TECHNICAL PAPER

Life Transfers Impair Foster Youth Success

I Pour Life™
ipourlife.org
TECHNICAL PAPER
I Pour Life | Springfield, Missouri, USA

TITLE
The effects of multiple life transfers on foster youth

SUBTITLE
Frequent transfers set youth back relationally and academically

ABSTRACT
Repeated life transfers are debilitating to the mental health and future success of youth who are in state custody. In an effort to maintain continuity of education, academic counselors, and other peer support groups, life transfers should include no more than two places of secondary education.

Youth in foster care are likely to be transferred between group homes and schools a number of times before aging out of the system due to various reasons. These major changes for an adolescent are known as “life transfers.” While just one life event of this capacity for any child in the United States may be marked as a defining event, having multiple life transfers is a frequent occurrence for youth in foster care. Along with other challenges for these youth, having multiple life transfers inhibits their ability to develop roots and gain stability through community support, friendships, and professional networking, along with inhibiting other vital relationships. In order to ensure that foster youth are given proper support and the opportunity to develop and grow emotionally, relationally, and personally, I Pour Life’s recommends a maximum of two life transfers between educational institutions for youth up until age 18.

AUTHOR(S)
Grace Higgins, David Gurian

INTRODUCTION
With a stable education environment and positive relationships, young adults can become healthy, independent goal seekers with a strong network to rely on as they develop. However, without ample time in a single environment, young people face difficult barriers to relationship development and education progress. Unfortunately, this is the reality for many foster youth who undergo frequent life transfers (the transition from one placement to another, whether in living facilities or schools). The cost of frequent life transfers means losing healthy relationships and
losing out on the crucial aspects of education. No one can afford these losses, especially foster youth given their status as an already vulnerable population.

Many people who have never been in the foster care system can cite an event similar to a life transfer as a pivotal or monumental event in their personal development. Defining moments happen when big events take place and the trajectory of one's life changes, such as changing schools or moving to a new city or state. Even with the stability of family, such moves or transitions deeply impact children emotionally, mentally, and developmentally. Even for adult children outside the foster care system, such moves require increased mental and emotional preparation even when the transition is long anticipated. Life transfers for youth in state custody often happen abruptly and repeatedly, which have long-term negative consequences, especially without a healthy family structure to support them along the way.

**DEFINING LIFE TRANSFERS**

Life transfers can be simply defined as a “major transition” for foster youth. Some examples of life transfers include the transfer from one group home to another, transfer from a group home to a foster family, transfer between foster families, or the transfer from one education institution to another. A life transfer can occur if a foster child is moved to a different living environment or education institution whether across the street, city, state, or even across state lines. Ultimately, a life transfer disrupts life and progress for foster youth. “Stein (2006) noted in the results of a meta-analysis that 30% to 40% of children in foster care experienced 4 or more moves, and that among these up to one tenth had been displaced 10 or more times” (Flores, Hawes, Westbrooks, and Henderson, 2018). While a life transfer is certainly inconvenient by all definitions for foster youth, the effects of a life transfer are much deeper than surface level. “Research has demonstrated that children who experience numerous moves in foster care are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems and less likely to achieve reunification or permanency” (Chambers, Crutchfield, Willis, Cuza, Otero, and Carmichael, 2017). Each life transfer has an enormous impact on the emotional and mental well-being of a foster child.

Life transfers happen for a variety of reasons. Among the many possibilities, youth who are in I Pour Life’s LifeStrengths program cite life transfers as a result of multiple reunification attempts (that end up failing), failed or tense relationships within a group home, behavioral choices that provoke a transfer, or a request from the youth themselves. Youth can request to move if they want to be closer to a relative in hopes of reunification or to pursue a romantic relationship, although the latter request would not be granted by the caseworker if that was the known reason. Youth who have few or no restrictions concerning placement can also be transferred out of a living facility with limited beds in order to accommodate an incoming youth who may have specific requirements or restrictions.

