

# In Youths' Best Interest: Implementing AB 12 and Supporting Youths' Transitions to Adulthood

April 2011

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## Introduction

Implementation of California legislation AB 12 promises to bring change to the ways older youth in foster care are cared for and supported by the child welfare system, especially as they navigate the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Specifically, AB 12 extends the length of time for which youth may stay in foster care by giving them the option to remain in care past their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. With much research documenting great economic and housing instability, low levels of education, and overall poor welfare among emancipated foster youth who have left or leave care at age 18<sup>i</sup>, these changes help to address the daunting challenges faced by many emancipated foster youth on the path to independence.

The John Burton Foundation recently surveyed various stakeholders throughout California, including formerly emancipated foster youth, to gather information for the planning and implementation of AB 12. This report provides an overview of results from the survey conducted with emancipated foster youth, and reflects input from 397 youth who responded to the survey. Findings provide useful information for policy planning and implementation, and also reveal great resilience and determination exhibited by these young adults as they've struggled to counter challenges and barriers while and since leaving care.

## Methodology

The data informing this report are the result of an electronic survey that was administered statewide during February 2011, to any formerly emancipated foster youth who had or was participating in the THP-Plus program. The survey was specifically developed for the purposes of informing AB 12 implementation, and has not been used elsewhere. THP-Plus program providers were first informed of the survey and its objectives, and then asked to encourage youth to respond to the survey. Participants accessed the survey electronically via a link hosted on the John Burton Foundation's website.

To date, the 50 counties participating in the THP-Plus program have served over 1200 former foster youth throughout the state. Survey results reflect close to one-third of the total THP-Plus population for a total of N=397. The survey is not intended as a fully representative depiction of foster youth perspectives in California, and is limited in its generalizability to the overall foster youth population. However, it does provide useful information and insight into what may or may not work for developing a foster care system responsive to the needs and challenges faced by young people leaving care and transitioning to independent living. The report begins with a descriptive profile of youth who responded to the survey.

The survey was developed by Sara Kimberlin, Chris Lee, and Michele Byrnes. The survey analysis was conducted by Chris Lee.

## Who Responded to the Survey?

The chart below describes the characteristics of youth who responded to the AB 12 survey, compared to the estimated current THP-Plus population.

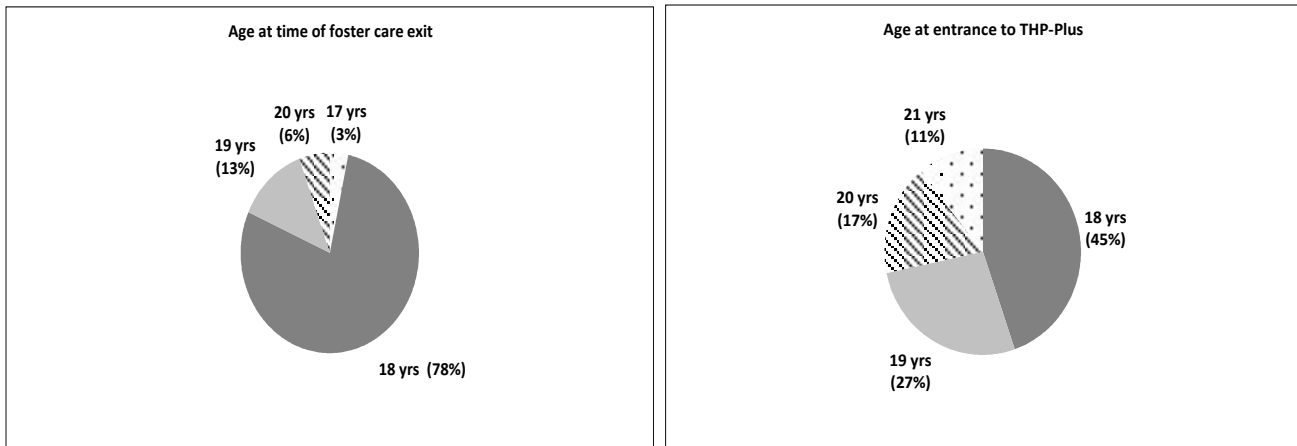
Characteristics of Survey Respondents Compared to Current THP-Plus Population					
		AB 12 Survey Respondents		Current THP-Plus population	
		%	N = 397	%	N = 797
Female		59.9	238	59.3	473
Male		34.8	138	38.6	308
Afr. Amer. / Black		28.7	114	37.4	298
White, non-Hispanic		22.9	91	32.2	257
Hispanic		24.7	98	33.4	266
Amer. Ind. / Native Amer.		1.3	5	3.8	30
Asian / Pacific Islander		3.3	13	4.8	38
Multi- / Other Race		13.1	52	8.0	64
Custodial parent		22.4	89	8.9	71
Age	18	14.9	59	.8	6
	19	26.7	106	16.7	133
	20	20.9	83	25.6	204
	21	14.1	56	22.0	175
	22	8.3	33	18.2	145
	23-25	6.3	25	16.8	134

