reported engaging in

discussions about completing high school and pursuing post-secondary education. Additionally, they spoke about learning social-emotional skills to manage their relationships and mental health, as well as to ask for help and access support. Similarly, all twelve care providers (100.0%) discussed supporting the youth in acquiring new or building on their existing skills and knowledge in the areas discussed above. For instance, one care provider shared: “She definitely learned how to make her own doctor's appointments, how to take accountability for doing that and setting reminders for herself as to what needs to be done and when” (C-001). While the care providers acknowledged that it might not be reasonable to expect the youth to learn all the skills listed in the Milestone Program, they emphasized the progress the youth made in the six months they were involved with the program.

**Learning What Needs to Get Done and Setting Goals.** All youth (100.0%) reported the Milestone Program helped them realize what that they need to learn to be more prepared for adulthood: the program “[made] me aware of [the] goals that I wanted, even the goals that I didn't like and kind of know, and I realize now are like definitely important to have” (Y-002). Additionally, they appreciated how the Milestone Program “breaks down [the goals] a bit more” and helped them understand that “you [need to] build upon smaller goals to make it to your bigger goals” (Y-002). Further, they noted that the Milestone Program “get [them] started on [their] goals” (Y-001) and motivated them to stay on track. Likewise, nine care providers (75.0%) discussed how the Milestone Program outlined the specific steps the youth could take towards independence. For instance, one care provider stated: “we could identify if something wasn't accomplished yet, what next steps needed to be put in place to help him work towards that that progress. We could identify who else he could reach out to for support in achieving some of those goals” (C-008).

**Thinking About the Future and Making Plans.** Nine youths (90.0%) reported that their participation in the Milestone Program had “got [them] thinking about the future” (Y-001), such as their career aspirations, their post-secondary education, and plans for the transition out of care and into adulthood. The youth also indicated that participating in the Milestone Program had helped them realize that they would be responsible for themselves, such that they ought to learn to do things on their own instead of relying on others to take care of themselves. Nine care providers (75.0%) also noted similar observations that the Milestone Program helped the youth be more accountable and take more responsibility, even when they might be reluctant to do many things on their own. One care provider provided an example: “She, very much, dependent on everyone around her and had very little interest in doing many things for herself. She learned how to do her own laundry, because I refuse to do that for her. I taught her how to do it [and she] learned how. So you know, she learned the hard way a couple of times that she had no clothes. And, you know that’s a life lesson we all go through that (C-006)”. Youth and care providers also talked about their feelings related to the youth’s future. While a small group of youth and care providers reported feeling more positive about the youth’s future after participating in the Milestone Program, a larger group of youth and care providers continued to report either mixed or negative feelings (e.g., worried) about the youths’ future.

**Feeling A Bit More Ready and Confident About Becoming an Adult.** Nine youths (90.0%) talked about feeling more confident and competent about becoming an adult in the interview. Some youth described the Milestone Program as helping them “realizing that [they] knew a little more than [they] thought [they] did” (Y-009), which helped them feel good about themselves and built a sense of competence in their ability to achieve transition tasks. For youth who did not feel very confident about their future, they talked about how the Milestone Program

had helped them believe more in themselves and their ability to become more prepared for the transition to adulthood. Similarly, eleven (91.7%) care providers noted an increase in the youths' confidence about becoming an adult. The care providers talked about how the Milestone Program provided opportunities for them to boost their youth's confidence by highlighting the things that they knew and celebrating their successes in accomplishing each goal. As one care provider stated: "Like whether they know how to do them or not, but just having that little, "oh, you accomplished this" you know what I mean? Check it off. I think it's very good for self-esteem and confidence" (C-007). They also noted that the youth were more independent and demonstrated a few skills that they had learned in the past six months.

**Table 6**

*Content Analysis of the Youth's and Care Providers' Perceived Impact on the Youth's Readiness for Transition to Adulthood*

Identified Categories	Frequency of youth (%) N = 10	Frequency of care providers (%) N = 12
1. Learning skills and knowledge that are important for the transition to adulthood	10 (100.0%)	12 (100.0%)
2. Learning what needs to get done and setting goals	10 (100.0%)	9 (75.0%)
3. Thinking about the future and making plans	9 (90.0%)	9 (75.0%)
4. Feeling a bit more ready and confident about becoming an adult	9 (90.0%)	11 (91.7%)

***Perceived Impact on Care Providers' Confidence in Supporting Youth's Transition to Adulthood***

Care providers' discussions of the perceived impact of the Milestone Program on their confidence in supporting youth's transition to adulthood were grouped into three categories (Table 7).



**It Gave Me Direction and Kept Me on Track.** Eleven care providers (100%) described an increase in their understanding of what is required to support youth's transition from care to adulthood, regardless of their levels of experience as care providers. As one care provider stated: "The Milestone Program makes you more aware of what you need to do, and what you should be doing and, um, sort of keep things on track, and it helps you remember the things that you should be doing" (C-002).

**It Helped Me to Tailor and Provide Learning Opportunities to The Youth.** Eleven care providers (100%) shared that the Milestone Program encouraged them to provide hands-on opportunities for youth to learn and practice their skills, as opposed to doing everything for them. The program also motivated them to tailor goals specific to their youth's needs and interests, such as focusing on a simpler goal at the beginning to encourage and motivate the youth and increase their feelings of accomplishment and sense of mastery. For example, one care provider shared: "Sometimes the goals were too big. Like I had to break them down quite a bit for us to accomplish a goal, like a step. I would think something simple as like taking a shower. It was five steps to get to the shower. Get your towel, get your soap, get your shampoo, get your little caddy...and that was the little steps for her to do a hygiene regimen" (C-004).

**It Helped Me to Know What the Youth Knows and Not Knows.** Nine care providers (81.8%) believed that the Milestone Program functioned as a tool that helped them assess their youth's readiness for transition to adulthood, such that they gained a better understanding of the skills that the youth already had and their areas of growth. As one care provider stated: "it opened my eyes a lot more on, like I said how initially, you know, you look at [the youth] and he presents very well. But as you get to know [him] and see him and live with him, it's like, no, he

can't do that. He talks about it but, he can't do it. Um, so it just sorts of opened my eyes...and we need to focus on the more important things” (C-005).

**Table 7**

*Content Analysis of the Care Providers' Perceived Impact on Their Confidence in Supporting Youth's Transition to Adulthood*

<b>Identified Categories</b>	<b>Frequency of care providers (%)</b> <b>N = 11*</b>
1. It gave me direction and kept me on track	11 (100%)
2. It helped me to tailor and provide learning opportunities to the youth	11 (100%)
3. It helped me to know what the youth knows and not knows	9 (81.8%)

\*One participant assumed the care provider's role for two youths in the study and was only counted once

### ***Youth's and Care Provider's Overall Experiences with the Milestone Program***

Youth's and care providers' overall experiences with the Milestone Program were summarized into two categories (Table 8).

**I Enjoyed the Program.** Nine youth (90.0%) and nine care providers (75.0%) used positive descriptors (e.g., “the program's good, “I liked it”, “I enjoyed it”) when reflecting on their experiences with the Milestone Program. The youth largely considered the Milestone Program to be beneficial and valuable, as one youth said “I went in with practically nothing, came out feeling a little more confident. You know, I get to smile more, talk more to my mom and my worker, more honest with my personal side of life and I'm a little more into wanting to work... I wanna go to school now” (Y-006). They particularly appreciated the list of milestones, as it allowed them to think about the different areas that they would like to work on. They also liked the goal-setting focus of the Milestone Program, as it fostered a sense of accomplishment

when they were able to mark goals as completed. Additionally, the youth talked about how the Milestone Program helped them address their anxieties about preparing for their transition to adulthood and provided opportunities for them to open up to others about their plans. The care providers also similarly valued the list of milestones and its focus on encouraging and celebrating youth in accomplishing goals. The care providers' positive experiences with the Milestone Program also stemmed from their youths' excitement and engagement in the program: "I think it was excellent. Um, it was well enjoyed by us. I think [youth], um, you know, again, for the time that we got to do it, I think she really enjoyed it. And I'm certain that she did learn a number of things, and those things are helping her today. So yeah, I think it's great. You just, I think you just gotta have the kids that are motivated to do it. And then, you know, whoever's working alongside them has to be equally as willing to be involved" (C-001). Overall, many of the youth and care providers viewed the Milestone Program as a helpful program for youth involved in child welfare and believed that it would help other care providers support youth in their transition to adulthood.

**The Program Had Its Challenges.** Five youth (50.0%) and seven care providers (58.3%) noted a few challenges in engaging with the program. Specifically, a small group of youth reported feeling "easily overwhelmed" (Y-009) with the number of milestones that they needed to work on within a short time. Some youth also spoke about their difficulty staying motivated throughout the program and that they felt the list of milestones was not relevant to their ages and life stages, such as the goals were too easy and more geared toward younger kids. Some care providers noted concerns about how the Milestone Program overwhelmed their youth as it made them "realize how many things [they] didn't know" (C-006). Additionally, care providers reported feeling guilty about not making adequate progress in the program and needing

more time with the youth to consolidate their skills. As one care provider stated: “I didn't feel very motivated with it because I was just so tired of fighting with her about it. And then it was tough. If I wasn't able to get her motivated, I wasn't motivated. It kind of felt like we were failing ourselves and not being useful to the program” (C-004).