In a California study conducted to gain perspective on what a “move” means for a foster youth, 43 adult participants who were former foster youth were interviewed about the conditions and implications of a move. Their research concluded the following:
“Participants in this study were very clear about what should be considered a move. The amount of time, whether it is one hour or one day is irrelevant; the youth still has to deal with the emotional stress, packing their belongings and moving to another location. The majority of participants stated that returning to their family home or placed in the same foster home prior to moving back impacted their well-being and therefore should be counted” (Chambers, Crutchfield, Willis, Cuza, Otero, and Carmichael, 2017).

The following characteristics of a move are defined by the same study:

1) A child's physical location has changed; care and responsibility of the child is assigned to another adult.
2) A child's personal belongings may or may not be transported to the new placement.
3) The placement move is coordinated by the caseworker and/or agency personnel, and the child may or may not be informed about the impending move.
4) Removing the child from one placement to another is done without consideration of the child's potential impact of the move, length of time at one placement, or anticipated outcome of the move for all parties involved (Chambers, Crutchfield, Willis, Cuza, Otero, and Carmichael, 2017).

According to many youth that I Pour Life has encountered, all three and oftentimes the fourth factor are prevalent in moves they've experienced, or life transfers as coined by I Pour Life. Frequent life transfers prove to be an enormous setback for youth across the board, but especially relationally and academically. As described by one of the youth at I Pour Life, life transfers usually happen with very little notice and not enough time for mental and emotional preparation. Life transfers also interfere with the youth’s relational development, which is crucial for foster youth to maintain given their existing limited scope of network and resources. Many youth rely on positive and stable relationships to properly cope with problems and feelings. Navigating developmental years can prove to be difficult for any young person, but especially difficult for a young person being repeatedly relocated without healthy relationships or adult mentors. Finally, frequent life transfers create a turbulent education experience which leads to a devastatingly low graduation rate for an already at-risk population.

**THE EFFECT OF LIFE TRANSFERS ON EDUCATION**

While all children are provided the opportunity to pursue primary and secondary education, not all children have the same educational experience. Foster youth are often transferred between multiple educational institutions causing them to fall into a constant cycle of uprooting and replanting themselves into new environments. The personal challenges that foster youth face are astounding as it is, which is why it is imperative that education must remain a consistent and positive factor of development instead of serving as an additional obstacle to navigate. If statistics, research, and society insist that education is paramount in order to achieve economic prosperity and independence, it would be a severe injustice to overlook an already at-risk
population experiencing disruption in this arena. This is especially true for foster youth, who must overcome a variety of obstacles that hinder their ability to pursue the opportunities and attain the value that education has to offer. The implications of allowing foster youth to fall through the gaps of community support and lose out on essential stability goes far beyond the damage being done during their young years, although that alone should be alarming enough to implement change.

Education is not only advantageous to the personal, academic, and professional growth of children, but is a critical component of emotional and relational development. While the benefits that come from education are important for all children, education becomes critical for foster youth who have failed to receive positive sources of development otherwise. “When supported by strong practices and policies, positive school experiences can counteract the negative effects of abuse, neglect, separation, and lack of permanency experienced by the more than 400,000 U.S. children and youth in foster care” (Fostering Success in Education, 2018). Clearly, a child who lacks permanency and stability in their home life cannot reap the benefits of the permanency and stability that school offers if the school, teachers, staff, student body, culture, and town are constantly changing as well. Fostering Success in Education (2018) outlines the contributions that limited school changes can make on the overall well-being of a foster youth:

“Children who experience frequent school changes may also face challenges in developing and sustaining supportive relationships with teachers or peers. Supportive relationships and a positive educational experience can be powerful contributors to the development of resilience and are vital components for healthy development and overall well-being.”

