Relationships Matter for Youth 'Aging Out' of Care

Research Report Executive Summary

Fall 2018

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This research report is accompanied by:

The *Relationships Matter for Youth 'Aging Out' of Care Photo E-book,* which features the valuable photography work of the co-researchers.

E-Book:
https://www.yumpu.com/document/view/59918518/relationships-matter-e-book

AND

The *Relationships Matter for Youth 'Aging Out' of Care Project Video,* which features the co-researchers, the principal researcher, and the collaborative photo exhibit event held at Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Center, on December 18, 2017.

Project video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lmPDZ360ow

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Background &
Purpose of the Study

This collaborative photovoice research project aims to build upon research already implemented in British Columbia on youth 'aging out' of care. The Vancouver Foundation has conducted research through their Fostering Change Initiative, and released two reports in 2016: a cost-benefit analysis of extending government supports for youth in care until the age of 25 published in the *Opportunities in Transitions,* and a report summarizing preliminary results of the Youth Transitions survey. *A Fostering Change Youth Photo Voice Project* was also conducted in 2016 in partnership with the Society for Children and Youth of BC (SCYBC) with young people in care ages 15 to 19 from Abbotsford and New Westminster, focusing on issues related to the transition to adulthood and the rights of youth preparing to leave care. By focusing on pathways to long-term supportive relationships for youth 'aging out' of care, this project contributes to the existing work by adding a social support element to the findings. The research is also timely; a report was released in February 2017 by the BC Representative for Children and Youth (BCRCY) titled *Broken Promises* on the untimely death of Alex Gervais, an 18-year-old Métis teen who took his own life while in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The report calls to the attention of the BC government the urgent need to pursue permanency for youth in care who are unable to return to their biological families. Given that the perspectives of youth in and from care are often left out of policy and decision-making discussions, this project focuses on incorporating and elevating the voices of youth who have 'aged out' of care on issues related to forming healthy, supportive and sustainable relationships with the people who matter to them.

Challenges Associated With
'Aging Out' of the Child Welfare System

Research in the last 20 years in North America and other Western countries has shown that young people in the general population are progressively taking longer periods of time to transition to adulthood[1]. This phenomenon, termed by Arnett (2015) as emerging adulthood, is associated with young people transitioning to adulthood between the ages of 25 and 29. Young people are also becoming more interdependent on their support networks as opposed to independent from them - they continue to rely on their parents, friends and community for advice, support and comfort throughout their adult lives[2].

Interdependency incorporates values of collaboration, connection and empowerment between members of a support network rather than isolation and complete independence.[3]

In contrast, youth in long-term government care who have not been adopted or reunited with their biological families are expected to transition to adulthood and become self-sufficient quite rapidly. This is due to provincial legislation across Canada mandating child welfare agencies to release youth from their care at the age of majority[4].

According to national estimates, approximately 10% (6,700) of the youth in care population transitions out ('ages out'[5]) of the Canadian child welfare system every year[6]. In British Columbia, approximately 1,000 youth 'age out' of care on a yearly basis at age 19[7].

The requirement for youth to leave government care at the age of majority is much earlier than the transition timeframe of most of their peers. This accelerated transition to adulthood has been shown to affect the ability of youth in care to self-focus, and limits their ability to build human and social capital[8] to support them throughout adulthood[9]. It also places an unrealistic expectation upon them of instant adulthood[10], one that many of their peers are not held to. Evidence from North American studies over the past 30 years demonstrate that youth exiting care at are a much higher risk of facing multiple challenges than their peers who are not in care, such as high rates of homelessness, under-education, unemployment or under-employment, poverty, mental health issues and post-traumatic stress, substance abuse, and early pregnancy or parenthood[11].

Independent Living Programs (ILPs) alone are not sufficient

To date, impact studies of Independent Living Programs (ILPs), typically offered to youth leaving care to prepare them for their transition to adulthood, suggest that such programs are inadequate and do not produce the intended outcomes[12]. Youth in care indicate that emotional support is a crucial need during the transition to adulthood, which is not usually the focus of ILPs[13]. Most ILPs tend to focus on tangible self-sufficiency skills (e.g., cooking, cleaning, budgeting, CV writing), rather than on establishing and maintaining social support networks for youth 'aging out' of care. Youth in and from care also express that ILPs alone are not sufficient to meet their needs, and that ideally support and training should be provided over an extended period by a parental figure[14]. Yet, policies continue to focus on independence as a main target outcome and ILPs as the focus of transition planning for youth 'aging out' of care.

Despite these findings, youth 'aging out' of care remain at a high risk of experiencing multiple difficulties during this crucial transition time in their lives. Due to fragmented and limited services, many adolescents who have not found permanent placements during their time in care are left to fend for themselves once they leave, and in more than dire circumstances.

Unlike their peers who can continue to seek assistance and support from their families, youth who have left the child protection system do not have the option to return to the care of the province in times of difficulty.

Long-term supportive relationships matter for youth 'aging out' of care

Research illustrates that foster youth want permanence in their lives and want to feel connected to and supported by people who are genuine and provide them with unconditional love[15]. A shift in societal and child welfare system attitudes about youth exiting care needs to occur, as they are often seen as undeserving of continued support due to behavioural challenges and their distrust in authority figures[16]. Reliance on others is considered a normal and healthy part of human development throughout the life course for youth in the general population. A focus on interdependence and an investment in sustainable relationships should become the central focus of prevention and intervention strategies for youth 'aging out' of care if we want them to have a fighting chance at experiencing the same level of positive outcomes during their transition to adulthood as their peers.