**Table 8**

*Content Analysis of the Youth's and Care Providers' Overall Experiences with the Milestone Program*

Identified Categories	Frequency of youth (%) N = 10	Frequency of care providers (%) N = 12
1. I enjoyed the program	9 (90.0%)	9 (75.0%)
2. The program had its challenges	5 (50.0%)	7 (58.3%)

**Discussion**

The current study represents the first evaluation of the Milestone Program designed by foster parents to promote youth's resilience while they are in care, including their relationships with care providers and readiness for transition to adulthood. The quantitative findings highlight the youth's and care providers' perceived impact of the Milestone Program on four study outcomes, including youth-care provider relationships, youth's readiness for transition to adulthood, care providers' confidence in supporting youth's transition from care to adulthood, as well as their satisfaction with the Milestone Program. Additionally, the qualitative interview findings reveal the youth's and care providers' positive experiences and challenges in the Milestone Program, thereby allowing us to contextualize the results of their quantitative accounts and providing detailed insights into the value of a relationship-based transition program for youth in out-of-home care.

Our current results show both youth and care providers perceived the program as having a positive impact on their relationships. Compared to the baseline, youth in our study reported a significant increase in the level of perceived support in their youth-care provider relationships after the program. The qualitative findings reveal that youth particularly valued the opportunities for their care providers to understand their visions for the future and collaborate in identifying goals that are important to them. Additionally, the youth in our study believed the Milestone Program promoted regular quality time with their care providers. Given it is common for youth involved in child welfare to have experienced childhood maltreatment, as well as instability and losses in caregiving relationships, the emphasis on having regular contact with their care providers in the program can be a meaningful experience that allows the youth to feel that they matter (Munson et al., 2015; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Indeed, a portion of the youth in our study believed that the care providers' involvement in the program allowed them to communicate their commitment to the youth's success, particularly through the naturalistic and scaffolding support that care providers offered to the youth. Aligning with the developmental resilience framework, having someone who is emotionally invested and encouraging likely helps youth involved in child welfare feel motivated to pursue their goals and feel confident about managing their difficulties (Ahrens et al., 2011; Masten, 2001; Munson et al., 2015).

Care providers also shared a similar perspective, in which they believed that the program prompted early conversations about the transition and sharing of their personal experiences to understand and validate the youth's thoughts and feelings about the future. They also reported that the Milestone Program offered opportunities for them to support their youth through teaching and modelling, which brought them and their youth closer. Given research has shown that youth with difficult relational histories may struggle with opening up to their non-parental

adult mentors (Greeson, Thompson, et al., 2015), the interactions that took place in the Milestone Program may facilitate a sense of trust and connections in the youth-care provider relationship. The feelings of trust and connection in the youth-care provider relationship may thereby allow the youth to share more openly about their thoughts and feelings and accept the help that is offered by their care providers (Thompson et al., 2016). However, these positive impacts were not fully reflected in the care providers' quantitative reports as only two-thirds of the care provider sample believed the program helped the youth feel more supported by them. This discrepancy may reflect that the care providers' involvement in the program was more meaningful and impactful to the youth than they realized (Spencer et al., 2018). The care providers' quantitative reports may also be impacted by the challenges they experienced in the Milestone Program, such as the tensions they felt when the youth were not motivated and engaged in the program.

While strengthening the youth's relationship with a supportive adult through engagement in collaborative skills-building activities is one of the goals of the Milestone Program, it is also central to the program that the youth feel more ready for their transition to adulthood. The values of the Milestone Program were reflected in most of the youth's quantitative and qualitative reports. Firstly, youth reported that the Milestone Program helped them in creating a vision for the future and recognizing that they will be responsible for their future trajectories. Given many youth involved in child welfare reported experiencing the transition as abrupt and lack of preparation, these experiences may encourage youth to find their voice and gain control in the process of making decisions about their life, with the support of their care providers (Chan et al., submitted; Goodkind et al., 2011; Powers et al., 2018). Further, youth in the study reported that the goal-oriented process in the Milestone Program supported them in identifying and pursuing

goals and recognizing their strengths and areas of growth. The experiences of neglect and maltreatment of youth involved in child welfare have likely led them to assume adult responsibilities at an early age and learn skills that are necessary for their survival (Chan et al., submitted; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019). The Milestone Program may support youth in discovering the strengths they developed from their past experiences and becoming more self-aware of their needs and a breakdown of actions that they need to take to achieve their goals (Chan et al., submitted; Katz & Geiger, 2019; Powers et al., 2018). Additionally, important to all youth was how the Milestone Program helped the youth acquire a wide range of skills and learn from their successes and failures. Many of these learning took place within the naturalistic interactions where the care providers provide guidance, encouragement, and emotional support to the youth through different scaffolding opportunities to navigate adult tasks, which highlights the importance of these shared experiences with supportive adults in facilitating youth's learning of the important skills for adulthood (Ahrens et al., 2011; Bonella et al., 2020; Munson et al., 2015).

There were generally fewer care providers than youth who identified these positive changes in the youth's readiness for transition to adulthood. The care providers' perspectives are likely impacted by their concerns for the youth's well-being and functioning, as well as their strong sense of responsibility to ensure the youth are as prepared as they can be for their transition to adulthood. Further, despite the positive changes recognized by the youth and care providers, they did not report significantly different levels of youth's readiness about becoming an adult in the future before and after the program. While youth were able to make some gains in the Milestone Program, the care providers articulated that it was not realistic to expect youth to learn everything important for adulthood, especially within the limited six-month study period.

Indeed, youth's readiness for transition to adulthood likely involves an ongoing process towards learning and building on different youth-identified goals and managing barriers and challenges as they arise with various levels of independence and support (McDaniel et al., 2014). Further, youth and care providers likely need more time to develop trusts, comfort, and understanding around youth's transition goals and needs (Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005). As such, it is recommended that youth involved in child welfare are offered the opportunities to strengthen their relationships with their care providers and prepare for the transition as early as possible while they are in care, so that they can leverage their supportive relationships as they face the inevitable milestone of transitioning out of care and into adulthood (Spencer et al., 2019).

Research on different relationship-based transition programs for youth involved in child welfare has focused on youth's experiences (e.g., Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Powers et al., 2018) while limited attention has been paid to the experiences of adults involved in these programs. The supportive adults' perspective is important given the central role of their relationship with the youth in facilitating the youth's transition to adulthood (Spencer et al., 2018). In the post-intervention survey, only half of the care providers reported that participating in the Milestone Program improved their confidence in supporting the youth's transition. It is likely that some of the care providers, particularly the workers who were already supporting the youth's transition to adulthood as part of their roles, did not find the Milestone Program particularly helpful in expanding their knowledge. The perceived positive impact of the Milestone Program on the care providers' confidence was more salient in the interviews as care providers were asked to reflect and elaborate on how they have incorporated the Milestone Program in their work with the youth. Specifically, almost all care providers spoke about how the program expanded their understanding of what is necessary to support youth's readiness for



adulthood, regardless of their length of involvement in the child welfare system. Further, the care providers found the program helpful in outlining the logistical steps they needed to take to help the youth feel more ready based on their needs and developmental age, as well as serving as a tool for them to accurately assess their youth's readiness for transition to adulthood. These positive findings are promising as research has shown that youth involved in child welfare feel frustrated that the staff in transition programs are inadequately trained to provide information and assistance to support them toward independence (Munson et al., 2017). Our study findings are also consistent with existing research that shows that care providers would benefit from more extensive and relationship-focused training to build mutually respecting and collaborative relationships with youth involved in child welfare and equip them with the necessary information to work with youth of various backgrounds (Cooley & Petren, 2011; Storer et al., 2014).

Lastly, most youth enjoyed the program and would recommend the Milestone Program to others. The perceived benefits of the program were further supported by the youth's accounts in the interview. The list-based and goal-setting nature of the Milestone Program provided opportunities for youth, with the support of caring adults, to identify and pursue a range of goals that are meaningful to them, celebrate their strengths and success, and build motivation and agency to take actions towards their self-identified goals. These experiences are likely a catalyst for building youth's motivation and autonomy in making decisions for their future, which have been found to support the positive transition to adulthood of youth involved in child welfare (Powers et al., 2018). Care providers in the current study also identified similar values of the Milestone Program and emphasized youth's buy-ins and active engagement in the program in contributing to their positive experiences. These results are consistent with the developmental resilience framework, which emphasizes the importance of increasing young people's positive

assets (e.g., readiness for transition to adulthood) and resources (e.g., supportive relationships) to promote their positive development in the context of adversity (Masten, 2001).

Despite these identified values and benefits, half of the youth also recognized challenges participating in the program, including their feelings of being overwhelmed by the program requirement, difficulty with motivation, and inadequate fit between the youth and the list of goals presented. Care providers generally had less positive experiences with the Milestone Program compared to the youth. The less favourable study results from care providers may have been caused by time constraints to complete the study in six months, perceptions of the program being overwhelming to the youth, and the complicated feelings and guilt that resulted from their limited progress on the program. Relatedly, the care providers in our study were adults who assumed different roles in the youths' lives and might have experienced different competing demands and time constraints that hindered their ability to serve the care provider's role in the Milestone Program (Rhodes, 2002). External stressors that are common in the lives of youth involved in child welfare may also interfere with their own and their care providers' ability to prioritize the program (Marcynyszyn et al., 2011). Nonetheless, the current study documented the encouraging results of the Milestone Program and underscored the value of transition programs that focus on relationship and skills building as part of promoting the successful transition to adulthood of youth in out-of-home care.

