

E Makua Ana Youth Circles: A Transition Planning Process for Youth Exiting Foster Care

by Loren Walker

"My proudest accomplishment since I've been a foster child is I'm graduating from high school and I got accepted to Western Oregon University," says the teenager, with a bright smile and warm brown eyes, as she looks at the facilitator. She will be 17 years old in two months and has lived in foster care for most of her life. It is June 2004 and she is sitting in one of the first *E Makua Ana Youth Circles*. Also sitting in the Circle are her aunt who has raised her for the last several years, a close cousin, her best friend, her maternal grandmother, a social worker from a shelter she lived in previously, her current state child protective services social worker, and the Circle facilitator. An empty chair in the Circle is in between her aunt and grandmother signifying the teen's absent mother who is in prison. A woman — the Circle recorder — stands with an easel and with different colored markers recording information on large sheets of butcher paper.

Background

E makua ana is the translation of *becoming an adult* into Hawaiian. In Hawai'i, over 130 *E Makua Ana Youth Circles* have been held for teens emancipating out of foster care. Former foster children are one of the most vulnerable groups of young people in our country (Wald and Martinex, 2003). Former foster children make up a hugely disproportionate share of people who are unemployed, on welfare and in prison (Roberts, 2002). *E Makua Ana Youth Circles* are one of Hawaii's attempts to deal with this serious problem.

Hawai'i's Youth Circle process, which is based on San Jose, California's *Emancipation Conference* and John Braithwaite's *Youth Development Circle* (Braithwaite, 2003), gives teenagers the opportunity to determine and voice their goals, and to generate or maintain a social support system. A *solution-focused* approach, as developed by Berg and de Shazer (see De Jong & Berg, 2002), guides the *E Makua Ana Youth Circle* process beginning with the initial referral.

Pre-Meetings with Referred Youth

The Youth Circle process begins with a referral to Effective Planning and Innovative Communication (EPIC) 'Ohana Conferencing, the non-profit agency that developed the program, for foster youth from the Hawai'i Department of Human Services (DHS). The referral form is one page, and it contains only general information about the youth. Because the Youth Circle uses the solution-focused approach, EPIC does not conduct in-depth background research of the youth or of her or his family. Instead, facilitators perform a "surface assessment" of the youth at a pre-circle meeting, noting the teenager's observed strengths; facilitators complement the youth on these strengths at the meeting. "Effective solution-focused assessment requires the facilitator to stay on the surface, avoiding any 'deep' assumptions about why people are behaving as they are at a given moment and instead focusing on the value of any given presentation" (Lee, Sebold & Uken, 2003, p. 25).

The facilitator calls the youth and asks for an appointment with him or her to describe the Youth Circle process. In rare cases, teenagers will be adamant that they do not want to participate in a Circle. The teenager's decision is respected. Most teenagers, however, want to have further information before deciding whether they want a Youth Circle and they are willing to meet with the facilitator.

After meeting with the youth and describing the Circle, the facilitator asks the youth, "Are you interested in having one?" Most of the foster youth that EPIC has contacted have said they want a Circle. For those teenagers who do not want a Circle, the facilitator asks if she or he may contact them again in three to six months.

For the teenagers who want a Circle, the facilitator asks who she or he wants to invite. The teenager is the sole person who determines who will be invited to the Circle, except that their state social worker must also be invited. Biological parents whose

rights have been terminated may be invited to the Circle if the youth chooses and they have often participated in the Circles with much success.

For teenagers who claim to know no one who would want to attend, the facilitator probes further with questions such as "Who could you call if you were really in trouble?" or "Who do you like to spend time with the most in life?" until at least one person is named. At least one person, not including the DHS social worker or another paid professional, must be identified as a supporter of the youth for a Youth Circle to be held.

At the pre-circle meeting, the facilitator gives the youth a brochure about the Circle, using it to prepare them for the Circle. The teenager is told she or he will need to think of at least five goals to discuss at the Circle. The facilitator tells the youth to think of something she or he or is especially proud of that they have accomplished while being a foster child. They will be asked this at the Circle.

The teenager is asked to think of a way she or he wants to open the Circle. Suggestions have included poems, music, songs or prayers. The facilitator tells the youth that if she or he does not find a way to open the Circle, a moment of silence will be used to open the Circle to thank someone who helped each of the Circle participants.

Finally, the teen is asked what type of food they want served after the Circle. Pizza and Hawaiian food are popular selections.

Convening the Circle

After meeting with the teenager at the pre-circle meeting, the facilitator finds a location for holding the Circle that is convenient for the youth. Often Circles are held in churches, community centers or the EPIC offices.

The facilitator calls or personally contacts all of the people who the

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teenager invited and explains the Circle process to them. The best date and time to hold the Circle is determined after speaking with the invited participants. Finding a date or time that fits the schedules of all participants can require many follow-up calls.

Convening a Circle takes far more time than conducting one.

Pre-Circle Calls

A few days prior to the Circle, the facilitator calls to remind the teenager about it and to learn if anything special will be needed, such as a boom box to play music or something else that is necessary for the youth to open the Circle. The teenager is also reminded to have five goals to discuss at the Circle, since they will be asked what accomplishments she or he or is especially proud of while being a foster child.

Youth Circle Process

A sign-in sheet is distributed for Circle participants to check or to write their addresses if it is not already listed. The facilitator sits participants in the Circle in assigned chairs, which are indicated with Post-it notes.