## What Did Youth Experience During Their Exit From Foster Care?

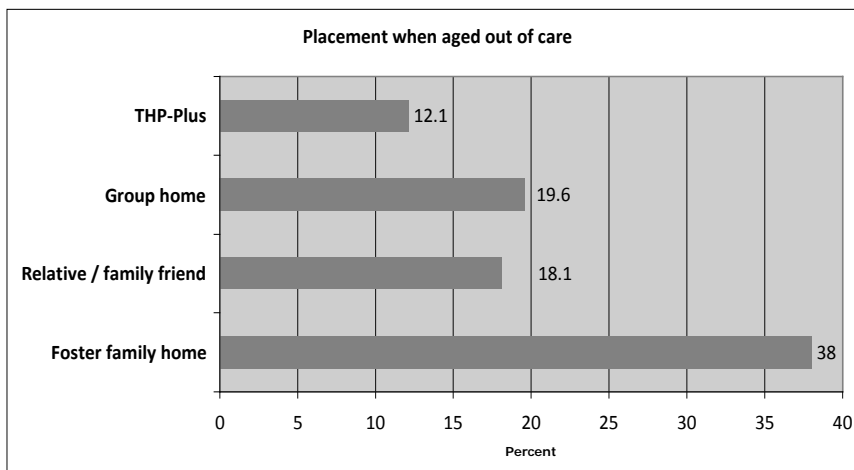
Respondents were asked to reflect back on their experiences just as they were leaving, and right after they left foster care. Noted below are their responses regarding **educational attainment** and **preparedness for leaving foster care**:

%	
76.8	Completed a high school education or equivalent before leaving foster care
88.7	Knew why and when they were leaving care BEFORE they actually left

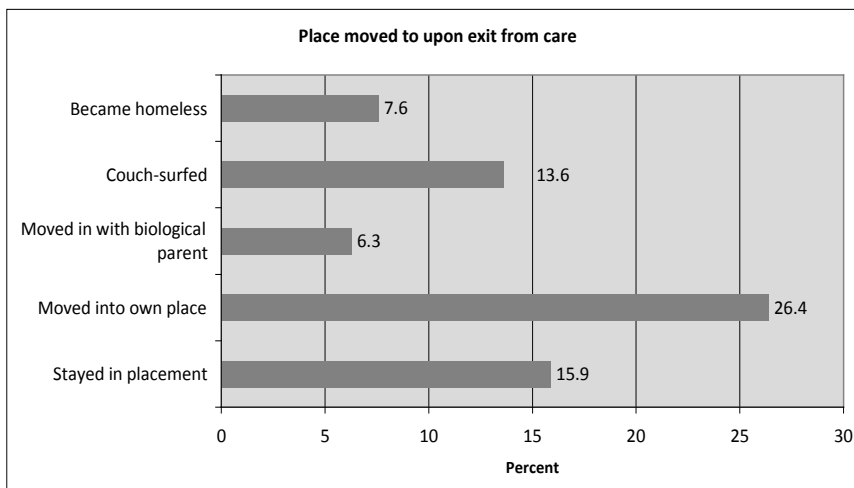
The majority of youth reported **leaving foster care** at age 18 (78%). Slightly fewer than half (45%) **entered THP-Plus** at age 18, while 27% entered THP-Plus at age 19, 17% at age 20, and 11% at age 21.