The perspectives of youth in and from care are often not considered in child welfare policy and permanency planning. Consequently, alternative paths for establishing supportive and permanent relational networks for youth 'aging out' of care are generally not incorporated into their transition plans, especially those relationships that do not fit within traditional and legal (biological or adoptive) family definitions[17]. As a result, youth who are unable to achieve permanent placement outcomes during their time in care are deprived of permanence in their lives, and are forced to leave care at the age of majority with little to no social support system.

Research shows that biological families, caregivers, peers, natural mentors and intimate relationships are identified as the key relationships that matter to youth 'aging out' of care, and when given the right tools and nurturing, these relationships can act as a buffer against many of the deleterious outcomes youth experience after their emancipation from the child welfare system[18]. Despite these findings, young people continue to leave care without long-term supportive relationships.

Nearly half of youth 'aging out' of care do not have enduring relationships with supportive and caring adults[19].

Youth in and from care are also more likely to have deviant peer relationships, which are positively correlated with engagement in criminal behaviours, mental health issues and unemployment[20]. It is thus important not only to ensure young people in and from care are connected to the people that are important to them, but to also provide the necessary supports so that the relationships they form are positive, nurturing and enduring.

The status quo is not working

These studies provide an understanding of the risk factors, challenges and reduced outcomes for youth who must exit care without achieving a permanent support network, and indicate that **the status quo is not working.** Current child welfare practices targeted to youth 'aging out' of care are based on standards that even their peers are not held to, and institutionalize the process of 'growing up' for young people in care.

We need to think of relationships and the transition to adulthood for youth in care in a different way, by moving away from the current self-sufficiency paradigm to one focused on supportive long-term relationships and interdependence.

It is also important to first and foremost capture the perspectives of young people 'aging out' of care about the relationships that matter to them, as their own perceptions and experiences may vary from what the adults in their lives might think they are experiencing.

Researchers, policy decision-makers and practitioners need to ensure that the needs, expectations and standards of success are developed and defined by youth in and from care rather than imposed on them through policies and programs that are based on traditional ideals of the adult majority culture. This can be supported by including them as decision-makers in their transition planning process, investing in advocacy and mentoring opportunities, involving them in the policy making process, and engaging them as co-researchers through emancipatory and social justice research approaches[21].

Project Design & Implementation

This project adopts a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, by incorporating youth engagement and consultation in all aspects of the research including design, data collection, analysis and dissemination. PAR requires collaboration with those who are affected by the issue being studied, with the aim to build advocacy capacity and affect social change(22). This approach is rooted in transformative research with oppressed and marginalized groups, and aligns with the objective of this research: to provide a powerful platform for the voices of marginalized youth from care in a social action context. The Vancouver Foundation's Fostering Change Youth Advisory Circle (YAC), comprised of former youth in care from the Greater Vancouver area, was consulted in the development of the research project proposal and design.

What is Photovoice?

Photovoice is a creative and arts-based qualitative research method that draws from documentary photography and filmmaking. It employs photography and group dialogue - the fusion of images and words - as a means for youth who have 'aged out' of care to deepen their understanding of the issue of long-term supportive relationships and explain their own experiences though critical reflection and dialogue(23). Photovoice is also an empowerment tool, through which former youth in care can work together to represent their own lived experiences rather than have their stories told and interpreted by others(24).

A specific photographic technique is utilized to teach young people from care creative ways to show others the world through their eyes(25). The visual images and accompanying captions produced by a photovoice project are dissemination tools that can be used to reach and inform academics, practitioners, policy decision-makers and the public through various creative mediums. One of the deliverables includes a community art exhibit at which friends, family, community members, politicians and key decision-makers are invited to attend. The aim of photovoice is to empower participants as co-researchers and advocates for change, and to create sustainable social change at the community level.

Photovoice is a particularly powerful approach in engaging youth who have 'aged out' of care, as they are often socially and politically disenfranchised, isolated and in need of connections to the larger community. While the purpose of photovoice is to examine serious social issues, it also incorporates fun, creative and collaborative research approaches, which can be more fulfilling and encourage young people's willingness to participate(26). This approach also provides an opportunity for participant skill development through photography training, critical reflection, group dialogue and analysis, problem-solving, political engagement and advocacy, research, co-authorship, public speaking, as well as opportunities for personal growth (e.g., self-esteem, sense of belonging, self-expression)(27).

The Co- Researchers

The co-researchers consist of eight young people between the ages of 19 and 29 who have 'aged out' of government care and were residing in the Greater Vancouver area at the time of project recruitment and implementation. In terms of age distribution at the start of the project, three youth were 19 years of age, with the other five co-researchers aged 21, 22, 23, 26 and 27 respectively. In terms of race and ethnicity, three of the co-researchers are Indigenous, one is mixed Iraqi/Indigenous, one is of mixed ancestry, one is Ashkenazi Jewish, one is African Canadian, and one is Caucasian. In terms of gender distribution, four co-researchers identify as female, three identify as male and one identifies as gender non-binary. Five of the eight co-researchers identify as LGBTQ2+, including one openly trans co-researcher.