The youth sits on one side of the facilitator while the state social worker sits on the other side of the facilitator. The person with the closest relationship to the youth sits on her or his other side with a descending order of people closest to the youth sitting near him or her. Professionals in the youth's life normally sit further away from the youth because the youth's family and friends have closer relationships, but on occasion a professional who has a particularly close relationship sits near the youth.

The facilitator relies on the Circle agenda to conduct the process. The recorder has set up an easel to record the group's discussion during the Circle.

Welcome & Opening

The facilitator welcomes the participants and asks the youth to open the Circle. If the teenager does not have an opening, the facilitator asks the participants, "Please stand and hold hands. Please close your eyes if you feel comfortable with that and imagine

a person who helped you get where you are today in your life. Give a moment of silent thanks to this person." The group waits quietly for about 15 seconds during this opening until the facilitator indicates they may sit down. "Openings are intended to help us shift our focus from out separateness to our relatedness" (Pranis, Stuart, & Wedge, 2003).

The facilitator tells participants, "E makua ana" means becoming an adult.

We're here today to celebrate [youth's name] becoming an adult and to assist him/her to plan for his/her future independence. We don't expect them to ever be totally independent and not need people—we all need people in our lives. We assume everyone will speak one at a time in the Circle and respect confidentiality laws."

Youth's Strengths & Goals

The facilitator asks the teen, "What is something you are proud of that you've accomplished while with Child Protective Services (CPS) that you'd like people to know about?"

Beginning with the social worker, each person in the Circle states several of the youth's strengths. The youth is asked, "What other strengths do you have not listed yet?" Most teenagers think of several more strengths.

The teenager tells the group five of her/his goals. Problems and concerns are only discussed at the Circle if the youth has a goal that conflicts with something that the youth indicates is a problem, such as if the teenager says she wants to get into Job Corps that has a strict drug free requirement and all applicants must test negative on a drug test. The use of drugs would be addressed because the youth says they want to get into Job Corps and has indicated that this is a problem.

Resources, Options and Transition Plans

Each participant in the group generates resources for the teenager in the areas of: housing, education, financial, employment, transportation, necessary documents (social security card, birth certificate, identification card), physical health, emotional health, and identifying their circle of support (youth indicates specific support persons during a "Time Alone" phase of the Circle).

After generating options under all the different needs, Circle participants take a break and are invited to eat some food and socialize. The youth alone, or with anyone she or he chooses, reviews the posted butcher papers prepared by the recorder and selects a Transition Plan that they want to pursue.

After the youth has chosen which options he or she wants to pursue, she or he tells the Circle participants about them. Everyone then applauds.

The facilitator reviews the Transition Plan selected by the teenager and asks the circle participants if anyone "wants to volunteer" to assist the youth apply for scholarships, find a room to rent, or conduct other activities in pursuit of the plan. Specific timelines are established for each assignment that a person volunteers to help the teen. A date is set for the completion of the task.

Re-Circles

The facilitator asks the group to determine the best follow up date for what is called the *re-Circle*. The re-Circles are much shorter and go over the initial Circle Summary. Any new changes are noted and a revised Circle Summary is prepared. With 16-year-old youth it is hoped three Circles will occur before and right after legal emancipation from state custody. However, most Circles have been held for youth closer in age to 18. Over 30 re-Circles have been held.

Circle Closing and Evaluation

Again a solution-focused approach is used and participants are asked to complement the youth on something they heard or learned about her or him during the Circle. Or, they may comment on anything else they want to tell the teen. The teenager then tells the group how the Circle process was helpful (or not) for him or her.

Each Circle participant is asked to fill out a prepared Circle survey. A different survey is given to the teenager; the other participants receive a non-youth survey. The surveys are filled out and collected at the Circle.

Whatever type of food chosen by the youth is provided for the group after

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the surveys are filled out. Any leftover food is given to the youth to take home.

Post-Circle Duties

The facilitator prepares a Circle Summary listing all the youth's strengths, what she or he is most proud of having accomplished, their goals, and the Transition Plan. Copies of the Summary are mailed to all the participants. The facilitator calendars the date for the follow-up re-circle and contacts the youth prior to that date to find out who they want to invite, their food choice, and where the Circle would most conveniently be held.

Satisfaction Results & Areas for Improvement

E Makua Ana Youth Circle participants have consistently and overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction with the process. A review sample of 48 Circles showed that each of the four types of participants (youth subjects; DHS social workers; family and friends of the youth; and non-DHS service providers) believe that the Circles were highly valuable experiences.

According to the surveys, the invitation process is one area where there could be improvement. Out of the 47 youth surveyed (one youth's survey was not provided), 13 (27%) took the time to write that the Circle would have been better if other people they had invited to the Circle had attended. Some teenagers mentioned specifically their parents, brothers and cousins. Still,

these teenagers found the Circle satisfying and were positive about its results. Of the 47 surveyed youth, only two found the Circle to be neutral and neither of these two mentioned any people missing who that they had invited. All other 45 youth found the Circles to be positive or very positive. None of the 47 youth found the process negative.

Conclusion

Providing foster youth with the opportunity to make concrete plans for a successful emancipation out of state custody should be encouraged and supported. Numerous studies show how hard it is for these teenagers to become successfully independent and attached to the community without support. The rates of incarceration, unemployment, and welfare dependence by former foster youth are alarming (Roberts, 2002; Toth, 1997).

The Youth Circle is a chance for at-risk foster youth to learn by engaging in and even by sometimes failing to make healthy and effective decisions. The re-Circle is valuable for the youth because it show them that planning is an on-going process, and that failing to achieve something is not a reason to give up trying something else. The opportunity to learn that they have support and how their decisions can influence their lives can only have positive influences on their futures.

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