

Youth Participation in Child Welfare Decision Making: A Focused Ethnography

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Youth Participation in Child Welfare Decision Making: A Focused Ethnography**

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This dissertation examines youth participation in child welfare decision-making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences held in New York City. It explores the factors that influence youth attendance and participation in decision-making opportunities. It also examines the strategies conference facilitators use to engage youth in decision-making in permanency planning family team conferences. The study employed a focused ethnography design, characterized by relatively short-term field visits, intensive data collection and intensive data analysis. Data collection included observations of permanency planning family team conferences, followed by in-depth interviews with young people and conference facilitators.

Grounded theory conventions for data analysis, including initial coding, focused coding, theoretical coding, and analytic memos, were used. Data analysis focused on gaining a deeper understanding of how youth are incorporated into decision-making procedures, including a comparison of youth and conference facilitators' perceptions and experiences. It also explored the specific strategies facilitators used to engage youth in decision-making at the family team conference.

The study findings demonstrate that youth attendance and participation in child welfare decision-making opportunities are influenced by the degree of relationship between youth and agency staff. Youth in the study valued workers who provided them with a combination of instrumental and emotional support. Factors that facilitated the

development of a positive relationship with agency staff included, case continuity, non-judgmental listening, establishing trust, and transcending roles.

Regarding facilitator engagement strategies, findings revealed two very different facilitation styles: adult centric and youth centric. Adult centric facilitation placed adults at the center of decision making by failing to engage youth, silencing the youth voice, adopting the adult narrative, and going through the motions. Youth centric facilitation placed youth at the center of decision making by establishing trust, encouraging youth to speak, adapting the youth narrative, and demonstrating genuine care and concern. The facilitation styles are demonstrated through case illustrations and examples. The study's policy and practice implications, limitations and areas of further research are presented.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Dianne Georgantas. Her unconditional love and support throughout my life made me believe that I can accomplish anything. In addition to being a wonderful mother of six and grandmother of twelve, she is an accomplished social worker and educator. She instilled in me the importance of working in a profession that positively impacts the lives of others.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Study Rationale**

There are approximately 400,540 children living in foster care in the United States and approximately half are adolescents between the ages of 11-21 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [U.S. DHHS], 2011). Each year, approximately 26,000 youth emancipate from foster care nationally due to age restrictions (U.S. DHHS, 2011). Prospective studies report foster care youth are at high risk for negative life outcomes during the transition to adulthood including poverty, homelessness, incarceration, low educational attainment, unemployment, sexual and physical victimization, and teenage pregnancy (Courtney et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2005).

Federal Legislation, through the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, and the Fostering Connections to Success and Improving Adoptions Act of 2008, make attempts to address the permanency needs of youth in foster care. Included in federal policy are efforts to increase the level of participation of young people in decision-making focused on permanency planning and transitional plans.

In 2007, the New York City Administration for Children's Services [NYC ACS] introduced the Improving Outcomes for Children child welfare reform initiative (NYC ACS, 2013a). The goal of IOC was to improve safety, permanency, and well-being for children and youth involved in foster care and preventive services. A key component of the IOC initiative was family team conferencing; a family and community engagement practice model whereby service planning and critical child welfare decisions are made by a team, ideally consisting of family members, advocates, community members and

service providers (NYC ACS, 2013a). Children aged 10 and older are invited to attend and participate in the conferences (NYC ACS, 2009).

International, federal and local policies attempt to address the legal rights of young people to have a voice in decision-making however they do not offer professional guidance for meaningfully engaging youth in decision-making practices. Efforts have been made to design typologies and theories of youth participation (Bessell, 2011; Hart, 1997; Shier, 2001; Thomas, 2007; Vis & Thomas, 2009). Researchers distinguish between consulting with youth about decisions versus including them in decision-making practices. Key elements of participation include notifying youth when important decisions are being made, inviting youth to be present, providing youth with adequate information regarding issues under consideration, providing opportunities for youth to express their views, considering youths' views when making decisions, and supporting youth throughout the entire decision making process (Cashmore, 2002; McLeod, 2007; McNeish, 1999; Murray and Hallett, 2000; Sanders and Mace, 2006; Thomas, 2007).

There are benefits to having youth participate in child welfare decision-making practices. From a human rights perspective, youth have a legal right to participate in decision-making (Cashmore, 2011). From an empowerment perspective, youth gain information about their options and rights, develop an understanding of the decision making process, develop decision-making skills, and gain a sense of control in the process (Cashmore, 2011; Checkoway, 2010; Khoury, 2006; Leeson, 2007; McNeish, 1999; O'Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2002; Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010). From an enlightenment perspective, youth provide up to date, relevant information about

their experiences and perceptions that can lead to more comprehensive and better-informed decision-making (Cashmore, 2011).

Studies of youth participation overwhelmingly conclude that foster care youth perceive limited opportunities to participate in making important decisions that significantly impact them (Bessell, 2011; Cashmore, 2002; Freundlich, Avery & Padgett, 2007; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999). When given the opportunity to participate, foster youth do not feel adequately prepared, do not fully understand the issues under consideration, and do not believe their wishes were heard and/or respected (Cashmore, 2002; Freundlich, Avery & Padgett, 2007; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999; Wilson and Conory, 1999). Although youth report limited opportunities to participate, they consistently state a desire to be involved and have “a voice” in decision-making processes (Boylan and Ing, 2005; Cashmore, 2002; Cashmore 2011; Saunders and Mace, 2006; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999).

There is limited empirical research focused on the nature and complexity of youth participation in child welfare decision-making, especially from the youth perspective. Studies report a lack of youth participation in decision-making opportunities however they do not adequately examine the experiences of youth who do participate. Additionally, studies do not use a consistent theoretical framework for collecting and analyzing data.

### **Study Goals**

This dissertation examines, for the first time, youth participation in child welfare decision-making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences held in New York City. As noted, there is scant scholarly research focused on youth

participation in child welfare decision-making, especially from the youth perspective. Additionally, no studies have examined the participation of older youth in permanency planning family team decision-making conferences. The aim of this dissertation is to address the gaps in the literature by exploring -- from the perspective of foster care youth and conference facilitators -- policies and practices pertaining to youth participation in decision making focused on permanency planning and transitional plans. Since the Family Team Conference model is a relatively new initiative in New York City, designed specifically to engage participants in decision-making, the study offers a rich, in-depth understanding of this phenomenon.

The dissertation explores the following research questions:

1. What factors influence youth attendance and participation in child welfare decision-making opportunities?
2. What strategies do conference facilitators use to engage youth in decision making in the context of the permanency planning family team conferences?

### **Methodological Choices**

The lack of empirical data, coupled with the desire to capture the experiences and perceptions of multiple stakeholders, informed the decision to employ a qualitative methodology. A qualitative design should be used when in-depth exploration of a topic is required (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It is appropriate when there is limited empirical information about a topic, the voices of participants have not been adequately captured, there is a need to develop theories, and/or quantitative methods (i.e. statistical analysis) won't capture the information sought (Creswell, 2013).

The study employed a type of sociological ethnography known as focused ethnography, characterized by relatively short-term field visits, intensive data collection and intensive data analysis (Knoblauch, 2005). The researcher observed permanency planning family team conferences and conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with young people and conference facilitators. Additionally, administrative documents describing the philosophy and structure of the family team conference and facilitator training materials were reviewed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was guided by three theories: procedural justice theory, emerging adulthood and positive youth development. Procedural justice has been used widely over the past three decades to examine bureaucratic decision-making practices (MacCoun, 2005). Research suggests that individuals who perceive decision-making procedures to be fair tend to be more satisfied and comply better with the outcomes (Tyler, 2000). Additionally, when people believe they were treated respectfully, their self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy may be enhanced (Warshak, 2003). To date, this has been underexplored with respect to foster care youths' perceptions of procedural justice.

The second theory that informed the study was Emerging Adulthood, conceptualized by Arnett (2000) as the developmental stage between the ages of 18-25. It is considered a unique stage of the life cycle, between adolescence and adulthood, where adolescents gradually develop the life skills necessary to move from dependence to independence. Development occurs in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains. Studies of emerging adulthood report that individuals in industrialized countries are delaying the acceptance of adult roles (i.e. marriage, full time employment, parenthood)

until their mid to late twenties (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). This developmental theory was selected because the study examines the experiences and perceptions of foster care youth, aged 18-21 years, in permanency planning decision-making practices. It was important to understand societal views of this stage of life in order to compare and contrast societal expectations of the general population compared to their expectations of a vulnerable and marginalized group, such as foster care youth.

Positive youth development (PYD) is a process whereby youth develop the knowledge and skills to successfully enter adulthood (Delgado, 2002). It focuses on youths' strengths rather than their deficits or risk factors. It emphasizes adults partnering with youth in programs and activities (Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman, 2004). This dissertation considers whether positive youth development principles and practices were utilized in the context child welfare decision-making practices focused on permanency planning and transitional plans.

### **Study Contributions**

This study has both theoretical and practical implications. On a theoretical level, the research expands the procedural justice literature to an understudied phenomenon, the participation of young people in child welfare decision making focused on permanency planning and transitional plans. It examines the application of the developmental theory, emerging adulthood, to foster care youth. It offers insight into the relationships foster care youth experience with formal networks of support, such as agency staff, during emerging adulthood and how these relationships may influence their attendance and participation in child welfare decision-making. It considers the utilization of positive youth development practices and principles in family team conferencing. On a practical



level, the study findings offer policymakers, administrators and practitioners' concrete recommendations and strategies for enhancing policy and practice focused on engaging youth in child welfare decision-making.

## **CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

This chapter begins with an overview of adolescents residing in foster care in the United States. Then, the concept of permanency planning and the development of federal legislation designed to address the permanency needs of foster care youth is reviewed. This is followed by a discussion of New York City's policies and practices focused on permanency planning for adolescents. The chapter concludes with an overview of family team conferencing.

### **Adolescents in Foster Care in the United States**

Child welfare addresses the long-standing phenomenon of child abuse and neglect, which is often referred to as child protection, maltreatment or dependency. When children are removed from their family due to abuse or neglect, they are placed in foster care. The term foster care includes both family-based care settings such as kinship and non-kinship foster homes and congregate care settings such as group homes and residential facilities.

Adolescents make up a large proportion of the children in foster care. There are approximately 400, 540 children living in foster care in the United States and approximately half are adolescents between the ages of 11-21 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [U.S. DHHS], 2011). In New York City, the location of the current study, there are about 13,000 children in out of home care and approximately half are adolescents (NYC ACS, 2013b). Compared to younger children, adolescents in foster care are more likely to live in congregate care facilities, experience multiple placement moves, and are less likely to achieve permanency through adoption (Courtney et. al, 2007; Wertheimer, 2002).

Each year, approximately 26,000 youth emancipate from foster care nationally (U.S. DHHS, 2011) and about 1,000 youth emancipate from foster care in New York City (NYC ACS, 2013b). They exit the foster care system due to age restrictions, rather than achieving permanency through adoption, guardianship, custody, or reunification. In the past ten years, the national percentage of youth aging out of foster care has increased. In 2000, the percentage of exits due to emancipation was 7 percent whereas in 2011 it increased to 11 percent (US DHHS, 2011).

It is well established in the literature that youth in foster care are not sufficiently prepared to make the transition to adulthood, resulting in negative life outcomes including homelessness, unemployment, health and mental health issues, substance abuse, and criminal activity (Courtney et al., 2007; Pecora et al, 2005). Studies demonstrate that youth in foster care fall behind their peers in the general population in terms of educational attainment, including lower rates of high school graduation, GED acquisition and college enrollment (Courtney et al., 2004; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2005). Foster care youth are at high risk for adverse health and mental health outcomes compared to the general population. According to the Child Welfare League of America (2013) more than 80 percent of young people in foster care have developmental, behavioral or emotional problems compared to 20 percent in the general population. Foster care youth are at substantial risk for engaging in high-risk behaviors including sex with multiple partners and unprotected sex (Bilaver & Courtney, 2006.) They consent to first intercourse at a younger age than their peers in the general population and experience higher rates of teenage pregnancy (Bilaver & Courtney, 2006; Carpenter, Clyman, Davidson & Steiner, 2001).

The most comprehensive outcome study of youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood in the United States is the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study), a longitudinal study examining a sample of young people from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois as they transition from foster care to independent living (Courtney et al., 2011). Five waves of data were collected from youth at aged 17 or 18 years old (n=732), 19 years old (n = 603), 21 years old (n = 591), 23 or 24 years old (n = 602), and 26 years old (n = 596).

Results from the most recent wave of data collection reported that at aged 26 former foster care youth lagged behind their peers in the general population in multiple domains including educational attainment, economic well being, self-sufficiency, and criminality. Regarding educational attainment, although 83 percent of the women and 77 percent of the men received a GED or high school diploma, only 11 percent of the young women and 5 percent of the young men received a post-secondary degree. Less than half of the sample were currently employed, and most were not earning a living wage. Almost half the sample reported at least one economic hardship, including not having enough money to pay rent, not having enough money to pay the utility bill, gas or electricity shutoff, phone service disconnected, and eviction. Two-thirds of the young women and two-fifths of the young men received food stamps during the past year and one quarter received emergency food. The majority of study participants had been arrested at least once and approximately one-third of the young women and almost two-thirds of the young men reported spending at least one night in jail since they were 17 or 18 years old.

While there is no comparable longitudinal study in New York City, researchers

report similar findings. Culhane and Park (2007) found that approximately a quarter of youth who left the foster care system in 1999 entered a homeless shelter within three years. Hilliard (2011) reported that about half of foster care youth aging out of the system were unemployed at any given time, thus they were more likely than their same age peers to experience homelessness, welfare dependence and incarceration.

### **Historical Development of Permanency Planning**

The phenomenon of youth emancipating from foster care to live independently is not a new issue however it has received increasing attention over the past three decades. The increase in publicity can be attributed to a combination of factors including empirical studies highlighting negative outcomes for foster youth during the transition from dependence to independence, increased reporting of federal and state level data tracking the status of children and youth, and federal legislation addressing the permanency needs of foster care youth.

Historically, foster care was viewed as a temporary solution for abused and neglected children (McGowan, 2010). Children remained in foster care until they were returned home to their parents, or were adopted. Children were not expected be raised in foster care, so there were no specific services focused on foster care youth acquiring independent living skills. Consequently, youth lingered in foster care without establishing permanency through adoption, custody or guardianship, and were not adequately prepared to make a successful transition from foster care to independent living.

The first piece of major federal legislation addressing the permanency needs of children and youth in foster care was the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (PL 96-272). The Act stressed the importance of permanency planning, defined as

goal-oriented activities designed to assist children to live in families that provide a continuity of relationships with nurturing caregivers and offer the chance to establish lifelong relationships (Maluccio, Fein, & Olmstead, 1986). The Act required states to track the progress of children in foster care through establishing case plans and holding regular administrative case reviews.

Research in the early eighties revealed that many foster care youth did not graduate from high school, large numbers were unemployed and many aged out of the foster care system without acquiring adequate housing (Festinger, 1983; Zimmerman 1982). In 1986, Congress amended the Social Security Act to include the Title IV-E Independent Living Program. It authorized \$70 million in mandatory funding to states to provide services to youth preparing for independent living. Services included outreach programs, education, employment, and housing assistance. Although federal funding became available, there were restrictions and limitations, resulting in a large number of eligible youth not receiving services (McGowan, 2005). Studies conducted after the implementation of the Title IV-E Independent Living Program concluded that the program was underfunded, the services were inconsistent, the programs and services varied by state, and were not effectively preparing youth to make a successful transition from foster care to independence (Barth, 1990; Collins, 2001; Cook, 1994; Westat, 1991).

In 1994, the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System [AFCARS] was established as a mechanism to collect state level data on all children and youth entering and exiting foster care. It recorded items such as the number of children in foster care, age, race/ethnicity, length of time spent in care, number of placements, type of placements, and permanency outcomes.

Despite federal and state efforts to address permanency, youth were still lingering in foster care without achieving permanency. In 1997, Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act [ASFA] (PL 105-89). ASFA set new time frames for permanency hearings. The initial hearing had to be held within twelve months of a child's entry into foster care and every twelve months thereafter until the child was discharged from care. The hearings reviewed the permanency plan for the child -- return to parent, guardianship, adoption, or another planned permanent living arrangement.

Two years later, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-109) replaced the Title IV-E Independent Living Program with the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. It drew wide attention to the needs of youth in foster care. It doubled funding for independent living services, from \$70 million to \$140 million, to assist youth in transitioning out of foster care. Independent living services included assistance in gaining a high school diploma, training in daily living skills, training in financial management, and other related services. It also allowed states to provide additional assistance, including room and board, to former foster care youth. It provided states the option of extending Medicaid for youth, ages 18-21, transitioning from foster care. The Act mandated states to involve youth in the design of state independent living programs and in developing their individual case plans. For all youth, ages 16 and older, the case plans had to include the programs and services that will assist the youth in transitioning from foster care to independent living.

Although states were required to provide youth with independent living services, they were also encouraged to develop a concurrent plan to find them a permanent home. The Act provided pre-adoptive parents additional funding and support to care for older

children in foster care considered “hard to place.” The Act also required states to provide the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services with outcome data to assess States’ performance. Data on youth included educational attainment, employment, housing, homelessness, teen pregnancy, incarceration, and other high-risk behaviors.

In 2001, Congress amended the Chafee Program as part of the reauthorization of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act (P.L. 107-133) and created the Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) Program. The program awards grants up to \$5,000 per year to current and former foster youth to help pay for college or specialized education to help prepare them for the workforce. ETV grants are funded by the federal government and administered by the states.

In 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Improving Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351) expanded services to older youth who lacked permanent families by providing states federal assistance to provide youth support services until age 21, given they are in school or employed. It required that 90 days prior to the youth’s emancipation from foster care, the caseworker and other appropriate adults develop a personalized transition plan as directed by the youth. The plan must include key elements such as housing, education, employment, health insurance, and social support.

In sum, since the passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, the federal government has made efforts to address the permanency needs of youth in foster care. Youth who are unable to achieve permanency through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or custody were given independent living services geared towards providing them with the necessary skills to transition from foster care to independence. Ninety days prior to a youths’ emancipation from foster care, at aged 18 or



21 years old depending on State regulations, the caseworker and other designated adults are responsible for working with youth to develop a transitional plan. Specific areas addressed in the plan include housing, health insurance, educational attainment, employment, and establishing meaningful connections to caring and committed adults.

### **Permanency Planning in New York City**

In accordance with the Chafee Legislation, the New York City's Administration for Children's Services introduced the Preparing Youth for Adulthood (PYA) plan in 2006. They were allocated \$13.5 million dollars from the Chafee Independent Living funds and \$5.5 million dollars re-allocated through the Administration for Children's Services to coordinate and strengthen the efforts of Children's Services and its contract agencies towards achieving successful outcomes for youth in foster care (NYC ACS, 2006).

The plan shifted the focus of services to youth in foster care from independent living towards youth development. Rather than focusing solely on acquiring independent living skills, youth development is more a holistic approach, viewing the development of skills as an on-going process. In order to assist youth in developing the skills and knowledge necessary to make the transition from dependence to independence, the PYA plan outlined six essential goals, including: (1) establishing permanent connections with caring adults, (2) residing in stable living situations, (3) providing opportunities to advance educational and personal development, (4) increasing responsibility for work and life decisions, (5) meeting individual needs, and (6) ongoing support after aging out of foster care (NYC ACS, 2006). Through the Performance and Evaluation System (PES)

and Evaluation and Quality Improvement Protocol (EQUIP), the Administration for Children's Services tracked key developmental outcomes.

In 2007, the Administration for Children's services introduced the Improved Outcomes for Children [IOC] child welfare reform initiative (NYC ACS, 2013a). The goal of IOC was to improve safety, permanency, and well-being for children and youth in the child welfare system. Key components of IOC included family team conferences, clearer lines of accountability, targeted technical assistance to foster care provider agencies, financing for foster care that promotes a flexible family based system of care that promotes child safety, permanency and well-being, and performance monitoring and measurement that holds the provider agencies accountable (NYC ACS, 2013a).

Family team conferencing [FTC] was a key component of the IOC initiative. Family team conferencing is a family and community engagement practice model where critical decision making and service planning decisions are made by a team of people (NYC ACS, 2013c). Ideally, the conference attendees should include family members, children and youth, service providers, community members, and advocates.<sup>1</sup> In fall 2007, FTC's were piloted into nine agencies that contract with ACS to provide foster care services. In spring 2009, all foster care providers that hold contracts with ACS implemented the FTC model.

### **Origins of Family Team Conferencing**

Family team conferencing originated in New Zealand in response to the growing dissatisfaction amongst the indigenous people with the European-based model of child welfare decision-making (Rauktis, McCarthy, Krackhardt, & Cahalane, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> Conference participants may vary depending on agency policy, client preference and/or other case related factors.

Indigenous people raised concerns that the child welfare practices were not culturally sensitive and were alienating children in care from their cultural networks (Connolly, 2006). In 1989, New Zealand included Family Group Decision Making in their child welfare legislation. Since then, the model moved to other parts of the world including Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States (Rauktis, McCarthy, Krackhardt, Cahalane, 2010).

The implementation of Family Group Decision Making around the world led to variations in the New Zealand model that were dependent on the local child welfare system. According to Berzin, Thomas and Cohen (2007) there is a consistent philosophy across the different models. The model is strengths based and family focused. There is an emphasis on empowering parents to take responsibility for their children and on the rights of clients (i.e. parents and children) to be involved in decision-making practices. Additionally, there's recognition of the need to be culturally sensitive and partner with families and communities in order to make more comprehensive decisions.

New York City's Family Team Conferencing model was adapted from The Annie E. Casey Foundation's (2013) *Family to Family Initiative* which incorporates four core practice strategies: 1) building partnerships with communities most effected by the child welfare system, 2) team decision making at critical child welfare decision points, 3) resource family recruitment, development and support, and 4) building the capacity of states to evaluate Family to Family outcomes. The three types of family team conferences in New York City include: 1) Family Support Services (preventive), 2) Child Protection, and 3) Family Permanency Services (foster care).

Family team conferencing is based on the philosophy that a team is often more capable of high-quality decision making than any one individual (Crea, Crampton, Abramson-Madden, & Usher, 2008). The model assumes that families are the experts on their lives and should have a voice in decision-making practices. It highlights the importance of treating all participants in the conference with dignity and respect. It assumes that participants can make well-informed decisions when supported by a team, and that by including participants in decision-making practices outcomes will improve (NYC ACS, 2013c).