More than one-third (38%) of youth reported living in a foster family home **at the time of aging out of care**:



Slightly more than one-quarter (26%) of youth moved into their own place **right after leaving care**:

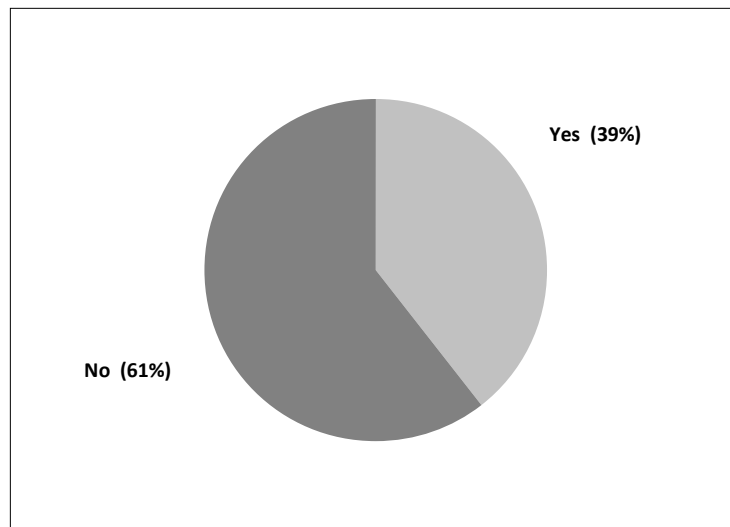


## What Happened Once Youth Left Foster Care?

In regards to their connections with the child welfare system after leaving care, youth reported the following:

%	
32.7	Indicated that their social worker kept in touch
70.0	Knew how to contact their social worker if needed
10.8	Indicated that their attorney kept in touch
36.8	Knew how to contact their attorney if needed
66.5	Participated in ILP after leaving foster care
79.8	Knew how to contact ILP after leaving foster care if needed

Just under half of the youth surveyed (39%) have been **homeless or couch-surfed** since exiting from care:



## What Are Youths' Opinions About Being in Care Past Age 18?

Responding either *Yes*, *No*, or *Maybe/I Don't Know*, if it had been an option:

%	
43.1	Of youth (N=171) <b>would have stayed in foster care</b> past age 18
30.0	Of youth (N=119) <b>would have considered returning</b> to care after having left

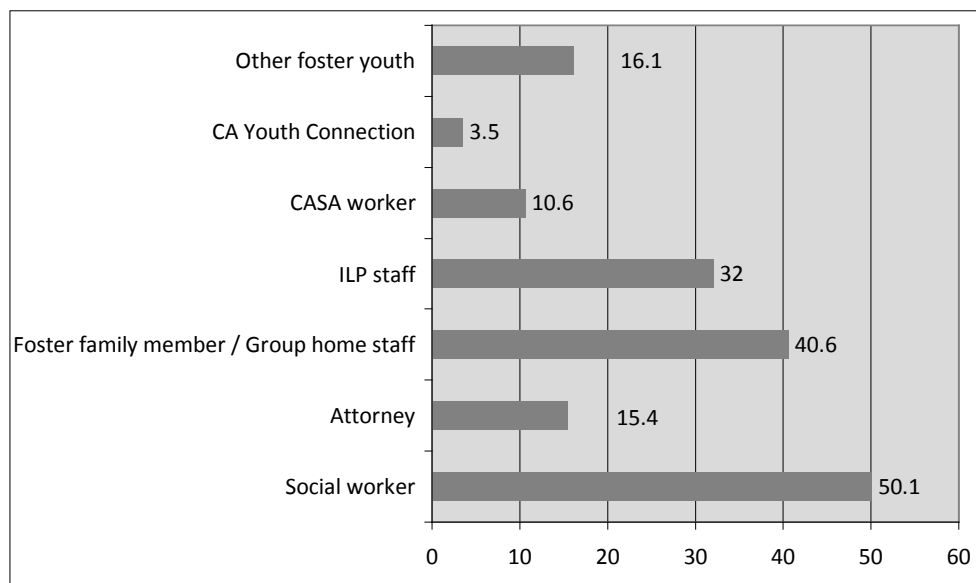
In regards to how much longer they might have chosen to stay in care:

%	
27.5	Would have stayed for <b>as short a time as possible</b>
41.6	Would have stayed <b>a short or long time, depending</b> on what they needed
30.9	Would have stayed <b>as long as possible</b>

To get a better sense of who would have stayed in care longer and who would have considered returning to care after having exited, the table below describes some of these youths' characteristics<sup>ii</sup>:

