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A Child's Perspective of the Foster Care System

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Abstract

Family and Children's Services of Monterey County Department of Social Services is an agency that serves families in the Monterey County who have an open case. In the Family Reunification Unit they work on reunifying families back together. Youth in the foster care system are uninformed about their dependency case. Unlike parents, they do not receive a class that teaches them all about their case. Some of the reasons for this is that social workers have very large caseloads, People/Youth have lack of knowledge of court systems and CASA has a long waiting list. The consequences of not informing youth with deep knowledge about their cases are that they will have misconceptions about their case, they may develop depression and anxiety, and they begin to lack the trust in others. A survey was created for foster children age ten and older in order to figure out what areas they are confused about. The data was analyzed to see what topics can be used to create a curriculum for them. As a result, foster youth that were surveyed were confused about many different aspects of their case. A class should be implemented in order to address the misconceptions that foster youth have about their dependency case. The class should be taught by an MSW intern or a social worker.

Keywords: foster, dependency case, survey, youth

Agency & Communities Served

Family & Children's Services (FCS)- Monterey County DSS commits to helping families in Monterey County. Their mission is:

The Family and Children's Services Branch offers child protective services, foster care services, and adoption services to children and youth in Monterey County. The mission of FCS is to prevent the occurrence of child abuse and neglect. Service goals strive to keep children and youth safe and within the protection of a permanent family. (Family & Children's Services, 2008)

FCS serves children in Monterey County who are in the foster care system. As of 2018, there are 389 children in foster care (Kids Data, 2018). FCS serves every race and ethnicity, but according to the data, 301 of the children are Hispanic/Latino (Kids Data, 2018).

The reunification department works with families to help parents reunify with their children. There are several programs offered through the reunification department of FCS. Parents are offered parenting classes, domestic violence classes, Narcotics Anonymous / Alcoholics Anonymous classes, therapy and connecting with them other agencies to find housing. Meanwhile parents are completing their case plan, children are placed in foster homes and group homes.

Depending on the type of abuse that parents have caused, they are required to complete different types of classes. Every family that has a dependency case completes a mental health assessment. This will help determine whether any of them need therapy. In most cases, therapy is needed in families. Parenting classes help parents better discipline their child and basically be a better parent. Every dependency case requires parents to complete all of these types of classes.

Problem Description

One of the problems at FCS is that youth in the foster care system are uninformed about their cases. Parents are able to attend a 10-week program that teaches them about what it means to have an open case with FCS. They learn about what to expect from a social worker, about court hearings, and about the different meetings that they are required to attend. The youth in the foster care system do not have this type of class that allows them to learn about their cases. As Lickerman states, "Research has suggested that taking the time to explain yourself will help your children develop a moral conscience..." (2010).

Contributing Factors

One of the contributing factors is that social workers have very large caseloads. There was a study done on how many caseloads a social worker is carrying and how many they should carry. "The average caseload for a child welfare worker is between 24 and 31 children. The Child Welfare League of America recommends caseloads of between 12 and 15 children per worker" (National Association of Social Workers, 2004). Having a large caseload is difficult for a social worker to be able to get into detail about every case with every youth.

Another contributing factor is that youth have a lack of knowledge of court systems. In Monterey County there isn't a program implemented to help youth learn about court systems and answer any questions they may have. In general, leaving people in the dark about their court case can really confuse them and make them feel confused. In an article from The Guardian it says, "Despite many attempts over the past 15 years to improve the experience of members of the public giving evidence in court, witnesses are still being left unsupported, uninformed and, in

many cases, left to feel like an afterthought in the process” (n.d.). One of the witnesses claimed that the court process “continues to frustrate, confuse and cause distress” (n.d.).

The final contributing factor is that CASA has a long waiting list. Since CASA advocates attend court hearings with the youth, they would be able to help them answer questions they may have about their case and the court system. In Monterey County, there are currently 65 children on a waiting list for a CASA advocate (CASA of Monterey County, 2019). That is a large number of children waiting to have an advocate and to help them with their understanding of the court system.

Consequences

One of the consequences of this problem is that foster youth will have misconceptions about their case. Many foster youth think they are in foster care as a form of punishment since they don't understand that it's because they were not safe at home. Foster youth also think they are going to orphanages or that all foster children live in one big place. (Fafsblog, 2013). Having these misconceptions can greatly confuse children even more than they already are.