The New York City Administration for Children's Services (2013c) highlights two main objectives of family team conferences. One is to improve critical decision-making focused on child safety, permanency and well-being. This is accomplished through inviting key stakeholders including family members, community members, and social service professionals, to be involved in decision-making. The other is to make comprehensive case decisions regarding service needs and permanency plans, the need for continued placement, and to track progress towards the permanency goal.

Family team conferences held in New York City are facilitated by a trained facilitator and follow a structured format (NYC ACS, 2009). The ideal conference structure begins with an introduction where the facilitator asks each participant to introduce themselves and their relationship to the case. Then, the facilitator reviews the ground rules for the conference to ensure a safe and respectful environment. The facilitator then discusses the difference between privacy and confidentiality. Since the information is used for case planning purposes, the information is private but not confidential. The facilitator informs the participants of their status as mandated reporters.

The facilitator then notes that the goal of the FTC is work together as a team to come to a consensus around decision-making, but if that does not occur, the agency is responsible for making the final decision. The next stage of the FTC is issue identification. During this stage, participants discuss the strengths and the concerns of the case. The purpose is to allow all participants to provide input during this stage. The next stage is to assess the risk and service needs. Then, the facilitator asks the group to brainstorm possible solutions to address the concerns. Once the possible solutions have been identified, the team formulates an action plan, including specific steps and a time-line for completion. The final stage of the conference is reviewing the plan, ensuring that each participant understands the plan and providing copies of the plan to all FTC participants.

### **Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences**

Permanency planning family team conferences, the focus of the present study, focus on child safety, permanency and well-being (NYC ACS, 2009). During the conference the team evaluates the need for ongoing placement, reassess service needs, and ensure progress towards permanency planning goals. Scheduling of the conferences is in accordance with federal time frames of the service plan reviews outlined in the Adoption Safe Families Act of 1997. The conferences in New York are held at three months and six months following a child's initial removal and then every six months thereafter throughout the duration of the case (NYC ACS, 2013c). Children 10 years or older are invited to attend family team conferences, unless it is determined by the caseworker or supervisor that participation would be harmful to the young person (NYC ACS, 2009).

Permanency planning family team conferences involving older youth focus on the permanency goals outlined in the Preparing Youth for Adulthood Plan (NYC ACS, 2006). Key areas include educational attainment, vocational status, housing, health and mental health issues, relationships with caring and committed adults, and relationships with peers (Pecora, et al., 2009). For youth with a permanency goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement [APPLA] the emphasis is on ensuring they are developing the life skills, knowledge and social supports to assist them in making a successful transition from foster care to independence.

### **Conclusion**

Each year, approximately 26,000 youth emancipate from the foster care system in the United States due to age restrictions. Prospective studies report negative life outcomes in key domains including education, housing, employment, social support, health and mental health. Federal and state policies attempt to address the needs of youth in foster care. In 2007, New York City introduced the Improving Outcomes for Children child welfare reform. IOC included a model for child welfare decision-making, family team conferencing, a strengths-based, family and community-focused practice model. The goal of the conference is to bring together a team of stakeholders to make comprehensive and collaborative case decisions. Children aged 10 and older are invited to attend the conference and participate in the decision-making process (NYC ACS, 2009).

### **CHAPTER 3: YOUTH PARTICIPATION**

This chapter reviews the literature pertaining to youth participation in child welfare decision-making internationally and in the United States. The first section discusses youth participation as an international human rights issue. The next section reviews typologies and theories of youth participation. The following section discusses the potential benefits of youth participation for the young person and child welfare professionals. The chapter concludes with a review of studies focused on youth perceptions of participation in child welfare decision-making.

#### **Participation as an International Human Rights Issue**

When young people are placed in out-of-home care, the state via the child welfare agencies and the court are responsible for their safety, permanency and well being (Courtney, 2009). An important component of this responsibility is to assist young people in making life decisions, such as where to live, what school to attend, whether to participate in extracurricular activities, visitation with family members, obtaining medical and mental health care, and how to achieve permanency goals. According to Thomas and O’Kane (1998), children in foster care are different from those in the general population in that they are subject to bureaucratic decision-making practices. Decision-making for youth living at home generally includes close family members, such as parents. For youth residing in foster care, decision-making generally includes multiple adults, such as lawyers, judges, therapists, and caseworkers, with varying degrees of knowledge about the young person.

Youth participation has been conceptualized as an international human rights issue (Bessell, 2011). Article 12 of the United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the

Child (1989) states that “State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child” (Article 12(1)) and that children should “be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law” (Article 12(2)). Article 12 has been influential in making the phenomenon of youth participation in decision-making an international priority.

According to Cashmore (2002), “This is a crucial article because it marks and demands a shift from a paternalistic approach to one where children are seen as stakeholders in decisions with a right to have some input rather than merely being the object of concern or the subject of the decision” (p.838).

While the United States has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, federal legislation provides a legal framework for including foster care youth in decision-making that impacts them. The Adoption Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) requires periodic permanency planning hearings with a focus on child planning. In New York, adolescents are encouraged to attend these hearings, with youth over the age of 18 required to attend or submit a statement in writing to the court that they want to continue residing in foster care. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-109) mandates that states involve youth in the design of state independent living programs and give them a voice in developing their individual case plans to prepare for independence. More recently, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) reinforces the significance of youth having a voice in planning for the transition to independence by requiring child welfare agencies, during



the 90-day period prior to the youths' emancipation, develop a personalized transition plan as directed by the youth.

As discussed in the previous chapter, The New York City Administration for Children's Services (2006) implemented the Preparing Youth for Adulthood plan, outlining six goals for youth to enhance their success as they transition out of foster care. A goal of particular interest highlights the importance of youth engaging in decision-making with the support of adults. It states, "youth will be encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their work and life decisions and their positive decisions are reinforced" (NYC ACS, 2006, p.1). In 2009, ACS implemented Family Team Conferencing into all contract foster care agencies and included in the policy that all children, aged 10 and older, be invited to attend and participate in their conferences (NYC ACS, 2009).

Although international, federal and state policies provide a legal framework for involving youth in decision-making that impacts them they do not provide clear guidance for achieving this goal. The lack of guidance results in large inconsistencies in terms of programs and practices.

### **Defining Youth Participation**

In recent years, efforts have been made to design typologies and theories of youth participation. Hart's (1997) ladder of participation was influential in shaping the field. Hart described degrees of participation moving from non-participation, which includes manipulation, decoration, and tokenism, towards increased participation, which includes assigned but not informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated, shared decision with children, child-initiated and directed decisions, and child-initiated shared decisions with

adults. Hart made a clear distinction between consultation and participation, noting that consultation does not constitute full participation.

Sheir (2001) built on Hart's model and developed a model of participation that included five levels of participation: 1) children are listened to, 2) children are supported in expressing their views, 3) children's views are taken into account, 4) children are involved in decision-making processes, and 5) children share power and responsibility for decision-making. At each level of participation, there are different degrees of commitment by professionals, labeled openings, opportunities and obligations. Openings are when a person working with youth is personally committed to including youth, but there may not be an opportunity to do so. Opportunity occurs when certain needs (i.e. resources, skills and knowledge) are met so that the worker and organization can function at this level. The obligation stage is when participation becomes an agreed upon policy among staff. In other words, it becomes "built-in to the system" (Sheir, 2001, p.110). Sheir's model highlighted the importance of adults sharing power with youth in decision-making practices and concrete ways this can be accomplished.

Vis and Thomas (2009) identified six levels of participation for children in out of home care. In the first level, children are consulted with about a decision but they do not fully understand the decision being made. In the second level, the child is provided information, but not the opportunity to express his/her views. In the third level, children express their views but do not participate in the decision making process. In the fourth level, children participate in the decision making process but do not make autonomous decisions. In the fifth level, children are able to make decisions but do not define the problem. In the final level, children define the problem and make the decision.

Participation requires children to have an influence on the decisions made and occurs on and above third level (Vis & Thomas, 2009).

Bessell (2011) provided a three-dimensional definition of youth participation, including youth are provided enough information to be able to participate in the decision making process, youth are given the opportunity to have a voice in the decision making, and their views impact the decisions made. Bessell's definition highlights key factors to consider when incorporating youth into decision-making. First, preparing youth for participation by providing them with adequate information to understand the decisions being made. Second, ensuring that youth have an opportunity to speak and be heard. Finally, ensuring that the youth perspective is considered when making decisions.

In sum, since Hart's ladder of participation, there has been an increasing interest in understanding youth participation in child welfare decision-making. A review of the literature highlights the distinction between consulting with youth about decisions versus including them in decision-making. Key elements of youth participation, highlighted in the literature, include notifying youth when important decisions are being made, inviting youth to be present, providing youth with adequate information regarding the issues under consideration, providing opportunities for youth to speak and freely express their views, considering youths' views when making decisions, and supporting youth throughout the entire decision making process (Cashmore, 2002; McLeod, 2007; McNeish, 1999; Murray and Hallett, 2000; Sanders and Mace, 2006; Thomas, 2007).

### **Potential Benefits of Participation**

The opportunity to participate in decision-making is an important human rights issue for all young people however it is particularly important for youth in foster care.

Most young people enter foster care due to parental inadequacies, including child abuse and neglect (Pecora et al., 2009). They have been separated from at least one parental figure and demonstrate high rates of trauma symptomatology (Samuels, 2011). Studies examining former foster care youth report high rates of health and mental health issues, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and criminal involvement (Courtney et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2005). Additionally, foster care youth fall behind their peers in educational attainment and vocational skills (Courtney et al., 2004; Hilliard, T., 2011). The majority of youth are not adequately prepared to make a successful transition from foster care to independent living (Collins, 2001).

The empowerment rationale claims that youth benefit from involvement in decision-making in multiple ways. They receive information about their options and rights, they gain an understanding the decision-making process, they develop decision-making skills, and they gain a sense of control in the process (Cashmore, 2011; Checkoway, 2010; Khoury, 2006; Leeson, 2007; McNeish, 1999; O'Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2002; Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010). By being treated with respect, having a voice and a sense of control in the process, feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy may be enhanced (Warshak, 2003).

Child welfare professionals also stand to benefit from youth participation. The enlightenment rationale purports that youth provide up to date, relevant information about their experiences and perceptions that can lead to more comprehensive and well-informed decision-making (Bessell, 2011). In other words, when youth are part of the process and share their views, it may result in more informed decisions and better outcomes (Cashmore, 2011).

### **Youth Perceptions of Participation**

Studies of youth participation conducted in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and North America report similar findings. Youth perceive limited opportunities to participate in making important decisions that significantly impact their lives (Bessell, 2011; Cashmore, 2002; Freundlich, Avery & Padgett, 2007; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999). When youth participate in decision-making meetings and conferences, they report a lack of preparation, a lack of understanding about the issues discussed, a lack voice in the process, and a lack of influence on the decisions made (Cashmore, 2002; Cashmore 2011; Freundlich, Avery & Padgett, 2007; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999; Wilson and Conroy, 1999). Youth perceive agency meetings, case conferences and court hearings as formal and intimidating, resulting in feeling confused, bored, frustrated and marginalized (Boylan & Ing, 2005; Cashmore, 2002; Thomas & O’Kane, 1999; Saunders & Mace, 2006). Although youth perceive limited opportunities to participate in decision-making, they consistently state a desire to be included and have a voice in the decisions made (Cashmore, 2002).

### **International Studies**

Baldry and Kemmis (1998) surveyed and interviewed young people, aged 6-14, residing in foster care in London. They examined the degree to which young people were consulted and participated in making decisions while in care. One third of the young people reported not knowing about the placement planning meeting, not knowing what a case plan was and not being asked about their view of the plan. Several participants reported not being prepared for the review, not having regular reviews, not attending the reviews and not being informed about the decisions made at the review. Findings

revealed the need for improvement in notifying young people of case planning meetings and involving them in the planning and review process.

Thomas and O’Kane (1999) examined the participation of young people, aged 8-12, in foster care case reviews and case planning in England and Wales through surveys and interviews with children, social workers, foster parents, and biological parents. In 55 percent of the cases, children were invited to attend decision-making meetings, with a further 6 percent invited to attend part of the meeting. In 36 percent of cases, children attended the entire meeting and twelve percent attended part of the meeting. Factors determining whether to invite the child included their age and developmental level of understanding. In cases where the relationship between the family and agency was described as a partnership, children were more likely to be invited to attend the conference.

Most children wanted to be invited and attend the case planning meetings. However, the majority (72%) wanted more preparation including what the meeting would be like, who would be there and what would be discussed. Some felt they were given an opportunity to speak, but most reported speaking only some or a little. The majority of children felt adults listened to them, but only about a quarter believed their input influenced the decisions made. Of interest, most children did not like the meetings. They described them as being intimidating, boring, alienating, stressful, and embarrassing (Thomas & O’Kane, 1999).

In another study, Murray and Hallett (2000) explored the role of young people participating in decision making in the Scottish Children’s Hearing system through observations of 60 hearings and 98 interviews. Researchers identified key aspects of

participation in decision-making before, during and after the hearing. Findings revealed that young people wanted more access to information prior to the hearing. While most young people (87%) attended the hearing, their contributions were limited to less than one sentence and most did not express an opinion about what should happen to them.

A more recent study in Australia, examining the participation of 28 young people in out of home care, echoed the findings of previous research (Bessell, 2011). Interviews and focus groups revealed that young people did not feel they had opportunities to participate in decision-making. Young people wanted to have a voice in important decisions such as the choice of placement, choice of school and contact with family and friends. Of interest, youth also wanted to have a choice as to who was assigned as their caseworker. Youth stressed the importance of relational characteristics of workers including workers who listened, valued their perspective and cared about them.

### **United States Studies**

Studies of youth participation in the United States reported similar findings. Youth perceived limited opportunities to participate in decision-making practices. When they participated, they did not feel prepared, did not feel listened to and did not believe they have an impact on the outcomes. However, they wanted to participate and have a voice in decision-making opportunities.

Wilson and Conroy (1999) explored the views of young peoples participation in permanency planning in Illinois. Researchers interviewed 1,100 children, aged 5-18, residing in out-of-home care. Children were asked whether they helped their caseworker determine their permanency goals. Less than a third (29%) felt they had a say in

permanency planning. One young person commented, "It was like I wasn't even there" (Wilson & Conroy, 1999, p. 63). Additionally, children complained about the way they were treated in court, citing that no one listened to them and they did not understand the topics being discussed.

A study of youth participation in permanency planning and decision-making in New York City reported similar results (Freundlich and Avery, 2005; Freundlich, Avery and Padgett, 2007). Researchers conducted interviews with former foster care youth, attorneys, judges and referees, youth advocates, and child welfare staff (n=77). Child welfare professionals expressed a range of perspectives regarding youth participation; some felt youth had adequate opportunities to participate in making important life decisions, while others felt youth were not provided ample opportunities to participate. Of interest, some professionals perceived child welfare agency staff as not being comfortable with youth involvement. One social worker noted that workers feel threatened when youth advocate for themselves. Other professionals reported that youth do not participate because they do not believe agency staff will listen to them.

Youth in the study perceived limited opportunities to participate in permanency planning and decision-making. Several youth reported that their input was not heard, respected or honored. Youth "placed a strong emphasis on the need for youth to assert themselves to ensure that they are included in their case reviews, receive the services they need and influence the quality of their congregate care environments" (Freundlich, Avery and Padgett, 2007, p.70).

Another study conducted in New York City by the Youth Justice Board (2007), a



team of 16 youth involved in the foster care system, reported consistent results. The Board conducted interviews and focus groups with youth and child welfare professionals, in order to improve court experiences and outcomes for youth. The Board issued a series of recommendations as part of a 64-page report calling for youth taking a more active role in their cases and the formation of stronger partnerships between lawyers, child welfare workers and youth. Specifically, youth want to have a better understanding of their cases, an opportunity to advocate for themselves, experience some control over their own cases, learn how to help themselves, feel respected, and feel that the system is fair.

In sum, youth participation in child welfare decision-making is a cross-national phenomenon. International and national studies overwhelmingly report that youth want to have an opportunity to participate in decision-making that impact them. Youth want to receive adequate preparation and information, have the opportunity to have a voice, feel respected, and have some influence over the decisions made. Additionally, youth value workers they perceive to listen, value their perspective and care about them.

### **Conclusion**

International, federal and local policy provide a legal framework for involving youth in decision-making practices however they do not provide clear guidance for achieving this goal. In recent years, researchers have proposed typologies and theories of youth participation and reported potential benefits of including youth in decision-making practices. While recent developments appear promising, there are large inconsistencies in terms of the application of policy to practice.

Studies in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand consistently report youth perceive limited opportunities to participate in child welfare

decision-making opportunities. When youth participate, they do not feel adequately prepared, do not have a voice in decision-making and do not perceive an impact on the decisions made. However, youth want to be included in making important decisions that impact them.

Although previous studies reported a lack of youth participation in decision-making opportunities, they do not provide adequate empirical information pertaining to the experiences and perceptions of youth who do participate. The current study contributes to the empirical evidence by using multiple methods of data collection, including observation of conferences and post observation interviews with youth and agency staff, to gain a comprehensive understanding of youth participation in family team conferences focused on permanency planning and transitional plans.

## **CHAPTER 4: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a conceptual framework for examining and understanding youth participation in child welfare decision making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences. This dissertation investigates the factors that influence youth attendance and participation in decision-making opportunities and the strategies facilitators use to engage youth in the context of family team conferences. As such, three theories were examined: procedural justice theory, emerging adulthood, and positive youth development. The review of theories provided information regarding youths' perceptions of bureaucratic decision-making, societal views regarding the developmental stage between ages 18-21 years old, and the principles and practices used by professionals to engage youth in decision-making opportunities.

### **Procedural Justice**

Procedural justice theory has been used widely over the past three decades to examine perceptions of fairness in bureaucratic decision-making practices (MacCoun, 2005). As such, it offers a useful framework for understanding youths' perceptions and experiences participating in child welfare decision-making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences. Research suggests that individuals value process fairness over outcomes. Individuals who perceive decision-making procedures to be fair tend to be more satisfied and comply better with the outcome, even when it was not necessarily their desired outcome (Tyler and Lind, 1992; Tyler 2000; Tyler and Huo, 2002). Additionally, when people believe they were treated fair and respectfully, feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy may be enhanced (MacCoun, 2005; Tyler, 2006).

Thibaut and Walker (1975) were instrumental in empirically demonstrating the importance of procedural fairness in decision-making practices. In studies of conflict resolution with college students, they distinguished between process control and outcome control. Process control referred to being able to present information and arguments to the decision maker. In other words, having a voice in the decision making process. Decision control focused on having a direct influence or shaping the decisions made. The authors concluded that participants placed greater value on the opportunity to present information and arguments than having control over the outcome.

Tyler and Lind (1992) expanded the procedural justice model by highlighting the importance of relational concerns, such as being treated well and perceiving decision makers to be fair. In their group value model decision-making practices were evaluated based on what they communicated about the relationship between the individual and authority figure or institution (Lind & Tyler, 1988). The relational model of procedural justice highlighted the importance of interpersonal treatment in determining whether people will comply with decisions made (Blader & Tyler, 2003; Tyler & Lind 1992).

In his review of the literature, Tyler (2000) identified four criteria that participants used to evaluate fairness in decision making procedures: 1) opportunities to participate, 2) whether authorities are neutral, 3) whether authorities are perceived to be trustworthy, and 4) the degree to which people are treated with dignity and respect. Participation is referred to as process control, or having a voice in the resolution of one's problems or conflicts. Neutrality refers to people's judgments about the honesty, impartiality and objectivity of the decision maker (Tyler, 2000). Trustworthiness refers to people's assessment of the motives of the decision maker (Tyler, 2000). For example, did

the decision maker consider the person's concerns, needs and arguments, did they try and do what was best for the person, and did they attempt to be fair. Treatment with dignity and respect refers to the degree to which the decision maker shows respect for the person's rights and status as a member of society (Tyler, 2000). Being treated with dignity and respect was found to enhance perceptions of fairness (Blader & Tyler, 2003).

Research pertaining to youths' perceptions of procedural justice in child welfare decision making is still in its infancy (Weisz, Wingrove & Faith-Slaker, 2007; Weisz, Wingrove, Beal & Faith-Slaker, 2011). Studies consistently report young people want to participate in decision-making practices. Similar to adults, young people want to have a voice, want to be treated with dignity and respect, and want the decision maker to be fair (Boylan and Ing, 2005; Cashmore, 2002; Leeson, 2007; Murray & Hallett, 2000; Saunders & Mace, 2006; Wilson & Conroy, 1999). In a study of family decision-making, young people who perceived authority figures to be trustworthy were more likely to go along with the decisions made and less likely to act out or participate in negative behaviors (Jackson & Fondacaro, 1999). More research focused specifically on youth perceptions of procedural justice in family team decision-making conferences is needed.

In sum, studies of procedural justice consistently report that young people want to participate and have a voice in decision-making procedures. Additionally, young people evaluate their experiences based on whether they are treated with dignity and respect, and the perceived neutrality of the authority figure or decision maker. However, there is limited empirical research focused specifically on young people's perceptions of procedural justice in child welfare decision-making opportunities (Weisz, Wingrove & Faith-Slaker, 2007). The present study expands the empirical research focused on

procedural justice to a population of youth, ages 18-21, who participated in child welfare decision-making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences. Specifically, young peoples' experiences and perceptions of the decision-making process are examined.

### **Emerging Adulthood**

The theory of emerging adulthood is reviewed in order to understand societal views and expectations of young people, ages 18-21 years old. This section begins by presenting literature focused on the general population of young people in the United States. Then, a discussion of youth in foster care highlights the unique challenges this sub-population faces during the transition to adulthood.

During the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, significant social and demographic changes occurred in industrialized countries, such as the United States (Arnett, 2006). Increasing economic demands for educational and vocational skills, has led young people to delay assuming adult roles such as marriage, parenthood and full-time employment in order to complete their education (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). According to Furstenberg, Rumbaut and Setterson (2005), a growing number of young people are delaying full-time employment until their mid to late twenties.

Young people in the general population are increasingly relying on their parents for instrumental and emotional support during emerging adulthood. Approximately 25 percent of young people live with their parents until aged 22 or longer (Aquilino, 2006). While the median age that young people leave home is 19 years old, almost 40 percent of

young people who leave home between 17-20 return, at least for a short time, to live in their parental home (Aquilino, 2006).