### **Limitations and Future Considerations**

There are several limitations to consider. Despite our efforts to recruit a larger sample of youth in out-of-home care and their care providers, our sample size was small. Our findings should also be considered in light of the relatively high attrition rate of youth and care providers in the program. It was not unexpected, considering the inherent challenges related to the

instability and attrition typically involved in research with the child welfare population, as well as the requirement to participate in the study for six months. Due to the nature of the program and our research questions, the sample was restricted to youth who were able to participate in the study with a care provider and we only included participants who have completed the baseline and post-intervention measures in the current study. Our findings may only hold for youth who have positive feelings about their care providers in the first place as youth who did not have a close relationship with their care providers may decline to participate in the study or experience challenges in engaging with the program. Our results and discussion may also likely reflect the experiences of youth and care providers who were more satisfied with the Milestone Program to complete the program. Further, youth's and care providers' level of motivation, interests, commitment, and competing demands may also impact their willingness to participate and complete this study in six months (Doucet et al., 2022). Future research is needed to better identify the population the Milestone Program is best suited for and the challenges for youth involved in child welfare to participate in a similar program with their care providers. More research is also needed to further identify issues related to program non-completion (e.g., change in placement) and to provide resources to better support the challenges experienced by these youth and their care providers.

Additionally, the small sample size and lack of a control group limit our ability to draw causal conclusions on the Milestone Program's impacts. It is also difficult to determine whether the perceived impact reported by the youth and care providers was related to their involvement in the program, the youth's natural maturity over time, or other factors, such as participation in other transition-related support. The study's short duration also limits our ability to evaluate the full benefit of the Milestone Program as many goals are developed with age and repeated

practice. Future research should replicate findings with a larger youth in out-of-home care population and ensure longer-term follow-up to assess the program's sustained impact on youth's preparedness and actual transition to adulthood.

Lastly, many of the measures used in the study are not standardized instruments and were adapted by the working group. Given the limited standardized measures available to measure transition outcomes for youth involved in child welfare (Agnihotri et al., 2022), more research is needed to establish measures that adequately capture the impact of programs that focus on relationships and skills-building among youth aging out of care. Specifically, a key question that arose throughout the study was how best to define and measure youth's readiness for transition to adulthood beyond their level of self-sufficiency and based on their own transition goals and needs. Future studies are important to continue to understand how those involved in child welfare conceptualize readiness for transition to adulthood and to validate scales that would be sensitive to evaluating changes in youth's readiness in a transition program.

## **Conclusions**

The extant literature for supporting the transition to adulthood among youth involved in child welfare focuses on fostering their self-sufficiency and independence (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021). Despite this focus, youth involved in child welfare often feel unprepared for the challenges associated with living independently and lack stable and nurturing relationships to turn to in times of need (Chan et al., submitted; Jones, 2014). Our study addresses this gap by evaluating a new program developed by foster parents to support care providers in promoting youth's relationships and transition to adulthood outcomes while the youth are in their out-of-home placement. Our finding contributes to the small but growing body of research on programs that prioritize developing supportive relationships with adults who are already in the youth's

network and emphasize transition skills development within the organic interactions of these supportive relationships. Overall, the current study provides preliminary evidence on the potential of supporting youth in developing transition skills through meaningful connections with their care providers within their out-of-home placement and offers insight into the collaboration between the research team and the community child welfare agency in developing, implementing, and evaluating a relationship-based transition program for youth in out-of-home care.

## References

- Agnihotri, S., Park, C., Jones, R., Goodman, D., & Patel, M. (2022). Defining and measuring indicators of successful transitions for youth aging out of child welfare systems: A scoping review and narrative synthesis. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1), 2130218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2130218>
- Ahrens, K. R., DuBois, D. L., Garrison, M., Spencer, R., Richardson, L. P., & Lozano, P. (2011). Qualitative exploration of relationships with important non-parental adults in the lives of youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(6), 1012–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.01.006>
- Ahrens, K. R., DuBois, D. L., Richardson, L. P., Fan, M.-Y., & Lozano, P. (2008). Youth in Foster Care With Adult Mentors During Adolescence Have Improved Adult Outcomes. *Pediatrics*, 121(2), e246–e252. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2007-0508>
- Anderson, B. L., & Williams, A. L. (2018). Defining success: The perspective of emerging adults with foster care experience. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 44(5), 643–655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2018.1477697>
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469.
- ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH. (2023). *ATLAS.ti Web* [Computer software]. <https://atlasti.com>
- Augsberger, A., & Swenson, E. (2015). “My Worker Was There When it Really Mattered”: Foster care youths’ perceptions and experiences of their relationships with child welfare workers. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 96(4), 234–240. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.2015.96.34>

- Beam, M. R., Chen, C., & Greenberger, E. (2002). The nature of adolescents' relationships with their "very important" nonparental adults. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *30*(2), 305–325. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014641213440>
- Bonella, B., Beirwolf, K., Coleman, L., Sterger, C., Pulli, K., Anguiano, C., & Barton, K. (2020). Mixed Methods Evaluation of Formal Mentoring: Journey UP for Aging out of Foster Care. *Global Social Welfare*, *7*(2), 121–130. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-019-00157-0>
- Chan, S., Estill, A., Leidershnaider, L., Rawana, J. S., & Connolly, J. (submitted). Listening to the voices of former youth-in-care to understand their readiness for transition from care to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review*.
- Collins, M. E., Spencer, R., & Ward, R. (2010). Supporting youth in the transition from foster care: Formal and informal connections. *Child Welfare*, *89*(1), 125–143.
- Cooley, M. E., & Petren, R. E. (2011). Foster parent perceptions of competency: Implications for foster parent training. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*(10), 1968–1974. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.05.023>
- Courtney, M. E. & Dworsky, A. (2006). Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA. *Child and Family Social Work*, *11*, 209–219.
- Courtney, M. E., Piliavin, I., Grogan-Kaylor, A., & Nesmith, A. (2001). Foster youth transitions to adulthood: A longitudinal view of youth leaving care. *Child Welfare*, *80*(6), 685–717.
- Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2017). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. SAGE Publications.
- Doucet, M. M., Greeson, J. K. P., & Eldeeb, N. (2022). Independent living programs and services for youth "aging out" of care in Canada and the U.S.: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *142*, 106630. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106630>

- Furman, W., & Buhrmester, D. (1985). Children's Perceptions of the Personal Relationships in Their Social Networks. *Developmental Psychology*, *21*(6), 1016.
- Goodkind, S., Schelbe, L. A., & Shook, J. J. (2011). Why youth leave care: Understandings of adulthood and transition successes and challenges among youth aging out of child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*(6), 1039–1048.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.01.010>
- Greeson, J. K. P. (2013). Foster Youth and the Transition to Adulthood: The Theoretical and Conceptual Basis for Natural Mentoring. *Emerging Adulthood*, *1*(1), 40–51.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696812467780>
- Greeson, J. K. P., & Thompson, A. E. (2017). Development, Feasibility, and Piloting of a Novel Natural Mentoring Intervention for Older Youth in Foster Care. *Journal of Social Service Research*, *43*(2), 205–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2016.1248269>
- Greeson, J. K. P., Thompson, A. E., Ali, S., & Wenger, R. S. (2015). It's good to know that you got somebody that's not going anywhere: Attitudes and beliefs of older youth in foster care about child welfare-based natural mentoring. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *48*, 140–149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2014.12.015>
- Gunawardena, N., & Stich, C. (2021). Interventions for young people aging out of the child welfare system: A systematic literature review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *127*, 106076. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2021.106076>
- Gypen, L., Vanderfaeillie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Holen, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic-review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *76*, 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2017.02.035>



- Häggman-Laitila, A., Salohekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2018). Transition to adult life of young people leaving foster care: A qualitative systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 95, 134–143. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.08.017>
- Häggman-Laitila, A., Salohekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2019). Young People's Preparedness for Adult Life and Coping After Foster Care: A Systematic Review of Perceptions and Experiences in the Transition Period. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 48(5), 633–661. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-019-09499-4>
- Havlicek, J. R., Garcia, A. R., & Smith, D. C. (2013). Mental health and substance use disorders among foster youth transitioning to adulthood: Past research and future directions. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(1), 194–203. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.10.003>
- Hokanson, K. (2020). 'Not Independent Enough': Exploring the Tension Between Independence and Interdependence among Former Youth in Foster Care who are Emerging Adults. *Child Welfare*, 97(5), 17.
- Holkup, P. A., Tripp-Reimer, T., Salois, E. M., & Weinert, C. (2004). Community-based Participatory Research. *ANS. Advances in Nursing Science*, 27(3), 162–175.
- Jones, L. P. (2014). Former Foster Youth's Perspectives on Independent Living Preparation Six Months After Discharge. *Child Welfare*, 93(1), 99–126.
- Katz, C. C., & Geiger, J. M. (2019). 'We Need That Person That Doesn't Give up on Us': The Role of Social Support in the Pursuit of Post-Secondary Education for Youth with Foster Care Experience who are Transition-Aged. *Child Welfare*, 97(6).
- Konijn, C., Admiraal, S., Baart, J., van Rooij, F., Stams, G.-J., Colonnaesi, C., Lindauer, R., & Assink, M. (2019). Foster care placement instability: A meta-analytic review. *Children*

