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Focus:
Civilian

Incorporating Self-Determination into Substance Abuse Prevention Programming for Youth Transitiong from Foster Care to Adulthood

SUMMARY: Substance abuse prevention services are important to have accessible for youth transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood. Yet, much of the time, these services are not accessed when they could or should be, due to concerns that they don't best fit the needs of the youth. This study utilized focus groups to examine how including elements of self-determination may make prevention services more engaging for youth with foster care experience entering adulthood. Results indicate that supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be beneficial in meeting the needs of youth.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Strategies to support autonomy include letting youth lead program development, decision making, and evaluation; respecting youth's decisions; and support youth in making decisions.
- Strategies to support competence include providing accurate information to help youth understand risks, helping them build skills, and providing tools and resources for them to use.
- Strategies to support relatedness include having open and respectful discussions, creating meaningful relationships, facilitating group involvement, and being mindful of potential relationship harm from poor strategies of engagement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS:

- Collaborate with youth who have foster care experience to enhance the self-determination components of prevention programming
- Create open dialogue with youth to ensure professionals' behaviors are consistent with supporting autonomy, competence and relatedness

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM LEADERS:

- Engage youth leaving the foster care system in support groups in which they have input as to the program development
- Provide concrete information to youth regarding risks of substance use

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS:

- Promote the development of youth advisory councils for program development within the foster care system
- Embed substance abuse prevention programming into longer-term service provision to increase relationship-building potential

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through contacting local foster care social service agencies in two-targeted cities.
- Focus groups were run by a social work doctoral student, lasted 1.5-2 hours, and had a semi-structured format.
- Two independent coders examined the transcriptions of the focus group discussions for overall themes, then reconciled codes together.
- Findings were checked for accuracy by having four of the original participants review and provide feedback.

PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 37 participants participated: 10 young adults ages 18-21 years old with foster care experience, six child welfare professionals, five independent living programming professionals, 10 higher education professionals, and six professionals from nonprofits that work with or conduct research with youth in foster care.
- Participants were split into four different focus groups with at least two young adults with foster care experience in each group.
- Youth participants were three female, one male, and six gender non-specified; professional participants were 15 female, five male, and seven gender non-specified.
- Racial/ethnic composition of youth participants were one Black, one White, two multiracial, and six race non-disclosed; while the racial/ethnic composition of professional participants were 18 White, two multiracial, and seven race non-disclosed.

LIMITATIONS

- The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings.
- The focus groups were not asked explicitly about the topic of self-determination in substance abuse prevention programming, but rather the authors extrapolated from more general discussion.
- The participants, particularly youth, who volunteered for the focus groups may differ from the general population of youth leaving the foster system.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Assess the implementation of the self-determination strategies found in this study to determine whether they improve program outcomes
- Develop the themes and strategies from this study into programming suitable for a variety of ages
- Study how to embed the themes and strategies into professional development training

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design ★★☆ **Appropriate** Research Plan and Sample

Methods ★★☆ **Appropriate** Measurement and Analysis

Limitations ★★☆ **Few**

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
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