Arnett (2000) conceptualized the developmental stage, roughly between the ages of 18-25, as emerging adulthood. It is considered a unique stage of the life cycle, between adolescence and adulthood, where adolescents gradually develop the skills necessary to move from dependence to independence. Development occurs in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains (Arnett & Taber, 1994). The cognitive domain is characterized by the development of logical reasoning, subjective feelings, personal experiences, and a sense of responsibility to others. The emotional domain includes gaining autonomy from parents and establishing intimacy in relationships. The behavioral domain includes complying with social conventions and establishing firm impulse control.

Based on a decade of research, Arnett (2006) proposed five distinct features of emerging adulthood, including the age of identity exploration, the self focused age, the age of instability, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities. During emerging adulthood, young people are exploring various aspects of their identity, including work, love and worldviews that will set the stage for their adult life. They are generally not yet involved in long-term jobs or committed relationships, so they have the opportunity to explore and experiment with various aspects of their work and social life. Additionally, young people are exploring their views and values in order to shape their own unique worldview.

Since young people have less obligations and responsibilities (i.e. work, marriage, parenthood) than adults, emerging adulthood tends to be a self-focused stage of life.

Young people make decisions about their life that are independent of others, such as parents, spouses and children. Studies demonstrate that emerging adults spend the most amount of time alone than any other age group, except the elderly (Arnett, 2000).

Emerging adulthood is also an age of feeling in between. Young people do not view themselves as adolescents, but also do not see themselves as adults (Arnett, 2006). The criteria cited in the literature for reaching adulthood includes, accepting responsibility for one's own life, making independent decisions and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 2006). Perceiving ones self as an adult is a developmental process that takes time to achieve.

Emerging adulthood can also be a time of great optimism where young people have the greatest opportunity to transform their lives. They establish an identity independent from their family and determine the type of person they want to become. While emerging adults are establishing their own worldview, relationships with parents, teachers, mentors, and friends are a key protective factor during the transition to adulthood (Aquilino, 2006).

Regarding decision-making capabilities, brain-imaging studies revealed that the brain experiences significant changes during emerging adulthood (Giedd, 2004; Steinberg, 2005). One important finding is that the prefrontal cortex, the portion of the brain that controls advanced functioning such as impulse control, decision making, planning, and anticipating future consequences, is the last part of the brain to develop and does not fully mature until the mid-twenties (Ramowski & Nystrom, 2007). Although emerging adults have similar decision making capabilities as adults, they are more likely to be swayed by their emotions (Labouvie-Vief, 2006). They may experience challenges maintaining



balanced cognitive-emotional representations, especially when emotions are activated due to issues of security and survival.

### **Emerging Adulthood and Foster Care Youth**

Social class and race significantly influence the transition to adulthood. Youth in the middle to upper class have more opportunities than those in the lower class (Arnett, 2000). Foster care youth, often poor and minority, represent a unique sub-population during emerging adulthood. They are forced to manage two transitions simultaneously: the transition from adolescence to adulthood and the transition from the child welfare system to living independently (Goodkind, Schelbe & Shook, 2011). Youth in foster care transition to adulthood due to age restrictions rather than developmental preparedness. Depending on state regulations, youth exit foster care at aged 18 years old or 21 years old. Once they make the transition out of foster care they immediately assume adult roles and responsibilities including obtaining housing and employment (Courtney, 2009). Unlike their peers in the general population who rely on their families for support, youth in foster care can no longer rely on the child welfare system to provide them with a safety net (Shirk & Stangler, 2004).

The emerging adulthood literature highlights the importance of social support, mainly the family of origin, as a key protective factor during the transition to adulthood (Aquilino, 2006). Youth in foster care were removed from their family of origin due to child abuse and neglect. While studies report some youth maintain contact with their family of origin, others feel disconnected from them (Courtney et al., 2011; Freundlich, Avery, Munson & Gerstenzang, 2006). Thus, their network of support often consists of formal systems of care such as caseworkers, foster parents, and therapists. Regarding

relationships with formal systems of care, youth report a lack of adequate emotional support including acts of empathy, listening and being there when needed (Samuels, 2008). Additionally, many youth do not view these relationships as enduring beyond their time in foster care (Samuels, 2008). More empirical research focused on understanding the nature and quality of youths' relationships with formal systems of care is needed (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Collins, Spencer & Ward, 2010; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007).

In sum, Arnett (2000) conceptualized emerging adulthood as a developmental process whereby youth gradually acquire the skills necessary to function as autonomous adults. Unlike youth in the general population, foster care youth do not have the opportunity to delay their transition to adulthood, placing them at risk for negative life outcomes (Berzin, 2010). Federal and state policy require youth to exit the foster care system due to age restrictions rather than being developmentally prepared. They are forced to immediately assume adult roles and responsibilities often without adequate skills or supports to make a successful transition to adulthood. In essence, young people are out of sync with conventional norms of delaying adult responsibilities to pursue educational opportunities (Collins, 2001).

There is an increased emphasis on examining social support and social networks for youth in foster care. Studies demonstrate the need to further examine youths' relationships with professionals in the child welfare system (Collins et al., 2010). The current study expands the emerging adulthood literature by examining the nature and quality of youths' relationships with agency staff in the context of child welfare decision-making practices.

## **Positive Youth Development**

Positive youth development has received increasing attention during the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Amodeo & Collins, 2007). The concept of youth development initiated largely out of studies of resiliency among children and youth (Garmezy, 1983; Rutter, 1985; Werner and Smith, 1982). Resiliency has been defined as “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity or trauma” (Lunthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000, p.543). Studies of resiliency focus on the balance of risk and protective factors across two separate (internal and external) yet interconnected domains. Risk factors hinder an individual’s ability to adapt to their situation, whereas protective factors are influences that assist individuals in achieving positive outcomes (Waller, 2001). Thus, there is a balancing act between the number of risk factors and protective factors that an individual experiences at any given time. The presence of enough protective factors may buffer against the potential negative impact of risk factors.

Positive youth development focuses on developing resiliency in adolescents through providing them with positive opportunities to develop life skills, meaningful relationships, and strengthen their social networks. There is no mutually agreed upon definition of positive youth development in the literature. Broadly defined, it is a “process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through coordinated, progressive services of activities and experience which help them become socially, morally, emotionally, physically and cognitively competent” (National Youth Development Information Center, 2013, p.1). The National Conference of State Legislatures (2010) defined positive youth development as “a comprehensive framework outlining the supports young people need in order to be successful. PYD

emphasizes the importance of focusing on youths' strengths instead of their risk factors to ensure that all youth grow up to become contributing adults.”

According to Hamilton, Hamilton and Pittman (2004) youth development is a natural process of development over time. It consists of principles that guide youth oriented practices and programs. The developmental goals consist of the five C's: Competence, Character, Connections, Confidence, and Contribution. *Competence* means developing the knowledge and skills to function effectively and adapt to one's environment. *Character* means acting in ways that are right and good. *Connections* means establishing social relationships with adults, peers and communities. *Confidence* means the self-assuredness to act in an effective manner. Finally, *contribution* means using one's attributes in positive a manner that impacts others, rather than being only self-focused.

Youth development principles include fostering supportive relationships between youth and caring adults who can mentor and guide them, supporting the development of youths' knowledge and skills, engaging youth as partners, providing opportunities for youth to show that they care about others, promoting healthy lifestyles, and teaching positive patterns of social interactions. The youth development approach offers young people opportunities to partner with adults, connect to communities, and develop the life skills necessary to successfully transition to adulthood. Programs are based on the philosophy that when youth are afforded opportunities to partner with adults and engage in positive activities they will develop a healthy self-esteem and a positive outlook for the future.

Research indicates that programs and services targeted towards youth in foster care should focus on the entire individual, rather than specific “problems” such as teen pregnancy, high school dropouts or unemployed youth (Hair, Ling and Cochran, 2003). In recent years, there has been a call for the field of child welfare to adapt a positive youth development approach towards working with youth. However, there has been some skepticism regarding applying positive youth development practices and principles to young people in foster care. In one study, child welfare workers perceived foster care youth to be too troubled for the youth development approach (Amodeo & Collins, 2007). Although this was an initial perception, researchers managed to develop and implement a positive youth development program, demonstrating the applicability of positive youth development to the field of child welfare.

The family team conferencing model, examined in this study, utilizes principles and practices that are consistent with positive youth development. The philosophy of the conference is a strengths-based, empowerment approach that focuses on youths’ strengths rather than their deficits. It underscores the importance of partnering with youth in decision-making opportunities. Through participation in decision-making, youth are provided opportunities to gain information and develop important life skills, such as decision-making skills. The current study examines whether positive youth development principles and practices are utilized in the context of youth participation in child welfare decision-making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences.

### **Conclusion**

The conceptual framework for the current study incorporates three theories, procedural justice theory, emerging adulthood and positive youth development.

Procedural justice has been used widely to examine bureaucratic decision-making practices. It provides a unique lens to examine youths' perceptions and experiences participating in family team conferences. Since the study population is aged 18-21 years old, emerging adulthood provides insight into this unique developmental stage of life. Finally, positive youth development provides principles and practices for assisting youth in developing the knowledge and skills to successfully transition to adulthood.

## Chapter 5: METHODOLOGY

### Qualitative Design

*Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p.3).*

There is limited scholarly research focused on youth participation in child welfare decision-making, especially from the youth perspective. Additionally, there are no studies examining the participation of older youth in family team conferences held in New York City focused on permanency planning. The lack of empirical data, coupled with the desire to capture the experiences and perceptions of multiple stakeholders, informed the decision to employ a qualitative method.

The strength of a qualitative design is that it offers a complex and detailed understanding of the phenomenon being explored (Creswell 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Maxwell, 2013; Padgett, 1998). Studies occur in their natural setting where participants experience the issue or problem under investigation, which provides up close and face-to-face interaction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Researchers focus on understanding the meanings and perspectives of participants resulting in a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013). Researchers are considered an instrument in that they collect data themselves rather than focusing on pre-existing data, questionnaires or instruments. The research design is emergent, meaning that the researcher can modify or adapt during the research process in order to meet the needs of participants or more appropriately capture the data. Qualitative researchers

collect and analyze multiple forms of data including interviews, observations, and documents, to make their findings more comprehensive.

Creswell (2013) suggests using a qualitative design when in-depth exploration of a topic is required. It is appropriate when there is limited empirical information about a topic, the voices of participants have not been adequately captured, there is a need to develop theories, and/or quantitative methods or statistical analysis won't capture the information sought. In the current study, adequately capturing the content of the conference and the interactions amongst various players (i.e. youth, parents, facilitator, agency staff, community members) would not be possible using quantitative measures.

### **Focused Ethnography**

The qualitative approach used in this study, derived from conventional ethnography, is focused ethnography. Drawing from both anthropology and sociology, conventional ethnography is focused on describing and interpreting shared and learned patterns, behaviors, values, beliefs, and language of a cultural or social group or system (Creswell, 2007; Emerson, 2001). It involves long-term field visits where the researcher is immersed in the group under examination. Data is collected through extensive fieldwork, primarily participant observation and face-to-face interviews. Some ethnographic researchers also examine documents, artifacts and other sources collected in the field. The goal of data collection is to capture the insider (*emic*) perspective, through daily interaction and face-to-face interviews. The goal of data analysis is to incorporate the emic view and the researchers scientific knowledge (*etic*) to develop a holistic understanding of the functioning of the social or cultural group (Creswell, 2013).



Unlike traditional ethnography aimed at describing and interpreting an entire culture or system, focused ethnography examines specific aspects of the field such as social interactions, situations and activities (Knoblauch, 2005). Researchers using this method should possess background knowledge of the topical area. Data collection is characterized by relatively short-term field visits, including visiting the field in intervals when communicative activities are taking place (Knoblauch, 2005). The short duration of fieldwork is supplemented by intensive data collection and analysis. A large volume of data is collected in a relatively short time through multiple methods including observations, interviews and documents. The use of multiple methods allows the researcher to compare and contrast various sources, making the data more rich, comprehensive and reliable. Data is recorded using a combination of field notes and recording devices, such as digital recorders, videos and cameras. The use of recording devices allows multiple researchers to listen, view and analyze the data. Data analysis includes managing and reviewing multiple sources of data.

Focused ethnography was selected for a number of reasons. First, the goal of the study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of youth participation in child welfare decision-making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences. Family team conferences are structured social interactions, bounded in space and time. Consistent with the focused ethnography design, data collection was short term and highly intensive. Data was collected between May 2011 and January 2012 in intervals when conferences with youth, ages 18-21, were held. Data was collected using various methods including observation of the conference, interviews with youth, interviews with conference facilitators, and reviewing agency documents. Data was recorded via

observational field notes and audio recordings. Data collection consisted of observing 18 family team conferences, conducting 18 face-to-face follow up interviews with youth, 17 face-to-face follow up interviews with facilitators, and reviewing agency documents. Documentary data provided a context for the structure, format and players at the conference. Observations provided in-depth information about social interactions and practices in the conferences. Interviews provided a deep understanding of youth and facilitators perceptions of youth participation. Multiple observations and interviews afforded the opportunity to compare and contrast diverse perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of team decision making, strategies utilized by facilitators to engage youth, the degree to which youth have a voice, whether their voice is factored into decision making, and the potential barriers to youth participation. Data analysis meetings were held on regular basis with my dissertation sponsor, Vicki Lens. We reviewed the field notes, verbatim transcripts and analytic memos. The peer review process ensured consensus around coding and developing the conceptual framework.

### **Site and Sample**

The study relied on purposeful selection, defined by Maxwell (2005) as “a strategy in which particular settings, persons or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p.88). According to Marshall (1996), a qualitative sample size is “one that adequately answers the research question” (p.523). Unlike quantitative procedures, there are no statistical procedures -- such as probability sampling -- in qualitative research to guide the researcher in selecting participants (Sandelowski, 1995). Sampling is based on other criteria such as the type of purposeful sampling and the methods used. Additionally, the

sample size refers to the number of people interviewed, the amount of observations conducted and the number of artifacts analyzed (Sandelowski, 1995).

The study took place in New York City, where I have worked professionally as a social worker for over a decade. I am familiar with the structure and functioning of the child welfare system. Gaining access to youth in foster care for research purposes has been a major challenge in previous studies (Fox and Berrick, 2007). A common practice in ethnographic research is to rely on a gatekeeper to gain access to a population (Creswell, 2007). I relied on the Associate Commissioner in the Division of Family Permanency Services at the New York City Administration for Children's Services [ACS] to identify agencies to participate in the study.

Prior to identifying agencies, I had a lengthy discussion with the Assistant Commissioner regarding agency selection. My preference was to recruit large, well-established agencies providing foster care services in multiple boroughs of New York City. I wanted to ensure the agencies had an adequate number of older youth, ages 18-21, in their care. Additionally, the agencies had to have fully implemented the Family Team Conferencing intervention; piloted in nine foster care agencies in New York City in fall 2007 and all foster care agencies in spring 2009. The Associate Commissioner reached out to the Executive Directors of two agencies that contract with the public child welfare agency to provide foster care services to children and youth. He selected them based on the criteria described above, as well as insider knowledge that they would be receptive to the research project. The agencies included: 1) New York Foundling, and 2) Graham-Windham.

I drafted a written research proposal that was presented to the Executive Directors. Then, I met with each Director face-to-face at their respective agency for approximately one hour to discuss the study design and answer questions. Both Directors agreed to allow their agency to participate in the study and drafted a letter of support for the Institutional Review Board. They connected me with a point person inside the agency responsible for coordinating the study.

### **Sample Foster Care Agencies**

The New York Foundling (2013) was founded in 1869 as a home for abandoned children. Since then they have expanded the scope of services and programs. Currently, they provide comprehensive, family-centered services in all 5 boroughs of New York City. They contract with New York City's Administration for Children's Services to provide foster care services including family foster care and residential care. For contract year 2011, they were granted 830 family foster care slots (NYC ACS 2011a) and 82 general residential care slots (NYC ACS, 2011b). Youth placed in foster care with New York Foundling reside in a range of living situations including foster boarding homes (kinship and non-kinship) and residential care (group homes, mother/child residences, and residential treatment centers). New York Foundling was one of nine foster care agencies that piloted family team conferencing in the fall of 2007.

Graham Windham (2013) was founded in New York City in 1806 as the Orphan Asylum Society. Since then, it has expanded its scope of services to meet the needs of disadvantaged children, families and communities. Graham Windham operates in three boroughs in Manhattan, including the Bronx, Brooklyn and Manhattan. It contracts with the New York City Administration for Children's Services to provide foster care services,

including family foster care (kinship and non-kinship) and residential care (residential treatment center). For contract year 2011, they were granted 800 family foster care slots (NYC ACS, 2011a) and 77 residential care slots (NYC ACS, 2011b). Graham Windham implemented family team conferencing in their foster care division during the general implementation in spring 2009.

### **Recruitment**

A designated staff member at each site assisted in recruitment of the sample. Each month, the designated staff member emailed me a list of permanency planning conferences involving youth, ages 18-21, scheduled to take place during the month. The list included the date, time and location of the conference, as well as the assigned facilitator. For confidentiality purposes, the list did not include identifying case information. Prior to the conference, I emailed the conference facilitator to see whether the conference was scheduled to go forward. Once confirmed, I went to the agency on the scheduled date and time and waited to see whether the youth would be in attendance and the conference would go forward.

Youth attendance was a big issue at the conferences. Most conferences I attended over a period of seven months were either rescheduled, because the youth was not present, or held without the youth present, because they had already been rescheduled at least once. Each month, I went to the agencies for approximately 25 conferences and only 2-3 of those would go forward with the youth present.

When the conference went forward with the youth present, the facilitator read the oral consent script prior to me entering the conference space (Appendix A). All participants present at the conference were required to verbally consent to my observation

of the conference. If they consented orally, they then reviewed and signed the written consent form (Appendix B).

### **Sample Youth**

A total of eighteen youth participated in the study. Twelve resided in foster care with New York Foundling and six resided in foster care with Graham Windham. Of the eighteen youth, eight were female and ten were male. They ranged in age from 18-21 years old, with a mean age of 19 years old. Regarding race, eight self identified as Black, seven as Hispanic, one as White, and two as other. The disproportionate number of minorities in the sample is consistent with national demographic statistics. According to Hill (2006) children of color are represented in foster care at disproportionate rates.

All youth in the sample, except one, had a permanency goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA), which can also be understood as independent living. The one exception had a permanency goal of adoption. Ten youth were currently residing in a non-kinship foster home, three resided in a kinship foster home, three resided in a mother-child residence, one resided in a group home, and one resided in a college dorm. The length of time spent in foster care ranged from 1.5 years to 20 years, with a mean of 7 years. The total number of placements while in foster care ranged from one to ten, with a mean of 5 placements. Select sample youth characteristics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Youth Sample

	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	8	44.4
Male	10	55.6
<b>Age</b>		
18	7	38.9
19	3	16.7
20	7	38.9
21	1	5.6
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Black	8	44.4
Hispanic/Latino	7	38.9
White	1	5.6
Other	2	11.1
<b>Type of Placement</b>		
Non-Kinship Foster Home	10	55.6
Kinship Foster Home	3	16.7
Mother-Child Residence	3	16.7
Group Home	1	5.6
College Dorm	1	5.6
<b>Permanency Planning Goal</b>		
APPLA	17	94.4
Adoption	1	5.6

### Sample Facilitators

A total of ten facilitators were observed facilitating the permanency planning family team conferences. Four facilitators were observed facilitating more than one conference. Of the ten facilitators observed, seven were female and three were male. Four were African American, three were Hispanic, two were White, and one was Asian. All participants held a Bachelors degree in social work, psychology, sociology or a related field. Two facilitators held a Masters degree -- one in education and one in social

work. Six participants worked at New York Foundling and four worked at Graham Windham. Refer to Table 2 for select facilitator characteristics.

A total of nine facilitators participated in the follow-up interviews<sup>2</sup> and four were interviewed more than once. Of the facilitators interviewed, the number of years working in child welfare ranged from 4 to 18 years with a mean of 8.5 years. The number of years working as a facilitator ranged from less than a year to 4 years, with a mean of 2.5 years, which makes sense given that the family team conference model was implemented into New York Foundling in 2007 and Graham Windham in 2009.

Table 2. Characteristics of Facilitator Sample

	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	7	70
Male	3	30
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Black	4	40
Hispanic	3	30
White	2	20
Asian	1	10
<b>Highest Level of Education</b>		
Bachelor's degree	8	80
Masters in Social Work	1	10
Masters in Education	1	10

### Data Collection

The main types of data collection in ethnographic studies are observations, interviews and documents (Creswell, 2013). Morse (1995) recommends that an ethnographic study include approximately 30 to 50 interviews and/or observations.

According to Marshall (1996), “in practice, the number of required subjects usually

<sup>2</sup> One facilitator was unable to participate in the follow-up interview due to personal reasons unrelated to the study.



becomes obvious as the study progresses, as new categories, themes or explanations stop emerging from the data” (p.523). I conducted enough observations and interviews to reach the point of data saturation, meaning gathering new data no longer sparked theoretical insights or new properties of my theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006). In total, I conducted 18 observations of family team conferences, 18 post observation interviews with foster care youth and 17 post observation interviews with conference facilitators, for a total of 53 data sources. I also reviewed select agency documents including FTC operating procedures and training manuals.

### **Observation**

Observations of Family Team Conferences were conducted between May 2011 and December 2011. A total of 18 conferences were observed, including 12 at New York Foundling and 6 at Graham Windham. Observation is a key method of data collection for ethnographic researchers (Angrosino, 2005) and an important data source in focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005). It allows the researcher to see through their own eyes the social activities and interactions taking place in a setting (Bailey, 2007).

Consistent with the focused ethnography design, I visited the field in intervals, when youth ages 18-21, were scheduled to be present at the conference (Knoblauch, 2005). My observations were limited to the boundaries of the conference. For example, the waiting area as participants arrived and the room where the conference took place (Bailey, 2007). My observations were structured in that the location and focus of my observation was pre-determined (Bailey, 2007). My role was a non-participant observer, meaning I observed the conference, but did not participate in the communications (Bailey, 2007). I took handwritten field notes of the physical space, physical characteristics of the

participants, verbal and non-verbal behaviors, level of participation in the conference, and the quality of personal interactions (Bailey, 2007). Field notes are written accounts or records of observational data collected through fieldwork (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007).

Below is an example of my field notes.