Another consequence is that foster youth can develop depression and anxiety. “Children who have been in foster care were seven times more likely to develop depression and five times more likely to have anxiety” (Reese, 2016). This statistic is for foster children in general, but the stress of being unaware of what is going on with their case it can be a trigger to their current mental health.

The final consequence is the lack of trust in others. Foster children are placed in foster homes with complete strangers in a brand-new environment. It is difficult for them to get used to living in a different place. In a study done with former foster youth, one said the connection

between them and their foster parents was fake. They also felt like foster parents just do it for the money (University of Washington, 2012). It was also stated, ‘Foster parents lack parenting resources and need more specific parenting skills. "Many foster parents couldn't tell the difference between normal teenage 'pushing your buttons' types of behaviors and troubled adolescent behavior due to past life traumas,"' (University of Washington, 2012). If foster parents are not able to understand their youth, there will not be any trust between them.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Social workers have very large caseloads	The youth in the foster care system are uninformed about their cases	Youth will have misconceptions about their case
People/Youth have lack of knowledge of court systems		Depression and anxiety
CASA has a long waiting list		Lack of trust

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project

A capstone project that would address the problem described would be to get more information from foster youth about their questions and concerns towards their case and the court system itself. A survey was created for foster children. After the surveys were completed, the data was analyzed to see what topics can be used to create a class for them. The class would help youth understand their cases and all about the court system. The age of the children that were surveyed was ten years and older. The reason why ten was the age chosen was because at age ten they are able to receive a court report for their case. This project addressed the problem of foster

youth being uninformed about their cases.

Project Purpose

The purpose of this project was to make sure the foster youth do not have a lack of knowledge towards the court system. When something is not explained to a person, it can cause them to make assumptions with misguided information. The survey helped the department understand what areas foster youth need more understanding on. It is important that the youth understand what is going on with their case and what their case is about.

Project Justification

The idea of doing a survey was to understand what types of questions and misconceptions foster youth had towards their case. Creating a class in the future will help them better understand their dependency case. This information also helped the social worker better understand what types of things they should be talking to their foster youth about. There are a variety of components to a dependency case, but having this information from the youth gave the social worker a more narrow understanding.

Project Implementation

In order to get the project started, there was a lot of preparing to do for it. The first capstone paper and class presentation were where the capstone idea was first brought up. At the site visit, the instructor, mentor and student briefly discussed the capstone idea. A brainstorm was done in order to think of ideas and questions that can be implemented in the survey. All of the topics that were thought of for the survey had to be ran by the social worker in order to make sure they were appropriate to ask foster youth. The social worker went over the questions and topics and then explained which ones were good and which ones were too sensitive for the foster

youth. Once the ideas were narrowed down, questions were organized by topic to make sure it was structured. The survey was not simple to make since the word choices were very important. All of the foster youth have had some type of trauma. The same survey was used for all of the youth, but with some youth, certain questions could not be asked. For example: if the youth did not have contact with their parents, questions about visits could not be asked. A question about visits could have triggered them. It was crucial to learn about the case beforehand in order to not trigger the youth.

The capstone project was explained thoroughly in order for the social workers to understand what the intern will be doing as she accompanied them to the home visits. It was important to explain it to them so when the survey was administered, the social workers were not surprised or confused about the content. A change of mentors was a slight interruption since she had to be put up to speed with what was going on. Everything was explained and after that everything continued smoothly. At the beginning of the Fall semester, the survey was given to the foster youth at the end of the social worker's home visit with them. Once the foster youth were surveyed, the data was analyzed.

In order to achieve the project's effectiveness, the surveys were conducted strictly by the intern. This was crucial in order to make sure all of the information was correct, and all of the questions were asked in the correct manner. Conducting the surveys in person was very important. Instead of sending out the surveys with social workers, it was more efficient to do them face to face with the youth. Seeing the reactions to the questions was significant because it gave a better understanding on how the youth were feeling. Appendix B, shows a sample of the survey that was given to foster youth.

