



HEALTHY OUTCOMES FROM CONNECTING, A PREVENTION PROGRAM FOR CAREGIVERS AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

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MISSION of SDRG

To understand and promote healthy behaviors and positive social development among diverse populations, we:

- Conduct research on factors that influence development
- Develop and test the effectiveness of interventions
- Study service systems and work to improve them
- Advocate for science-based solutions to health and behavior problems
- Disseminate knowledge, tools, and expertise produced by this research

There are more than 84,000 early adolescents (youth from 11 to 15 years of age) in foster care in the United States on a typical day. Evidence indicates that youth who grow up in foster care have higher incidences of substance use and conduct problems and early sexual activity, and are at a higher risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system than youth in general.

FOSTER PLACEMENTS AS PREVENTION OPPORTUNITIES

Stable and positive foster family placements provide an important opportunity for prevention of behavioral health problems among youth by promoting healthy social development. However, preservice training for licensed foster caregivers does not provide adequate preparation for caregivers to be emotionally responsive, open to communication, and able to provide for the needs of adolescent youth in their care. Foster and relative caregivers need effective family-focused interventions to help them provide opportunities for positive social development to the teens in their care.

ABOUT THE CONNECTING PROGRAM

To address the need for parenting programs tailored to support the needs of adolescents in foster care, researchers at SDRG developed an affordable, self-directed, family-focused program called *Connecting*. The Connecting program was adapted from Staying Connected with Your Teen, an existing universal parenting program with evidence for preventing risky behaviors in adolescence. Connecting is intended to be completed jointly by caregivers and foster youth in their care who are 11 to 15 years old. The program features a workbook and videos with easy-to-follow activities for caregivers and youth. The program is designed to provide youth with opportunities to contribute to

their foster families and acquire the skills needed to take advantage of these opportunities, increase caregiver supervision, reduce conflict, and promote bonding through reward and recognition strategies. Connecting is self-paced, but the recommended completion time is 10 weeks.

EFFECTIVENESS OF CONNECTING FOR OLDER YOUTH

Researchers at SDRG completed a long-term trial of the Connecting program with 220 caregivers and youth in foster care. Two years after program delivery, positive effects of Connecting were seen across a spectrum of risk and protective factors and health outcomes. Among youth who were older (14-15 years old) during program delivery, when compared with receiving the standard of care in foster placement, Connecting was associated with reduced substance use, nonviolent antisocial behavior, and thoughts of self-harm. Youth in Connecting also showed less favorable attitudes toward substance use and early initiation of sexual behavior. In addition, caregivers of these older youth who participated in Connecting reported stronger bonding with the youth through more frequent instances of communication, shared activities, displays of warmth, and positive interactions. No program benefits were observed for youth who were younger (11-13 years old) during program delivery.

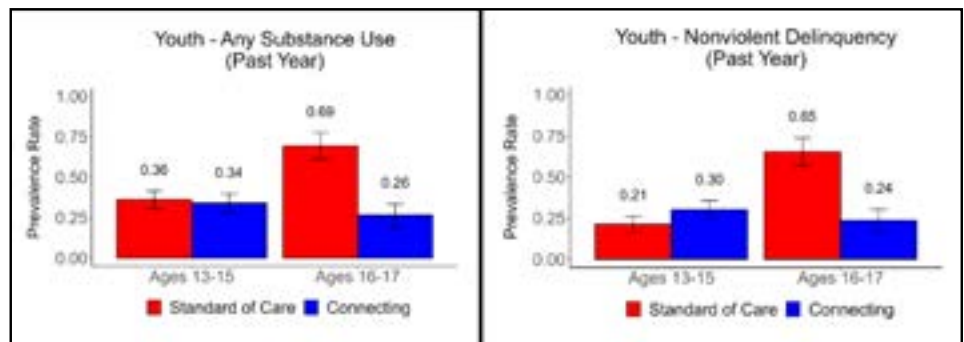


Fig. 1
Less substance use and nonviolent delinquency among older youth who participated in Connecting with their caretakers (versus standard of care for foster placement).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

The availability of relevant, self-directed parenting guidance for foster caregivers caring for teens may be beneficial for reducing overall later risk-taking behaviors. A key motivator behind the development of Connecting was to help caregivers establish stronger positive relationships with their foster children. To this end, the improved bonding outcomes for older youth gives an encouraging sign that the program's activities were supportive of this goal. If found to be effective in larger samples and with longer term follow-up, the Connecting program has the potential to fill an important gap in the continuum of services offered to caregivers of youth in foster care.

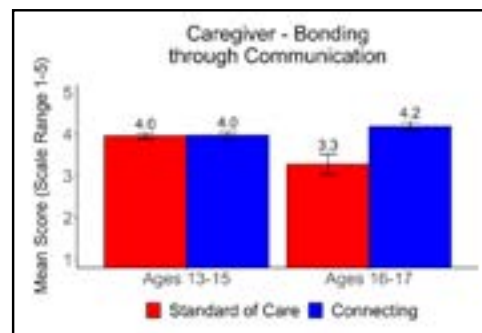


Fig. 2
Stronger youth-caregiver bonding among older youth who participated in Connecting with their caregivers (versus the standard of care for foster placement).

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THIS TOPIC, PLEASE REFER TO THE ORIGINAL ARTICLES:

Haggerty, K. P., Barkan, S. E., Caouette, J. D., Skinner, M. L., & Hanson, K. G. (2023). Two-year risk behavior outcomes from Connecting, a prevention program for caregivers and youth in foster care. *Prevention Science, 24*, 15-26. DOI: 10.1007/s1121-022-01390-4

Haggerty, K. P., Barkan, S. E., Caouette, J. D., Skinner, M. L., & Hanson, K. G. (2023). Family, mental health, and placement outcomes of a low-cost preventive intervention for youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 150*, 106973. DOI:10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.106973

FUNDING INFORMATION

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