Two areas that shape the growth and development of children are their personal lives and their educational environments. If these environments prove to be unstable—the two areas where youth spend the majority of their childhood (without having a choice or say in either)—instability becomes a negative theme in the child’s life that threatens to linger into the foster youth’s young adult years. The experiences that a child has during their educational years sets a foundation for their future, whether those experiences are positive or not. With a stable education experience sustained by limited life transfers, youth are able to focus on their future and begin resourcing themselves with skills, knowledge, and social capital in order to create the future they desire.

In addition to developmental advantages that stem from a stable education environment, academic success also tops the list of advantages that come from stability. With stability in early phases of education, youth are equipped to enter higher/post-secondary education which can set them apart in their field, provide a consistent income, and lead to self-sufficiency. However, post-secondary education is not the normal experience for youth in foster care, and it is rare among youth who have undergone multiple life transfers during their time in the foster care system. Foster youth who would greatly benefit from education often are not completing a high school degree or attaining their GED, let alone post-secondary education. The National
Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care indicates that over one-third of former foster youth had not received their high school degree or GED compared to less than one-tenth of youth the same age who were not part of the welfare system (“Fostering Success in Education,” 2018). While these youth are already less likely to complete education compared to other youth outside of the foster care system, frequent life transfers prove to be an added hurdle that contributes to the statistic of foster youth who do not graduate high school or attain their GED (“Fostering Success in Education,” 2018).

“High school students who change schools once or more, are less than half as likely to graduate as their peers who do not experience a change in schools. In a national study of 1,087 foster care alumni served in 13 states, youth who had one fewer change in living arrangement per year were nearly twice (1.8 times) as likely to graduate from high school before leaving foster care,” (“Fostering Success in Education,” 2018).

Multiple life transfers can be debilitating and heavily discouraging in a foster youth’s education journey. Additionally, foster youth can inherit economic disadvantages if their multiple life transfers result in their failing to complete high school.

“Researchers have found that youth in foster care are less likely to complete high school than their non-foster care peers including peers who are homeless. This is troubling considering that high school graduates earn an average of $8,500 more per year than nongraduates. When youth in foster care do complete high school, they often graduate later than expected” (“Fostering Success in Education,” 2018).

The unstable nature of foster youths’ frequent transitions is a major factor in their failure to complete high school.

“Evidence suggests that young people in foster care are less likely to graduate high school if they experience repeated changes in their foster care living arrangements, as well as when they experience repeated school changes” (“Fostering Success in Education,” 2018). While a single life transfer causes youth to uproot and start over in a completely different school, multiple life transfers can limit the youths’ ability or desire to plant roots anywhere and cause them to withdraw from society. In an educational setting, many factors of life transfers pose risks to youth being able to fully maximize their education. For example, multiple transitions between schools lack consistency in teachers, methods, and continuity of curriculum. Additionally, moving schools may create a gap in chapters or units for youth, causing them to fall behind academically, even when transitions are relatively quick. This is compounded by the natural gaps that take place during a life transfer due to the enrollment process. Many times, credits do not transfer from one school to another with equivalency making it difficult for students to keep up with the rest of their classmates. When a same-age peer surpasses a foster youth in class or
grade levels, the school setting can become an embarrassment, causing the youth to want to drop out. Each of these factors may contribute to the reasons why foster youth statistically take longer to complete high school or attain a GED.

When youth are set back too much, they are more likely to quit school altogether. In 2017, 2.1 million students ages 16-24 dropped out of high school or discontinued GED pursuit (“Fostering Success in Education,” 2018). The social, financial, and academic setbacks that foster youth encounter regarding a lack of support in education is a sacrifice of more than their current situation, but also their future ability to become self-sufficient. “In summary, youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care are faring worse than their same-age peers, in many cases much worse, across a number of domains of development functioning. They approach the age of majority with significant educational deficits and relatively few of them appear to be on a path that will provide them the skills necessary to thrive in today's economy” (Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, 2005).