Once the surveys were finished, they were put together and analyzed. The things that were to be looked for were to see what areas the youth needed more information regarding their dependency case. The data was used to create a sample curriculum of topics that could be used to create a class for the foster youth. The timeline for this implementation plan is attached in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

Expected Outcomes & Assessment Plan

The expectations for the project was for it to be a useful tool for the department. The original number of youth expected to survey was twelve, but the actual number of youth surveyed was ten. The information gathered from the surveys was used to create a sample curriculum of what topics need to be addressed. This can be used to create a class for the foster youth which will help them understand their dependency case and the court system. The topics in the class will target any questions or concerns the youth may have.

Project Results

When the surveys were completed, everything was analyzed in order to figure out what was the biggest confusion the youth had. One of the observations made was that youth know what certain things are, but not the actual term for it. Ten foster youth were surveyed instead of the number expected (twelve). Although less youth were surveyed than expected, the results were still successful. More than enough information was collected in order to assess the foster youth's confusion in regards to the foster care system. In Appendix C, Figure 1, it shows that 70% of youth surveyed said they did not know what "family reunification services" were. All of the youth surveyed are currently in that process, therefore it was very surprising that they did not know the term for it.

In Appendix C, Figure 2, it shows that all of the youth surveyed did not know how often they have court hearings. In other questions regarding court, some knew when their next court date was or if they knew what a court report was. Knowing how often they have court is very important because it can help them understand the process and how long everything takes. A list of topics was created that should be addressed in a class for foster youth. In Appendix D a sample curriculum is shown that explains the court process. The curriculum included what a court hearing is, who attends and who is involved and what happens at court. Since there are different court hearings, the different ones were all explained and how often court hearings are. It also included information about court reports and what the different sections mean.

Overall, the outcomes were very helpful towards creating a curriculum that would be helpful for foster youth. Most of the foster youth that were surveyed were confused about many different aspects of their case. The results helped create a sample of what they are actually confused about.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Based on the results from the survey, it should be noted that most children were confused on very different levels of their dependency case. Many of the children knew what some topics meant, but they did not know the correct term for it. They are also unaware of the different court hearings and everything that has to do with them.

This project is just the beginning of a process to help foster children better understand their case. A survey was created and foster youth were surveyed. The data was analyzed in order to create a sample curriculum of what topics to be addressed. The other topics that need to be

addressed are about CFT meetings, home visits, court reports, family visits and about their social worker(s). All the children surveyed were confused by at least one of these topics. A curriculum should be created by future interns in order to get the class started. It would be very beneficial for social workers to team up with therapists and teach the class to foster youth. This type of program could really help youth understand every aspect of their case. This project could very much improve by just continuing the process and finishing it.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	MLO's Addressed
Capstone Paper- intro to the agency and project	Intro to project	January 11 th	Information Management
Class Presentation- introduced agency and project idea to the class	Intro to project	February 8 th	Professional Communication
Agency Site Visit- Caitlin met with mentor. Discussed capstone to mentor	Discussion	February 21 st	Collaboration
Brainstorm for Capstone- mentor and student brainstormed ideas for survey	First step	March 20 th	Information Management
Capstone Supervision- talked about what topics should be asked, what youth (age)	Collaboration about project	May 1 st	Professional Communication
Worked on Capstone- started brainstorming on questions to ask youth	Survey ideas	May 1 st	Information Management
Develop Survey- mentor looked through survey, finalized survey	Start making survey	By May 20 th	Information Management
Present to other Social Workers- explained project and questions	Present Capstone	On going	Professional Communication, Collaboration
New Mentor- first meeting, discussed duties with previous mentor. Talked about capstone project and what support was needed	First meeting with new mentor	Sept. 9 th	Professional Communication
Survey Foster Youth- attend home visits with social workers, introduce mt survey at the end of visit.	Survey	Sept. & Oct.	Professional Communication, Information Management

Analyze Data- went through surveys, looked at what topic was the most confusing	Final analysis	Oct. 21 st	Information Management
Create template- created a list of topics to address. Decided on what topic was going to be used for sample curriculum	Binder	Nov. 4 th	Information Management
Create Sample Curriculum- made a curriculum of a topic as if it were to be taught in a class. Addressed different areas of topic	Final part	Nov. 8 th	Information Management

Appendix B

Survey for Foster Youth

Please write down the child's age and gender.