- and Youth Services Review*, 96, 483–499.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2018.12.002>
- Lee, C., & Berrick, J. D. (2014). Experiences of youth who transition to adulthood out of care: Developing a theoretical framework. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 46, 78–84.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2014.08.005>
- Marcynyszyn, L. A., Maher, E. J., & Corwin, T. W. (2011). Getting with the (evidence-based) program: An evaluation of the Incredible Years Parenting Training Program in child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(5), 747–757.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2010.11.021>
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 227–238. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.227>
- Masten, A. S. (2014). Ordinary magic. *Resilience in Development*. New York, London: Guilford.
- Masten, A. S., Cutuli, J. J., Herbers, J. E., & Reed, M.-G. J. (2009). Resilience in development. In *Oxford handbook of positive psychology, 2nd ed* (pp. 117–131). Oxford University Press.
- Masten, A. S., & Monn, A. R. (2015). Child and family resilience: A call for integrated science, practice, and professional training. *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, 64(1), 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12103>
- Mayring, P. (2014). *Qualitative content analysis: Theoretical foundation, basic procedures and software solution*.
- McDaniel, M., Courtney, M. E., Pergamit, M. R., & Lowenstein, C. (2014). *Preparing for a “Next Generation” Evaluation of Independent Living Programs for Youth in Foster Care*

- *Project Overview* (p. 10). Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services.
- Mennen, F. E., & O’Keefe, M. (2005). Informed decisions in child welfare: The use of attachment theory. *Children and Youth Services Review, 27*(6), 577–593.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2004.11.011>
- Minkler, M., & Wallerstein, N. (2011). *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health: From Process to Outcomes*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Munson, M. R., Brown, S., Spencer, R., Edguer, M., & Tracy, E. (2015). Supportive Relationships Among Former System Youth With Mental Health Challenges. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 30*(4), 501–529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558414554803>
- Munson, M. R., & McMillen, J. C. (2009). Natural mentoring and psychosocial outcomes among older youth transitioning from foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 31*(1), 104–111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2008.06.003>
- Munson, M. R., Stanhope, V., Small, L., & Atterbury, K. (2017). “At times I kinda felt I was in an institution”: Supportive housing for transition age youth and young adults. *Children and Youth Services Review, 73*, 430–436.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2016.11.027>
- Nesmith, A., & Christophersen, K. (2014). Smoothing the transition to adulthood: Creating ongoing supportive relationships among foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 37*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2013.11.028>
- Núñez, M., Beal, S. J., & Jacquez, F. (2022). Resilience factors in youth transitioning out of foster care: A systematic review. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 14*(S1), S72–S81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001096>

- Powers, L. E., Fullerton, A., Schmidt, J., Geenen, S., Oberweiser-Kennedy, M., Dohn, J., Nelson, M., Iavanditti, R., & Blakeslee, J. (2018). Perspectives of youth in foster care on essential ingredients for promoting self-determination and successful transition to adult life: My life model. *Children and Youth Services Review, 86*, 277–286.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.007>
- Propp, J., Ortega, D. M., & NewHeart, F. (2003). Independence or Interdependence: Rethinking the Transition from “Ward of the Court” to Adulthood. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 84*(2), 259–266. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.102>
- Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth. (2012). *My Real Life Book: Report From The Youth Leaving Care Hearings*. <https://cwrp.ca/publications/my-real-life-book-report-youth-leaving-care-hearings>
- Rhodes, J. E. (2002). *Stand by me: The risks and rewards of mentoring today's youth*. Harvard University Press.
- Spencer, R., Drew, A. L., Gowdy, G., & Horn, J. P. (2018). “A positive guiding hand”: A qualitative examination of youth-initiated mentoring and the promotion of interdependence among foster care youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 93*, 41–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.06.038>
- Spencer, R., Gowdy, G., Drew, A. L., & Rhodes, J. E. (2019). “Who Knows Me the Best and Can Encourage Me the Most?”: Matching and Early Relationship Development in Youth-Initiated Mentoring Relationships with System-Involved Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 34*(1), 3–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558418755686>
- Stein, M. (2008). Resilience and Young People Leaving Care. *Child Care in Practice, 14*(1), 35–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575270701733682>

Storer, H. L., Barkan, S. E., Stenhouse, L. L., Eichenlaub, C., Mallillin, A., & Haggerty, K. P.

(2014). In search of connection: The foster youth and caregiver relationship. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *42*, 110–117.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2014.04.008>

The Colorado Trust. (2004). *After-School Initiative's Toolkit for Evaluating Positive Youth*

*Development*. The Colorado Trust. <https://www.coloradotrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ASIToolkitJun04.pdf>

Thompson, A. E., Greeson, J. K. P., & Brunsink, A. M. (2016). Natural mentoring among older

youth in and aging out of foster care: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *61*, 40–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2015.12.006>

Tyrell, F. A., & Yates, T. M. (2018). Emancipated foster youth's experiences and perceptions of

the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *21*(8), 1011–1028.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1441983>

Werner, E. E. (2004). Journeys from childhood to midlife: Risk, resilience, and recovery.

*Pediatrics*, *114*(2), 492. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.114.2.492>

Wightman, P., Robinson, K., & Schoeni, R. F. (2012). *Familial financial assistance to young*

*adults*. National Poverty Center Ann Arbor, MI.

Woodgate, R. L., Morakinyo, O., & Martin, K. M. (2017). Interventions for youth aging out of

care: A scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *82*, 280–300.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2017.09.031>

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

This dissertation represents the partnership between Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions, an integrated child welfare agency and the Teen Relationships research team at York University in conducting two comprehensive studies to better understand and support the transition to adulthood for youth involved in child welfare. Rooted in the developmental resilience perspective (Masten, 2021) and guided by the community-based participatory framework (Jacquez et al., 2013), my dissertation offered a nuanced and deeper understanding of the resilience of youth who had transitioned from care to adulthood and provided an evaluation of a relationship-based transition program to promote youth's readiness for transition to adulthood while they are involved in out-of-home care. Study 1 (Chapter 2) is a qualitative interview study of the experiences of young adults who have navigated the transition from care to adulthood to explore the factors that promoted and hindered their readiness for transition to adulthood. Study 2 (Chapter 3) builds upon Study 1 and existing research on transition support programs for youth involved in child welfare. The mixed-method, longitudinal study focuses on the initial outcomes and experiences of youth and care providers who participated in the Milestone Program, designed by foster parents to promote youth's relationships and transition to adulthood outcomes while they are in care. In the following sections, I will briefly summarize the findings from the two studies and then present an integrative synthesis of the two studies within the developmental resilience perspective. I will conclude the discussion with a consideration of the practice and policy implications, limitations, and future directions.

### **Understanding the Resilience of Young Adults Who Navigated the Transition from Care to Adulthood: Study 1**

The overarching goal of Study 1 was to advance the understanding of resilience among young adults who had navigated the transition from care to adulthood with evidence of adaptation. We utilized a qualitative, interview design to gather data on how these young adults conceptualized their readiness for transition, the experiences they believed have contributed to and hindered their readiness for transition, and their recommendations about the support that would be helpful for youth currently in the care of child welfare. While research has shown that youth involved in child welfare experience disproportionately negative outcomes as they transition to adulthood (Gypen et al., 2017; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018), our study findings offered a more nuanced perspective on the young adults' experiences, contextualized within a resilience framework.

Central to our finding was that the transition from care to adulthood is an inevitable milestone for young adults involved with child welfare, irrespective of their perceived readiness for this transition. Despite the participants representing a relatively successful group of young adults, their accounts revealed the challenges they experienced related to independent living, as well as managing their stress and mental health while being in survival mode. Further, their sense of loneliness and isolation was exacerbated by the limited support they sometimes received and feelings of being different from their peers who were not involved with child welfare. However, the most notable finding in our study was the way these young adults spoke about persevering in the face of these adversities by drawing on their assets and resources, such as their desire and perceived capability for autonomy and independence and strong relationships with close others, including their foster parents and child welfare workers. Based on their lived experience, they recommended providing opportunities for youth to learn and practice independent living skills, offering social-emotional support and skills training, increasing the capacity of the child welfare

system to support youth before and throughout the transition to adulthood, and recognizing the unique experiences and needs of youth involved in child welfare. The study findings highlight the need for a targeted intervention to support youth's transition to adulthood and resilience in the context of supportive relationships, which correspond directly to the relationship-based transition program developed by foster parents in Study 2.

### **Evaluating a Relationship-Based Program to Support the Resilience and Transition to Adulthood of Youth Involved in Child Welfare: Study 2**

The goal of Study 2 (Chapter 3) was to evaluate the initial experiences and outcomes of youth in out-of-home placement and their care providers who jointly participated in the Milestone Program for six months. In the program, the care providers, such as foster parents and child welfare workers, were guided to support the youth in building the assets and resources required for a successful transition to adulthood. There were four study outcomes: the youth-care provider relationship, the youth's perceived readiness for transition to adulthood, the care provider's confidence in supporting the youth's transition to adulthood, and the youth's and care providers' experiences with the Milestone Program. We collected quantitative data to compare the baseline and post-intervention outcomes from the youth's and care providers' perspectives and utilized their qualitative post-intervention interview data to contextualize their experiences in the program.