<b>Field Notes: Excerpts from Shade's Conference</b>
<p><b>Start Time:</b> 4:55      <b>End Time:</b> 5:45</p> <p><b>Attendees:</b> FTC Facilitator, Youth, Foster Mother, Foster Father, Case Planner</p> <p><b>Physical Description of Participants:</b></p> <p><u>Youth (Shade)</u> - The youth was a tall (approximately 6 feet), slim Black male. He wore a red sweatshirt and black jeans. The hood of his sweatshirt was over his head and he had an intimidating presence. I wondered if he would be open to participating in the study.</p> <p><u>Facilitator</u> – Hispanic woman in her late 20's/ early 30's. She was dressed professionally with a skirt, button down shirt and a vest. She wore her hair back in a ponytail. She was outgoing and friendly.</p> <p><u>Case Planner:</u> Black woman who appeared in her late thirties or early forties. She had medium length straightened hair and was casually dressed.</p> <p><u>Foster Mother:</u> Middle aged Black women, medium to heavy build with her hair curled. She was well dressed and presented professionally.</p> <p><u>Foster Father:</u> Middle aged Black male wearing Tan Timberland boots, jeans and a tan T-shirt. He had a friendly demeanor, but didn't speak much during the conference.</p> <p><b>Partial Conference Excerpt:</b></p> <p>The conference took place in an office with a desk, computer, phone and big windows. The facilitator pulled chairs into the room in a circle so everyone had a place to sit. The space felt cramped and was not set up for an FTC. Usually the conference space has a white board or post it notes to chart progress of the meeting and the FTC ground rules are posted on the wall.</p> <p>The facilitator did not begin with an introduction to the FTC. She did not introduce the participants, discuss the ground rules, or review the format of the FTC. [I need to ask her about this during the follow up interview].</p> <p>The facilitator began by saying to the youth - tell me something good about yourself. The youth appeared uncomfortable and looked over at the foster mother who said, "what are you looking at me for?" The facilitator said to the youth, "you are 20 with a goal of</p>

APPLA” [She used a code to describe his permanency goal and did not explain what it meant. I wonder if the youth knows what APPLA is]. The case planner told him to “start from that one.” The facilitator said, “What about school? Are you finished with school?” The youth said he is finishing up school and that he is in an alternative High School. The facilitator asked him how long until he will be finished? The youth told her he would graduate in a year. The case planner jumped in and said “it was supposed to be last year but he didn’t want to get up in the morning, so he missed school.” The foster mother stated he wasn’t living at my house then. The case planner responded, “If he went to school, he would be on target to graduate” [Her tone was negative and judgmental]. The facilitator asked the youth if he was helpful in the home. The case planner interrupted saying “He knows what he does wrong. He knows he is lazy. He only has until January 20<sup>th</sup> and he is out of the foster care system. [This is supposed to be the point in the conference for the youth to discuss his strengths not the concerns]. The foster mother responded by saying, “I am disappointed because he can do so much. The foster father responded, “All he wants to do is play video games and basket ball.” The case planner responded by stating, “My issue is preparing him for the next stage of his life. He thinks adults will help him out all the time. He needs to hit rock bottom to see that life is not so simple. The State is paying people to provide shelter, food and stability. Once your 21 it’s done, done. He makes it look like we do nothing but that’s not the case. Those are my issues. [I wonder how the youth is experiencing this discussion? He appears disengaged – his head is down and he playing with a pencil on his lap. The Case Planner and Foster Mother are continuously lecturing him and focusing on what he is doing wrong. The facilitator is allowing them to continuously interrupt, speak for him and focus on concerns. She does not appear to be neutral. She is siding with the adults].

### **Impressions:**

The Case Planner and Foster Mother dominated the conference. They did not allow the youth to speak. They continuously interrupted him, answered questions that were directed towards him and lectured him about what he was doing wrong. The Facilitator was unable to control the power dynamics in the conference - she seemed to be siding with the adults. She did not follow the prescribed format for the conference so it was hard to keep track of what was going on. For example, she did not do an introduction to the participants or the ground rules for the conference. She did not write on the post it notes so everyone was on the same page. She did not brainstorm ideas to address the issues that were raised, instead she developed and action plan on her own and read it to the youth and had him sign it without asking for his consent.

Throughout the conference the youth became less and less interested in the discussion. He seemed to shut down and stop paying attention. His physical presence was one of defeat. He looked down at his lap and at one point put his head down on the table.

In addition to writing detailed field notes, I utilized a pre-designed coding form where I recorded standard information from each conference such as the parties present,

presenting issues, duration of the conference, and decisions made (Appendix C). After the observation, I typed my handwritten field notes and documented my personal reflections (Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

## **Interviews**

Interviews are a main source of data collection in qualitative research (Roulston, 2010). According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), “interviews are structured conversations” (p.129). They are organized by combining main questions, follow-up questions and probes. The main questions are determined in advance and attempt to answer the research questions. The follow-up questions are meant to elaborate upon the interviewee’s responses. Probes keep the interview on track by clarifying information or asking for examples (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

I conducted 18 post observation interviews with youth whose conferences I observed. All interviews were held face-to-face directly following the conference. Participation in the interviews was voluntary. Youth signed a consent form agreeing to participate prior to the start of the interview (Appendix D). In-person interviews were used so the researcher could establish rapport with the youth and encourage them to open up and share detailed information. The interviews were held at the agency where the observation took place in a private room and lasted approximately one hour. I used a pre-designed interview guide consisting of semi-structured and open-ended questions (Appendix E). The semi-structured questions ensured that I received standard information from each participant including data such as age, race, duration in care, and placement type. The open-ended questions allowed for in-depth exploration of youth’s perceptions and experiences participating in child welfare decision-making in general and in the

context of the family team conference. Guided by Rubin and Rubin (2005), I began by asking an open-ended question, and then asked follow-up and probing questions to encourage youth to elaborate on certain responses and/or provide specific examples. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Youth were compensated \$25 per interview.

I conducted 17 face-to-face interviews with 9 of the 10 facilitators observed at the conferences. Participation in the interviews was voluntary. Facilitators signed a consent form agreeing to participate prior to the start of the interviews (Appendix F). Four facilitators were observed facilitating more than one conference, so they were interviewed more than once. Similar to the youth format, I used a pre-designed interview guide consisting of both semi-structured and open-ended questions (Appendix G). The semi-structured questions allowed me to gather uniform data from each facilitator such as race, gender, educational attainment, years working in foster care, and years working as a facilitator. The open ended questions focused on their perceptions and experiences of youth participation in decision making in the context of the family team conference and the strategies they used to engage youth. I used follow up questions and probing questions as appropriate to gather additional information and examples (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The interviews were held at the foster care agency in a private room and lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Documentary Data**

It is common practice for ethnographers to examine documents, artifacts and other sources collected in the field (Hodder, 2000). I reviewed agency documents addressing the function and purpose of the family team conference, the roles of attendees and the

prescribed format. I also reviewed FTC facilitator training materials, including the facilitator training manual and the participant manual. Documentary data provided a deeper understanding of the philosophy of family team conference, the format for conducting the meeting, the role of the facilitator, and the role of other participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis focused on gaining a deeper understanding of how youth are incorporated into child welfare decision-making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences. It explored the factors influencing youth attendance and participation, as well as the strategies facilitators use to encourage youth participation.

All data, including the interview transcripts, observational field notes and agency documents were entered into HyperRESEARCH, a computer software program that allows qualitative data to be organized, searched, and coded. Grounded theory conventions for data analysis, including initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding, were used (Charmaz, 2006). During initial coding, the data was read line-by-line and assigned provisional codes. During focused coding, I applied the initial codes to more of the data, elaborated on, collapsed and/or dropped codes (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, during theoretical coding, the relationships between the codes were further conceptualized and defined.

### **Stages of Coding**

**Research Question One: What factors influence youth attendance and participation in child welfare decision-making?**

I began the coding process by reading the youth and facilitator transcripts multiple times to familiarize myself with the data. During initial coding, the verbatim interview transcripts were inductively analyzed line-by-line where each line was assigned a provisional code (Charmaz, 2006). For example, in my interview with Monique, I asked her whether she talked with anyone regarding her decision to terminate her pregnancy. Monique identified a staff member in her residential facility. I asked her why she spoke with the staff member. Her response is below.

Because any time I needed her she was there. But then again, the rest of the staff was, but it was more personal with her. Like the day my aunt passed away, she didn't have to come all the way to where I was on a weekend, which was in Brooklyn, to come find me to make sure I was okay, personally.

These lines were coded as follows:

Line	Initial Code
Because any time I needed her she was there.	Being there unconditionally
But then again, the rest of the staff was, but it was more personal with her.	Having a personal connection
Like the day my aunt passed away, she didn't have to come all the way to where I was on a weekend, which was in Brooklyn, to come find me to make sure I was okay, personally.	Exceeding expectations Demonstrating concern

During initial coding, the codes remained very close to the data and were assigned as actions based on the participants' words (Charmaz, 2006).

During focused coding, I reviewed the initial codes to see which ones I was using most frequently and/or appeared to be the most significant themes and patterns in the data (Charmaz, 2006). I then applied the codes to more of the data, elaborated on, collapsed and/or dropped the codes. In a process called axial coding, I built the codes into categories, and described their properties and dimensions (Charmaz, 2006). For example, in sixteen of the youth interviews, youth described relationships with agency staff. Several described workers they perceived to go beyond their role to provide support. The initial codes, “exceeding expectations,” “having a personal connection” and “demonstrating concern,” were re-coded into “transcending roles.” Through analyzing codes across multiple interviews, I was able to explore the nature and quality of youths’ relationships with agency staff, including the influence of these relationships on youth attendance and participation in decision-making opportunities.

Theoretical coding consisted of reviewing the focused and axial codes and creating a conceptual framework. During this stage, I reviewed the salient themes, compared the themes within each interview and across each interview. Youth’s relationships with agency staff were placed into three categories based on the level of support the youth perceived from the staff member. The relationships ranged from no support or *detached*, to concrete support or *formal*, to a combination of instrumental and emotional support or *engaged*. Four components, identified during the focused and axial coding stage, further conceptualized the differences in relationships: 1) case continuity, 2) non-judgmental listening, 3) establishing trust, and 4) transcending roles.

**Question Two: What strategies do facilitators use to engage youth in decision making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences?**



I began by reviewing the agency documents to familiarize myself with the structure and functioning of the family team conference. Then, I reviewed my field notes and conference observation sheets multiple times to familiarize myself with the observational data. Finally, I reviewed the interview transcripts multiple times to familiarize myself with the youth and facilitator perspectives.

Similar to the coding process described above, during initial coding, the data was analyzed inductively by applying line-by-line codes. Below is an example of initial coding of a dialogue between participants at a family team conference:

Line	Code
<b>Facilitator:</b> the permanency goal is “03, APPLA.”	Speaking in code
<b>Youth:</b> You keep using codes. I don’t know what they mean.”	Lacking understanding
<b>Facilitator:</b> How long have you been in care? You have been to other conferences. You must have heard your goal before.	Blaming the youth
<b>Youth:</b> I didn’t pay attention	Not paying attention

During focused coding, I reviewed the initial codes to determine which were being used most frequently and/or were most salient. Then, I applied the codes to more of the observational data and the interview transcripts and used axial coding to group them into different categories, and to refine the dimensions of these categories. For example, the initial codes described above including, “speaking in code” and “blaming the youth” were recoded as “failing to engage. The codes “lacking understanding,” and “not paying attention” were re-coded as “silencing the youth voice.”

During theoretical coding, I reviewed all of the codes, compared them within and across multiple data sources, and developed a conceptual framework. For example, the themes “failing to engage” and “silencing the youth voice” were paired with two additional themes, “adopting the adult narrative” and “going through the motions.” Together, these four themes made up the larger conceptual category *adult centric* facilitation. Similarly, four contrasting themes, including “establishing trust,” “encouraging the youth voice,” “adapting the youth narrative,” and “demonstrating genuine care and concern,” were dimensions of the larger conceptual category, *youth centric* facilitation.

### **Analytic Memos**

Analytic memos “document and reflect on your coding process and choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emerging patterns, categories, and subcategories, themes and concepts in your data – all possibly leading toward theory” (Saldana, 2009, p.32). Throughout the iterative coding process, I wrote analytic memos. The memos served as a key intermediary step between coding and recording the findings (Charmaz, 2006). Through memos, I defined, described and developed my codes. I explored the connections between various codes and identified the themes and patterns in the data. I then connected the data to the existing literature. Finally, I developed a conceptual framework (Charmaz, 2006; Montgomery & Bailey, 2007). My dissertation sponsor reviewed my memos, providing feedback regarding the emergent themes and patterns in the data.

Below is an example of a memo written during the early stages of focused coding for the developing theme “transcending roles.”

### 6.8.12 Memo: Transcending Roles

Transcending roles is when an adult goes beyond the expectations of their job to support a youth and/or establish a relationship. The adults view their job as more than just collecting a paycheck. They demonstrate through their actions, interactions and/or both that care about the young person and will go the extra mile to support them.

**Case example:** *“but when you have a steady caseworker, they’re really pretty open and they treat you like, you know, they’re not just there for the check, you know what I mean? Like they treat you like a friend. They treat you like, you know, not so, like you have a comfort zone with them. [Case 13]*

When youth describe staff that transcends roles, they describe personal characteristics such as being “cool” or a “good person.” They also discuss the level of information and knowledge they have about the case.

**Case example:** *“she’s a good person besides being a good caseworker” and “she’s a real worker” who “knows the case like the back of her hand.” [Case 6]*

Youth also describe how the adult makes them feel good about themselves. Explore further themes of empowerment or enhanced self-esteem.

**Case example:** *I guess it’s her personality. When I first met her and stuff, she uh, she makes me feel good, I guess, I don’t know. She makes me feel normal. And uh, I could cry to her and stuff like, it’s like she gets into my head but it’s like, it’s not a bad thing. It’s like she, she, when, when I would say certain things, she know what goin’ on, you know, she’s, she knows what’s good for me... [Case 8]*

Several youth describe the significance of the deep connection they experience. It encourages them to feel safe, open up and discuss personal issues.

**Case Example 1:** *But, building relationship helps a lot. A lot. Because, if I just looked at Ms. (name) as a residence supervisor, I wouldn’t talk to her as deep as I do. But, because we built the relationship, I don’t look at her like (name), she’s the residence manager. I look at her like, “Oh! I have a connection with this woman. I need to talk to her. [Case 4]:*

**Case Example 2:** *Uh, it’s always the same. It’s, it’s just like when, when we have meetin’s, I’m not nervous ‘cause I feel like it’s just me and her. And, I just, we just connected [Case 8]*

**Next steps:** Further define the theme transcending roles. Explore contrasting examples of workers who youth do not perceive as transcending roles.

### **Ensuring Data Quality**

All researchers bring their own preconceptions, beliefs, values, experiences, and assumptions to their work (Padgett, 1998). I worked for many years in the field of child welfare as a child advocate in Family Court. Youth were not regularly present in court when important life decisions were being made. When youth were present, they were consulted with regarding their position, but their attorney spoke on their behalf. My observations were that youth were not actively participating in their court proceedings. I entered the current study with this frame of reference regarding youth participation in child welfare decision-making. It was important for me to acknowledge my previous experience and discuss any biases I had regarding youth participation. In order to foster reflexivity, I worked closely with my dissertation sponsor, an expert in ethnographic research, throughout the entire research process, including designing the study, collecting the data, and analyzing the data. We met for regular peer review and debriefing sessions where we explored the data, examined potential biases and reviewed the findings. I also wrote memos where I documented my methodological decisions and reflected on how my own values and interests may be affecting the research process (Charmaz, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

Another method used in this study to ensure quality data was triangulation (Maxwell, 2005). I used multiple methods of data collection, including observation, interviews and documents. I compared multiple perspectives, including my observations, the youth perspective, the facilitator perspective, the documents, the existing literature, and multiple theoretical frameworks (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). The comparison of numerous sources allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of youth

participation in decision-making, that I would not have achieved through using only one source. For example, through facilitator interviews and observations of conferences, I was able to determine inconsistencies between what some facilitators said they did in the conference (i.e. encouraged the youth voice), versus what they actually did (i.e. silencing the youth voice). Through interviews with youth, I learned how certain practices influenced youths' experiences and perceptions of participation in the conference (i.e. feeling heard or feeling shut down).

I used member checking as a mechanism to review my findings and ensure accuracy. Member checking is a process whereby participants review for accuracy rough drafts of memos or writings where their thoughts and ideas are represented (Stake, 1995). I discussed my initial findings with select facilitators. These discussions led me to look deeper into the relationships youth experience with agency workers. They confirmed the importance of the relationship between the case planner and the youth in terms of getting youth to attend and participate in agency based decision-making opportunities. They noted that the conference is a lens through which you can see the nature and quality of relationships youth have with various adults in their life. They highlighted the need educate and to gain buy-in from all participants in the conference.

### **Human Subjects**

The Institutional Review Board [IRB] at Columbia University, the New York City's Administration for Children's Services, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, and New York Foundling approved this dissertation study. Youth in foster care are considered a vulnerable population, therefore, my sample was limited to

youth who were 18 years or older and legally able to provide consent. The IRB protocol was adhered to throughout the study.

## **CHAPTER 6: RELATIONSHIPS WITH AGENCY STAFF**

This chapter answers the research question: What factors influence youth attendance and participation in agency based child welfare decision-making opportunities, such as family team conferences? It reviews the nature and quality of youths' relationships with agency staff, including the factors that encourage youth to share information and engage in decision-making practices, and the factors that lead youth to shut down or disengage.

### **Getting Youth to Attend**

One of the biggest barriers to youth participation in family team conferences (FTC's) observed by the researcher and reinforced through the post observation interviews, was getting youth to attend the conference. Most conferences attended by the researcher over a period of seven months were either rescheduled, because the youth was not present, or held without the youth because they had already been rescheduled at least once. Facilitators speculated potential reasons why youth did not attend the conferences. One reason was that the FTC is not mandatory and some youth do not understand the importance of it. One facilitator noted, "some of these kids have been in foster care for a long time, and they just, they don't want to deal with anything that they don't necessarily have to. And I think that these conferences are seen as something, for some anyway, as something they don't necessarily have to attend." Other possible reasons included youth have other commitments (i.e. employment, school, extra-curricular activities, child care responsibilities), youth do not want to "deal with" the agency or the foster care system, and/or youth did not want to listen to adults tell them what they "should" be doing or "did not" do. One facilitator noted that youth who are successful in other areas of their life are

more likely to attend the FTC's. She stated, "it's not scientific, but a lot of times the kids that don't come aren't doing much outside, but the ones that are in school and doing well, they tend to come." This response may reflect the youths' level of engagement both inside and outside of the agency.

Staff used various methods to get youth to attend the conference. Facilitators reported that some workers strategically schedule FTC's at a time when the youth has another appointment at the agency, or is scheduled to collect their monthly independent living stipend, thus providing a financial incentive for them to be there. Facilitators also highlighted the importance of administrative reminders including phone calls, letters, text messages, and Facebook messages. One facilitator noted that youth are more likely to attend if they receive a "personal invitation" from their worker. It creates a sense of obligation and sends the message that youths' presence at the conference is important and necessary.

Most youth in the study reported that the reason they attended their conference was because an adult, generally the caseworker or foster parent, asked or told them to attend. They discussed administrative reminders such as the caseworker calling them to inform them of the meeting, sending them an email or a Facebook message. Brian noted, "Every, every time they call the house and tell me to come to the meeting, I just come." Karen reported that she wanted to attend another program after school that day, but her case planner called her, sent her a text message and Facebook message reminding her of the FTC, so she felt it was important for her to be there.

While administrative reminders were important, youth and facilitators reported that relationships between youth and agency staff were the most important factor in



getting youth to attend their FTC. Youth discussed a sense of obligation, due to their relationship with agency staff, to attend the conference. As reflected in Devon's comments about his caseworker: "Ms. T. begged me. Well, she didn't beg me but she told me, told me to come. I was like, "Alright." 'Cause, me and Ms. T. are close. So, I came 'cause of her." Similarly, Eduardo stated, "I decided to come because uh, for the simple fact Mr. V. been stressing that he needs me to be here." Some youth did not want to upset their caseworker or make them mad. This is reflected in Juan's comments about his caseworker, "'Cause I'm always givin' her like a stress and stuff so. 'Cause, I was gonna say no but you just hear like in her tone that, you know, she's gonna be pissed off. So, I'm like, ok I'll go."

The finding that the relationship between casework staff influenced youth attendance at the conference was confirmed by the facilitator interviews. As one facilitator noted:

*I really, I really think that's on a case planner level. I think the more engaged the case planners are with their kids, the more often they're gonna come to our conference. If the case planner and the kid don't have a relationship, how are we gonna expect us to get a relationship and get them in a room?*

Similarly, another facilitator stated: "I mean, some people have a better working relationship with the teenagers than others, and can get them to come to the conferences and get them to participate in their services."

A few facilitators noted that when relationships between youth and their caseworkers are strained, workers might not want their clients to attend the FTC, because issues in the working relationship may be revealed during the conference. This could result in workers

not reminding their clients' of the FTC, or not conveying the importance of their attendance. While lack of an established relationship may prevent some youth from attending the conference, for some youth it may also serve as a reason to attend, either to complain about the agency/caseworker, or to ensure they receive necessary services.

Veronica highlighted this point in her interview:

*I came because I wanted to hear what they were gonna say. I'm to the point where I've heard the same things over and over again, and I've stated how many problems I've had with the agency or whatever. And, I came today, I wanted to hear what they were gonna say, and you know, I had more concerns but I just kept thinking to myself to be thankful, instead of pointing out every little thing.*

### **Nature and Quality of Relationships**

Youths' relationships with agency staff were also at the core of how they participated in decision-making opportunities. While, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the facilitators guided the family team conference, it was the relationship with the caseworker that often affected the youths' level of engagement. Not surprisingly, when relationships were strong, youth were open to talking with agency staff and soliciting their advice, information or guidance when making life decisions, such as whether to be adopted, whether to stop visiting with a family member, whether to apply to college, whether to get a high school diploma or GED, whether to apply for SSI, and whether to keep a child or terminate the pregnancy. When relationships were weak, youth did not open up to staff to share important information or solicit advice.

This section describes the nature and quality of relationships between youth and their caseworkers, and identifies three levels of engagement: detached, formal, and

engaged. Also discussed are the elements that encouraged a positive relationship between caseworkers and youth, or which were absent from such relationships: case continuity, non-judgmental listening, establishing trust, and transcending roles.