1. What is your understanding about being in foster care?
2. Do you feel confused about what it means to be in foster care? If so, what is confusing?
3. How long have been living here?
4. Do you like it? What do you like or don't like about it?
5. How many social workers have you had?
6. Do you know why you have had this many?
7. Where do you feel most comfortable talking with your social worker?
8. Do you know what home visits are? If so, what are they?
9. Have you been to Court hearings? If not, why?
10. Do you know when your next Court hearing is?
11. Are you going to your next Court hearing? If not, why?
12. Do you know how often you have Court hearings? How often do you have them?
13. Do you know what a Court report is? If so, what is it?
14. Have you read one of your Court reports? If not, why?
15. Do you know what a case plan is? Do you know where to find it?
16. Do you know what Family Reunification Services are?
17. Do you know what a CFT is? If so, what is it?
18. Have you ever been to a CFT? If not, why?
19. How often do you visit with your parents?
20. What is your favorite thing about visits?
21. What would you like to do in your visit that you don't do?
22. What about being in foster care is most confusing to you?
23. If you have a question about foster care who would you go to?
24. Can you think of anything else that is confusing to you about foster care?

Appendix C

Figure 1: Do you know what Family Reunification Services are?

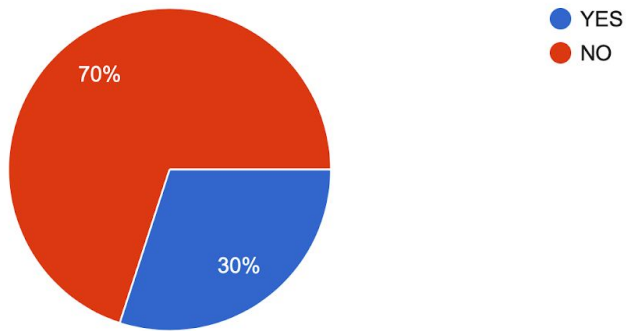
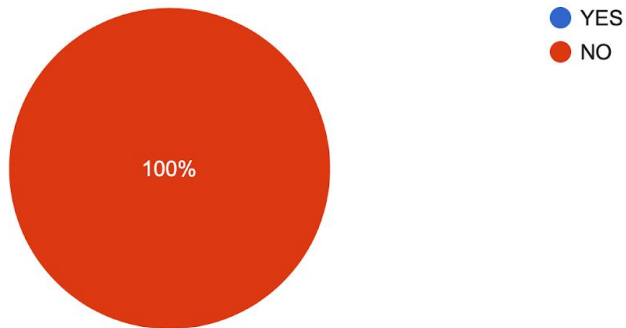


Figure 2: Do you know how often you have Court hearings?



Appendix D

Sample Curriculum

The Court Process

How a Case Gets to Court

The dependency process begins when someone reports suspected child abuse or neglect. An investigation is done by the Department of Social Services. If the social worker believes that the child’s safety requires court protection, then the social worker files a petition to declare the child a dependent of the court. This petition is called a section 300 petition.



Detention Hearing

This hearing is the court’s first chance to hear about the situation that brought the family to the attention of the Department of Social Services. At the first hearing, the judge decides whether the child’s safety requires that they be removed from their home until legal proceedings take place on the allegations of abuse or neglect filed against the parents, and whether the child should stay in the temporary custody of the Department of Social Services.

This hearing happens as soon as possible after the child is removed from her home and before the end of the next court day after the petition is filed.



Jurisdiction/Disposition Hearing

These two hearings are held together.

The child’s parents have a right to a trial on the allegations of abuse or neglect charged against them. At this hearing, the court receives evidence and determines whether the allegations of abuse or neglect are true. If it decides that they are, then the court sustains, or upholds, the petition. If the juvenile court finds that the child was abused or neglected, one of several things can happen. The court can dismiss the case if it finds that dismissal is in the interest of justice and that the welfare of the child requires dismissal; the court may order informal services for the family; or the court may decide to make the child a dependent of the court.

If the court declares that the child is a court dependent, the judge then decides whether the child should remain with a parent or be legally removed from the parents’ care. If the child is removed from the parents, the court then considers who should care for the child.

