



HEALING COMES FIRST

Building Resilience For Young People
In Foster Care



What Caregivers, Child Welfare Professionals and Other Caring Adults Can Do:

- Make sure young people have relationships with caring, consistent adults who can support them in resolving past experiences of loss and pain and embrace their unique strengths and capacity to overcome challenges.
- At least weekly, talk to adolescents about causes of stress. That's just as or more important than educating about the harms of substances or risky behavior they may rely on to cope with stress and difficult emotions.
- Communicate with words, facial expressions and tone of voice grounded in unconditional regard, respect, acceptance and support.
- Slow down. Make the time and emotional space to help young people deal with rejection, discouragement or failure.
- Once feelings have been heard and acknowledged, practice helping young people reframe their experiences and describe how they might channel their feelings and the lessons they've learned. Encourage them to develop empathy and consider how others experience the world.
- Encourage young people to maintain their own healthy sleep schedule to restore the body. Consider scheduling meetings with young people in the late morning or afternoon instead of the early morning.
- Look at a young person's schedule, and take a pulse check. Are these the activities of a typical young person not growing up in foster care? Or are they heavily weighted to system involvement? If so, focus on adding relaxing everyday activities, like learning to cook, ice skating, attending a concert or something else the young person will enjoy.
- Support personal writing, which nurtures the capacity to reflect and gain insight into one's real feelings and reactions. Young people in foster care may think they have to filter their true feelings and thoughts to avoid rejection; a private journal provides a sacred place to hold and honor feelings.
- Consider the form of therapy that best fits the individual, if any. Some young people welcome the chance to have someone to talk to, whether individually or in a support group. Others may respond better to art, dance, working with animals, music and rapping, martial arts, journaling or doing yoga or other forms of exercise.
- Try positive self-talk. Have young people talk themselves through the steps of a difficult experience or event and periodically pause for a mental play-by-play narrative of what is happening. Self-talk can focus on times young people have grown and learned from mistakes or failure.
- Help young people see themselves as agents of change or activists in the context of the larger human family and experience.

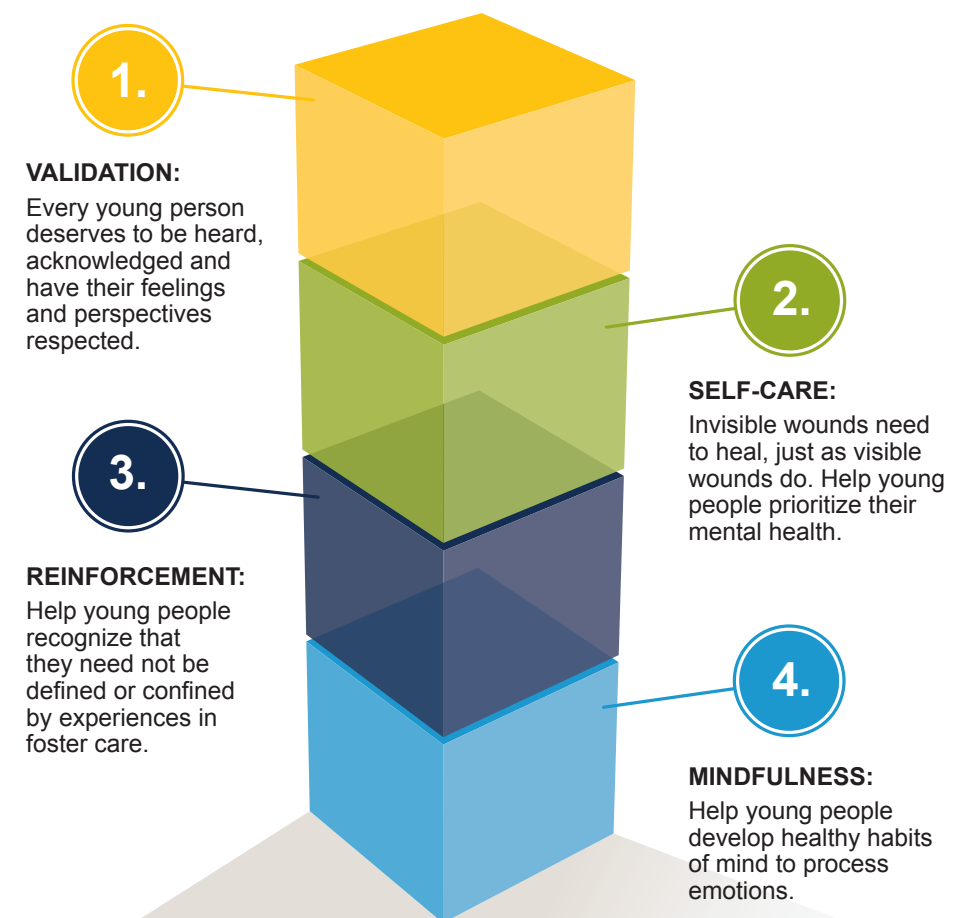
Learn more by downloading the full paper, *The Road to Adulthood: Aligning Child Welfare Practice With Adolescent Brain Development*, at www.aecf.org/resources/the-road-to-adulthood.