Project Timeline

The project took place over 12 weekly group sessions, starting the first week of October 2017 and ending the third week of December. At the start of the project, the co-researchers received photography training from a professional photographer, and were provided with digital cameras. The lead researcher and co-researchers convened for 2 to 3 hours every Saturday afternoon to examine and discuss the photographs and connect them to the research question and areas of inquiry. With the assistance of the lead researcher, co-researchers developed concrete recommendations for change in policy, community and intervention approaches related to the relationship-based themes that emerged from their photographs. During the last week of the project, a photo exhibit was held at Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre, which was open to the larger community. Several key government officials were present, in addition to representatives from the BC Representative for Children and Youth and the Vancouver Foundation's Fostering Change Initiative.

Research Question & Areas of Inquiry

What kind of relationships are perceived by youth who have 'aged out' of care as supportive of their transition to adulthood and how can those relationships be developed and nurtured in the long-term?

This study, especially the data gathering process, was guided by the following **areas of inquiry**:

- What do supportive long-term relationships **mean** to youth who have 'aged' out of care?
- Who do youth who have 'aged out' of care identify as **important and supportive people** in their lives and why?
- What are the **expectations** of youth who have 'aged out' of care pertaining to establishing lasting and supportive relationships with those who are important to them and why?
- What are some of the **barriers and required supports** identified by youth who have 'aged out' of care to be able to connect them to and sustain these important and supportive relationships?
- What are some of the **strengths** identified by youth who have 'aged out' of care in establishing and maintaining these important and supportive relationships?

Overview of Findings

Photographs featured in this section were captured and selected by the co-researchers.

1. Animal companions: more than just pets

Tahsina Al-aibi

Nearly half of the youth shared photographs of their pets, referring to them as family.

> ❝ *"[…] With animals, they give you such unconditional love and it's always going to be unconditional. […] She's a therapy animal, she's my service animal. She means the world to me, and she's my baby and I love her."*

> ❝ *"I feel like I can relate to the animals when they're rescues because I was kind of a rescue, you know. […] They're like my little kids […]. I feel like I've created a new family for myself."*

2. Accessible, affordable & safe housing

Raina Jules

All co-researchers had experienced or were currently experiencing housing instability due to the lack of accessible, affordable and safe housing in the Greater Vancouver area. Given the incredibly low rental vacancy rate (0.8% in 2017[28]), co-researchers often had to compromise their safety to secure affordable housing, and many had experienced homelessness. Many felt that proper housing was less accessible to them due to discrimination exercised by landlords regarding their former youth in care status, which put them at higher risk of homelessness. This housing instability impacted their ability to form lasting relationships within their communities. For those who had pets, it often forced them to decide between being able to keep their animal companion or securing housing.

> " *"I want them [the landlords] to know that just because I'm a former youth in care and I have an animal, doesn't mean that you shouldn't rent to me. […] And it's so hard to find housing when the rental rate, the vacancy rate in Vancouver, is so low."*

3. Connection to the land, culture & spirituality

Ronda Merrill-Parkin

More than half of the youth, particularly Indigenous and racialized youth, expressed the need to be connected to their culture and their history. According to them, this is often a relationship component that was missing in their case plans during their time in care, and highly impacts their sense of belonging and identity. Most were also placed into foster placements that were not culturally matched to their own backgrounds.

> **"I always have been drawn to being on the land, I really enjoy it, that's where I'm most at peace, I'm most calm. […] I think we're so colonized now that a lot of us forget our relationship with the land and how important it is to connect with the land. In Aboriginal culture and spirituality, it's really important to protect the land."**

> **"[…] Since I never had anything to belong to, I was always moving from house to house, from family to family, and none of them really connected."**

4. Nurturing relationships with siblings, extended family & parent-like mentors

Raina Jules

Most co-researchers had siblings and extended family they used to be close to and were separated from once they entered care. The separation significantly impacted their relationship, as it was not nurtured during their time in care. Many felt they were left to pick up the pieces of a relationship damaged by the system after they had 'aged out'. Another youth shared their frustration with the system's definition of who fits in their definition of 'family', as it limited their ability to spend time with positive parent-like adults in their life who they considered as family.

" *"[…] Because growing up [in care] alone, feeling like you're alone in a family that's not yours and not having your siblings, it's so isolating. […] It's like you close off all your emotions because you're afraid […], you are not sure how to love those people because they're not your family. […] Not only were you ripped away from your family, you're also ripped away from your siblings - it's just adding layers of trauma, and that impacts how you're able to form trusting relationships later in life."*

5. Breaking the cycle of intergenerational foster care

Ronda Merrill-Parkin

One of the co-researchers, who is also a young single parent, shared frustrations regarding the inherent bias they received from child protection front line workers, as they were never provided with the proper tools and resources to be a successful parent. In their view, this contributed to perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational foster care, and would have been a completely avoidable process if they had been given the right supports without judgement.