In some cases, the court orders a reunification plan for the parents so that the child can return home. A reunification plan describes the responsibilities and duties of both the social services department and the parents to remedy the problems that caused the child’s removal. At this hearing the court can also make orders about visitation, issue restraining orders, and make any other orders the judge finds are in the best interest of the child.

The jurisdiction hearing and disposition hearing are held on the same day for the convenience of the court and the people attending the hearings. This hearing must be held within 15 days of the court’s order detaining the child.



Three-Month Oral Review Hearing

At this hearing, the social worker gives an oral update on how the parents’ progress with their case plan and how the children are doing in foster care. They give a brief overview of progress and address any challenges. This is to keep everyone up to date.



Six-Month Review Hearing

The juvenile court must review the cases of all children placed in foster or relative care at least once every six months. At the first review hearing, information is given on the parents’ progress with their reunification plan and on how the child is doing in foster care.

The court may return the child to his home or may order that the child continue to live in a relative’s home or a foster home.



12 Month Permanency Review Hearing

A permanency hearing must be held within 12 months of the date the child entered foster care. The court will decide if the child can safely be returned home or if efforts to reunify the child with her birth family should end. In some cases, the court may decide to continue trying to reunify the family. The child’s parents are often able to continue visits and other involvement with the child even if the court terminates reunification services.

If the child cannot return home, another permanent plan will be selected at the permanency hearing. That plan could be adoption, legal guardianship, placement with a fit and willing relative, or continuation in foster care while one of these plans is pursued. The preferred choice is the most permanent home possible for the child, so the court considers first adoption and then legal guardianship. If neither of those options is possible or neither is in the child’s best interest, and placement with a fit and willing relative is not possible, then the judge orders continuation in foster care with a goal to achieve one of these plans.



Selection and Implementation Hearing

Within 120 days of termination of reunification services for the child’s parents, a selection and implementation hearing must be held. The social worker prepares a report for this hearing that includes information about the child and a preliminary assessment of whether the child is likely to be adopted and identifies any prospective adoptive parent or guardian.

At the selection and implementation hearing, the court can permanently terminate parental rights and order that the child be placed for adoption. If no adoptive home has been identified, the court can order adoption as the permanent plan and order the social worker to find an appropriate adoptive home for the child. If adoption is not possible, the court can appoint a legal guardian and issue letters of guardianship, order placement with a fit and willing relative, or order continuation in foster care with the goal of achieving one of the other plans.



Post-Permanency Review Hearings

A hearing is held every six months to update the court on the child’s progress and needs. These hearings continue until either the child is adopted, a legal guardianship is established in which court supervision is no longer necessary, or the case is dismissed for some other reason.

Once a year, the court must address whether the permanent plan for the child continues to be appropriate. The court can add or modify orders until the child turns 18 (or 21, if the child chooses and participates in extended foster care) or the case is dismissed.

WHO ATTENDS COURT?

Parents

Children 10+: At age 10, children have access to their court report.

Foster parents

Attorneys: These people give advice and talk in court for the people who have disagreements. Represent child in court and tell judge what child wants.

Judge: This person’s job is to make decisions and make sure that everyone follows the rules in court.

Bailiff: This person keeps order in the courtroom and usually wears a uniform.

Clerk: This person organizes all the papers and keeps track of the judge’s decisions.

Witnesses: These people come to court to tell the truth and talk about what they have seen or heard.

Court reporter: This person types everything that is said in court into a machine.

Interpreter: This person translates what is said in court.

Social worker: will make recommendations to the court and makes important decisions about where child lives, who they live with and visitation with others.

CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate): advocate at court. Makes sure others who are working on case know what’s important to child and they need.

HOW SHOULD YOU BEHAVE AT COURT?

1. Be on time.
2. Dress neatly.
3. Tell the truth.
4. Don’t go in alone. Make sure there is an adult with you, your attorney is available
5. Be respectful.
6. Don’t eat or drink in court.
7. Don’t chew gum.
8. No electronic devices.
9. Refer to the judge as “Your Honor.”
10. Don’t speak unless the judge or an attorney asks you to.
11. If you don’t understand something, say that you don’t understand. Someone will explain it again for you.