DID YOU KNOW?

Sleeping late is normal! Getting **9-10 hours of sleep** per night during adolescence is crucial to promote patience, stable moods and impulse control.

Four building blocks can help young people develop resilience and heal from trauma.



Researchers at Stanford University found that mindfulness and yoga helped alleviate the observed symptoms of post-traumatic stress among students, who were also encouraged to translate the practices in their lives at home.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative works to ensure the well-being of young people emerging from foster care and to position them for success as adults.

All adolescents and emerging adults encounter periods of happiness and sadness, clarity and confusion, passion and ambivalence as they travel through this unique stage of development. However, for those involved in the child welfare system, navigating the normal ups and downs of adolescence through adversity, stress, loss, lack of support and, in some cases, trauma can look very different.

Surviving or Thriving?

Paired with the uncertainty and confusion of navigating the foster care system, stress, trauma, relationship disruptions and separations lead a young brain to constantly scan the environment for potential losses, rejection or harm. When chronic stress and frequent transitions are the norm, developing brains prime themselves to focus on survival. Overreliance on survival mode can compromise development of more complex brain functions needed in adulthood, including:

- Emotional regulation
- Impulse control
- Flexibility
- Organization
- Planning ahead
- Critical thinking

Caregivers and social workers can promote a physical and emotional environment that is balanced, calm and rich in opportunities to form rewarding and lasting relationships, acquire new experiences and express one's spiritual, cultural and ethnic values. "I learned how to cook and dance in my culture and that was important so when I went away, I stayed connected to my culture," says Jim Casey Initiative Young Fellow Nyeelah Inniss.

Forging Neural Pathways for Healing

Forming supportive relationships with consistent, caring adults is the most important way to heal and build resilience. Because brain development is such a highly interactive process, every interaction with a young person has the potential to heal – or to hurt.

Neural plasticity is, in part, the brain's natural way of giving us new opportunities to heal from past adversity and losses, and forge new pathways to build stronger relationships with ourselves and others. Neural pathways and connections nourished through positive relationships and experiences will grow, while neglected or underused connections may weaken.

Mindfulness — setting intentions for the quality of one's state of awareness and feelings — is a very important approach to building resilience for all young people in foster care. As an approach, mindfulness is especially nimble, and doesn't depend on a young person having resources or a robust support system. Young people can be coached in techniques that promote being fully present and acknowledging and integrating their experiences while learning how to manage emotional reactions — all skills that will serve them well into adulthood.

Mindfulness exercises in moments of stress and uncertainty can help retool and expand a young person's repertoire of coping with emotional or physical reactionary impulses. Help them focus on activities aimed at integrating the mind, body and spirit, which can retrain the nervous system to operate and respond in more calm, constructive and reflective ways. Everyday practices like deep breathing, long walks, yoga, meditation and other creative outlets can move young people beyond moment-by-moment survival states and into toward proactive mindsets — from surviving to thriving.

Be Mindful! Learn More

Visit these websites to learn more about practicing mindfulness:

ACEs Connection has articles, blogposts and events regarding mindful approaches to resilience, trauma and adversity. acesconnection.com

Find meditation apps at mindfulnessforteens.com/resources

Read articles on mindfulness in Greater Good magazine from UC Berkeley: greatergood.berkeley.edu



Resilience involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.

(American Psychological Association)

BUILDING RESILIENCE: Having Healing Conversations

When a young person says:

I'm done going to all of these appointments. **I want to do things on my own terms.**

The young person may mean:

Everyone keeps putting **more and more on my plate** and telling me to do what they think is best for me. When do I get to choose?

Or:

I've felt hurt for so long now, I really doubt that therapy is going to make me feel better.

7 ways to decompress with a young person!

- Hike through a local park
- Photograph local wildlife, insects, trees or flowers
- Swim at a local pool or rec center
- Watch a nature documentary
- Hang out with animals at the local zoo
- Run short distances or train for a marathon
- Take in an audio book or playlist outdoors
- Garden

Instead of responding this way:

Clearly, you need to do something! **Your behavior and attitude** are out of control. I can't handle it anymore!

Caring adults can say:

You've been through a lot of things that a young person should not have to go through, and **you deserve a chance to be heard and heal.** If you thought about activities that you might be interested in exploring, what comes to mind?

Or:

You deserve an opportunity to express yourself and maybe even get some things off your chest in a way that works for you. On a scale of 1-5, where 1 is *no way* and 5 is *willing to give it a go*, what number would you give yoga/ writing/running etc.? What would you need to give it a go?