> " *"I found that after 'aging out' that the system kinda wants to stay in your life, and not necessarily in a good way if you have children. […] And they weren't supportive because they had this idea in their mind that I wasn't able to parent […]. I felt that I was being discriminated against for growing up in care, even though they were the ones that were, in a sense, in charge of my upbringing. […] Because I felt like I was more or less shamed, because I didn't have my medication and I didn't have housing. They could have helped me with that, I was young enough at the time that they could've reopened my file […]."*

6. Mental health, alternative medicine & therapies, & healing

All youth emphasized the importance of healing from the displacement, losses and trauma they experienced during and after their time in care, so they could develop healthy long-term relationships. Many experienced frustration with the lack of available alternative therapies and treatments, and having to conform to a one-size-fits-all approach to access mental health services. For many, conventional services and treatments were not effective, and often aggravated their condition, which in turn impacted their ability to form long-term supportive relationships.

Tahsina Al-aibi

> ❝ "[…] I don't have the time to mourn, I don't have the time to grieve properly because I got to keep going. I was never given a grief counsellor, […] I don't personally know how to grieve other than to just keep going and push everything off to the side. And because of that I don't form a lot of close bonds or closeness with people that are around me. […] Like for me, I can't just sit around in an office and just be like 'yeah so, this is how I'm feeling today'. 'Okay so how does that make you feel?' […] Like for me things that really help are like art therapy, it's drawing, it's writing poetry […].

> ❝ "I used to self-harm, and when I started smoking weed I stopped. […] It's just been a big part of my life, I work at a dispensary, and it helped me get through a lot in my life. I like to think of it as my medicine. There is definitely a stigma attached to it, even still today when it's about to get legalized."

7. Trauma-informed practices

All co-researchers identified the need for trauma-informed practices across all systems providing services to children and youth in care, and expressed frustrations with current institutional approaches. Several co-researchers had experiences of having their honesty used against them, especially as it related to their trauma and mental health issues. Many felt misunderstood by workers who were not properly trained to understand and recognize the impacts and signs of trauma. Some felt they had to be inauthentic to access the services they needed, and often did not seek help due to the risk of being involuntarily admitted to a psychiatric unit. This impacted their ability to form positive relationships with authority figures.

Harrison Pratt

❝ *"[…] As a youth going into the system, your first encounter is with the police. […] You meet the police right away, you kind of feel like a criminal. […] The system feels kind of institutional, and I think there is a close relationship with - or kind of a pipeline between - youth in care and prison as well."*

❝ *"[…] You're always being interrogated by the social workers, and everything you say will be used against you. […] Youth can be perceived as not worthy of supports. […] These adults […] they like to impose their values on you and don't listen to what you say you need, so you have to appeal to their values in some sense and then they'll see you as someone who is 'good'. […] And so, the more high risk you are, the less support you get."*

8. Youth-centered decision-making

Keeshana Emmanuel

All co-researchers felt they did not have a lot of power to control their own situations during their removal from their homes, while they were in care and during their transition to adulthood, and were often not involved in decision-making processes that affected their lives. Most felt that current policies, interventions and decision-making processes were systems-centered and paternalistic, rather than youth-centered. This significantly impacted their experiences and relationships during their time in care, as most felt they could not openly voice their needs to their workers, and felt unacknowledged and undervalued.

❝ *"[…] We [me and my siblings] didn't have any input on being able to choose ourselves. They [front line workers] didn't ask for our input."*

❝ *"Personally, I found it very hard to rely on social workers, because they're supposed to be your guides, your guardians, but it was really hard for me to communicate if something was wrong or something was right, because they're not really there for me. They're kind of there for whatever they need to do for their work."*

9. Investing in interests, talents & strengths

Sabien Vanderal

Nearly all co-researchers voiced their frustrations regarding the constant focus on problems and crises by front line workers, rather than focusing on the positive aspects of their lives. Most felt that their potential was rarely acknowledged, and their strengths and talents were too often overshadowed by a focus on what was going wrong in their lives during their time in care. Several co-researchers also shared that their experience in care forced them to grow up too quickly due to having to learn how to survive continuous crises with little to no supports. This left no space and time to be a child and play, and many felt robbed of their childhood and adolescence. This forced adulthood impacted their ability to forge relationships with others based on their interests, talents and strengths.

❝ *"Throughout my time in foster care, I wasn't allowed to work on vehicles. […] I really wish that I had maintained that relationship with my interests, because then […] I probably wouldn't be in the situation I am in now where I don't have a very good job. I could have been going to school for something [in mechanics] or getting a scholarship for it."*

❝ *"It's important to nurture the child, to nurture the child within and not just ask us to grow up. Because when we grow up too fast, we lose a lot. We miss those years of innocence and that time and space to play. It really impacts us as adults […]. I also find myself wanting to play and I don't know how. So, I have to relearn that."*

10. Peer-led advocacy & support

Martha Dzhenganin

While several co-researchers had been previously engaged in the youth in care advocacy community, others had not had such opportunities until their involvement in the project. For many, connections with other former youth in care only occurred after they had 'aged out' and due to the support of youth-serving community organizations they became engaged with. Being connected to others who have similar lived experience was expressed as important for youth in and from care, as it can be difficult for them to connect with others who have a more privileged way of life. Most felt there was a lack of peer-led and peer-driven life skills training programs, and that most of the survival skills they learned were self-taught after they left care.