In general, most youth enjoyed the program and would recommend the Milestone Program to others. They reported a significantly higher level of support in the youth-care provider relationship at post-intervention than at baseline. Consistent with the quantitative findings, they indicated in the interview that the Milestone Program had a positive impact on their relationship with their care provider, creating opportunities for them and their care provider



to collaborate and communicate, engage in shared activities, and build trust and connections. Additionally, the majority of the youth believed the Milestone Program helped them to learn transition-related skills and knowledge, set goals and make plans for the future, and feel more ready and confident about becoming an adult. On the contrary, while many care providers also identified the above-mentioned positive impacts of the Milestone Program, fewer care providers enjoyed the program and they generally had less positive experiences with the Milestone Program compared to the youth. The less favourable study results from care providers were likely caused by several factors, such as their difficulty in engaging the youth in the Milestone Program, time constraints to complete the study in six months, and their perceptions of the program being overwhelming to the youth. While our research represents a small-scale evaluation of the Milestone Program, our study results emphasize the crucial role of relationships with caring adults in preparing youth's transition to adulthood and highlight additional components that youth in out-of-home care and care providers value in a transition program. The study also yields insight into the opportunities and challenges of implementing a relationship-based program with youth involved in child welfare and their care providers within a community setting.

### **Integrative Synthesis and the Developmental Resilience Perspective**

This investigation offers an in-depth understanding of the resilience and transition experiences of young adults with previous involvement with child welfare, as well as the perceived impact of a relationship-based program in supporting the transition to adulthood among youth who were in out-of-home placement. Through interviews with young adults who had navigated the transition from care to adulthood (Study 1), insight into how they conceptualized their readiness for transition to adulthood and the factors that they viewed as

important in helping them feel more ready for the transition were identified. Specifically, the findings highlight the resilience demonstrated by young adults during their transition to adulthood. Despite having experienced early childhood adversity and challenges during the transition to adulthood, they viewed themselves as having the inner strengths and capacity to manage some of the obstacles related to independent living and recognized the support from others that enabled them to navigate the demands of the transition. Our findings align with previous work that underscores the contribution of supportive relationships to the resilience of youth involved in child welfare (Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson, 2013; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). We further expand the literature by describing how these supportive relationships, as well as the youth's individual strengths, contribute to their perceived readiness for transition to adulthood, an important source of resilience and outcome of many transition support programs for youth in care (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019), including the Milestone Program evaluated in Study 2. In Study 2, qualitative and quantitative data from youth in out-of-home placement and their care providers shed light on their perceived positive changes in the relationship and transition to adulthood outcomes after participating in the program for six months. Youth in our study recognized the support from their care provider and appreciated the opportunities to prepare for their transition within the everyday interactions with their care providers. This study is the first evaluation of the Milestone Program and offers preliminary evidence of the values of promoting youth's readiness for transition to adulthood within the context of organic interactions and relationships with supportive adults while youth are in care. Overall, these two studies, grounded within the youth's perspective, underscore that youth's resilience is shaped by the interplay between their individual strengths and characteristics and the supportive relationships in their environment (Ungar, 2013). More importantly, the study findings emphasize that youth's

successful transition from care to adulthood requires the support of caring adults and highlight the need for a more developmentally appropriate approach toward promoting youth's interdependence rather than independence during their transition to adulthood (Propp et al., 2003).

This dissertation contributes to the developmental resilience perspective in several ways. First, longstanding research documents that the experiences of youth involved in child welfare placed them at increased risk for multiple negative outcomes as they transition to adulthood (Courtney, et al., 2001). This dissertation aims to shift the focus from previous research and practice, which view youth solely through the lens of individual vulnerabilities and deficits, to explore the positive development and outcomes that are also experienced by youth involved in child welfare (Masten, 2011; Yates & Grey, 2012). Further, recent research has mostly defined the resilience of youth involved in child welfare as the achievement of successful adult outcomes, such as finding employment and housing (Miller et al., 2017; Shpiegel et al., 2021). While it is helpful to document the traditional positive adulthood outcomes among youth involved in child welfare, additional research is needed to understand resilience as defined by the youth themselves (Anderson & Williams, 2018). This dissertation represents an important step in including the voices of youth involved in child welfare to understand how they conceptualized their resilience and readiness for transition to adulthood based on their own goals and experiences and beyond society-defined outcomes (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). Further, it broadens the scope of resilience by including an in-depth examination of the youth's lived experiences and support that were present before and throughout their transition that helped them feel prepared for adulthood, rather than their outcomes after the transition. These findings highlight the resilience factors that may encourage positive development before and during the youth's

transition to adulthood and build the foundation for a strength- and resilience-based approach to transitional planning for youth involved in child welfare (Zimmerman, 2013).

Second, the development resilience perspective posits that youth is embedded within many interdependent systems that interact with their inner strengths to influence their resilience and positive development (Masten, 2021; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). This dissertation builds upon this perspective and supports the notion of interdependence, which honours youth's needs for support and engagement with trusted adults during the transition to adulthood (Augsberger & Swenson, 2015; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Specifically, our investigation underscores the ability of youth involved in child welfare to achieve resilience depends largely, on the capacity of their social environment to provide meaningful support and resources to facilitate their adaptive functioning and growth (Ungar, 2013). As many youth in out-of-home placements experience disruption in their family relationships and struggle to rely on their biological families for consistent support, our findings support that caring and supportive care providers who already exist in the youth's social environment play an important role in guiding their positive development during the transition to adulthood (Hokanson et al., 2020; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Specifically, care providers are well-positioned to encourage youth to learn by doing, explore their strengths and future goals, and take risks in achieving their independence through their organic, regular interactions with the youth. This finding is in support of Masten's research on "ordinary magic" (Masten, 2001) and expands the literature on the important contributions of supportive relationships with care providers in the child welfare system to the resilience of youth transitioning from care to adulthood.

In summary, youth involved in child welfare, particularly those involved in out-of-home care, often experience relational challenges, childhood maltreatment, and placement instability

(Nuñez et al., 2022). These early childhood adverse experiences have increased their risks for negative outcomes across multiple domains during their transition to adulthood (Courtney, Dworsky, et al., 2011). Indeed, young adults in our study spoke about their challenges and difficulties during the transition to adulthood. However, our study findings also shows that the same group of youth demonstrated their resilience during this vulnerable period, drawing on their inner strengths and supportive relationships as they navigated these challenges in adulthood. To effectively prepare youth for their transition to adulthood, this investigation highlights the importance of capitalizing on youth's strengths in the context of supportive relationships with caring adults while they are in care. Care providers in the child welfare system are uniquely positioned to support youth in gradually acquiring the skills and knowledge required for successful adulthood through scaffolding opportunities and providing them with a supportive environment during their time in care, throughout their transition to adulthood, and beyond.

### **Practice and Policy Implications**

Longstanding research has established that youth involved in child welfare are at a much higher risk of encountering challenges in different domains than their peers who are not in care during the transition to adulthood (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Day, A. et al., 2011; Gypen et al., 2017). Although there is scarce research on the outcomes of Canadian youth involved in child welfare, similar youth outcomes documented across countries indicate that Canadian youths are likely to experience similar challenges and negative outcomes (Gypen et al., 2017; Kovarikova, 2017). The present study examines a critical issue in service delivery to this high-risk group of youth and has the potential to inform transition support and policies for youth involved in child welfare in Canada and beyond.

Our research underscores that meaningful, supportive relationships and transition-related skills are both critical for youth transitioning from care to adulthood. Youth leaving the child welfare system must be equipped with the skills and resources to find housing and employment, continue with their education, and assume adult responsibilities. However, it is up to the youth's social environment to provide the supportive relationships that are essential for the youth to turn to for advice, emotional and practical support, and encouragement to manage these demands (Ungar, 2013). Specifically, our study findings emphasize the importance of supporting youth in building strong relationships with caring adults early on when they are involved with child welfare and especially before they begin their transition to adulthood. The present research underscores the crucial role of the youth's care providers in the child welfare system in promoting youth's resilience while the youth are in out-of-home placements. To facilitate the positive transition to adulthood outcomes in this population, attention and funding are required to ensure youth involved in child welfare are equipped with the skills and resources to prioritize building and maintaining their relationships with supportive adults while in care, so that they can leverage this support as they gradually assume adult responsibilities (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). It is also within the responsibilities of the child welfare agencies to provide more guidance to care providers to strengthen their existing relationships with the youth and offer targeted training to enhance their skills and knowledge in recognizing the youth's unique transition needs and providing appropriate scaffolding support to prepare youth for their transition to adulthood (Augsberger & Swenson, 2015).