Characteristics of Youth Who Would Have Stayed Longer or Returned to Care					
		Would have <b>stayed in care</b>		Would have <b>returned to care</b>	
		%	N = 171	%	N = 119
Female		62.6	107	68.9	33
Male		32.2	55	27.7	82
Custodial parent		22.8	39	23.5	28
Age at time of exit	17	5.3	9	7.6	9
	18	70.2	120	69.7	83
	19	11.7	20	11.8	14
	20	5.3	9	3.4	4
Age at THP-P entry	18	35.7	61	36.1	43
	19	28.1	48	28.6	34
	20	16.4	28	13.4	16
	21	12.3	21	13.4	16
Completed HS diploma / GED		74.9	128	73.1	87
Experienced homelessness / Couch-surfed post care exit		48.0	82	53.8	64
Social worker kept in touch		29.8	51	35.3	42
Attorney kept in touch		8.8	15	10.1	12

When asked **who they would have consulted with** to decide whether or not to stay in care longer, most youth would have spoken to their social worker (50%) or foster family (41%) to help them decide:



### On Attending Court Hearings...

Asked to choose between *Yes, No, or Maybe / I Don't Know*, a little fewer than half of youth (46%) **would have gone to their court hearings** while in care past age 18. Six percent (6%) indicated that they would not have gone to their court hearings, and 12.6% were unsure.

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Youth responded in the following ways for **reasons why they would have chosen to stay** in care:

%	
32.7	Would have wanted to continue receiving housing and other support
32.5	Staying would have helped them achieve their educational goals
31.7	Did not have anywhere else to go
27.0	Liked the foster care placement they were living in
13.9	Would have wanted to continue having a county social worker
7.6	Would have wanted to continue having an attorney and court hearings
4.5	Were living with a relative/friend who needed the foster care payment

**79%** of youth selected the following as the **MOST important reasons** they might have chosen to stay in care:

%	
31.3	Did not have anywhere else to go
27.6	Staying would have helped them achieve their educational goals
20.3	Would have wanted to continue receiving housing and other support

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In contrast, youth responded with the following for **reasons why they would have chosen NOT to stay** in care:

%	
19.1	Were ready to be on their own
8.8	Already had another place to live
6.5	Would not have wanted to continue having a social worker
5.8	Probably would not have liked any of the available placement options
5.8	Would not have wanted to continue having an attorney or court hearings
1.5	Wanted to live with their biological parent(s)

**86%** of youth indicated the following as **MOST important** for why they would have chosen NOT to stay in care:

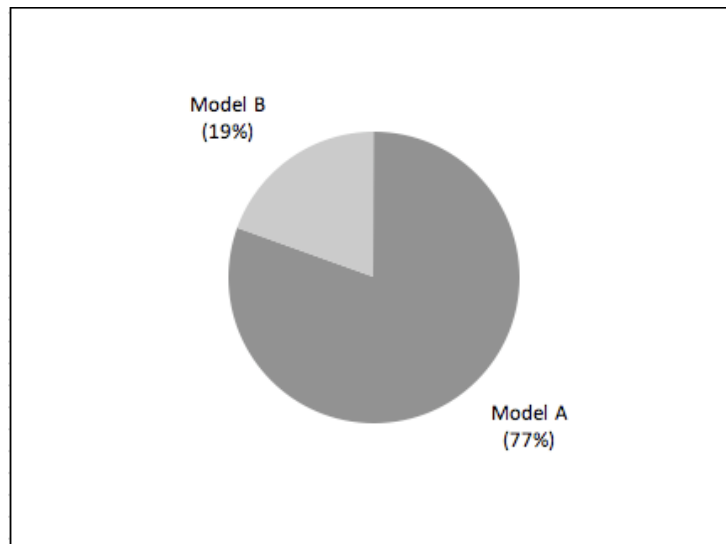
%	
56.4	Were ready to be on their own
18.2	Already had another place to live
10.9	Do not think they would have liked any of the available placement options

## What Might a Foster Care Placement Look Like for Youth Over Age 18?

When asked to choose between the following two **placement models for youth over age 18**:

- A. Housing, one-on-one help from a youth advocate / case manager, and a limited direct monthly stipend
- B. Housing and a larger direct monthly stipend, but no help from a youth advocate / case manager

A large majority (81%) preferred **Model A**, a placement offering housing, one-on-one help and a limited direct monthly stipend.