> ❝ *"[…] It's been really difficult for me to connect with other youth in care, because my social worker really never connected me with resources and stuff like that. […] It's really cool to see people connect and work under a common goal. Because it helps me sort of contribute to others and others contribute to me. […] It felt like I was part of a bigger thing, so that really helped me because usually I feel a lot of isolation. […] So, having opportunities to engage in peer support and advocacy is really important."*

11. Expanding the definition of community

Harrison Pratt

Several co-researchers emphasized the importance of including non-conventional forms of connection, such as relationships developed online and via social media, within the definition of 'community' for youth in and from care. Some indicated that several of their close and long-term relationships had been developed and nurtured online, and those forms of connection were not considered as a priority or a right by front line workers and foster parents during their time in care. For others, having accessible spaces within the larger community to meet new people who share similar interests, and being able to nurture those relationships, was identified as important. Co-researchers shared their frustrations with the gentrification of their neighbourhoods, resulting in many of their beloved community spaces being destroyed to make room for residential condos, which in turn negatively impacted their ability to maintain relationships within their communities. .

❝ *"[…] The Internet community is more of a community to me than the physical community. […] I'm not sure a lot of people necessarily think about that."*

❝ *" […] You can really have life-changing experiences by meeting people, even in small places like on the Drive, […] for example where you have Café du Soleil and they have poetry nights there, and you can even have open mic nights to play music if that's what you're into. […] Because I think we [former youth in care] gravitate towards art, affordable spaces. And without them, you may not necessarily have the opportunities to meet other people that make your life worth living […]."*

Jordan Read

12. Long-term unconditional support & nurturing

All co-researchers expressed frustration with the cut-off of supports at the age of majority. They emphasized that the lack of guidance and support received during their time in care in preparation for their transition to adulthood negatively affected their lives after 'aging out' of the system. Many felt a sense of loss and isolation after leaving care, as they had no continued support system despite still being at risk of experiencing significant difficulties. They collectively expressed that the child welfare system's sole focus on independent living prevents youth 'aging out' of care from forming lasting and healthy relationships, and forces them into isolation and to grow up too fast. While learning life skills such as budgeting, cooking and cleaning were deemed important to a young person's functioning, being connected to others who can provide continuous mentoring, support and nurturing throughout adulthood was considered equally as important. Also, all co-researchers voiced their concerns regarding the abrupt transition to adulthood, which often occurred on their 19th birthday. Rather than looking forward to turning of age and having a birthday celebration with friends and family, most of the co-researchers considered it as a dreaded and traumatic deadline.

> ❝ *"Because of how spiritual human beings are, being completely alone is not something that we're built to do. Just like a fire can't just start by itself - someone has to start it. We need connection to keep the flame going, we are all interconnected."*

Tahsina Al-aibi

Several co-researchers shared that the holidays were particularly difficult times of the year for them, given the lack of connections and community support. Many did not have positive holiday memories during their time in care due to multiple placements and a lack of connection to their foster family or group home. Several indicated they were struggling to turn the holidays into a positive experience for themselves after 'aging out', and had to put in extra effort on their own to establish connections they could rely on during the holidays.

> 66 *"[…] I'm trying to make my own Christmas [now] because I want it to be a positive experience again, not like before [during my time in care] when I was uncomfortable and always wanted to go to my room and didn't feel like eating really. [...] I feel like I'm definitely not the only one that had a negative holiday experience in care, it's uncomfortable for a lot of kids in care. It's definitely about family, and a lot of us don't have a sense of family, and the holidays can be kind of weird."*

Keeshana Emmanuel

Overview of Recommendations

Thirty-four recommendations emerged from the thematic analysis of the photographs, and were developed as a group during the last few sessions of the project.

1. The traditional **definition of 'family'** for youth in and from care does not include pets, and should be   expanded to **include animal companions**.

2.The child protection system needs to facilitate **certification of service and therapy animals** for youth in and from care, and policy barriers to obtain certification need to be removed.

3. **BC housing and tenancy laws** need to be **revised** so that youth from care do not have to choose between affordable housing and their animal companion(s).

4. Often, youth 'aging out' of care must choose between affordable housing and safe housing, as most affordable places are run down and old. We need more **housing options that are both affordable and safe** so that we have a stable place to live.

5. **Opportunities to (re)connect with the land and our ancestors through cultural programs and retreats** are important, so that Indigenous and racialized youth in and from care can find moments of peace and grounding during times of crisis and transition.

6. For those of us who are also young parents, it is important that we be given **opportunities to participate in cultural programs and events with our children**, so we can pass on the teachings to the next generation.

7. It is important to **nurture cultural connections before youth age out**, because those relationships can act as a buffer for the challenges we face when we suddenly must transition from care at the young age of 19.

8. Indigenous and racialized children and youth should be placed in **culturally appropriate placements** and receive services by **culturally competent workers** that allow for them to remain connected to their spirituality, their cultural identity and community during their time in care.

9. When children and youth are placed into care, **preserving the family unit** as much as possible by **placing siblings together** can have a profound and lasting impact on our lives.

10. It is important for us to be able to **develop and nurture relationships with our families** during and after care, **including extended family members and parent-like mentors**, so that we can start the process of healing and break the cycle of intergenerational trauma. The **definition of family** also needs to be revised to **include those who youth consider as family**, but may not be related by blood.

11. It is very important for us to be able to **develop natural relationships with our siblings** over time, because they last longer than paid relationships ever will.

