PRACTICE NOTES

MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING IN TRANSITION PLANNING: SUPPORTING YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF FOSTER CARE

There are approximately 442,995 children in foster care in the United States, and a quarter of these young people are age 14 or older. In addition, more than 17,000 young people age out of foster care at age 18 each year.[1] To successfully transition into independent living, youth in care need supportive and healthy adult-youth relationships as well as access to resources and opportunities that can assist them as they work towards independence.[2]

Positive Youth Development and Motivational Interviewing

Professionals who use a positive youth development framework view adolescence from a strengths-based perspective and propose that youth are able to be successful when their assets, resources, and opportunities are aligned. Furthermore, youth are seen as major contributors to their own development.[5] Regardless of youth's circumstances, the positive youth development perspective asserts that a youth's developmental assets, such as self-efficacy, autonomy, and confidence, must be nurtured by adults in their network to allow youth to thrive. Developmental assets have been positively associated with academic achievement, emotional resilience, and healthy behaviors.[6,7,8]

Since developmental assets can refer to both internal (e.g., social capabilities) and external (e.g., interpersonal relationships) factors, they can be used as a framework for instruments that assess youth functioning (e.g., Well-being Indicator Tool for Youth[9]) as well as a foundation to determine best practices for services and resources for youth who are transitioning to adulthood. For example, independent living programs tend to focus on three areas: improving life skills, increasing

knowledge, and widening access to resources,[10] all of which fit within a developmental assets model. However, many youth encounter obstacles to accessing services and resources as they transition out of foster care.[2] A possible explanation is that some youth have difficulty feeling a sense of purpose and motivation to participate in prosocial behaviors and social service programs.[11] Strategies that address self-efficacy and motivation to increase youth engagement in and successful completion of tasks may improve their transition from the foster care system. Fortunately, there are ample opportunities for child welfare professionals to use different approaches that encourage and motivate youth.[12]

One approach is motivational interviewing (MI), which is a communication style that aims to strengthen individuals' motivation and commitment to make positive changes in their behaviors.[3] MI can be used to promote the characteristics and skills that contribute to youth's resilience and positive outcomes. During transition planning, this approach can help child welfare professionals guide youth towards making positive decisions while supporting their autonomy. MI is based on four theoretical principles and four action-oriented processess (see below).

MI Principles

1 **Empathy** refers to the expression of understanding without judgment or criticism, and creates a safe space to discuss difficult or sensitive topics.

2 **Discrepancies** are developed when youth are made aware of the differences between their current behaviors and their life values and goals. Once discrepancies are identified, probing statements are used to encourage the use of critical thinking and problem solving (see page 3).

3 **Resistance** is expected in the process of change. MI encourages reframing opposing views and involving youth in the problem-solving process to address resistance they might have.

4 **Self-efficacy** is an important component because although adults can help with guidance, youth's behaviors must be self-directed, which includes supporting the belief that one can be effective and successful.[3]

MI Processes

1 **Engaging** refers to displaying attitudes and behaviors that establish a collaborative working alliance (e.g., empathy, mutual respect and trust).

2 **Focusing** involves clarifying and deciding on the changes in behaviors and attitudes needed to help achieve goals. Often, discrepancies are revealed while generating specific goals.

3 **Evoking** involves eliciting motivation and working through ambivalence. Resistance can surface when there is strong ambivalence.

4 **Planning** is signaled by making decisions and setting goals, and occurs once ambivalence lessens and individuals indicate readiness. This phase is denoted by a switch from discussions on why to discussions on how.[4]

Practice Considerations

Motivational interviewing can be a complex process that requires training. However, applying the principles that this approach is based upon can be done with minimal additional instruction for child welfare professionals. To begin utilizing MI in your daily practice supporting youth in care, begin by applying the four processes. These four processes will help elicit more engagement and motivation from youth. For example, emphasize behaviors that increase self-efficacy and when youth show resistance to change. Another example includes avoiding arguing by asking probing questions that encourage youth to generate their own alternate ideas or solutions. You can build rapport by acknowledging that youth may feel ambivalent about change and that it is normal to feel unsure about a new way of thinking, new set of behaviors, or new experiences. Make sure that you use a conversational style that focuses on guiding and not directing the conversation in order to be more collaborative and reinforce youth's autonomy.

CASE EXAMPLE

Angela is an 18 year-old young woman who recently graduated from high school and is planning to transition out of foster care in about one month. She has lived with the same foster family for three years and is making plans to live with her older biological sister. She works part-time in a clothing store and often complains about not getting enough hours per week to cover her personal expenses. She is unsure about attending college or vocational training, and mostly talks about getting her driver's license so she can buy a car. She started a new romantic relationship a few months ago, and since then, has missed curfew at least

once per week and skipped multiple meetings with her social worker. Other changes in Angela's behavior in the past few months have included being short-tempered in interactions with her foster family, inconsistently taking her psychiatric medications, and drinking alcohol. Her goals on her transition plan include obtaining her driver's license and full-time employment; however, Angela hasn't demonstrated any movement towards accomplishing these goals. The social worker is worried that not only is Angela not making adequate progress towards her goals, but also that she has begun to engage in problematic behaviors.

» In your next meeting with Angela, how would you express empathy and begin to develop a discrepancy between her goals and current behaviors?

» Based on Angela's short-temper, how would you address her potential resistance to making changes to her behavior?

» While speaking with her, Angela discloses "she feels like a failure." How could you apply principles of MI and positive youth development to guide her as she navigates these feelings?

Summary

Motivational interviewing and positive youth development are based on respect for individuals' internal developmental assets, such as confidence, while also recognizing that external assets, such as supportive relationships, help produce positive change. Discussions about transition planning are an ideal opportunity for child welfare professionals to employ approaches that demonstrate discrepancies between youth's behaviors and their goals in order to elicit their motivation as well as guide them to generate solutions. In doing so, child welfare professionals are supporting youth's self-efficacy, an essential personal quality as youth prepare for a successful transition from foster care to independent living.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you currently try to elicit motivation to make positive changes from youth transitioning out of foster care to independent living.? What approaches have been most successful?

2. How can you incorporate principles of motivational interviewing into your current practice?

3. Consider youth who currently have transition plans, based on the information in this issue of *Practice Notes*, how can those care plans be enhanced?

4. What could you do to share this information with other professionals who work with youth and their families?

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