Within the supportive relationships with caring adults, our findings speak to the importance of supporting youth in preparing for their transition to adulthood based on their expectations and goals for themselves (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). Participation in the Milestone

Program encouraged many youths to share their initial thoughts and feelings about their transition to adulthood with their care providers. Our findings show that some challenges, anxieties, and feelings of being unprepared for the transition to adulthood should be expected from youth involved in child welfare, along with some positive feelings and hopes and goals for the future that they are able to identify. Youth also benefitted from the program's emphasis on affirming their strengths, empowering them to make decisions about their future, and building their motivation and agency to take action towards their self-identified goals. Findings from this dissertation highlight that allowing youth to provide their input about their future plans and goals is a promising avenue to foster a supportive environment where youth can practice making their own decisions and realize their full potential (Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). Similar to the youth in the general population who learn transition-related skills with their parents, care providers are encouraged to support youth in identifying transition-related skills and tasks that they desire to master and providing them with hands-on, scaffolding opportunities to manage these tasks as they feel ready for them. These are important considerations for our community partners and policymakers when designing support for youth involved in child welfare, to explore ways to involve them in the decision-making process about their future and balance their developmental need for autonomy and support as they prepare for the transition to adulthood (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

Another important learning from this investigation is that the preparation for the transition to adulthood is a gradual process. While the youth in the Milestone Program reported learning and practicing some transition-related skills, it is not realistic to expect the youth to have acquired all the skills needed for a successful transition to adulthood in six months. Indeed, the young adults' accounts in the first study reflect that youth involved in child welfare prepare for

the transition to adulthood at their own pace, encountering different responsibilities and challenges that allow them to continually grow, refine their skills and goals, and draw on the resources provided by their supportive relationships. Clinicians and policymakers need to incorporate a developmentally appropriate approach to follow the youth's lead and provide youth with more time and space to prepare for their transition to adulthood gradually. However, this approach is likely to be less effective if youth do not have access to resources for their basic needs and are in survival mode to manage all their adult responsibilities. Considering this, post-care resources must become available for youth transitioning to adulthood and the ongoing learning and adaptation that take place within the youth's ordinary, yet meaningful relationships with supportive adults should be a component of an overall system approach to improving outcomes of youth involved in child welfare.

Finally, this investigation exemplifies the collaborative efforts between the local child welfare agency and the research team, working jointly to draw on the lived experiences of youth involved in child welfare to better understand and support their resilience during this critical period of transition from care to adulthood. By responding to our community partner's request to support in evaluating the Milestone Program, this dissertation ensures the research priorities are aligned with the needs of our community partner and offers new relevant and actionable knowledge that can lead to meaningful change to child welfare practice and policy (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011). Specifically, our research implications are particularly relevant to the new child welfare redesign strategy (Government of Ontario, 2021) and the new "Ready, Set, Go" transition program (Government of Ontario, 2023) released by the Ontario government during the evaluation of the Milestone Program. Both the new redesign strategy and transition program emphasize the importance of strengthening the relationships of youth involved in child welfare



and ensuring they have the support they need to transition successfully to adulthood (Government of Ontario, 2023). The recommendations outlined by the young adults who had navigated the transition, as well as the several components of the Milestone Program highlighted by the youth and care providers in our study will help to refine and expand these new policies to ensure existing transition support meet the unique needs of youth involved in child welfare. Further, our research documents the authentic and successful academic-community partnership that addresses a critical issue in supporting youth's transition from care to adulthood. This partnership advocates for the importance of ensuring youth in child welfare have a strong voice in research and builds the foundation for future collaboration between the academic and child welfare communities, with the ultimate goal of promoting positive outcomes among youth in care through evidence-based practices and policies.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Several limitations related to this investigation should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. In terms of our sample, we only recruited participants through our partnerships with a single child welfare agency and two child welfare advocacy groups. The sample sizes are small in both studies and there may have been selection bias among the youth and young adults who chose to participate in the studies. For instance, in Study 1 we recruited a relatively successful group of young adults who had maintained personal contact with their workers and/or were involved with child welfare advocacy groups. We also only recruited youth who had a care provider to participate in the Milestone Program with them and presented the results only on those who have completed the baseline and post-intervention measures in Study 2. As such, the resilience and experiences of the youth who are the most vulnerable, who may not have a close relationship with a supportive adult, and who have fewer resources and capacity to participate in

research and the Milestone Program are likely not reflected in this investigation. Additionally, we were unable to conduct statistical analyses to draw casual conclusions on the impact of the Milestone Program on study outcomes due to the small sample size and the lack of a control group in Study 2. Future research is needed to further delineate the resilience and transition experiences of a diverse sample of youth and young adults involved in child welfare and evaluate the effectiveness of the Milestone Program with youth with different backgrounds, experiences in care, and access to resources.

This dissertation is based on self-report data and thus, participants' responses may be impacted by a multitude of factors that are not accounted for in this investigation. For instance, young adults in Study 1 completed the interview about their transition experiences after learning about the Milestone Program, which might prime them in reflecting on their transition to adulthood in the areas highlighted by the program. Our investigation represents an important step in capturing the experiences and factors that young adults believed have contributed to their readiness for transition to adulthood; however, future research will benefit from incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore a broader array of individual and external factors that help youth feel ready for their transition. Additionally, youth's and care providers' relationships, interests, motivation, competing demands, and commitment to the Milestone Program may also impact their willingness to participate in the program and their perceived impact of the program on study outcomes (Doucet et al., 2022). Much more work is needed to build upon our initial findings and further evaluate and validate the Milestone Program to document the population the Milestone Program is best suited for and explore different factors that may impact participants' participation and engagement in such relationship-based programs. Further, while individuals with different experiences and expertise in the child welfare system in

the working group supported the interpretation of data within the context of the participants' experiences, participants were not directly involved in the interpretation of the data due to the short time frame of the study. Future research will benefit from sharing the qualitative interview data with the participants themselves to gather their input in the interpretation of results.

Another limitation of this investigation was that many of the readiness for transition to adulthood measures in the study were created by the working group. Future research is imperative to better understand how youth involved in child welfare conceptualize their readiness for transition to adulthood based on their personal experiences, goals, and expectations and develop reliable measures that capture youth's outcomes and experiences in programs that promote their readiness for transition to adulthood. Further, as the transition to adulthood is a gradual process, six months might not be sufficient time to evaluate the full benefit of the Milestone Program. Future directions should include the replication of these findings, ideally with a larger population of youth in care, along with a longer-term follow-up to examine the impact of the Milestone Program on youth's relationships and readiness before, during, and after their transition to adulthood.

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the resilience of youth involved in child welfare by understanding the assets and resources that promote their perceived readiness for transition to adulthood and evaluating a new relationship-based approach that aims to improve their transition to adulthood outcomes while they are in care. Our study findings, grounded within the youth's experiences, emphasize the important role of youth's relationships with their care providers, as well as their strengths, hopes, and motivations for the future in helping them to feel ready for the transition to adulthood. This collaboration underscores the

importance of including the perspectives of youth to better understand their transition experiences and providing them with a platform to utilize their voices to inform support for youth involved in child welfare. This study also builds the foundation for the continued collaboration between the child welfare and academic communities to support youth involved in child welfare, translating research to inform sustainable practices and policies to optimize their resilience during the transition to adulthood.

## References

- Ahrens, K. R., DuBois, D. L., Garrison, M., Spencer, R., Richardson, L. P., & Lozano, P. (2011). Qualitative exploration of relationships with important non-parental adults in the lives of youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(6), 1012–1023.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.01.006>
- Anderson, B. L., & Williams, A. L. (2018). Defining success: The perspective of emerging adults with foster care experience. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 44(5), 643–655.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2018.1477697>
- Augsberger, A., & Swenson, E. (2015). “My Worker Was There When it Really Mattered”: Foster care youths’ perceptions and experiences of their relationships with child welfare workers. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 96(4), 234–240. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.2015.96.34>
- Courtney, M. E. & Dworsky, A. (2006). Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA. *Child and Family Social Work*, 11, 209–219.
- Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- Day, A., Dworsky, A., Fogarty, K., & Damashek, A. (2011). An examination of post-secondary retention and graduation among foster care youth enrolled in a four-year university. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(11), 2335–2341. - Google Search. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 2335–2341.

- Doucet, M. M., Greeson, J. K. P., & Eldeeb, N. (2022). Independent living programs and services for youth “aging out” of care in Canada and the U.S.: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 142*, 106630. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106630>
- Government of Ontario. (2021, March 2). *Child welfare redesign*. <http://www.ontario.ca/page/child-welfare-redesign>
- Government of Ontario. (2023, February 15). *Ontario Connecting Youth Leaving Care with Supports to Succeed*. News.Ontario.Ca. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1002724/ontario-connecting-youth-leaving-care-with-supports-to-succeed>
- Greeson, J. K. P. (2013). Foster Youth and the Transition to Adulthood: The Theoretical and Conceptual Basis for Natural Mentoring. *Emerging Adulthood, 1*(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696812467780>
- Gypen, L., Vanderfaellie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Holen, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic-review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 76*, 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.02.035>
- Häggman-Laitila, A., Saloekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2018). Transition to adult life of young people leaving foster care: A qualitative systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 95*, 134–143. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.08.017>
- Häggman-Laitila, A., Saloekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2019). Young People’s Preparedness for Adult Life and Coping After Foster Care: A Systematic Review of Perceptions and Experiences in the Transition Period. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 48*(5), 633–661. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-019-09499-4>