Ronda Merrill-Parkin

Martha Dzhenganin

Jordan Read

Harrison Pratt
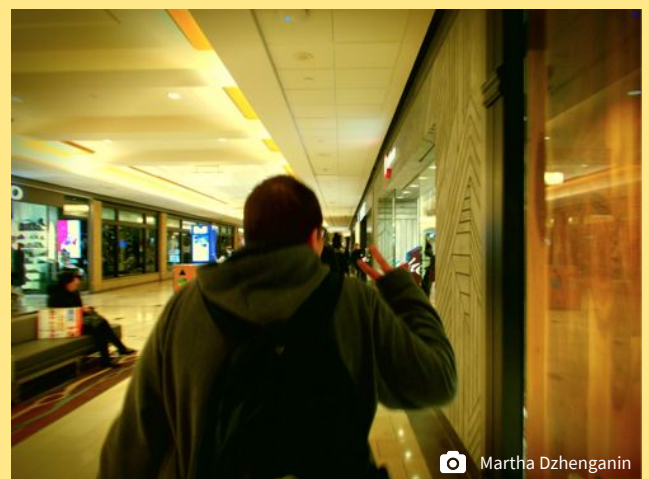
12. Given that the system oversees our upbringing, it is important for government to **provide the supports and services young parents from care need** so they can support the next generation and succeed. These services need to be provided without bias or judgement.

13. All children and youth being removed from their homes should be **encouraged and supported to undergo a mental health and well-being assessment** to assess their needs, and **more funding and investment in mental health resources** is required.

14. We should also be given the opportunity, as part of our healing journey, to **make connections with people who will add positivity to our lives and build us up** rather than tear us down. This includes connections to **mentors from the LGBTQ2+ community** for those of us who identify as LGBTQ2+ and/or are struggling with our identities.

15. Youth in and from care are not all the same; we process things differently and thus **treatments and interventions cannot be 'one size fits all'**. For some of us who have anxiety or depression, antidepressants do not always work and we need to be able to have **alternative forms of medicine** available to us without judgements and stereotypes.

16. Youth in and from care need to be provided with **resources for healing that works for them**, such as **art therapy and other forms of unconventional interventions**. Front line workers need to **listen** to what we say we need and **believe us**.

17. Training for professionals working in the child protection system, in public institutions and in the community, needs to come from a **trauma-informed** perspective, and the types of supports youth in and from care receive need to be provided within a trauma-informed context.

18. Children and youth in and from care need to be **involved in all decision-making discussions**. We need to be seen and heard as **valid contributors and stakeholders**.

19. Youth in and from care also need **transparency and honesty** in the decisions that affect them.

20. Paternalistic forms of intervention need to be replaced with **youth-centered practices**. Front line workers need to **listen** to what youth in and from care say they need, **believe** them, and **advocate** for them.

21. Whether it is photography, mechanics, engineering, art, dance or creative writing, we should be provided with **opportunities** while we are in care and after **to explore our interests and hone our talents** so we can be the best that we can be.

22. Increased **investment in long-term mentorship programs and resources** is required for youth while they are still in care. These relationships need to be continuously nurtured and supported, even after youth exit the care system.

23. Front line workers should make **connections to peer-led advocacy and support** for us during and after care so that we have the opportunity to create enriching relationships and not feel so alone.

24. Youth in and from care need **opportunities to connect with peers who are sober and involved in pro-social interests** to counteract traumatic relationship aspects, and encourage us to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

Raina Jules

Sabien Vanderwal

Keeshana Emmanuel
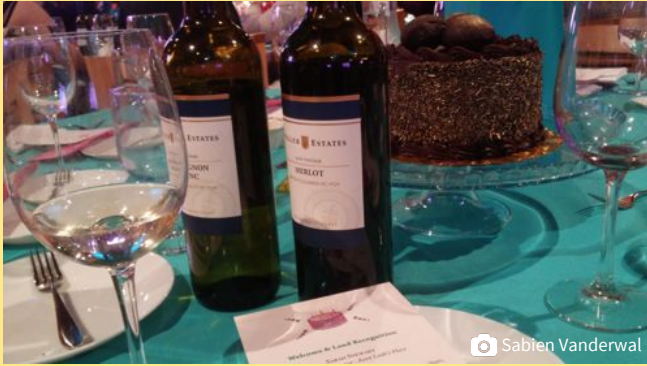
25. During our time in care, we should be taught **how to cook, how to clean and how to survive on a small budget**. Those skills also need to be taught in an organic and nurturing way - not in a classroom, but **by peer mentors** who have been through it and have survived.

26. Online forms of connection need to be included in the **definition of 'community'** for youth in and from care. For youth in and from care, a sense of community and identity can be built online, and relationships can be nurtured in the long-term this way.

27. Internet access should be considered as **a vital resource for our mental health and well-being** and a right rather than a privilege, both during and after care. Internet access needs to be less rigorously controlled and monitored during our time in care to allow us to form and nurture online relationships in an organic way.

28. Accessible spaces need to be considered as an **important part of the community** for youth in and from care, and protected from gentrification so that young people have a place to connect and explore their interests and talents.

29. Youth 'aging out' of care need to be able to **maintain supportive relationships long-term**, so that we can experience permanency and thrive during our transition to adulthood.

30. Youth 'aging out' of care deserve to **celebrate their 19th birthday in a positive way**, just like their peers who are not in care do. A **celebration ceremony** should be put in place for all youth in care who reach the age of majority.

31. Youth in care need more time to transition to adulthood, and the **age of transition** should be **extended until at least age 25**.