### **Range of Relationships**

*So, the way I feel about Miss M. is just someone to help me. (laughter) That's, that's just how I feel about her. Like, okay, I just call her. There's nothin' special about me and Miss M. She's just my social worker. That's how I feel about it."*  
(Susie, age 20)

*But, building relationship helps a lot. A lot. Because, if I just looked at Miss J. as a residence supervisor, I wouldn't talk to her as deep as I do. But, because we built the relationship, I don't look at her like Miss J., she's the residence manager. I look at her like, "Oh! I have a connection with this woman. I need to talk to her."  
(Monique, age 18)*

Monique and Susie's description of their relationships with agency workers demonstrates that there is variation in the level of support youth perceive from their relationships with agency staff. On one end of the spectrum is *detached* youth, those who did not feel they received any support from workers at the agency. In the middle of the continuum are *formally engaged* youth, those who received instrumental support. On the opposite end of the spectrum are *engaged* youth, those who received both emotional and instrumental support.

Only a few youth in the sample fell into the category of *detached* or those who did not perceive any relationship with agency staff. The reasons youth provided for the lack of connection included lack of case continuity, lack of privacy and confidentiality, not feeling heard or supported, and having their needs met outside the agency. Lack of case continuity meant being assigned multiple caseworkers and either not having the time to develop a trusting relationship, or being resistant to forming a relationship. For example, in Dillon's FTC there was a discussion about transitioning his case to a new caseworker, present at the conference. Dillon did not participate in the conversation. During the follow up interview, Dillon explained that he was assigned three caseworkers in less than a year. He did not remember the name of the first caseworker, and did not have time to get to know the other two. He was reluctant to form a relationship with the new caseworker because he wasn't sure how long she would be on his case.

Another reason some youth did not engage with the worker was due to lack of privacy, and not feeling heard and/or supported. For example, Jerrod reported that he does not confide in his caseworker because she sides with his foster mother and tells her whatever he says, so he doesn't trust her to keep information he shares with her private. Additionally, he has a close relationship with his foster mother so he would rather speak with her directly rather than going through a third party.

*Formally connected* youth are distinguished from *detached* youth based on the degree of support they received from agency staff. *Detached* youth reported receiving no support, whereas *formally connected* youth received instrumental support, such as information, services, advice, and advocacy. Youth reported receiving concrete services such as a metro card, money for clothes, assistance with housing applications, or referrals

to programs and services. They made comments such as “the agency provides good services” or “they help me with school and stuff.” Some youth believed that agency staff interacted with them solely because it was a function of their job, indicating that they were “only there to collect a paycheck”. They described their relationships with these staff as transactional, meaning youth received a concrete service, but did not receive emotional or psychological support. The transactional nature of these relationships was illustrated in Susie’s excerpt above, “There’s nothin’ special about me and Miss M. She’s just my social worker.” Similarly, when discussing the relationship with his case planner, Francis noted, “Well, we didn’t really have like a close relationship. She just comes like when she’s supposed to come on visits and stuff, talk, and that’s about it. She helped us with a couple of things, but that’s it.”

*Engaged* youth were differentiated from *formally connected* youth by the perceived level of support they received from agency staff. *Engaged* youth described relationships with staff that went beyond their job function and where a close connection was established. Youth believed they could go to these staff for concrete information about programs and services, but also talked with them on a personal level, sharing concerns and issues, asking for advice and engaging in collaborative decision making. The following factors facilitated the development of an “engaged relationship:” 1) case continuity, 2) non-judgmental listening, 3) establishing trust, and 4) transcending roles.

### **Case Continuity**

A number of participants discussed case continuity -- the amount of time a staff member had been working on a case and their level of knowledge about the case --as an important component in establishing an *engaged* relationship. It is well documented in

the workforce retention literature that child welfare workers have high rates of turnover, which directly impacts service delivery and permanency planning (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003; 2006). It is also well known that many foster care youth have experienced multiple losses, which may impact their ability to form close relationships (Perry, 2006). Overall, youth who experienced multiple caseworkers during their time in foster care expressed difficulty establishing trust and opening up to agency staff. For example, Shelly stated, “right now, there’s not much of a relationship (laughter) cause in the last six months, I’ve had probably six or seven different caseworkers.” Similarly, Susie described feeling reluctant to develop new relationships after a caseworker she had a strong connection to left the agency:

Susie: To be honest, the closest relationship I’ve ever had to a case planner was when I was at [agency name]. Yeah and, after that, ‘cause after that, I didn’t, I chose not to get too close to anybody.

Interviewer: Why?

Susie: Because, it’s uh, it’s irritating to me where I get close to someone and then I have to leave them or they have to leave. You know? And, that’s been happening to a lot, to a lot of people around me. Like recently, Miss W., she had to leave so it was just a good thing that I didn’t get to close to her because I would have been really upset and hurt. But uh, my case planner there, I was really sad that I had to leave. I didn’t want them to switch me over but due to money and budgeting, they had to. So, it irritated me.

Staff members working with youth for longer durations were perceived by both facilitators and youth to have a more in-depth knowledge of the case and an enhanced opportunity to establish an *engaged* relationship with the young person. For example, when discussing Karen's case, the facilitator reported that the case planner had been assigned to work with Karen for 12 years, the duration of time she spent in foster care. She described the interaction between Karen and her case planner as both "comfortable" and "respectful". She noted, "it makes a big difference of having the same case planner. If you've connected with them, having the same one all the way through, its' really good for the kids." During Karen's interview, she revealed that at first she did not like her case planner because, "I didn't know him, he was just a freak, he was a stranger". In the beginning, she did not feel comfortable opening up to him. Over time, Karen got to know her case planner and formed a more positive opinion of him. Now, she described him as "awesome" and would feel comfortable opening up to him about personal issues and soliciting advice.

During the FTC, Karen and her case planner were observed to be comfortable with each other, at times joking with each other. For example, when the issue of Karen waking up on time to attend school was raised, the case planner turned to Karen and said that she would be able to sleep better if she wasn't on Facebook until 2am. Karen responded to the case planner in a respectful yet joking manner, "and what were you doing on Facebook at 2am?" It was evident that the case planner had a clear understanding of Karen's permanency planning goals that was grounded in his long history on the case. When discussing Karen's progress, the case planner recited her foster care history, including areas of growth and development from memory rather than

referring to his notes, as many other case planners in his situation did. Additionally, his supportive and positive use of language, such as “she’s a good kid” and “she’s come long way,” coupled with his proud demeanor when referring to Karen’s progress demonstrated a strong personal commitment to her overall success.

In general, youth perceived staff members working with them for longer durations to be in a better position to understand their thoughts and provide support. In the excerpt below, Monique reflects on her reasons for talking with Miss J., a residential worker at her mother child residential program, about important life decisions:

*It’s easier to talk to her than anybody else. Somebody else, I’ll have to tell them the whole background, the reason, and then the decision. Ms. J., I could just tell her the decision and she’ll remember things, you know, that can even happened last year and say, “Oh, you know, and now I know why you think like that.” You know? It’s easier talkin’ to her.*

Although case continuity was an important factor, identified by both youth and facilitators, a few youth described situations where they were able to form close connections with agency workers after knowing them for only a short period of time. The factors youth identified as facilitating the development of these relationships included workers taking the time to get to know them and learn the facts of their case, listening from the youths’ perspective, supporting their perspective, and advocating for them. These factors are demonstrated in Veronica’s comments about her caseworker that she knew for less than a year: “she is a good person besides just being a good caseworker. Uh, you know I can always like confide in her whether I’m feeling down or happy or



whatever concerns I have, and she will always follow through.” Veronica described the significance of her caseworker knowing the facts of her case:

*Mrs. B., she's like, she's on point, you know, she knew everything about the case, and what to say and what not to say or whatever. You know, she, she's up-to-date. She knows what's goin' on. She's a real worker. Uh, I've had previous workers that were just like, "Oh, the child, it's like in tenth grade," and I was really in eleventh or something, you know, and uh, they just didn't know my case, they didn't know what was goin' on. But, she knows the case like the back of her hand.*

Lack of case continuity could also be overcome when a worker was perceived as going the “extra mile” to address a young person’s concern. As demonstrated in the story about her caseworker told by Susie, who had a biological brother in the foster care system and wanted assistance in locating him. Susie discussed the issue with several case planners she had in the past, but none of them listened to her or took her seriously. She noted, “They wouldn’t budge. They wouldn’t move a finger to help me.” After only one month of being on the case, her caseworker, Ms. A. put Susie’s brother’s name in the computer system and located him. Susie recalls, “I was so happy she found my brother.” When reflecting on this incident, Susie discussed how she “hated” her past workers because they did not recognize how important it was to her to locate her brother. She only knew Ms. A. for one month when she took the steps necessary to locate her brother. This action led Susie to form a close relationship with Ms. A. Although she has since left the agency, Susie remains in touch with Ms. A. and stated that she will “never forget what she did” for her.

Although case continuity was an important factor, discussed by several participants, Veronica and Susie demonstrated that it is possible for a worker to establish an engaging relationship with a young person, even after working with them for a short time. Their examples highlighted the importance of workers getting to know the youth, learning the facts of their case, listening from the youth's perspective, and taking steps to address their concerns.

### **Non-Judgmental Listening**

*Maybe if my caseworker sat down and listened to what, what I was actually trying to get across or tryin' to understand where I was coming from, then maybe things would not be so rough. (Jerrod, Age 20)*

*"He was talkin' to me like he understood me. He understood me. Like he was in my shoes." (Tyrone, Age 18)*

As reflected in the above excerpts, youth in foster care place great emphasis on workers listening in a non-judgmental manner and attempting to understand their views. Non-judgmental listening is a way of listening and responding to another person in a manner that conveys an understanding of their thoughts and feelings. Youth differentiated between someone who listened from their perspective versus someone who saw it through the eyes of the youth, as reflected in Tyrone's excerpt above. Youth stressed the importance of workers not judging them or personalizing the information they share. As Eduardo described his case planner, "Yep, I could speak to him however I want. He would not judge me. And, he would not, he would not take any offense to what I say to

him. He would not. And, that's what I like." Similarly, Brian discussed the reasons he felt comfortable confiding in an agency worker:

*I guess it's her personality. When I first met her and stuff, she uh, she makes me feel good, I guess. She makes me feel normal. And uh, I could cry to her and stuff like, she get's in my head but it's like not a bad thing. It's like when I would say certain things, she listens and knows what's going on, you know, she knows what's good for me.*

A key component of non-judgmental listening was the workers response to the information shared by the youth. Some responses conveyed an understanding of the youth's perspective and encouraged them to open up and established trust. Other responses were perceived to be judgmental or lacking an understanding of the youth's thoughts and feelings. Susie described a situation when she informed her case planner that she was pregnant. The case planner stated, "Oh so what are you gonna do now, you know, cause you got to start, to finish school, you know, you got to finish school." Susie described feeling judged, which led her to shut down and stop discussing the situation with her worker. Susie's noted that her purpose in talking with her caseworker was to process her feelings surrounding the pregnancy, not to be lectured about finishing school. Similarly, Jerrod discussed how he could tell his worker wasn't listening to him, because her responses reflected a lack of understanding of his perspective. He stated, "At some point, I think she was but then just when I would give her the benefit of the doubt and think she's listening to me, like something would get said that would just tick me off and just show me that she really wasn't paying attention to what I said."

In contrast, Monique discussed a situation when she discovered, at age 17, that she was pregnant with her second child. She was confused as to whether she wanted to keep the child or terminate her pregnancy. She decided to confide in Ms. J., a residential worker. Monique remembered Ms. J. saying, "I'm not going to tell you to terminate the pregnancy, I'm not going to tell you to have the pregnancy, you know, have the baby. How do you feel?" Miss J's open-ended question demonstrated that she was interested in understanding Monique's perspective. Further, Miss J. conveyed that she was not judging or imposing her own values on Monique. Because Ms. J took the time to listen to Monique's views and provide support, Monique was able to make the decision to terminate the pregnancy. She revealed that although the decision was a difficult and painful, Ms. J. was with her "every step of the way."

### **Establishing Trust**

Youth placed great significance on establishing relationships with agency staff that were based on trust. For them, it was important for staff to keep information they shared with them private and/or share the information in an appropriate and supportive manner. When youth established trust with their workers, they were much more willing to open up to them, share information and believe that the worker had their best interest in mind. For example, when Francis was asked why she shared personal information with her caseworker about having a boyfriend and experimenting with drinking and drugs, she said she did because, "that's the only person, like mainly, I could trust. Trust and like we are very close. Like he is close. Like we are close. So that's the reason."

When youth did not trust their worker, they questioned their intentions when asking them personal questions. They described them as being intrusive or "in my

business too much.” They noted that in foster care your life is constantly under a microscope with various adults knowing personal information about you. They worried that if they confided in their worker, they would share the information with other child welfare professionals such as supervisors, attorneys, judges and foster parents. Tyrone reported that when he confided in his caseworker, he shared the information with his foster parent and other agency workers. Tyrone said about his caseworker, “he can’t keep nothin’ private. If I tell him something, and I tell him to keep it private, that mean I want him to tell someone.”

Similarly, Jerrod described an experience with his caseworker when she shared personal information about him in a meeting with his foster mother/aunt. He thought the information he shared with his worker was confidential, so he viewed her disclosing it in the meeting as a breach of trust in their relationship:

*Like I remember one time, we had a meeting and we was talkin’ ‘cause we had a meetin’ because me and my aunt wasn’t gettin’ along too well at the time. I was smokin’, drinkin’, partyin’, you know, regular, you know, regular, average teenage stuff. And, just like how I said, drinkin’ and smokin’, stuff like that - it’s supposed to be confidential and stuff like that. So, it’s like sometimes like we’ll have a meetin’ and personal things that I do with myself in my life will get brought up. Like without me bein’ asked how would I feel if it was brought up or do I want to talk about it, or like, like none of those questions was asked of me. Like, it was times where it was just brought up, and it’s like, it wouldn’t bother, like it doesn’t bother me, because I, I, if I change, I don’t change for the next person. I change for me. So, I don’t let it bother me. But, it’s like where’s the trust*

*though? Like I, you're supposed to be my worker, like I'm supposed to feel comfortable talkin' to you and lettin' you know things, but I can't do that if, if you know somethin' and then for some reason it starts a world war four or somethin' like that.*

Jerrod went on to explain how his relationship with his caseworker changed after the meeting where she disclosed information he perceived to be confidential. He noted, “why would ask me something and you get me thinking nobody’s gonna know what we talkin’ about, and I tell you and somebody ends up knowin’ anyways?” Jerrod stopped confiding in his worker because he no longer trusted that she would keep the information private or notify him prior to sharing the information. Additionally, Jerrod’s aunt felt betrayed when she learned the information from a third party, causing strain in their relationship.

The above example highlights the importance establishing trusting relationships with youth in foster care. Youth value workers who they can confide in and trust that the worker will either keep the information private or share the information in a thoughtful and productive manner. When workers are not up front and honest with youth regarding how they will utilize personal information, it can have a damaging impact on the relationship and the youth’s ability to trust other individuals. As noted by Jerrod, “that’s why I take personal information so serious, ‘cause it’s like if we can’t trust the people, if we can’t trust the people who’s tellin’ us that they’re here to work and support for us, then who can we trust?”

### **Transcending Roles**

*She was just so friendly. She was just so, like they're all friendly, but she just really had like connection with me. She really cared, you know? She really, really did. You could tell, like they all, like I said, they all have, they all do care. You can see it. But, she really was like, you know, even if she had to like do things after hours, like as far as like she was off one day, she would do it for me. Like she would make like phone calls right away. Things with her would happen right away. She would get me things that, you know, I didn't even know I was eligible for. So, she was really cool. Really, really, good. (Shelly, age 21)*

Shelly's comments about a former caseworker demonstrates the significance of youth perceiving workers to care about them and perform tasks that they perceive to go beyond their workers job responsibilities. Francis noted that her case planner, Mr. C. demonstrates through his actions and interactions that he cares about her and her brother. In describing Mr. C., she stated, "like if we need somethin' done, he gets, he gets it done. Or, like if we need somethin', he give it to us, like supplies and stuff." The FTC Facilitator agreed with this perception of Mr. C., describing him as a worker who goes "above and beyond" for all of his clients. For example, if one of his clients comes into the foster care agency hungry, Mr. C. will use his own money to buy them food if the agency doesn't have any. The Facilitator reported, "he never gives up on a client", he "stands behind them" and "pushes them."

An important component of transcending roles is paying attention to the youth's emotional needs. Monique described how her residential supervisor, Ms. J. cared about

her emotional needs and was there for her when she needed support and guidance.

Monique stated, “Any time I needed her, she was there.” For example, when Monique’s aunt died, she was upset and went to Brooklyn to be at her aunt’s home. Ms. J. traveled, on the weekend, from Manhattan to Brooklyn to find her and offer emotional support:

*She didn’t have to come all the way to where I was on the weekend, which was in Brooklyn, to come find me to make sure I was okay, personally. She didn’t know if I was home or anything. I wasn’t answering my cell phone, I was hurt, you know, my aunt raised me from the time I was nine to the time I was 16. So, she came to Brooklyn, she found me, and she made sure I came home, you know, everything was fine.*

Similarly, Mevi described how her caseworker sends regular emails checking in to see how she is doing. She stated, the email “seems genuine as she actually wants to know, as opposed to it’s my job, so I am gonna write this email, ask you.” Mevi perceived her caseworker to care about her as a person, as opposed to just being one of her clients.

### **Conclusion**

The current chapter examines the important role relationships can play in facilitating youth attendance and participation in decision-making opportunities at the agency. A range of relationships existed between youth and agency staff from detached, to formal, to engaged. The optimal relationship was *engaged*, where youth receive both concrete and emotional support from agency staff. Factors youth identified in establishing an *engaged* relationship included case continuity, non-judgmental listening, establishing trust, and transcending roles. While the factors were reported independently in this section, participants in the study often discussed them simultaneously as



interconnected factors. For example, youth described workers who listened from their perspective and respected their privacy as individuals they could establish a trusting relationship with. On the contrary, when workers did not listen to the youth's viewpoint, or shared private information without notifying the youth, the youth may be less likely to open up to them.

In sum, the nature of the relationship between a worker and youth was found to be a strong contributing factor in getting youth to attend agency based meetings and conferences, share information, and receive information, advice and guidance. The next chapter will examine specific strategies used by FTC facilitators to engage youth in the decision making process in the context of the Family Team Conference.

## **CHAPTER 7: FACILITATOR STRATEGIES**

This chapter addresses the research question: What strategies do conference facilitators use to engage youth in decision making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences? The previous chapter highlighted the importance of youths' relationships with agency staff, mainly case planners/caseworkers, in getting them to attend agency based decision-making opportunities, such as the family team conference. Once present at the conference, the facilitator played an essential role in engaging youth in decision-making. Other adults contributed to the content and dynamics of the discussion, but the facilitator was largely responsible for managing the structure and flow of the conference. This chapter utilizes case illustrations to highlight strategies facilitators use to encourage youth participation in family team conferences. It demonstrates practices that promote youth participation and practices that discourage youth participation.

### **Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences**

The goal of permanency planning family team conferences is to assess child safety, permanency and well being, evaluate the need for ongoing placement, reassess service needs, and ensure progress towards permanency (NYC ACS, 2009). In the FTC protocol, the individuals that are supposed to be invited to attend the conference include the youth, parents and/or legal guardians, foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, permanency resources, the case manager, the case manager's supervisor, key service providers, and any other persons identified by the youth.

All conferences attended by the researcher included a facilitator, youth and case manager/case planner. There were no biological parents present at any of the observed

conferences. Twelve conferences included the case manager's supervisor or borough director, eight included a youth development specialist<sup>3</sup>, seven included a foster parent or pre-adoptive parent, two included a mental health coordinator, one included a youth advocate<sup>4</sup>, one included a community representative<sup>5</sup>, and one included a forensic social worker<sup>6</sup> working alongside the attorney for the child.

A trained facilitator employed by the foster care agency facilitated the conferences. Facilitators guide the team through each stage of the FTC process, including introduction to the participants, discussing the strengths and concerns, brainstorming steps to address the concerns, reaching a consensus, and coming up with an action plan (i.e. service plan). In the FTC model, the facilitator is meant to be a neutral party, with no previous involvement with the family (NYC ACS, 2009). However, since each location had only one or two facilitators assigned to facilitate the conferences, many facilitators had previous knowledge of the case from facilitating prior conferences with the youth.

All facilitators were trained centrally at the New York City Administration for Children's Services. The initial training followed a six-day curriculum, initially developed for the Annie E. Casey Foundation *Family to Family* Initiative and adapted to meet the needs of family team conferencing in New York City. The training included background information on the FTC, the practice paradigm shift, procedural FTC basics,

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<sup>3</sup>Facilitators reported a preference to have a youth development specialist at the conference, but their attendance depended on scheduling and availability.

<sup>4</sup>The youth advocate was a former foster care youth, currently employed by the foster care agency.

<sup>5</sup> The community representative did not have previous knowledge of the youth or the case. He was attending all FTC's at the agency scheduled that day.

<sup>6</sup> The forensic social worker was advocating for an exception to policy for the youth to remain in foster care beyond 21 years old, so she and the attorney for the child were actively involved in the case.

FTC structure and process, the role of the facilitator, communication skills, dealing with difficult emotions, and developing an effective summary report (Saunders, 2009). The training modules consisted of power point slides, large and small group discussions, group activities, case examples, videos, and role-playing.

As noted in the methodology chapter, of the ten facilitators observed, seven were female and three were male. Four were African American, three were Hispanic, two were Caucasian, and one was Asian. All facilitators held a Bachelors degree either in social work, psychology, sociology or a related field and two held their Masters degrees - one in education and one in social work. Facilitators were required to have at least two years of child welfare work experience. The number of years working in child welfare for the sample ranged from 4 to 18 years with a mean of 8.5 years. The number of years working as a facilitator ranging from 6 months to 4 years with a mean of 2.5 years.

FTC's followed a structured format including six steps: 1) introduction, 2) issue identification 3) assess the situation (concerns and strengths), 4) development of ideas, 5) decision making and plan development, and 6) recap/evaluation/closing (ACS, 2012). At the end of the conference all participants are provided with the Family Team Conference Summary Report including the next steps, time frames and referrals. All but one youth participating in the study had a permanency goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA), with the majority exiting foster care to live on their own. The one outlier had a goal of adoption. Permanency planning conferences with this population focused heavily on ensuring that the youth was prepared to make the transition from foster care to living on their own. Topics discussed included stable housing, educational and/or vocational attainment, employment opportunities, mental, physical and emotional

well-being, and permanent relationships with caring and committed adults. Other topics included the youth's citizenship status, criminal involvement or other legal issues such as delinquency or criminal cases, family planning, obtaining documents (i.e. passport, birth certificate, social security card, drivers license), and interpersonal relationships (i.e. peers, intimate relationships).