- Hokanson, K., Neville, S., Teixeira, S., Singer, E., & Berzin, S. (2020). “There are a Lot of Good Things that Come Out of it at the End”: Voices of Resilience in Youth Formerly in Foster Care During Emerging Adulthood. *Child Welfare, 97*, 233–249.
- Jacquez, F., Vaughn, L. M., & Wagner, E. (2013). Youth as Partners, Participants or Passive Recipients: A Review of Children and Adolescents in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). *American Journal of Community Psychology, 51*(1–2), 176–189. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9533-7>
- Kovarikova, J. (2017). *Exploring Youth Outcomes After Aging-Out of Care* (p. 38). Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth.
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist, 56*(3), 227–238. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.227>
- Masten, A. S. (2011). Resilience in children threatened by extreme adversity: Frameworks for research, practice, and translational synergy. *Development and Psychopathology, 23*(2), 493–506. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579411000198>
- Masten, A. S. (2021). Resilience in developmental systems: Principles, pathways, and protective processes in research and practice. In *Multisystemic resilience: Adaptation and transformation in contexts of change* (pp. 113–134). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190095888.003.0007>
- Masten, A. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2016). Resilience in development: Progress and transformation. In *Developmental psychopathology: Risk, resilience, and intervention, Vol. 4, 3rd ed* (pp. 271–333). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119125556.devpsy406>
- Miller, E. A., Paschall, K. W., & Azar, S. T. (2017). Latent classes of older foster youth: Prospective associations with outcomes and exits from the foster care system during the

- transition to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 495–505.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2017.06.047>
- Minkler, M., & Wallerstein, N. (2011). *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health: From Process to Outcomes*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Nesmith, A., & Christophersen, K. (2014). Smoothing the transition to adulthood: Creating ongoing supportive relationships among foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 37, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2013.11.028>
- Nuñez, M., Beal, S. J., & Jacquez, F. (2022). Resilience factors in youth transitioning out of foster care: A systematic review. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 14(S1), S72–S81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001096>
- Propp, J., Ortega, D. M., & NewHeart, F. (2003). Independence or Interdependence: Rethinking the Transition from “Ward of the Court” to Adulthood. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 84(2), 259–266. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.102>
- Samuels, G. M., & Pryce, J. M. (2008). “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”: Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(10), 1198–1210.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2008.03.005>
- Shpiegel, S., Simmel, C., Sapiro, B., & Ramirez Quiroz, S. (2021). Resilient Outcomes among Youth Aging-Out of Foster Care: Findings from the National Youth in Transition Database. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 1–24.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2021.1899098>



- Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2018). Assets and pathways in achieving future goals of residential care alumni. *Children and Youth Services Review, 89*, 71–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.04.023>
- Ungar, M. (2013). Resilience, trauma, context, and culture. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse, 14*(3), 255–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838013487805>
- Yates, T. M., & Grey, I. K. (2012). Adapting to aging out: Profiles of risk and resilience among emancipated foster youth. *Development and Psychopathology, 24*(2), 475–492.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579412000107>
- Zimmerman, M. A. (2013). Resiliency Theory: A Strengths-Based Approach to Research and Practice for Adolescent Health. *Health Education & Behavior : The Official Publication of the Society for Public Health Education, 40*(4), 381–383.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198113493782>

## APPENDIX A

### Study 1 Interview Guide

#### Introduction

Hello [name]. Thank you for meeting with me today. My name is [your name] and I am a research assistant at York University who has been working on the development and evaluation of the Milestone Program with Simcoe Muskoka Family Connections (SMFC).

We're here today as we would like to learn more about your experiences transitioning into adulthood and to gather feedback on the Milestone Program. The information you provide will be used to refine the program and get it ready for a larger roll-out with current youth in care and families involved with SMFC.

The interview should take about an hour and I will be recording the session so I don't miss out on any of your responses. We will make sure that whatever information we include in our report does not identify you in any way. You don't have to talk about anything you don't want to and you may end your participation at any time. If you have any questions, please feel free to let me know.

Before we start the interview, I would like to check if you have attended the information session or watched the recording on the Milestone Program? [If yes – proceed with the interview]

Today we're talking about your experiences transitioning out of care. Can you start by telling us – how old were you when you transitioned out of care? How long did you spend in care before that?

#### Transition to adulthood

1. Thinking back to when you transitioned out of care and into adulthood, how prepared did you feel?
  - a. What were the skills you have? What were the skills that you do not have? Cue for skills in the following areas: education, life independence skills, social presentation, emotional and behavioural, health and well-being, identity and culture, and self-care skills and transitioning to adulthood
  - b. What experiences stand out to you? What about these experiences make them stand out to you?
  - c. What was your housing/employment/education like when you transitioned to adulthood? What went well? Did you experience any difficulties? If yes, what happened?
  - d. What were the main feelings you remember having as you transitioned out of care?
2. What were the most challenging aspects of transitioning to adulthood? How did you overcome them?
3. Who helped you to prepare for the transition to adulthood? How did they help you?
4. What could have been done to help you feel the most prepared for your transition to adulthood?

5. Anything else to add before we move to the next section?

**Milestone Program**

1. What did you like most about the Milestone Program?
2. What are the things that you would suggest changing on the Milestone Program?
3. Thinking back to your experiences, how do you think the Milestone Program could help youth in care now when they transition to adulthood?
4. How can we encourage youth and foster parent's participation in the Milestone Program?

Is there anything else that you think would be important for us to know about your experiences and the Milestone Program?

## APPENDIX B

### Study 2 Baseline and Post-Intervention Survey

#### Demographics

Please tell us a little bit about yourself by answering the following questions:

Questions	Response Options
<b>For all youth, care providers, and workers</b>	
Enter the ID number that was given to you by the researcher	-
How old are you? (years)	-
Please indicate how you identify (Check one)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male</li> <li>• Female</li> <li>• Transgender-masculine</li> <li>• Transgender-feminine</li> <li>• Non-binary</li> <li>• Two-Spirit</li> <li>• Prefer to self-describe: (please specify)</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
Please indicate your ethno-cultural background (check one)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black (e.g., Africans and African heritage people from the Caribbean, Americas, Europe, etc)</li> <li>• East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc)</li> <li>• Hispanic or Latinx (including Indigenous persons from Central and South America)</li> <li>• Indigenous peoples of North America</li> <li>• Indo-Caribbean (e.g., Trinidadian, Guyanese, etc)</li> <li>• Persons of mixed origin (e.g., with one parent member of a visible minority group)</li> <li>• South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, etc)</li> <li>• South East Asian (e.g., Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese, etc)</li> <li>• West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Lebanese, Afghan, etc)</li> <li>• White/Caucasian</li> <li>• Other (please specify):</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
How good are you with technology?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excellent</li> <li>• Above average</li> <li>• Average</li> <li>• Below Average</li> <li>• Very Poor</li> </ul>

How often do you set goals for yourself?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Always</li> <li>• Very often</li> <li>• Sometimes</li> <li>• Rarely</li> <li>• Never</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
<b>For youth only:</b>	
Are you enrolled in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
What grade are you in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1<sup>st</sup> -6<sup>th</sup> grade</li> <li>• 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade</li> <li>• 9<sup>th</sup> grade</li> <li>• 10<sup>th</sup> grade</li> <li>• 11<sup>th</sup> grade</li> <li>• 12<sup>th</sup> grade</li> <li>• First year of college/university</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
Are you currently employed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working full-time</li> <li>• Working part-time</li> <li>• Other (please specify):</li> <li>• Not working</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
<b>For care providers only:</b>	
What is your marital status?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single, never married</li> <li>• In a domestic partnership</li> <li>• Married</li> <li>• Widowed</li> <li>• Divorced</li> <li>• Separated</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
Which of the following best describes your HIGHEST level of education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some high school</li> <li>• Completed high school</li> <li>• Some college/university</li> <li>• Completed college/university</li> <li>• Some graduate education</li> <li>• Completed graduate education</li> <li>• Professional degrees</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
What is your current employment status?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time employment</li> <li>• Part-time employment</li> <li>• Unemployed</li> <li>• Self-employed</li> <li>• Homemaker</li> <li>• Student</li> <li>• Retired</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to work</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
<b>For worker only:</b>	
What is your role with SMFC?	-
Which of the following best describes your HIGHEST level of education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed college/university</li> <li>• Some graduate education</li> <li>• Completed graduate education</li> <li>• Professional degrees</li> <li>• Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>
How long have you been working with SMFC? (years)	-
How long have you known the youth? (years)	-

### **Youth-Care Provider Relationships Questions (Baseline and Post-Intervention)**

#### Network of Relationships Inventory – Social Provision Version (NRI-SPV)

Everyone has a number of people who are important in his or her life. These questions ask about your relationships with the youth/care providers who participated in the study with you:

Sometimes the answers for different people may be the same but sometimes they may be different. Please indicate your response on a scale of 1 (Little or None) to 5 (The Most).

	Little or none	Somewhat	Very Much	Extremely Much	The most	Prefer not to answer
1. How much do you and this person get upset with or mad at each other?						
2. How much do you and this person get on each other's nerves?						
3. How much does this person treat you like you're admired and respected?						
4. How sure are you that this relationship will last no matter what?						
5. How much do you play around and have fun with this person?						
6. How much do you and this person disagree and quarrel?						

7. How much does this person help you figure out or fix things?						
8. How much do you and this person get annoyed with each other's behavior?						
9. How much do you share your secrets and private feelings with this person?						
10. How much does this person really care about you?						
11. How much do you and this person argue with each other?						
12. How much do you and this person hassle or nag one another?						
13. How much do you take care of this person?						

**Youth's Perceived Readiness for Transition to Adulthood Questions (Baseline and Post-Intervention)**

	Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Very	Extremely	Prefer not to answer
1. This month, how ready do you feel about becoming an adult in the future?						