32. Currently, youth in and from care who seek the support that they need often must meet an array of eligibility criteria. This causes many of us who are unable to meet these conditions to fall through the cracks. **Supports** for youth in and from care **need to be provided unconditionally**.

33. Rather than focusing solely on material gifts, the **holidays** are a time of year where the focus should be placed on providing youth in and from care with the **relationships** they need, and the opportunities to take part of **community activities** so they can feel **connected**.

34. **Policies and practices** targeted to youth 'aging out' of care need to be reframed and shift from an approach focused on independent living to one **focused on interdependent living**. This means **building and nurturing lasting communities of connection** while young people are still in care, so they have a support system that will follow them throughout their entire adult lives.

Jordan Read
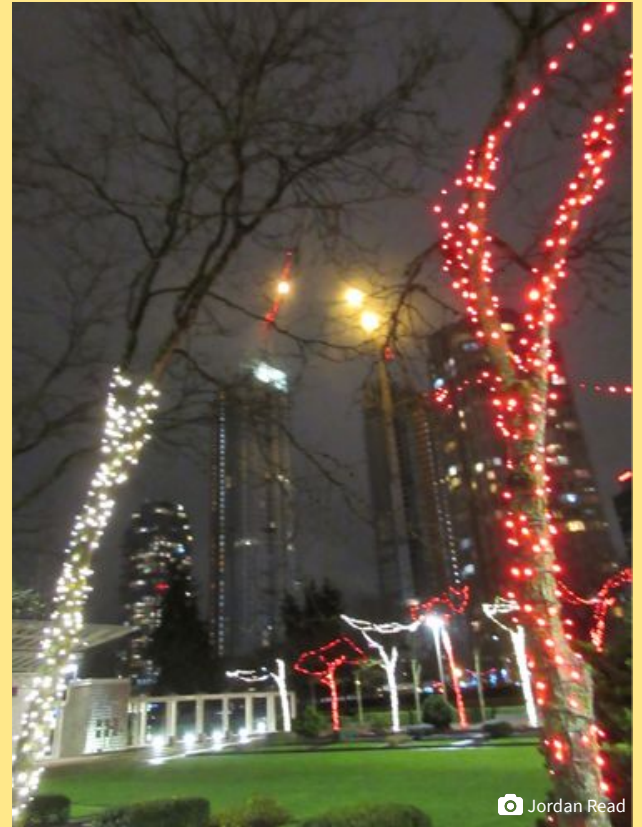
Project Dissemination
Deliverables & Next Steps

One of the deliverables of this photovoice project included a community art exhibit at which friends, family, community members, politicians and key decision-makers were invited to attend. This event was held at the Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre in Vancouver, BC the evening of Monday, December 18, 2017. To promote the exhibit event and the project, the lead researcher and three of the co-researchers were featured in an article in the Tyee on Friday, December 15, 2017 titled *Creating Connections Through Photography*(29). On Monday morning, the lead researcher did an interview in French with Radio Canada Vancouver's *Phare Ouest* program(30), and a second interview in the afternoon with two other co-researchers with CBC Radio Vancouver's *On the Coast* program(31) . Over 100 people attended the photo exhibit event to witness the talents and expertise of the co-researchers. A professional photographer was hired to take photos of the exhibit event, which were featured on the Fostering Change website and Facebook page on January 3, 2018(32).
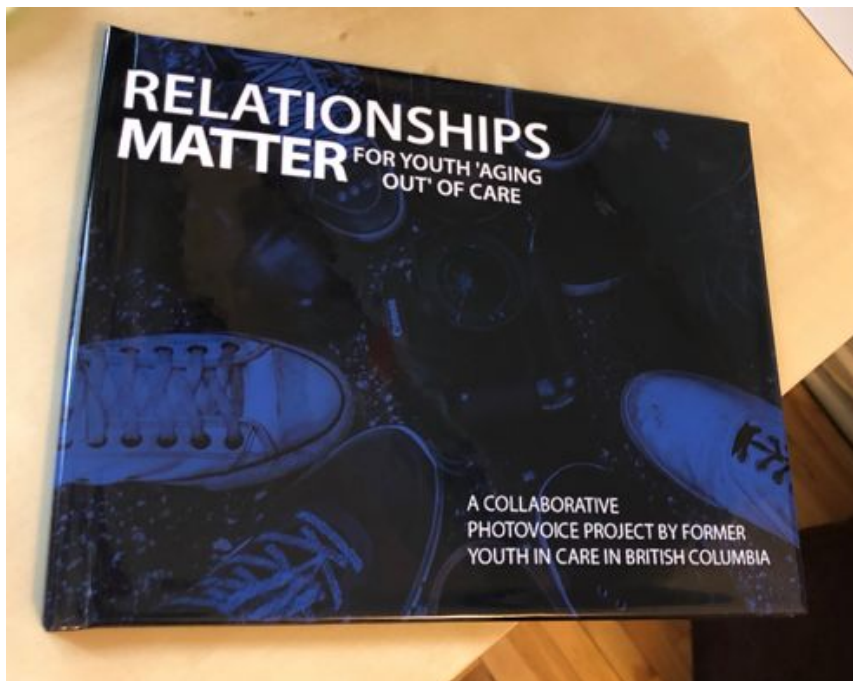
Two copies of the *Relationships Matter* photo book were printed through the Davie Street London Drugs Photo Lab, which feature the co-researchers' artist bios, photographs and accompanying titles and captions that were featured at the photo exhibit event. A copy was sent to the lead researcher, and another copy was picked up by one of the co-researchers, which will be shared amongst the co-researcher group for presentation purposes. A project video was developed by the videographer hired to film the photo exhibit event, and an e-book version of the photo book was developed to accompany the project video. The *Relationships Matter* project video and e-photo book were publicly released via the Fostering Change website(33) on June 6, 2018 as part of BC Children and Youth in Care Week, and were featured in First Call BC's *The Child and youth Advocate* June 2018 newsletter.