**TRACKING LIFE TRANSFERS THROUGH LIFEHISTORY MAPS**

LifeHistory Maps are a resource utilized by I Pour Life to make connections and piece together the path of a foster youth in order to better understand their story. Similarly, LifeMaps are a forward-thinking tool used to set goals and see what practical steps can be taken to achieve these goals. This anonymous youth referred to as “A” uses a LifeHistory Map to chart out various life transfers from age 4 to 17, which was A’s age at the time the LifeHistory map was created.
The numerous changes between foster homes and other institutions before the age of 10 indicate an average of one different foster home per year during critical developmental years. At just 9 years old, A ran away from home and was later hospitalized. At 10 years old, A began self harming and later attempted suicide at age 15.

After seeing a visual representation of life transfers, it is easy to see the barriers to establishing positive relationships that could counteract the negative experiences of constantly moving between education institutions, medical institutions, government facilities, and foster homes.

LIFE TRANSFERS HINDER POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS
Tragically, as each life transfer seemingly opened a new chapter for A, the personal damage previously done from other life transfers and negative experiences was being compounded. Frequent life transfers do not give the youth or their foster families a realistic chance at developing stable relationships. It is highly unlikely that A’s attempt at suicide at age 15 was a result of the conditions from a single foster family placement. However, the event could possibly be compounded from A’s initial self-harm that began five years and eight placements prior. In many instances, the first foster family that a youth is placed in does not work out to be a good fit for the family and the child. Moving a child between numerous placements hurts the child’s development, callouses the child to structure and healthy discipline, and can cause development problems that carry over into the child’s next placement. Additionally, a childhood full of life transfers has been described by I Pour Life youth as furthering the idea of isolation and unwantedness in a child’s brain and distorts the child’s view of the right way to deal with problems.

The benefits that result from a healthy relationship with an adult are too numerous to list. And while there might be instances of tension and rebellion, if an adult is able to earn the trust and respect of the foster youth, positive examples of structure, discipline, and reward can be achieved along with healthy problem solving and decision making. These positive outcomes are given adequate opportunity to develop when life transfers are limited and stability for the foster youth is a priority.

One source of positive relationships can come from the foster youth’s education environment. As children progress from primary to secondary education, students often turn to the relationships they’ve created with teachers, faculty, and employers to grow their network and create social capital. Through healthy relationships and network expansion, young students create a solid foundation of resources for themselves during a crucial development stage. In their post-education years, young people with positive relationships will be better prepared to live independently and know how to properly cope with problems while advancing toward their goals. However, these ideals become increasingly difficult for foster youth who encounter multiple life transfers. Along with navigating frequent transfers, not having steady support from adults hinders foster youth from making important decisions. “Youth in foster care need supportive adults to help them achieve their education goals and pursuits … A growing body of research is demonstrating the importance of having adult mentors and advocates to support
students’ education successes” (“Fostering Success in Education,” 2018). As advantageous as a consistent education environment can be for students, it is absolutely essential for foster youth who otherwise do not have any stability, positive relationships, or network to turn to in times of need.

CONCLUSION
Ultimately, youth in care are often moved around so many times that it becomes improbable for them to exist in a community long enough to create a network of support, establish critical and meaningful relationships that generate emotional and personal stability/well-being, and create social capital. While life transfers originate with the best interest of foster youth in mind, excessive life transfers can disrupt healthy relationships and deconstruct the support network of foster youth. I Pour Life recommends that foster youth undergo no more than two life transfers in order to allow youth to develop and sustain crucial relationships. During secondary education, I Pour Life recommends a limit of two education transfers so youth are able to nurture vital connections among adult mentors and peers. Foster youth need stability in relationships and education. They need a chance to be rooted in a community. I Pour Life continues to advocate for youth on state and local levels. While there is a growing need for more research on life transfer and the effect that these frequent transitions have on foster youth, LifeCoaches at I Pour Life have reported a strong correlation between youth who have undergone fewer life transfers and positive behavioral development (i.e., mental stability). Fewer life transfers present more opportunities for foster youth to step into a self-sufficient future.
REFERENCES