**Milestone Program Evaluation Questions (Post-Intervention)**

These questions ask what you think about how the Milestone program may have helped you/your youth. Please indicate your response with three options: Yes (1), Kind of (2), and Not Really (3)

Please check the box below that is closest to your/your youth's experience with the Milestone Program.

	Yes	Kind Of	Not Really	Prefer not to answer
--	-----	---------	------------	----------------------

<b>Being in the Milestone Program has helped me/my youth to...</b>				
1. Feel better about my future				
2. Learn I can do things I didn't think I could do before				
3. Feel I have more control over things that happen to me				
4. Feel better about myself				
<b>The Milestone Program helped me/my youth...</b>				
1. Feel more ready for my transition to adulthood				
2. Gain skills that are useful for my transition to adulthood				
3. Gain knowledge that are useful for my transition to adulthood				
4. Prepare for a successful transition to adulthood				
5. Feel more supported by my care provider				
6. Feel more support by my worker				
<b>Care provider only:</b> I feel more confident in supporting my youth's transition to adulthood after using the Milestone Program				
<b>Youth and care providers:</b> I enjoy the Milestone Program.				

	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Prefer not to answer
How was your overall experience with the Milestone Program?						



## APPENDIX C

### Study 2 Post-Intervention Interview with Youth and Care Providers

#### **Interview with Youth**

**To start, we would like to thank you for your hard work in using the Milestone Program for the past six months! We're going to be asking you questions about your experience with the Milestone Program, from the beginning of the study until now. I know the beginning of the study was 6 months ago, so we're going to ask you to try to think back and remember as much as you can.**

1. Thinking back to when you started the Milestone Program, what did you expect it to do?
  - a. How did you think it would help or not help you? or your care provider/worker?
2. How did the program meet your expectations or not meet your expectations?
  - a. Were there any surprises?

**Thanks for sharing that. Now that we are at the end of the study, we are interested in the impact of the Milestone Program on how you feel about your move to adulthood. As a reminder, you have set X number of goals and completed X milestones on the Milestone Program website (extract numbers from the Milestone Program website). Some of the milestones you have achieved include...(give 3 examples from 3 domains).**

1. What skills or knowledge did you learn from the Milestone Program? Can you give me an example of how you have learned those skills (probe for each skill identified)?
  - a. Prompt for skills in the following areas: education, life independence skills, health and well-being, identity and culture, social presentation, emotional/behavioural, self-care and transitioning to young adulthood skills
2. How do you think these skills (probe for each) would help you get ready for adulthood? Why or why not?
3. What feelings come up now when you are thinking about your future?
4. How did this program make you think or feel differently about your future, if at all?
5. Compared to six months ago when we first started the study, how ready do you feel to one day leave care and become an adult? Did your feelings change?
6. Compared to six months ago when we first started the study, how did the Milestone Program change your understanding of what you need to learn to be more prepared for adulthood? How has it changed, if at all?
7. Overall, how did your experience with the Milestone Program impact your confidence about your move to adulthood, if at all?

**Now I want you to think back to how you have been using the Milestone Program for the past six months. Specifically, I would like you to think back to the time period directly after the training when you and your care provider/worker were asked to review all the milestones and set goals with you. If you recall, we had asked you to try and complete the**

**goal setting by choosing one milestone from each domain within two weeks after the training. I'd like to get your perspective on how that went for you.**

1. How did you pick the goals from each domain? Walk us through your steps.
  - a. Prompts: Would you say you took more of a lead role or your care provider/worker took more of a lead role?
2. What went well when you were reviewing the milestones and selecting goals?
3. What was challenging about reviewing the milestones and setting goals?
4. Was anyone else involved in the goal setting process?

**Now I will ask you to reflect on your ongoing use of the program over the last six months.**

1. How did you use the program over the last 6 months?
  - a. Any factors that made it difficult for you to work on the milestones? What kind of additional support could be provided?
2. Did you experience any challenges with the program? Did you ever have times when you got frustrated with the program? Can you tell us about those times?
3. What motivated you to use the Milestone Program?
4. For youth in triad only: What was it like to work with your care provider on the Milestone Program over the past 6 months? What did you like and not like about working with your care provider on the Milestone Program? How did it change the way you interacted with them, if at all?
5. What was it like to work with your worker on the Milestone Program over the past 6 months? What did you like and not like about working with your worker on the Milestone Program? How did it change the way you interacted with your worker, if at all?
6. Did anyone else use the Milestone Program with you during this time?
7. Some of the milestones ask you to rate how ready you are to do each of the milestones. How did you rate your readiness for the milestones you have completed or previously acquired?

**To end the interview, we would like to ask you about your overall experience with the Milestone Program.**

1. How would you describe your overall experience using the Milestone Program?
2. What was your favourite part of the program? Why?
3. What was your least favourite part of the program? Why?
4. Do you think participating in the Milestone Program is a good use of your time? Why or why not?
5. If you could change one thing about the Milestone Program, what would you change? Would you continue with the Milestone Program after the study? Why or why not? Would you recommend this program to other youths in care?

Is there anything else that you think would be important for us to know about your experiences?

### **Interview with Care Provider**

**To start, we would like to thank you for your hard work in engaging the Milestone Program for the past six months! We're going to be asking you questions about your experience with the Milestone Program, from the beginning of the study until now. I know the beginning of the study was 6 months ago, so we're going to ask you to try to think back and remember as much as you can.**

1. Thinking back to when you started the Milestone Program, what did you expect it to do?
  - a. How did you think it would help or not help you? or your youth?
2. How did the program meet your expectations or not meet your expectations? Were there any surprises?

**Thanks for sharing that. Now that we are at the end of the study, we are interested in the impact of the Milestone Program on how you feel about your youth's move to adulthood. As a reminder, you and your youth have set X number of goals and completed X milestones on the Milestone Program website. Some of the milestones your youth have achieved include...(give 3 examples from 3 domains).**

1. What skills or knowledge did you think your youth learn from the Milestone Program? Can you give me an example of how your youth has learned that skills (probe for each skill the care provider identifies)
  - a. Prompts for skills in the following areas: education, life independence skills, health and well-being, identity and culture, social presentation, emotional/behavioural, self-care and transitioning to young adulthood skills
2. How do you think these skills (probe for each) would help your youth get ready for adulthood? Why or why not?
3. What feelings come up now when you are thinking about your youth's future? How did this program make you think or feel differently about your youth's future as they become an adult?
4. Compared to six months ago when we first started the study, how ready do you feel your youth is to one day leave care and become an adult? Did your feelings change?
5. Compared to six months ago when we first started the study, how did the Milestone Program change your understanding of what is required to support youth's readiness for adulthood?
6. Overall, how much did your experience with the Milestone Program make you feel more confident about supporting your youth in their transition to adulthood?
7. Workers in dyad only: what was your experience in supporting families in engaging with the Milestone Program as part of your role? Did you feel the Milestone Program will be helpful or not helpful for the work you are already doing with the family?

**Now I want you to think back to how you have been using the Milestone Program for the past six months. Specifically, I would like you to think back to the time period directly after the training when you were asked to review all the milestones and set goals with your youth. If you recall, we had asked you to try and complete the goal setting by choosing one**

**milestone from each domain within two weeks after the training. I'd like to get your perspective on how that went for you.**

1. What did you think about the format of the training?
  - a. Prompts: times, length, format
2. How did you and your youth pick the goals from each domain? Walk us through your steps.
3. Prompts: Would you say you took more of a lead role or your youth took more of a lead role?
4. What went well when you were reviewing the milestones and selecting goals?
5. What was challenging about reviewing the milestones and setting goals?
6. Was anyone else involved in the goal setting process?

**Now I will ask you to reflect on your ongoing use of the program over the last six months.**

1. How did you use the program with your youth over the last 6 months?
  - a. What type of support did you provide?
  - b. Any factors that made it difficult for your youth to work on the milestones? What kind of additional support could be provided?
2. Did you experience any challenges with the program? Did you ever have times when you got frustrated with the program? Can you tell us about those times?
3. What motivated your youth to use the Milestone Program?
4. What motivated you to use the Milestone Program with your youth?
5. What was it like working with your youth on the Milestone Program over the past 6 months?
6. What did you like and not like about working with your youth on the Milestone Program?
7. How did it change the way you interacted with your youth, if at all?
8. For care provider only: What was it like working with your youth's worker on the Milestone Program over the past 6 months?
9. What did you like and not like about working with your youth's worker on the Milestone Program?
10. How did it change the way you interacted with your youth, if at all?
11. Did anyone else use the Milestone Program with the youth during this time?
12. Did anyone help you in supporting your youth in the Milestone Program?
13. Some of the milestones ask you to rate how ready your youth are to do each of the milestones. How did you assess your youth's readiness for the milestones that they achieved or previously acquired?

**To end the interview, we would like to ask you about your overall experience with the Milestone Program.**

1. How would you describe your overall experience using the Milestone Program?
2. What was your favourite part of the program? Why?
3. What was your least favourite part of the program? Why?
4. Do you think participating in the Milestone Program is a good use of your time? Why or why not?

5. If you could change one thing about the Milestone Program, what would you change?
6. Would you continue with the Milestone Program after the study? Why or why not?
7. Would you recommend this program to other care providers?

Is there anything else that you think would be important for us to know about your experiences?