Since the new year, several co-researchers have continued their engagement in project dissemination activities. Co-researcher Martha Dzhenganin's photography and accompanying tiles and captions are currently featured at the new Aunt Leah's Place location in downtown Vancouver, and they were featured in an article in Aunt Leah's Spring 2018 newsletter titled *There Isn't Just One Narrative of Foster Care*(34). Also, the lead researcher and co-researcher Harrison Pratt collaborated on an opinion piece about the foster care to youth criminal justice system pipeline, which was featured in Policy Options on April 18, 2018(35).

The lead researcher and five of the co-researchers presented the project findings to the BC Representative for Children and Youth staff in Burnaby, BC on August 21, 2018. In line with the participatory and social justice-oriented methodology framing this project, the lead researcher and interested co-researchers will continue to engage with the BC Representative for Children and Youth for follow-up on actions taken to implement the recommendations for change outlined in this report. To achieve a sustainable social impact, interested co-researchers are also encouraged to continue their engagement within the youth in care advocacy community, through involvement in existing community-based committees and groups. Co-researchers can also choose to continue engaging with the larger community by doing presentations, lectures and workshops on the findings of this project and exhibiting their photography work. The lead researcher will continue to engage the co-researchers in the dissertation writing process, as well as any presentation and publication opportunities that may arise in the future.

Footnotes

(1) Arnett & Schwab, 2012, 2013, 2014; Beaujot & Kerr, 2007

(2) Avery, 2010; Beaujot & Kerr, 2007; Molgat, 2007

(3) Propp, Ortega & NewHeart, 2003

(4) Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, 2011; Mulcahy & Trocmé, 2010; Reid & Dudding, 2006

(5) 'aged out/aging out' refers to youth who have reached the age of majority and are no longer eligible for government care (e.g., foster home, group home or a Youth Agreement for who those come into care after the age of 15). Although it is a label that is not applied to youth in the general population, it is a term that most people who are/have been in care understand, and is widely used in child welfare reports, peer-reviewed articles and in the media.

(6) Flynn, 2003

(7) Vancouver Foundation, 2016

(8) Human capital refers to the skills, knowledge and experience an individual acquires through education and/or the workforce, while social capital refers to the networks of relationships individuals belongs to, which in turn help them function and thrive in society.

(9) Courtney, Hook & Lee, 2012; Singer & Berzin, 2015; Stein, 2006

(10) Stein, 2006

(11) Casey Family Programs, 2003; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty & Damashek, 2011; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Koegel, Melamidt & Burnam, 1995; Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012; Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007; Tessier, Flynn & Beaupré, 2014

(12) Greeson, Garcia, Kim, Thompson & Courtney, 2015; Greeson, Garcia, Kim & Courtney, 2015; Zinn & Courtney, 2015

(13) Rosenwald, McGhee & Notfall, 2013

(14) Geenen & Powers, 2007

(15) Sanchez, 2004

(16) Munro et al., 2011

(17) Samuels, 2008

(18) Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Britner, Randall, & Ahrens, 2013; Collins, Paris & Ward, 2008; Duke, Farrugia, & Germo, 2017; Greeson, Usher & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Lackey, 2003; Montgomery, 2005; Smith, 2011; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016; Wade, 2008; Wright& Cullen, 2004

(19) Ahrens et al., 2008; Greeson et al., 2010

(20) Shook, Vaughn, Litschge, Kolivoski and Schelbe, 2009

(21) Blanchet-Cohen, Linds, Mann-Feder & Yuen, 2013; Dupuis & Mann-Feder, 2013

(22) MacKinnon & Stephens, 2010; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009

(23) Palibroda, Krieg, Murdock, & Havelock, 2009

(24) Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997

(25) Palibroda et al., 2009

(26) Blackman & Fairey, 2007

(27) Ibid.

(28) https://www.thestar.com/vancouver/2018/04/23/vancouver-expects-to-collect-30m-from-empty-homes-tax-in-2018.html

(29) https://thetyee.ca/News/2017/12/15/Creating-Connections-Through-Photography/

(30) https://ici.radio-canada.ca/premiere/emissions/phare-ouest/segments/entrevue/51867/melanie-doucet-tutelle-photographie

(31) Interview starts at 1:27:56: http://www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/on-the-coast/episode/15239593

(32) Relationships Matter for Youth 'Aging Out' of Care Photo Exhibit Event: http://www.fosteringchange.ca/relationships_matter_for_youth_event

(33) Relationships Matter Highlights Project Video: http://www.fosteringchange.ca/relationships_matter_highlights

(34) https://auntleahs.org/enewsletter2018/

(35) Breaking the cycle for "crossover youth": http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/april-2018/breaking-cycle-crossover-youth/

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