All conferences observed were held at the foster care agency in a conference room with a table and chairs organized in either a square or circle with all participants visible to each other. Facilitators reported that the purpose of the set up is to encourage a collaborative team environment where each participant is an equal participant in the conference. There are no assigned seats, so participants choose where they want to sit. In the majority of conference spaces, FTC ground rules were posted on the wall. Various versions of the rules were observed, but they generally included items such the right to privacy, respect each other views, no side bar conversation, everyone will have a chance to speak, one person speaks at a time, no cursing, turn cell phones off or on vibrate, no texting, no shaming, and no blaming. There were also blank papers posted on the wall so the facilitators could chart the progress of the conference including the strengths, concerns and action plan.

The conferences follow a structured format, described above however the facilitator plays a key role in adhering to the philosophy and format of the FTC. The goal of the facilitator was to level the playing field so that all participants are provided the opportunity to speak, have their perspective heard, feel respected, and collaborate in the team decision making process. Facilitators were responsible for managing the power dynamics so youth and professionals were genuine collaborators, rather than the adults or

professionals dominating the conference. The idea of adults/professionals collaborating with youth on decision-making was novice and/or challenging for some participants. Therefore, it was the role of the facilitator to educate parties about the paradigm of the FTC that youth are considered “experts” on their situation and capable of contributing to decision-making with the support and guidance of professionals and adults.

### **Facilitation Styles**

Two very different facilitation styles emerged from the data. Some facilitators, who I describe as *adult-centric* placed adults at the center of decision making by allowing professionals and /or adults to share their views on the youth’s situation, encouraging youth listen to the adult perspective and utilizing the adult perspective as a basis for decision making. Other facilitators, who I describe as *youth centric* placed youth at the center of decision making by encouraging them to share their perspective, encouraging adults to listen to the youth and incorporating the youth’s views into the collaborative decision making process. While the dominant behavior of any particular facilitator may be adult-centric or youth-centric, it should be noted that human behavior is complex and variable, with facilitators capable of adopting characteristics of the other approach.

Adult centric facilitators treated adults and professionals as the “experts” on the case as opposed to youth as the experts on their own life. They allowed the adult/professional perspective to guide decision-making, expecting youth to listen, understand and adapt to the adult/professional perspective. Questioning was often directed towards adults/professionals, rather than the youth. When questions were directed towards the youth, they lacked substance or depth. At times, youth were blamed

or shamed for not meeting their permanency planning goals, including not being prepared to exit foster care and live independently.

In contrast, youth centric facilitators established a trusting environment, directed questioning towards the youth, listened in a non-judgmental manner, and acknowledged, validated and responded to the youths' perspective. They highlighted youths' accomplishments, while simultaneously encouraging them to continue taking steps to achieve their permanency planning goals. They established a personal connection with the youth and tailored the conference to meet their individual needs, wants and goals.

The two different facilitation styles are demonstrated next through case illustrations. These two cases were chosen because each represented the sharpest and most fertile examples of each approach, thus permitting an in depth description of each style, while also highlighting the differences between them.

### **Chewed Up and Spit Out: A case illustration of adult centric practice**

Shade is a 20-year-old Black and Native American male with a permanency goal of independent living. He has been in foster care for 10 years and resided in various settings including foster homes, group homes and residential treatment center. He is currently residing in a non-kinship foster home with a foster mother, foster father and a foster brother, aged 13. Shade will turn 21 and age out of foster care in approximately 3.5 months. The purpose of the FTC was to review his progress since the last conference, six months prior, and prepare him to exit foster care. Present at the conference were the facilitator, the youth, the case planner, the foster father, and the foster mother.

The facilitator began the conference by stating that they would discuss the youth's strengths. She directed her attention on Shade saying, "tell me something good about

yourself.” He seemed uncomfortable with the question and looked at his foster mother, who responded by saying, “What are you looking at me for?” Shade then described himself as “somewhat responsible.” The facilitator did not address his response, but instead noted that Shade was 20 years old with a goal of APPLA (Another Planned Permanency Living Arrangement). The case planner told the youth to “start with that one.” The facilitator asked Shade whether he was finished with school and when he would graduate. Shade noted that he is in an alternative high school and has another year until graduation.

The case planner and foster mother spoke up in turn, disparaging Shade and noting his deficiencies. The case planner pointed out that, “It (graduation) was supposed to be last year but he didn’t want to get up in the morning, so he missed school.” She continued on, “If he went to school, he would be on target to graduate.” The facilitator changed the topic, asking the youth whether he was helpful in the home. The youth, already starting to shut down, responded monosyllabically, saying “sometimes.” The case planner spoke up, again emphasizing Shade’s flaws, “He knows what he does wrong. He knows he is lazy. He only has until January 20<sup>th</sup> and he is out of the foster care system.” The foster mother and foster father also began disparaging Shade. The foster mother said, “I am disappointed because he can do so much.” The foster father said, “All he wants to do is play video games and basketball.” The case planner persisted in her complaints, as she explained her frustration in working with Shade:

*My issue is preparing him for the next stage of his life. He thinks adults will help him out all the time. He needs to hit rock bottom to see that life is not so simple. The State is paying people to provide him with shelter, food and stability. Once*



*your 21 it's done, done, done. He makes it look like we do nothing, but that's not the case. Those are my issues.*

The facilitator mirrored the case planner, adopting her negative approach, noting, “So he needs to take ownership.” The case planner responded by stating, “I care about him like he’s one of my children. But, he is in a playland. Let’s say Ms. J. kicks him out tomorrow. Where are you going?” The facilitator then confronted Shade, asking him, “Do you hear this? What are you going to do?” Shade indicated that he wanted to go to college. The case planner responded with great emotion, saying to Shade, “You are not graduating until January. What are you going to do? Where are you going to lay your head?” Shade did not respond, but looked down at his hands with a look of defeat.

The conference continued in the same manner with the case planner and the foster parents lecturing the youth, telling him he needs to “get it together” and “take responsibility for his life.” They also referred to him as being “lazy” and a “broke dude.” The case planner noted that Shade “disappoints her” and the foster mother stated, “he is a smart kid but he doesn’t use it.” The facilitator reinforced the case planner and foster parents comments by continuously asking Shade questions to ensure he understood, such as, “do you hear all of this” and “what have you got to say?” As the conference continued, Shade became less and less engaged, looking down at his hands and putting his head down on the table. He rarely spoke, and did not try and defend himself against the many negative characterizations of his behavior. At one point he appeared to mollify the facilitator by stating, “I am understanding what to do better.”

At the end of the conference, the facilitator came up with several areas for the action plan including: 1) Shade will graduate from high school and explore college, 2)

Shade will minimize his use of video games, 3) The case planner will monitor the youth, 4) The foster parents will continue to be a support, and 5) Shade will search for employment. The facilitator noted that all of these have a deadline date of January (3 months), because that is when Shade would age out of foster care.

This case illustrates the use of adult centric facilitation. The facilitator allowed the case planner and foster parents narrative of a lazy, unmotivated, and underachieving youth to dominate the discussion. The case planner and foster parents continuously interrupted Shade, answering the questions that were directed towards him. The facilitator asked Shade questions that focused on getting him to understand and adapt the adults' perspective as opposed to gaining his own unique viewpoint.

Notably, the facilitator did not follow the FTC format, which required a more structured and strengths based approach. For example, she did not begin with an introduction to the purpose, format or ground rules for the conference. She did not chart the strengths, concerns and action plan on the wall so everyone could visibly see them. Instead she took notes on a pad that was only visible to her. She mentioned at the beginning that she wanted to hear strengths, but then allowed the case planner to continuously discuss her disappointment and frustration in working with Shade, thus highlighting his deficits throughout the conference. Instead of brainstorming the action plan as a team, including soliciting Shade's input and agreement, the facilitator developed the plan on her own based on her understanding of the issues and read it aloud at the end of the conference. There was no discussion around whether Shade agreed with the action plan. Instead, the facilitator passed around the summary form and directed the parties to sign it.

My post observation interview with Shade confirmed my observations, that Shade felt disengaged and frustrated during the FTC. He described his experience in the conference as being “chewed up and spit out”. He felt attacked from every angle. He did not believe he had an opportunity to share his viewpoint or that he would be understood. He reported that one of his goals was to go to college and he had already started looking into schools. When I inquired as to why he didn't mention this in the FTC, he said he kept it to himself because he didn't want to hear that it was an unrealistic plan.

My post FTC interview with the facilitator also revealed a divergence between what she was trained to do, and what she actually did. The facilitator noted that the standard goal of all FTC's was to get the youth engaged in the decision-making process. As she explained, “they're the experts on the family. So I try and led them lead.... I am just a guide... so I try to let them do the talking most of the time.” However, she acknowledged that Shade was not engaged in the discussion and supported the way in which the caseworker and foster mother spoke about Shade. As she explained, the caseworker and foster mother were “on a roll.” She indicated that they know him a lot better than she does, so she felt it was appropriate that they would discuss their concerns with him in this direct manner. Additionally, she felt Shade needed to hear what they were saying because he will age out in a few months and is not prepared to live on his own. She reported that the conference served as “a reality check for him... he needed to hear it.” The facilitator's support of the caseworker and foster parents behavior in the conference was inconsistent with her comments about letting youth “lead” and youth being the “experts.” She justified the inconsistency by noting that he is aging out of foster care in three months and does not have a plan in place.

**Nothing About Me Without Me: A case illustration of youth centric practice**

Similar to Shade, Brian is a 20-year-old Black male with a permanency goal of independent living. He has been in foster care for 11 years and resided in two foster homes, including both kinship and non-kinship. He is currently residing in a foster home with a non-kinship foster mother. He will turn 21 and age out of foster care in approximately 4 months. The purpose of his FTC was to review his progress since the last conference and discuss his plan for exiting foster care. Present at the conference were the facilitator, the youth, the case planner, the FTC supervisor, and the foster mother.

The facilitator began the conference by thanking the participants for attending. She asked everyone to introduce themselves to the team and explained that the purpose of the conference was to discuss safety and permanency. She explained the FTC format -- to discuss the strengths and concerns and develop an agreed upon action plan. She indicated that the foster mother was only available for part of the conference, so she would begin with her. She asked the foster mother what was going well. The foster mother reported that Brian isn't hanging out the way he used to. The facilitator responded by using positive, strengths based language, "Great, he is growing up." Then she asked if there were any concerns. The foster mother indicated that Brian needs housing. The facilitator noted this as a concern and then asked the foster mother if she was a resource for him after he ages out of care. She said, "Yes, Brian knows he is always welcome in my home." The facilitator turned her attention to Brian:

Facilitator: What is going well in the foster home?

Brian: I have a key to the FM house. I am saving money.

Facilitator: (smiling and nodding) Good, you are saving money?

Brian: We go food shopping. She buys what I like. She cooks my favorite food.

Facilitator: I like how you are saying “we.”

Foster Mother: He is a part of the family. We talk a lot.

Facilitator: I like it! It is nice to see that you are relating better. That is a strength.

Foster Mother: He has grown up a lot since the first time he came to my home.

FTC Supervisor: (Directed at foster mother) Thank you for your time and your dedication to supporting Brian.

Facilitator: Brian is going to get a big hug after the meeting.

In the above excerpt, the facilitator used strengths based verbal and non-verbal communication to highlight the youth’s strengths each time a conference participant spoke, which in turn lead the participants to acknowledge Brian’s positive behavior. For example, when Brian stated, “we go food shopping,” the facilitator noted that he is using the word “we” when talking about him and the foster mother. This led the foster mother to highlight his inclusion in the family unit. The facilitator went further noting that the foster mother and Brian are relating better and acknowledging their improved interaction as a strength. This encouraged the foster mother’s positive comment that he has “grown up a lot” in her home.

The facilitator then focused on the housing concern raised by the foster mother. The case planner noted that Brian was referred to a housing specialist and that he was denied New York City Housing Assistance (NYCHA) because he’s on his mothers Public Assistance case. The case planner noted that Brian is not interested in supportive housing

and that he wanted his own place so his biological mother can live with him. The facilitator validated Brian's wishes while simultaneously focusing on his needs, "It is commendable that you don't want to leave your mother. But what about you?" The supervisor suggested that he apply for supportive housing because he can receive it until he is 26 years old. The facilitator stated, "We don't want you to lose this opportunity. Do you want to re-visit supportive housing?" The youth agreed to apply for supportive housing. The facilitator again validated his feelings about his mother, "It is commendable that you are always looking out for your mother. That is a strength."

The facilitator next explored Brian's educational attainment. Brian reported that he took his GED test, but hadn't received the results yet. The facilitator brainstormed potential ways he could get the results quicker, including going to the school in person to get the results. She also strategized how the agency could assist him in getting the results, such as calling the school if he continued to have difficulty. The case planner then diverted the conversation, mentioning that Brian applied for SSI to obtain an income so he could get housing, but he did not get a required letter from the doctor. Brian, fully engaged in the conversation, said he was going to the doctor today and would get the letter. The facilitator looked at the youth with concern and asked if he felt bombarded by all of the appointments. He said it was a lot, but he was fine. The supervisor suggested that they get him a calendar where he can write down all of his appointments. Brian said he liked that idea, and the facilitator responded that she would get the calendar for him.

The issue of employment was then raised as a concern by the case planner, who explained how Brian had two jobs but had to stop working because he had surgery. The facilitator asked Brian how he terminated with the employers. He mentioned that he

didn't call them to let them know. The facilitator responded in a supportive manner by discussing the importance of relationships: "It is important to tie up loose ends. Relationships are important and it's important to leave on a good note. You never know when you might need someone in the future." Brian agreed that relationships were important and then mentioned that he wanted to do an internship. He mentioned that FECS has both GED and job placement, and that he had visited FECS, but didn't apply yet. The facilitator responded in a supportive manner by stating, "We want to make sure that whatever you do is right for you. Doesn't help to enroll in a program you don't complete. What does Brian want to do?" Brian expressed interest in the medical field. The facilitator acknowledged his interest and then facilitated a discussion around potential opportunities for education and employment in the medical field.

The facilitator next explored Brian's interpersonal relationships with his biological family, the case planner and other adults in his life. Brian discussed how he worries about his mother. The facilitator responded in an empathetic manner by stating, "I am sure it bothers you and it is hard for you. If you get yourself together, you can better help your mother." She commended him for developing a relationship with his case planner, noting the duration of their relationship. Brian noted that the case planner helps him and tells him what is best for him. The facilitator acknowledged that Brian has worked hard on that relationship and that positive relationships take time and energy.

Towards the end of the conference, the facilitator went over Brian's strengths and concerns, and then developed the action plan with the input of all conference participants. The action plan included: 1) Brian and his mother will go to the PA office to remove him from her case, 2) The case planner will supply a letter to public assistance indicating that

Brian is in foster care. 3) Brian will go to the doctor and get a letter for SSI, 4) Brian and the housing specialist will explore supportive housing, 5) Brian will explore the medical field, and 6) Brian will speak with the educational specialist to follow up on the GED test results. Each item was given a specific time frame, between a few days to a month, for completion. The facilitator read the action plan out loud and asked if everyone agreed, to which all parties nodded their head in agreement. She then walked over to Brian with a big smile on her face, shook his hand and stated, "I am so proud of you, Brian."

This case illustrated youth centric facilitation. By taking time to introduce all the participants and providing them a detailed explanation to the purpose, philosophy and format of the conference, the facilitator sent the message that the conference would be a safe and collaborative process. The facilitator used positive, strengths based language to highlight the youth's strengths several times throughout the conference. She discussed Brian's progress and noted that she was personally proud of him. She asked Brian to discuss his feelings, concerns and goals. She acknowledged his ambivalence about his relationship with his mother while simultaneously encouraging him to think about his own needs. She appeared concerned about Brian beyond her role as a facilitator. For example, she offered to get him a planner so he could get organized and make all of his appointments. At the end of the conference, she shook his hand, looked him in the eye and told him she was proud of him. She then invited him to stop by her desk before leaving the agency so they could talk further.

My post-observation interview with Brian confirmed my observations. Brian felt heard and understood by the adults in the room. He felt fully engaged in the decision-making process. He was comfortable raising concerns and expressing his views. His



feelings were sufficiently explored and he integrated into every aspect of the discussion. Additionally, he maintained eye contact with the facilitator and other adults in the room, and smiled often when the facilitator pointed out his strengths. When discussing the facilitator, Brian discussed his perceived connection, stating: “It’s just like when we have meetings, I am not nervous ‘cause I feel like it’s just me and her. And, I just, we just connected.” He said the reason he confides in her is because she makes him “feel good” and “normal.” He stated, the facilitator “don’t have to get paid to help me. She’s always there for me.” He felt his relationship with the facilitator extended beyond the walls of the conference. In fact, he planned to stop by her desk to touch base before leaving the agency.

In my post-observation interview with the facilitator she explained her facilitation philosophy, which was consistent with her approach in Brian’s conference. She noted that the youth is “the most important person in the room.” She tries to help the youth recognize this by remaining focused on them and pointing out their strengths. She indicated that youth generally respond positively to hearing what they are doing well and it opens them up to discuss areas that are not going well. Using a common FTC phrase, “nothing about me without me,” she explained the importance of youth being involved in every aspect of the decision making process at the FTC. She discussed the use of eye contact and youth friendly language as a mechanism for engaging youth:

*So, every once in a while, I’ll have to get into their world. So, they relate to things like, “Do you feel me?” You know, “Do you feel me? I’m tryin’ to tell you somethin’ very important.” You know, we would say, “Do you understand,” but the kids say, you know, “You feel me?” So, sometimes when I, when I can get*

*there with him, you know, he smiles more. You know, he lets down a little bit more of a guard and, and gets better.*

She also noted that importance of listening to what youth want and encouraging them to explore it further. She provided the example of Brian wanting to go into the medical field. She noted, “ So, he may have all these things he thinks but if somebody doesn’t say, ‘But you could do that. Of course you can.’ Then, I don’t know if he even realizes that that’s something I could even do.” She went on to state, “It starts with a thought. “You hear what I said. Sit down and think about it. You got to think about it. Research it. Figure out how much it makes. Does it make enough for you? Do you want to go to school that long?” It starts with a thought.” The facilitator noted that for her it’s not just about being there to do a meeting. Her job is to help youth become successful and independent and that is what she feels she is working towards. She described herself as caring about the youth and doing whatever it takes to encourage them to be successful. Further, she disclosed that she has a child this age and consistently thinks about how she would want her own child to be treated.

### **Case Illustrations Summary**

In sum, the case illustrations *chewed up and spit out* and *nothing about me without me* demonstrate the difference between youth centric and adult centric facilitation practices. While it’s possible that Brian was performing better than Shade in terms of permanency planning, they appeared similar in terms of age, educational attainment, employment record, housing, discharge planning, and interpersonal relationships. But the narrative that developed was noticeably different. In *chewed up and spit out* the facilitator allowed the narrative of the case planner and foster parent dominate the

discussion. She provided the adults with various opportunities to share their perspective and spent the majority of the conference getting the youth to understand and adapt their perspective. While Shade verbally stated in the conference, “I am understanding what to do better” his body language and post-observation interview comments revealed that he did not feel heard, understood or engaged in the decision making process. He was hunched over looking down at his hands, looking defeated during most of the conference. Subsequently, he described his experience as being “chewed up and spit out.”

In *nothing about me without me* the facilitator made Brian’s perspective central to the decision making process. Her perspective, that the youth is the “most important person in the conference,” served as her guiding principle. She provided Brian an opportunity to share his views, listened to him, highlighted his strengths, and encouraged him to continue taking steps to meet his goals. She modeled positive, strengths-based practices for other adults in the room. She encouraged adults to listen to Brian’s perspective and brainstorm ideas to support him. Consequently, in the post-observation interview, Brian revealed that he felt as if he was the most important person in the room and noted that the adults at the conference were supportive of him by stating that the adults “have my back.”

### **Contrasting Youth Centric and Adult Centric Practice**

Multiple observations and interviews demonstrated that youth centric practices encouraged youth to open up and participate in decision-making at the conference, while adult centric practices did not. As described next, and drawing from the case illustrations and additional interviews and observations, the four elements that distinguished youth

centric practices from adult centric practices included, establishing trust, encouraging the youth voice, adopting the youth narrative, and establishing a connection.

### **Establishing Trust**

Youth in foster care value their privacy and confidentiality. When they share information, they want to know who will receive it and how it will be used. As illustrated in *nothing about me without me*, the introduction to the FTC provides an excellent opportunity for the facilitator to establish an environment where youth feel comfortable opening up and sharing personal information. Most facilitators began the conference by asking all participants to introduce themselves, followed by an explanation to the purpose, format and ground rules for the conference. However, youth centric facilitators capitalized on the introduction as an opportunity to make conference participants feel welcome and highlight the importance of working together as a collaborative team. This was illuminated in one conference when the facilitator asked the participants to write their name and relationship to the case on a folded piece of cardboard, which she then placed on the table facing inward so everyone could view it. She then asked each participant to introduce themselves to the team by name and relationship to the youth. Then, she reviewed the purpose of the conference, the format of the conference and the ground rules, which she noted were also posted on the wall as a visual reminder. Her introduction sent a clear message that the participants were there to work collaboratively and support the youth viewpoint.

In contrast, the adult centric approach did not capitalize on the introduction as an opportunity to establish trust, with some skipping the opening statement all together and others moving through it quickly, as if reciting from a memorized script. As seen in

*chewed up and spit out*, rather than providing an introduction to the FTC, the facilitator began the conference by asking the youth, “what are your strengths?” He appeared uncomfortable, looking across the room at his foster mother. The facilitator’s lack of introduction and explanation to the purpose and format for the FTC (i.e. brainstorming strengths and concerns) made her question appear out of context. Additionally, the lack of an established structure resulted in the foster mother and case planner talking out of turn and speaking for the youth.