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When asked to consider the following placement options for youth over age 18, a majority (77%) endorsed having youth **live in an apartment either on their own or with a roommate**:

%	
76.6	Live in an apartment either on their own or with a roommate
45.3	Live in a college dorm or other on-campus housing
40.6	Continue the same foster placement they had at age 17 or younger
36.3	Live with a relative or friend whom the young person chooses

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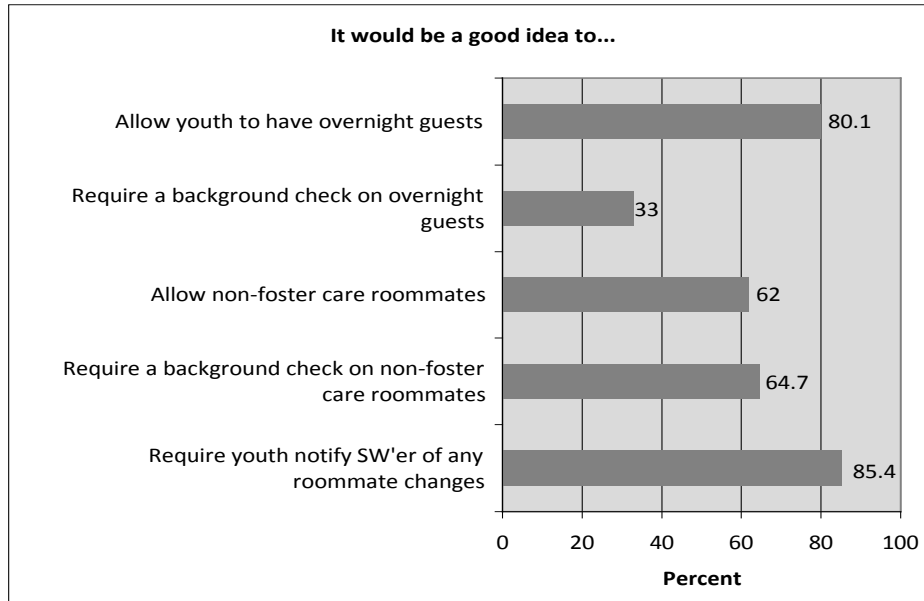
Youth rated the following as **important for supporting youth during their transition to adulthood**:

%	
68.3	Having an affordable place to stay
66.8	Receiving support in identifying and attaining post-secondary education
66.0	Receiving support in seeking and obtaining employment
64.5	Receiving one-on-one help from a youth advocate or case manager
62.5	Being responsible for managing one's own budget
56.4	Being able to live on their own apartment
54.9	Receiving monthly cash stipend to spend on basic necessities

## What Are Youths' Views on Guidelines for Young People in Extended Foster Care Settings?

In an effort to determine what living in an extended foster care placement for youth over age 18 might look like, respondents were asked what they thought about having rules related to: having overnight guests, living with non-foster care roommates, requiring background checks on overnight guests and/or non-foster care roommates, and requiring youth to notify their social worker of any roommate changes.

The chart below depicts the percentage of youth who endorsed each of the rules listed above:



Youth were also asked about rules related to having a curfew, possessing and using substances, participating in services, receiving a stipend for basic necessities and managing their own stipends. In response, youth:

36.5	Agree that having a curfew would be a good idea
78.8	Think youth in extended care should have to participate in services
84.1	Agree that possessing illegal drugs or alcohol should result in consequences
89.7	Think youth should be given a monthly stipend to cover basic living costs
75.8	Agree that youth should be responsible for managing their own stipend

Several noted that while they support having youth receive and manage their own stipends, it is important that youth are first taught and allowed to practice doing so in order to prevent misuse or overspending of money.

The top 3 responses given by youth on **how often youth advocates or case managers should visit**:

35.8	Once a week
33.6	Once every two weeks
23.7	Once a month

Realizing that a situation might arise when an extended foster care placement is not a good fit for an individual, youth were asked for their opinion on what they thought would be appropriate reasons to ask someone to leave a program or their apartment. Below are percentages of youth who agreed with the listed reason as being appropriate for asking someone to leave.

%	
68.5	Leaving an apartment vacant for 30 days or longer while NOT paying rent
62.0	Possession of illegal drugs
42.3	Not participating in services
35.8	Possession of alcohol (illegal for most participants due to being < 21 yrs)
11.8	Leaving an apartment vacant for 30 days or longer while STILL paying rent
18.4	ALL are appropriate reasons to ask someone to leave
2.8	NONE are appropriate reasons to ask someone to leave

Some indicated that each situation **should be considered on a case by case basis**, and also gave other reasons not noted above that would be appropriate for asking someone to leave:

- When a youth is **creating problems and difficulty for their roommate or the whole household**
- Situations of **physical violence** and **other threats to safety**

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Based on traditional foster care services, where a child or youth is usually given 72 hours to move out when a placement doesn't work out, survey respondents were asked if this same standard should be applied in an extended foster care setting. More than half (56%) of youth disagreed.