Similarly, in another conference, the facilitator provided a quick introduction to the participants, but did not review the format or ground rules. She allowed others to disrupt the structure and flow of the conference. Notably, a supervisor entered the room speaking on his cell phone and continued to talk as the FTC was taking place. The facilitator rolled her eyes at the supervisor, but continued on without addressing his disrespectful behavior. Participants engaged in side conversations, interrupted each other and spoke out of turn, with the facilitator failing to address these behaviors. The youth appeared disengaged, doodling on his notebook and getting up to leave the room twice to answer his cell phone. In the post-observation interview, the youth lacked an understanding that the purpose of the conference was to review his permanency plan. He reported that he only came to the conference to support his foster mother who was also his maternal aunt.

In another conference, the facilitator gave a quick introduction to the conference, but did not make an effort to establish trust and rapport with the youth. She stood in front of the room quickly reciting the opening script, did not make eye contact, or ask the youth if he had any questions or concerns. Her stiff and formal body language, coupled

with her lack of engagement sent the message that the conference was a “formality” she wanted to get through as quickly as possible. As a result, the facilitator was unable to engage the youth in the ensuing discussion.

A second component of the introduction was explaining the parameters of privacy. Youth centric facilitators stressed that the information discussed in the conference is private, but not confidential, as it will be used for case planning purposes. One facilitator specifically stated to the youth that the information shared in the meeting will be used for case planning but it isn't “going to come back and uh, be detrimental to you afterwards.” In the post observation interview, the facilitator explained that many youth are reluctant to open up and share personal information in the conference because they don't know how it will be used. In contrast, adult centric facilitators did not discuss the parameters of privacy, or they provided the information quickly without taking time to provide a detailed explanation; thus, creating a divide between the professionals who already knew how the information would be utilized and the youth who did not.

### **Encouraging the Youth Voice**

As demonstrated in the case illustrations *nothing about me without me* and *chewed up and spit out* the facilitator played a crucial role in determining whether the youth had an opportunity to have a voice in the conference. Practices that encouraged the youth to have a voice included using positive and strengths based language, using everyday language and using humor.

The facilitator in *nothing about me without me* used positive, strengths based language throughout the conference. She stated phrases to the youth such as “you're the most important person at the meeting” and “we couldn't have this discussion without you”

and “what you have to say is important”. She also used positive action words to describe the youth’s behaviors such as “successful,” “independent,” “consistent” and “diligent.” Her words reinforced the notion that the youth was a crucial member of the conference. The use of positive, strengths based language was observed with other facilitators engaging in youth centric practices. One such facilitator noted to the youth, “you are the expert on your family.” Another facilitator complimented a youth by stating, “You have grown a lot and developed a lot over the years. I want to commend you for your progress.”

In contrast, adult centric facilitators were more likely to rely on professional jargon, which can create a divide between adults/professionals and youth. Examples of such language include the use of codes, acronyms or technical language when discussing the youth’s permanency planning goals. In one conference the caseworker referred to the youth’s permanency planning goal as APPLA. The youth asked, “What’s that?” The facilitator said, “becoming an independent young adult.” In the post-observation interview, the facilitator acknowledged that clients are often unfamiliar with acronyms and codes, so the caseworker should have used less technical language.

Similarly, in another conference, the facilitator stated that the youth’s goal was 03. The youth appeared confused and said he didn't know what that meant. The facilitator said, “APPLA.” The youth became visibly frustrated stating, “You keep using codes. I don’t know what they mean.” The facilitator responded defensively, “How long have you been in care? You have been to other conferences. You must have heard your goal before.” The youth stated, “I didn’t pay attention.” The facilitator responded by blaming the youth for not understanding the professional jargon. He stated, “You need to pay

attention. You are 18 now and will be aging out in a few years.” Recognizing the youth’s confusion, a supervisor in that same conference translated what the facilitator meant, explaining that the youth did not have someone to live with (i.e. discharge resource) when he leaves foster care so the agency was preparing him live on his own.

In short, youth centric facilitators replaced professional jargon with everyday language. As one facilitator described, when determining whether a youth has a permanent resource, rather than asking, “who are your permanent resources” she asks, “Who do you call when you get a really good grade or you got that job? Who do you call to share that with?” She explained that youth don’t understand what a “permanent resource” is, but they can tell you whether they have someone to call when they have good or bad news to share. If so, you know they have a caring and committed adult in their life.

Getting youth to open up and share information required a certain level of sensitivity to youth centered language. Some facilitators posed questions in ways that increased the youth’s confusion and discomfort. For example, in one conference, the facilitator asked, “How do you feel about yourself?” When the youth appeared confused and did not answer the question, the facilitator probed further stating, “are you a player, a lover?” The youth appeared uncomfortable, responding, “I am a person.” In another conference, a facilitator asked, “Are you still against individual counseling?” The youth responded, “yes.” A supervisor jumped in and re-framed the question, “How can we support you to achieve your goals, where do you see yourself, what do you want?” She explained to the facilitator that this question is another way of asking youth about



participating in services. Her reframing of the question led to a discussion focused on the youth's interests and how the agency could assist him in achieving his goals.

Several facilitators reported using humor as a strategy to get youth to open up.

One facilitator noted:

*I just try to make the conference like as, it's, for the teenagers, actually like as laid back as possible. Like I'll joke with them, tell jokes, whatever, to try to make it a little more laid back, 'cause nobody wants to feel like they're gettin' like in school at a lesson. But, like I'll joke with them like, "What are you talkin' about? Dah, dah, dah, dah." And, like have jokes with them to get them to talk, and like, "Okay, this is not that bad. I'll come back for the next one.*

Similarly, another facilitator noted that although it's not a topic addressed in training, humor makes a big difference in terms of working with and connecting to youth. He stated, "We, we never learn it in training. We've uh, we've never really, you know, addressed it, but I think all of us who have been here for a while and who have been successful in this agency, have used sense of humor..."

### **Adopting the Youth Narrative**

An important youth centric practice highlighted in *nothing about me without me* was allowing the youth narrative to unfold, including directing questions towards the youth and getting other parties to listen and support the youth. Several facilitators noted the importance of keeping the conference focused on youth, including asking adults to remain quiet or re-directing the discussion when adults attempt to promote their views. Several times during one conference, the facilitator was observed asking the foster mother and caseworker to stop talking and listen to the youth. The facilitator noted, "my

role and my joy is to be able to turn it around and, as a facilitator, kind of quiet the rest down and say, “Well, we know your opinion, you know, I know your opinion,” and keep redirecting it back to the youth.” When the youth was asked her impression of the conference, she noted that the conference was “about me” and the facilitator “listened to me. That was good.” Similarly, another youth praised her facilitator for listening and acknowledging her perspective. As she described, “I feel like she’s more concerned about what I have to say than anybody else in the room. Because, you know, plenty of times she stops the meeting and says, ‘How come I only hear you all talk and I don’t hear Monique? When we’re here for her.’”

As portrayed in *chewed up and spit out*, adult centric facilitation focused on gaining and supporting the adult or agency perspective, including directing questions towards adults, allowing adults to answer for youth and encouraging youth to listen to adults. This sometimes meant not taking the necessary steps to get youth to share information. For example, when one youth responded to a facilitator’s questions with short answers that lacked substance, she did not ask him follow up questions or encourage him to elaborate on his responses. Instead, she turned to the adults and asked them for more information. She asked the foster mother questions about the youth’s behavior including whether he attending therapy, whether they had a good relationship, and what she sees as the youth’s strengths. She also asked the case planner to list the youth’s strengths. However, she never asked the youth for his views.

In the post observation interview, the youth reported that he “chose not to say nothing” in the FTC. His impressions of the facilitator were, “I won’t talk to her like, about like anything, ‘cause I don’t really know her that much.” He further reported that

he feels more comfortable opening up and sharing his concerns with his foster mother and case planner in individual meetings at the foster home. In the post-observation interview, the facilitator minimized the youth's lack of participation in the conference. She noted that the youth didn't participate as much as she would have wanted, but since his permanency goal was adoption she wasn't as concerned about him as she is with other youth his age who don't have a discharge resource.

In contrast, other facilitators actively sought the youth's perspective and brainstormed ways of meeting their goals. As noted in *nothing about me without me*, Brian was interested in the medical field so the facilitator brainstormed the steps he needed to take to learn about educational and professional opportunities. She also explored how the agency could support him in accomplishing this goal. Similarly, when another youth reported during a conference that she wanted to graduate from high school, the facilitator responded by asking, "what do you need to do to graduate?" The youth responded that she needed to go to class and said she was risking failing science. The facilitator probed further, "What steps will you take to pass science?" The youth stated a few steps she could take including, waking up on time and going to the make-up labs. The facilitator deepened the discussion by focusing on concrete steps the youth can employ to pass her science class, including a discussion regarding how the foster parent and case planner will support the youth in getting up on time, getting on the bus and attending her science labs.

This approach is in sharp contrast, to *chewed up and spit out*, where Shade's goal of going to college was dismissed at the onset by his case planner, who responded to him by stating, "You are not graduating until January. What are you going to do? Where are

you going to lay your head?” Instead of brainstorming a plan to achieve his goal, the facilitator allowed the adults to berate Shade, telling him he needs to “get it together” and “take responsibility for his life.”

Youth centric facilitators also were more likely than adult centric ones to problem solve during conferences, including when necessary focusing on the agency’s potential missteps. In a conference with a youth residing in a mother child residence,<sup>7</sup> the youth complained that for the past two weekends when she came home from work the door to the facility was locked and she had to sit outside with her child for over an hour. The case planner attempted to place responsibility on the youth by saying that she needs to call the staff and notify them when she is coming home. In response, the youth reported she told the Assistant Manager of the residence that she will be home between 3:30-4pm. The facilitator responded in a supportive manner stating, “we need to come up with a plan to deal with this.” The facilitator then focused on the agency’s actions, rather than the youth’s, asking the case planner a series of questions until it was acknowledged that the agency was indeed at fault because the Director had been on vacation and things had “fallen through the cracks.” The facilitator stressed that they need to come up with a plan because the youth should not be sitting outside waiting with her baby. The case planner said that the youth can call her on Friday to let her know her work Saturday work and she will notify the residential staff. The facilitator asked the youth if she was comfortable with the plan, to which the youth agreed. The facilitator wrote on the action plan that the case planner will notify the residential staff on Friday what time the youth will come home from work on Saturday.

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<sup>7</sup>A mother-child facility is a residential facility where youth in foster care live with their child.

A similar situation occurred in another conference where a youth noted a problem with the agency, specifically, that she was not reimbursed for travel expenses to college. The case planner conceded that she submitted the paperwork but the youth had not been reimbursed. The youth protested that it wasn't fair that the agency told her she would be reimbursed and then didn't approve it. The facilitator used the conference to brainstorm a solution to the problem. She asked the supervisor for a further explanation. In response the supervisor said he would look into it immediately and excused himself from the room. The facilitator continued on, attempting to brainstorm a solution to the problem. She asked whether the agency could purchase the tickets in advance, whether someone from the agency could drive her back and forth and whether the school has a rideshare program. After a short time, the supervisor came back into the room noting that the staff member who deals with financial reimbursement wasn't in the office but they will look into the situation further. The facilitator wrote on the action plan that the case planner and youth development specialist will look into the reimbursement issue and come up with a plan going forward for transportation during every holiday break.

In contrast, adult centric facilitators left problems unresolved, or youth's questions and complaints unanswered. In one such example, the youth at the conference raised what he described to be his "only concern" was when his adoption would take place. When the case planner responded that a different case planner not present at the conference is responsible for the adoption and the courts control the process, rather than probing further or brainstorming steps to obtain the information for the youth, the facilitator accepted the case planners explanation and moved on to another topic.

### **Establishing a Connection**

Youth centric facilitators were notable in that they established personal connections with the youth in the conferences they facilitated. They focused on engaging youth and establishing rapport with them. They used verbal and non-verbal communication skills to demonstrate their personal investment in the youths' success. When facilitators were already familiar with the youth due to facilitating other conferences, they acknowledged the goals from the previous conferences that were successfully accomplished. Youth centric facilitators reported caring about the youth and providing them with emotional and instrumental support that went beyond their prescribed function.

Youth centric facilitators went beyond their role, *as did* the facilitator in *nothing about me without me*, to provide youth with support. The facilitator noted that technically she is not supposed to get personally involved with the youth, but she reported, "Would I get personally involved with Brian? (Head nod - yes)." She further stated, "how can you not care about a youth who wants to continue his downward spiral in order to help his mother?" She has helped with his resume, served as a personal reference, given him food and clothing, and been there to listen to him. During the conference the facilitator mentioned that she would purchase Brian a planner to assist him in scheduling and remembering all of his appointments, an area that is not her responsibility.

The facilitator in *nothing about me without me* was observed forming a connection with other youth as well. In another conference, she began by giving the youth a round of applause for meeting one of her major permanency goals, graduating from high school. The youth reported feeling happy because the facilitator remembered

her goal of finishing high school from the previous conference, six months prior. The facilitator reported, “it mattered a lot that I was gonna meet Monique, and that she was excited about graduating and I wanted her to know that I was too.” At the end of the conference the facilitator wished Monique good luck with graduation, told her she was proud of her and that she wanted to see pictures from her graduation. In the post observation interview the facilitator reflected on her work facilitating conferences with the pregnant and parenting teens:

*So, it's not just about me being there to do their meeting. Like I'm meeting these girls. I'm seeing their babies. Like I really want them to do well, and complete, and become successful, and independent. And, I use that a lot in the FTC's. Like our job is to help you become successful and independent, and I really feel like that's what I'm working towards.*

Her comments were consistent with her practice and demonstrated that her interest in the youth went beyond her role as the conference facilitator. She cared about the youth and appeared invested in their overall success.

Although it was her first time facilitating a conference with Susie, she demonstrated interest and made Susie feel special. At the end of the conference she told Susie that even if she is not the facilitator at the next conference, she wants to receive an update from her on her progress. In the post observation interview, Susie reflected on the how the facilitator treated her:

*Like a star. (Laughter). Yeah, 'cause she said that, I don't know. I thought she was just so happy. She's just a happy person, 'cause she was always smiling, no matter what, even if it was a concern - she was always smiling for everything.*

*Smiling for everything that she said. And, I, I felt really positive about her. I was always getting positive vibes from her. Every time I looked at her she always had a smile. And, that's the first time I met her, so that's really good for me to feel.*

The facilitator in *nothing about me without me* made a conscious effort to establish a connection with the youth in her conferences.

Other facilitators demonstrated similar behaviors. One such facilitator discussed the potential advantages of facilitating a youth's conference multiple times. She stated, "One of the advantages is that uh, the youth are able to relate to me. The youth see me like, "okay, you're not an outsider. You're someone that understands." She reported:

*I'm able to recall faces, and recall certain events, and incidents and situations, which make it, give it a personal touch. And they say, "Okay, you know, she recalls. So, it was important to her to some given extent what happened to me or what I expressed in the previous conference. That she is able to uh, bring it up now." So, you know, that has really uh, created some sort of rapport between myself and the youth that come. You know, and they come for advice, and, and I welcome them, and they come to my table, (laughter) or to my desk and take my candy.*

The facilitator was able to establish a connection with the youth by facilitating their conferences more than once. The multiple contacts led youth to view the facilitator as an "insider." In turn, youth sought out the facilitator for advice and information. In fact, one youth made a special visit to the agency to introduce the facilitator to his new baby.

Although youth responded positively to facilitators who established connections with the youth, the majority of facilitators did not perceive this to be their function. One



such facilitator discussed the importance of maintaining professional boundaries with youth. Her perspective was that the case planner was the appropriate person to establish a connection with the youth, rather than the facilitator, since the case planner works closely with them. Youth perceived facilitators who maintained professional distance as being there to “collect a paycheck;” meaning they went through the motions of facilitating the conference but were not perceived as being invested in their success.

In sum, the degree to which the youth perceived a personal connection with the facilitator influenced their level of engagement in the conference. Youth who perceived the facilitator to care about them and be invested in their overall success were more likely to be engaged in the conference. As demonstrated in *nothing about me without me*, when Brian stated about the facilitator, “It’s just like when we have meetings, I am not nervous ‘cause I feel like it’s just me and her. And, I just, we just connected.” Youth who perceived the facilitator to “go through the motions” were less likely to be engaged in the conference. As noted earlier in the chapter, one such youth reported in the post-observation interview that he “chose not to say nothing” at the FTC. His comments reflected his lack of connection to the facilitator, “I won’t talk to her like, about like anything, ‘cause I don’t really know her that much.” He went on to report that he would talk with his foster mother or case planner, but not the facilitator because, “I don’t know her that much.”

### **Conclusion**

This chapter explored the research question: “What strategies are employed by agency staff to facilitate youth participation in Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences?” The chapter focused on strategies utilized by FTC facilitators that either

encouraged or discouraged youth from engaging in decision making in the context of the conference. Two cases were presented in order to highlight adult centric practice and youth centric practice. *Chewed up and Spit Out* illustrated practices that allowed the adult narrative to guide decision making in the conference. *Nothing About Me Without Me* demonstrated strategies that encouraged the youth narrative to guide decision-making. Various strategies were then discussed including establishing trust, encouraging the youth voice, adopting the youth narrative, and establishing a connection.

## **CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the study findings and their contribution to the empirical evidence focused on youth participation in agency based child welfare decision-making opportunities. The study findings are discussed in the context of child welfare practice and policy implications. Additionally, study limitations and suggestions for future research are provided.

### **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore youth participation in child welfare decision-making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences. Two research questions were examined: 1) what factors influence youth attendance and participation in child welfare decision making opportunities, and 2) what strategies do FTC facilitators use to engage youth in decision making in the context of family team conferences? Observations of conferences and post-observation interviews with youth and facilitators offered a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

### **Relationships with Agency Staff**

Study results highlighted the importance of youths' relationships with agency staff in terms of getting them to attend and participate in agency based decision-making opportunities. A significant barrier to youth participation in decision-making was youth attendance at the FTC. Each month, the researcher went to the agency approximately 25 times for scheduled conferences. Of the 25 conferences scheduled, only 2-3 went forward with youth present. Conferences were regularly rescheduled because the youth was not present, or held without the youth present because they had already been re-scheduled at least once. Facilitators discussed the important role the case planner played

in encouraging youth to attend and participate. They consistently reported that case planners who established positive relationships with the youth were generally able to get youth to attend and participate in the conferences. Youth also reported the important role agency staff played in getting them to the conference. A common theme was the “close connection” youth experienced with their worker. They felt a sense of obligation to attend the conference based on their relationship with the worker. Youth noted they did not want to “let them down” or did not want to get the worker “in trouble.”

Previous studies of youth participation reported that youth were not informed of important decision-making meetings and/or did not feel they had the opportunity to attend (Bessell, 2011; Freundlich, Avery & Padgett, 2007; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999). Chaifetz (1999) reported that over half of the sample youth (57%) were not regularly involved in service plan reviews and a significant number of youth (70%) received less than two weeks notice. The current study underscores the importance of agency workers extending a “personal invitation” to youth and preparing them prior to the conference regarding what to expect. Workers used various forms of communication to invite youth to the conference, including in-person conversations, telephone calls, social media, emails, and text messages. When workers stressed the importance of youth being present at the conference, youth reported feeling valued and an important part of the team. One youth reported that she came to the conference because “it’s about me.”

Studies of emerging adulthood highlight relationships with caring and committed adults as a key protective factor during the transition to adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Avery, 2010). The current study expands the literature by describing the nature and quality of

foster care youths' relationships with agency staff. Youth reported wanting both instrumental and emotional support from agency staff, with many discussing the importance of experiencing a "close connection" with their worker. Samuels (2008) reported similar findings in her study of relational permanence for youth in foster care. Of particular interest, emotional support was frequently named by youth as missing in their relationships and a support they felt they needed the most. Participants understanding of emotional support was "to have access to someone they trusted to whom they could talk" (Samuels, 2008, p.80).

Youth identified factors that facilitated the development of a positive relationship with agency staff including, case continuity, non-judgmental listening, establishing trust, and transcending roles. Case continuity referred to the length of time a staff member worked on a case and their level of knowledge about the case. Staff members working with youth for longer durations were perceived to have a more in-depth knowledge of the case and an enhanced opportunity to establish a supportive relationship with the young person. Collins, Spencer and Ward (2010) examined formal and informal connections experienced by foster care youth. They reported longevity of the relationship as a key factor in establishing and maintaining a relationship. Due to the multiple losses youth in foster care experience and the trauma of being removed from their family of origin, having a long-standing relationship with an adult can serve as an important protective factor (Charles & Nelson, 2000; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Perry, 2006; Shirk & Stangler, 2004)

Youth discussed the importance of workers' listening to them and responding in a manner that conveyed an understanding of their thoughts and feelings. They placed great

emphasis on establishing relationships with agency staff that were based on mutual trust. These findings are consistent with other studies of youth participation in child welfare decision-making. Bessell (2011) reported that young people in foster care greatly valued workers who “listened to and valued their views” (p. 498). Additionally, “in order to express their views on deeply personal matters, young people needed to know the person they were confiding in” (p.498).

An important finding of this study is that youth valued agency staff they perceived to go beyond their role to provide emotional support. They discussed workers who demonstrated through their actions and interactions that they genuinely cared about the young person and provided unconditional support. As a result, the young person felt comfortable opening up to the agency staff and accepting support and guidance around decision-making. In addition to being open to guidance and support from the worker, the perceived relationship may also assist youth in developing important life skills. For example, in a study of relationships between youth and preventive service workers, youth who perceived a higher level of trust, mutuality and empathy in their relationship with staff had more improvements in social skills such as cooperation, empathy, self-control and assertiveness than those reporting lower levels (Sale, Bellamy, Springer & Wang, 2008).

### **Strategies For Engaging Youth**

Analysis of multiple observations and interviews revealed two different facilitation styles, including *adult centric* and *youth centric*. Adult centric facilitators placed adults or professionals at the center of decision-making. They had difficulty partnering with young people in decision-making practice. Through verbal and non-

verbal communication, they silenced the youth voice. For example, they directed their attention and questions towards the adults, rather than the youth. They used professional jargon such as codes or acronyms without explaining to the youth what they meant. They focused on the youths' deficits, as opposed to highlighting their strengths. They adopted the adult narrative of the youth and allowed that narrative to dominate the conference. Youth viewed adult centric facilitators as "being there to collect a paycheck." They went through the motions of the conference, but did not make efforts to connect with them.

In contrast, youth centric facilitators placed youth at the center of decision-making. They focused on establishing trust and rapport with the young person. They encouraged youth to speak by asking them questions and directing their attention to the young person. They focused on youths' strengths, and used a strengths based approach towards addressing their concerns. They listened to the youth perspective and incorporated it into the decision making process. Youth perceived these facilitators as demonstrating genuine care and concern for them.