Respondents who voiced disagreement noted that youth leaving extended foster care most likely would have to secure a new place outside of the foster care system, which would require longer than 72 hours. Some also expressed concerns that youth might be asked to leave without any warning or without being given a chance to address the relevant problem(s). Thirty-nine respondents offered alternative timelines that they thought would be more appropriate, including **1 week** (n=7), **2 weeks** (n=10), or **30 days** (n=22).

## Summary & Additional Comments

Responses received from this survey clearly indicate that youth have experienced great challenges as well as successes whilst navigating the pathway to adulthood. Though the sample of youth who responded to this survey may not be representative of the overall emancipated foster youth population, the information they shared provide valuable insight into some of the experiences of emancipating out of care.

More than three-quarters (77%) of respondents reported completing their high school education or equivalent before leaving foster care, and 88 percent knew why and when they were leaving care before they actually left. Not many youth had their social workers or attorneys keep in touch with them after leaving foster care, however most reported knowing how to contact them if needed. And though many youth indicated a readiness to try living on their own at age 18 or 19, the 39 percent of youth who have experienced homelessness or couch-surfing since leaving care suggests that more is needed to support successful adult transitions for these youth.

Fewer than half (43%) shared that they would have stayed in care longer if it had been option, while slightly under one-third (30%) indicated that they would have returned to care if given the choice. For those who would

have stayed in care longer, most cited reasons related to valuing the supports and services they have received through foster care services, participating in ILP, or from participating in THP-Plus. Indeed, when asked to choose between a placement model offering more cash support without one-on-one assistance, or one offering one-on-one assistance with less cash support, an overwhelming majority chose the model including one-on-one assistance with less cash support.

Respondents' reactions were mixed when asked to consider setting rules and guidelines for over age 18 youth living in an extended foster care setting. Their responses reflect a struggle between desiring to be on their own and no longer being treated as a child, while also realizing that becoming an adult does not happen instantaneously and requires continued guidance and support from other adults.

## Implications for Policy

Overall, **support** and **safety** are the two most prominent themes that emerge from respondents' comments, whether in regards to wanting to stay or return to care, wanting regular visits from youth advocates, or supporting the implementation of rules in extended foster care settings. **Youth largely note that they want to "grow up" and live on their own, and want to do this successfully.** In order to do so, many acknowledge the need for assistance in the form of concrete services, active guidance in adult living skills, emotional support, formal help to achieve their goals, and maintaining a sense of connectedness with a familiar mentor or worker.

**Additional suggestions** youth offered for assisting transitioning former foster youth include:

- Provide youth with an **emergency contact** that they can call at any time, in cases of emergency or other situations where they may need assistance outside of normal business hours
- Help youth **"stay connected" with a computer and internet connection**, for use for school or work
- Provide a clothing allowance to be spent on **professional wear** for interviews and work
- Lengthen the time that a youth may work with their **CASA worker**
- Help youth with the process of qualifying and applying for **permanent affordable housing** once they are ready to move out of a formal care environment into a place of their own

Youth also reported that current life skills training classes are often redundant of what they received in ILP, and other courses that would be helpful include **cooking classes, help with taxes, and assistance in learning to drive and obtaining a driver's license.**

**Parenting youth** also suggested **asking new fathers to take parenting classes** because women tend to be recruited for these classes more often than men. Parenting youth also indicated that **having the option to live with their partner and/or child's other parent** would be helpful, as well as being connected to other parenting foster youth for support.

Finally, among youth who do support an extended foster care placement option for youth over age 18, many noted that age 21 may be too soon to stop services and eligibility for care, and suggested ages 24, 25, or 26 as more appropriate age limits to help ensure youth have time to successfully transitioning to living on their own.

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<sup>i</sup> Barth, R. P. (1990). On their own: The experiences of youth after foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 7(5), 419-440.

Cook, R. J. (1994). Are we helping foster care youth prepare for their future? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 16(3-4), 213-229.

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Courtney, M. E., Piliavin, I., Grogan-Kaylor, A., & Nesmith, A. (2001). Foster youth transitions to adulthood: A longitudinal view of youth leaving care. *Child Welfare Journal*, 80(6), 685-717.

<sup>ii</sup> For additional information on youth who would've chosen NOT to stay in care or return to care after having left, please refer to the table in the Appendix