Youth centric facilitators incorporated positive youth development principles and practices. Positive youth development focuses on developing resiliency in young people through providing them with opportunities to develop life skills, meaningful relationships, and strengthen their social networks (Delgado, 2002; Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman, 2004). Youth centric facilitators assumed a strengths-based, empowerment approach focused on youths' strengths rather than their deficits. Facilitators provided youth with opportunities to have a voice in decision-making and partner with adults throughout the decision making process. Studies of youth participation reported that by participating in decision-making, youth are provided opportunities to gain relevant information, gain a

sense of control over the decision making process and develop life skills, such as decision-making (Cashmore, 2011; Checkoway, 2010).

The youth centric approach is also consistent with procedural justice theory in that participants wanted to have a voice, be heard and perceive the decision maker to be fair and trustworthy (Tyler, 2000). Results expand the procedural justice literature by highlighting the significance of the perceived relationship between the youth and the decision maker. Of particular interest, youth valued facilitators they perceived to demonstrate genuine care and concern for them, an area that has not been adequately examined in previous studies.

The emerging adulthood literature highlights the important role of relationships with adults during the transition to adulthood. Youth in the general population rely heavily on their family of origin to support them emotionally and financially during emerging adulthood (Aquilino, 2006). Older youth in foster care are often disconnected from their family of origin, or their family members who are low income and minority do not have the social capital necessary to provide them with these resources (Avery, 2010). Thus, the child welfare system assumes the role of “corporate parent”, responsible for providing youth with the financial, instrumental and emotional support they would normally receive from their family (Courtney, 2009). The individuals charged with providing this support consist of agency staff, foster parents, mental health professionals, child advocates, and others. The notion that youth would want facilitators responsible for facilitating family team conferences where important life decisions are made to be concerned about their welfare beyond their prescribed role is consistent with the “corporate parent” function. It is especially important given that youth in foster care are



expected to share highly personal information in the conferences such as their health and mental health status, sexual activity, substance use, relationships with family and friends, living situation, and academic/vocational achievement and goals.

### **Policy and Practice Implications**

The current study has clear policy and practice implications. On a policy level, foster care agencies should be adopting a positive youth development framework in their work with adolescents and emerging adults. Historically, child welfare programs and practices focused on youth in terms of their problems or issues as opposed to their strengths and potential (Hair, Ling and Cochran, 2003). The positive youth development approach focuses on youths' assets, rather than their deficits. It provides young people opportunities to establish meaningful connections to adults, connect to communities, and develop life skills necessary for the transition to adulthood (Hamilton, Hamilton and Pittman, 2004). Youth development programs and services are based on the philosophy that when youth are afforded opportunities to engage in positive activities they will develop enhanced self-efficacy, self-esteem and a positive outlook for the future.

In order for interventions, such as family team conferencing, to be successful in engaging youth in decision-making, there will need to be a paradigm shift in terms of the way child welfare professionals view youth in foster care. Leeson (2007) reported that child welfare workers' viewed youth through a particular lens, such as "child in need of protection" (p.274). The implementation of the family team conferencing model moves away from a paternalistic focus on "rescuing youth" towards an emphasis on empowering youth. In other words, rather than imposing decisions upon youth, professionals must partner with youth in decision-making.

Studies report challenges in terms of implementing team-decision making models. Specifically, caseworkers and supervisors wanted more discretion as to when they used the team-decision making approach, as opposed to applying it uniformly to all their cases (Crea, Crampton, Abramson-Madden & Usher, 2008; Crampton, Crea, Abramson-Madden, & Usher, 2008). The current study highlighted the importance of achieving “buy in” from all child welfare stakeholders including administrators, supervisors, front line workers, mental health professionals, and foster parents.

On a practice level, the study findings provide specific strategies for engaging youth in decision-making practices including establishing trust, providing youth an opportunity to have a voice, supporting the youth perspective, and demonstrating a genuine care and concern. When facilitators used youth centric practices, youth reported feeling more engaged in decision making and more satisfied with the action plan developed at the conference.

In order to improve practice with young people, it is important for child welfare professionals to receive specialized training. Facilitators were trained on the philosophy and structure of the FTC however they did not receive specialized training focused on working with emerging adults. It is essential for all agency staff working with youth on permanency planning and transitional plans to understand the developmental stage of emerging adulthood, including the unique challenges marginalized youth face when making the transition to adulthood. Additionally, it is important for agency staff to receive training focused on communication skills (i.e. listening and questioning) and relational skills (i.e. establishing trust, demonstrating care and concern) demonstrated in the study as important when working with youth in foster care.

The importance of agency staff establishing “engaged relationships” with youth must be underscored. While it is important for adults to provide youth with instrumental support such as information and resources, youth in the current study valued agency staff that provided emotional support, such as listening and understanding their views. In a qualitative study of youth in foster care transitioning to adulthood, the importance of youth having a relationship with at least one caring and committed adult as they move into adulthood was often seen by participants “as more important than accessing formal services, and was described as critical in providing youth with information and support as they move into adulthood and can no longer access resources through the child welfare system” (Geenen & Powers, 2007, p.1092).

Policy and practice targeted towards youth in foster care has historically been more focused on youth gaining independent living skills and self-sufficiency rather than connection and collaboration. Increasingly, professionals are calling for a more developmentally appropriate approach towards independent living that focuses on interdependence, rather than independence. “This approach calls for a very different type of relationship between the youth and the caseworker. The relationship will be based on active collaboration, mutual respect, and shared-decision making” (Propp, Ortega & Newheart, 2003, p. 264). Due to the nature of their job, agency staff is in a unique position to provide youth with multiple forms of support. The current study provides information about the nature and quality of youths’ relationships with agency staff in regards to child welfare decision-making opportunities. It also provides strategies for engaging youth in team decision-making practices. Additional research focused on these two aspects of child welfare decision-making is needed.

### **Study Limitations and Future Research**

The current study has several limitations. The study examined the experiences and perceptions of youth who attended and participated in permanency planning family team conference. It did not capture the perceptions and experiences of youth who did not attend and participate in their conference. Although foster care youth and conference facilitators provided potential reasons why youth did not attend, it would be important to hear directly from the non-attendants. There may be differences between sample youth who attended the conference versus those who did not. For example, youth who attended may have better relationships with agency staff or be more engaged in the agency. Future studies should conduct a sub-group analysis to explore similarities and differences between attendants and non-attendants.

The methodology and sample size do not permit conclusions as to which style, youth centric or adult centric, dominated. Out of the ten facilitators observed, four were adult centric and six were youth centric. Some facilitators were only observed once whereas others were observed more than once. In order to draw conclusions about the styles, it would be important to observe each facilitator multiple times and observe a larger sample of facilitators to determine if a particular style dominated and whether facilitators held a consistent style or whether they adapted their style based on the group.

Since the study was exploratory, it is not possible to examine whether different facilitation styles led to better case outcomes. Future research should focus on operationalizing and developing a measure for youth centric practice. Different methodologies should be used to examine whether specific facilitation styles lead to

greater youth participation. Additionally, studies should explore whether certain facilitation styles lead to better case outcomes.

Race, gender and other personal characteristics are also not addressed in this study. The gender and race of the facilitator may have an influence on their facilitation style. Similarly, the gender and race of the youth may influence their degree of participation and perceptions of participation. Future research should explore the influence of race, culture and gender on youth participation in decision-making.

The Institutional Review Board approval process impacted the study design and methodology. Since youth in foster care are considered a vulnerable population, there were human subjects concerns. Therefore, the study was limited to youth, ages 18 and older, because they are legal adults and capable of consenting to participation in the study. Ideally, it would be important to examine permanency planning decision-making practices for youth in foster care beginning at a younger age and following youth over time.

The family team conferencing model was introduced into all foster care agencies in New York City in spring 2009. Data collection occurred between May 2011 and January 2012. Considering that the average duration youth resided in foster care was 7 years, it is likely that most youth participated in agency meetings and conferences prior to the implementation of the FTC model. Therefore, youths' level of attendance and participation may have been influenced by their previous experiences participating in case planning conferences. For example, they may not be familiar or comfortable with the youth centric approach, or they may not have developed the skills necessary for participating in the conference. Future research should examine a sample of youth who

began participating in conferences after the implementation of the family team conference model. Ideally, the study would be longitudinal, comparing facilitator styles and levels of participation to case outcomes at multiple data points.

Finally, findings highlighted the importance of youths' relationships with agency staff, mainly caseworkers in encouraging them to attend and participate in decision-making opportunities. The study only captured the experiences and perceptions of conference facilitators and youth. Since caseworkers play an essential role in working with the youth on their permanency goals and assisting them in acquiring the knowledge and skills to make a successful transition out of foster care, it would be invaluable to gain their perspective on youth participation in decision-making. Additionally, due to the bureaucratic nature of child welfare decision-making, multiple adults have a role in decision-making for youth in foster care; future research should capture the views of various stakeholders including caseworkers, agency administrators, parents, foster parents, attorneys and judges.

## CHAPTER 9: REFERENCES

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## **CHAPTER 10: APPENDICIES**

### **Appendix A: Oral Consent Script**

Consent Script for Family Team Conference Facilitators: (to be read by the conference facilitator prior to Ms. Augsberger joining the conference)

Astraea Augsberger, from the Columbia University School of Social Work, is conducting a study of Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences. As part of the study, she would like to observe this family team conference. Anything she observes will be confidential. She will use what she learns for purposes of her dissertation, but will not link specific observations with specific individuals and your name and identity will never appear in her writing. The outcome of the conference will not be affected by whether or not you consent to her observation of the conference. If at any point during the conference you do not want Ms. Augsberger present, you may ask her to leave the room. Do you consent to her observation of the conference?

## **Appendix B: Observation Consent Form**

### **Research Purpose**

The current study examines child welfare decision making in the context of Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences. The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of how young adults experience decision-making in Family Team Conferences focused on Permanency Planning issues.

### **Instructions**

This consent form should be filled out by all adult participants (18 years and older) attending today's Permanency Planning Family Team Conference.

### **Information on the Research**

We are asking permission to observe this Family Team Conference for a research study sponsored by Columbia University School of Social Work. The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of how young adults experience decision-making in Family Team Conferences focused on Permanency Planning issues. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about anything that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. If you chose not to participate in the study, the researcher will not attend the Family Team Conference. This process is called 'informed consent.'

### **Procedures**

This observation will take place in a private room designated for Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences. The researcher will observe and take notes only and will not actively participate in the conference. All information will be kept strictly confidential and will be used only for the purpose of this study. The outcome of the Family Team Conference will not be affected by whether or not your consent to her observation of the conference. Should the researcher have reasonable cause to suspect that a child is being abused or neglected, this information will be reported to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment.

Based on the information presented above, please check one of the following:

I agree to allow the researcher to observe the conference

I do not agree to allow the researcher to observe the conference

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

### **Risks**

This study presents risks to participants similar to what is experienced in every-day life. You may become uncomfortable or upset during the conference, and you may ask the

observer to leave the room at any time. You may also ask the researcher for a referral for counseling or support services.

### **Benefits**

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study, however your participation may promote better participation in child welfare decision making for young people in foster care.

### **Alternative Procedures**

The alternative to participating in this study is to choose not to participate.

### **Confidentiality**

The information collected at the Family Team Conference will remain confidential. Findings will be reported without identifying information. For example, written reports or other materials will not include any personal information that would identify you including items such as your name, date of birth, address, email and phone number. Only Columbia University researchers involved in this project will have access to the consent forms and observation notes. Regulatory and oversight bodies may on occasion review participant records. In each instance, the importance of participant privacy is paramount. Those with access are held to the strictest standards of confidentiality. Consent forms and observation notes will be stored in a locked drawer in the Co Investigators desk and will be destroyed no longer than 3 years after the study is complete.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary and there will be no penalty if you decide not to participate. Your participation will not affect the outcome of the Family Team Conference, your employment status, or any services provided to you by New York Foundling or Graham-Windham. If at any time during the conference you no longer wish to participate in the study, you may ask the researcher to leave the room.

### **Additional Information**

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact Astraea Augsberger at 212-851-2191 who will answer all questions. If at any time you have comments regarding the conduct of this research or questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Columbia University Institutional Review Board at 212-851-7041 or by fax at 212-851-7044.

### **Signature**

Study Participant

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Person Obtaining Consent

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix C: Family Team Conference Observation Guide

<b>Participants:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Young Person	<input type="checkbox"/> Conference Facilitator	<input type="checkbox"/> Agency CW
	<input type="checkbox"/> ACS	<input type="checkbox"/> Father	<input type="checkbox"/> Mother
Members	<input type="checkbox"/> Sibling(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> Foster Parent	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Family
	<input type="checkbox"/> Mentor	<input type="checkbox"/> Community Member	<input type="checkbox"/> Advocate
	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____		
_____			

**Purpose of Family Team Conference:**

**Issues Discussed During Conference:**

**Examples of Youth Participation:**

**Strategies used by Facilitator to Incorporate Youth Voice:**

**Barriers to Youth Participation:**

**Outcome of Conference:**

**Other Observations: (e.g. physical space, physical descriptions, interpersonal interactions)**

## **Appendix D: Youth Interview Consent Form**

### **Research Purpose**

The current study examines child welfare decision making in the context of Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences. The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of how young adults experience decision-making in Family Team Conferences focused on Permanency Planning issues.

### **Instructions**

This interview is a follow up to the Family Team Conference observed by the researcher from Columbia University School of Social Work. The consent form should be reviewed and signed by the young person prior to starting the interview.

### **Information on the Research**

We are asking you to be interviewed for a research study sponsored by Columbia University School of Social Work. The study focuses on decision making at Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences. Specifically, the researchers hope to gain a deeper understanding of how young people experience decision-making at Family Team Conferences focused on Permanency Planning issues. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about anything that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.'

### **Procedures**

This interview will take place in a private room. You will be asked a series of questions which will take approximately one hour to answer. Questions will be based on your experiences participating in child welfare decision-making. For example you will be asked what was your understanding of the purpose of the family team conference? What, if anything, did you do to prepare for the conference? You may decline to answer any question, and you may end your participation at any time. During the interview, if the researcher has reasonable cause to suspect that you or any other child is being abused or neglected, this information will be reported to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment.

### **Audio Recording**

We would like to audio record this interview for the purpose of transcription. All information you provide will be kept strictly confidential, and will be used only for the purpose of this study. You may decline to have the interview audio recorded, but still consent to being interviewed.

Based on the information presented above, please check one of the following:

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be audio taped in this interview

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to be audio taped in this interview

---

Print Name

---

Signature

**Risks**

This study presents risks to participants similar to what is experienced in every-day life. You may become uncomfortable or upset when answering questions, and you may terminate the interview at any time. You may also ask the researcher and/or your agency caseworker for a referral for counseling or other support services to be provided through the agency.

**Benefits**

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study, however by helping us understand what it is like to participate in child welfare decision making and family team conferences, you may promote better experiences for other youth in foster care.

**Alternative Procedures**

The alternative to participating in this study is to choose not to participate.

**Confidentiality**

The interviews will remain confidential. Findings will be reported without identifying information. For example, the written transcripts will not include any personal information that would identify you including items such as names, date of birth, address, email, phone number. Only Columbia University researchers involved in this project will have access to the tapes and transcripts. Regulatory and oversight bodies may on occasion review participant records. In each instance, the importance of participant privacy is paramount. Those with access are held to the strictest standards of confidentiality. Consent forms, cassette tapes and digital recordings will be stored in a locked drawer in the Co-investigators desk. Tapes and digital recording will be erased and destroyed no longer than 3 years after the study is complete. Written transcripts will not contain identifying information.

**Compensation**

You will be compensated \$25 dollars in cash at the end of the interview.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary and there will be no penalty if you decide not to participate. Your participation will not affect your status in foster care or any services provided to you by New York Foundling or Graham-Windham. You may refuse to answer any question and may terminate the interview at any time.

**Additional Information**

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact Astraea Augsberger at 212-851-2191 who will answer all questions.



If at any time you have comments regarding the conduct of this research or questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Columbia University Institutional Review Board at 212-851-7041 or by fax at 212-851-7044.

**Signature**

Study Participant

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Person Obtaining Consent

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix E: Youth Interview Guide

<b>Learning Objectives</b>	<b>Sample Questions</b>
Describe the sample demographics	<p>How old are you?</p> <p>What is your ethnicity?</p>
Describe duration in foster care	<p>How old were you when you first entered foster care?</p> <p>How many different places have you lived?</p> <p>Where do you live right now?</p> <p>How long have you lived in your current placement?</p>
Describe youth experiences participating in child welfare decision making	<p>Can you tell me about an important life decision that was made while you were living in foster care?</p> <p>Can you describe other types of decisions that were made while you were in foster care? Probe: education, housing, visitation, services.</p>
Describe youth experiences participating in decision making in Family Team Conferences	<p>What was your understanding of the purpose of the family team conference?</p> <p>Did you do anything to prepare for the conference?</p> <p>What did you think about how the conference facilitator treated you?</p> <p>How were you feeling during the conference?</p> <p>Did you have an opportunity to say everything you wanted to say?</p> <p>Did you feel like people listened to you?</p> <p>Was there anything that you didn't understand or that confused you?</p>
Describe youths understanding of the outcome	<p>What was the outcome of the family team conference?</p>

	<p>Do you think what you wanted was factored into the outcome?</p> <p>Do you think the outcome was fair?</p>
<p>Compare youth experiences participating in Family Team Conferences to other stages of the child welfare decision making process</p>	<p>Was your experience at the family team conference different than your experiences at other agency meetings? In what way?</p> <p>Was your experience at the family team conference different than your experiences in court? In what way?</p>
<p>Identify strategies for improving youth participation in child welfare decision making</p>	<p>What would you do to improve the decision making process for youth in foster care?</p> <p>What advice would you give about decision making to other young people living in foster care?</p>

## **Appendix F: Facilitator Interview Consent Form**

### **Research Purpose**

The current study examines child welfare decision making in the context of Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences. The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of how young adults experience decision-making in Family Team Conferences focused on Permanency Planning issues.

### **Instructions**

This interview is a follow up to the Permanency Planning Family Team Conference observed by the researcher from Columbia University School of Social Work. This consent form should be reviewed and signed by the Family Team Conference Facilitator prior to starting the interview.

### **Information on Research**

We are asking you to be interviewed for a research study sponsored by Columbia University School of Social Work. The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of how young adults experience decision-making in Family Team Conferences focused on Permanency Planning issues. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about anything that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.'

### **Procedures**

The interview will take place in a private room. You will be asked a series of questions which will take approximately one hour to answer. Questions will be based on your experiences facilitating Family Team Conferences. For example you will be asked what was the purpose of the family team conference? Do you think all parties were engaged in the decision making process? You may decline to answer any question, and you may end your participation at any time. Should the researcher have reasonable cause to suspect that a child is being abused or neglected, this information will be reported to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment.

### **Audio Recording**

We would like to audio record this interview for the purpose of transcription. All information you provide will be kept strictly confidential, and will be used only for the purpose of this study. You may decline to have the interview audio recorded, but still consent to being interviewed.

Based on the information presented above, please check one of the following:

- I agree to be audio taped in this interview  
 I do not agree to be audio taped in this interview

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Print Name

---

Signature

**Risks**

This study presents risks to participants similar to what is experienced in every-day life. You may become uncomfortable or upset answering questions, and you may terminate the interview at any time. You may also ask the researcher for a referral for counseling or other support services.

**Benefits**

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study, however your participation may promote better participation in child welfare decision making for young people in foster care.

**Alternative Procedures**

The alternative to participating in this study is to choose not to participate.

**Confidentiality**

The interviews will be confidential. Findings will be reported without identifying information. For example, the written transcripts will not include any personal information that would identify you including items such as names, date of birth, address, email and phone numbers.

Only Columbia University researchers involved in this project will have access to the tapes and transcripts. Regulatory and oversight bodies may on occasion review participant records. In each instance, the importance of participant privacy is paramount. Those with access are held to the strictest standards of confidentiality. Consent forms, cassette tapes and digital recordings will be stored in a locked drawer in the Co-Investigators desk. Tapes and digital recording will be erased and destroyed no longer than 3 years after the study is complete. Written transcripts will not contain identifying information.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary and there will be no penalty if you decide not to participate. Your participation will not affect your position at New York Foundling or Graham- Windham. You may refuse to answer any question and may terminate the interview at any time.

**Additional Information**

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact Astraea Augsberger at 212-851-2191 who will answer all questions. If at any time you have comments regarding the conduct of this research or questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Columbia University Institutional Review Board at 212-851-7041 or by fax at 212-851-7044.

**Signature**

Study Participant

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Person Obtaining Consent

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix G: Facilitator Interview Guide

<b>Learning Objectives</b>	<b>Sample Questions</b>
Describe the sample demographics	<p>What is the highest educational degree you have obtained?</p> <p>How long have you been working in child welfare? What position(s) have you held?</p>
Describe the experience level and training of conference facilitators	<p>How long have you been working as a conference facilitator?</p> <p>What training did you receive to become a conference facilitator?</p> <p>Approximately how many conferences have you facilitated?</p>
Describe the purpose of Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences	<p>What is the purpose of Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences?</p> <p>What are some examples of issues discussed?</p> <p>What are some examples of decisions made at family team conferences?</p> <p>What was the purpose of the family team conference I observed?</p>
Describe the facilitators perceptions of general participation in the conference	<p>Do you think all parties were engaged in the decision making process at the conference I observed? Why or why not?</p> <p>What strategies did you use to engage the parties in decision making? Do you think you were successful?</p>
Describe the facilitators perceptions of youth participation	<p>Do you think the youth was engaged in the conference?</p> <p>Did you use any specific strategies to engage the young person? Probe: Can you give an example?</p> <p>Do you think the young person's wishes were incorporated into the decision(s) made at the conference? Probe: can you give an example of how/when this</p>

	happened
Compare and contrast Family Team Conferences to other stages of child welfare decision making	<p>How did this Family Team conference compare to others you have participated in?</p> <p>Have you been involved in other child welfare meetings, conferences or court proceedings where decisions were being made about young people in care? If so, how are the Family Team Conferences the same? How are they different?</p>
Identify strategies for improving participation in child welfare decision making	<p>What is the hardest part about facilitating Family Team Conferences with youth?</p> <p>What is the easiest part about facilitating Family Team Conferences with youth?</p> <p>Do you have any suggestions for improving youth participation in child welfare decision-making?</p>