

Supporting expectant and parenting youth in the foster care system: qualitative evaluation of the DCFS Expectant and Parenting Youth (EPY) Conferences Program

Alexis Coatney BA
Kym Ahrens MD MPH
Wadiya Udell PhD
Sarah Lowry PhD
Charles Brady BS



Seattle Children's[®]
HOSPITAL • RESEARCH • FOUNDATION



Acknowledgements: This work was supported by a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and sponsored by the Los Angeles Reproductive Health Equity Project for Foster Youth (LA RHEP). LA RHEP is led by the National Center for Youth Law and includes a leadership team comprised of the following agencies: the Los Angeles County Department of Children & Family Services, Alliance for Children's Rights, Children's Law Center, John Burton Advocates for Youth, Public Counsel, and Seattle Children's Hospital.

Supporting expectant and parenting youth in the foster care system: qualitative evaluation of the DCFS Expectant and Parenting Youth (EPY) Conferences Program

Purpose

Expectant and parenting youth living in foster care confront unique challenges which require specialized resources, supports and services to help them, in parenting their young children successfully, and moving toward independence. In 2004, child advocates from the Children's Law Center, the Alliance for Children's Rights, and Public Counsel approached the then Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) with a request to determine what improvements could be made in delivering services to expectant and parenting youth under DCFS' supervision. A Pregnant and Parenting Teen (PPT) Workgroup was established in 2004, co-chaired by the DCFS Child Welfare Health Services Section Program Manager and a Children's Law Center representative. The idea of offering specialized meetings to expectant and parenting DCFS youth originated in the PPT Workgroup with the express goals of preventing detentions of the children of DCFS parenting youth when safely possible, and supporting the young parents in continuing their education, linking them with health services, and working towards preventing further unplanned pregnancies through linkage to reproductive health clinics and resources. Expectant and Parenting Youth (EPY) Conferences, formerly referred to as Pregnant and Parenting Teen (PPT) Conferences, were developed. This report describes the experiences of DCFS expectant and parenting youth who have attended one or more DCFS EPY Conferences.

Methods

Description of Conference

An EPY Conference is a specialized meeting designed to address the needs of any expectant or parenting youth under the supervision of DCFS, including young fathers. It is a proactive tool intended to identify and discuss issues related to pregnancy and early stages of child rearing. EPY Conferences can identify and address potential problems before those problems reach crisis level.

EPY Conferences are given direction by the DCFS EPY Conference Facilitator while allowing the goals of the meeting to be informed by the youth and members of the youth's support system. The conferences are held on a voluntary basis with the consent of the expectant and/or parenting youth. The Conferences are also attended by an independent Resource Specialist (RS), not affiliated with the child welfare or court system, who brings knowledge and expertise regarding the issues and available resources for this population. EPY Conferences are also attended by the youth's DCFS Children's Social Worker (CSW), when possible the Supervising Children's Social Worker (SCSW), and any additional people the youth chooses to invite, such as a counselor, biological parent, friend or other significant person in the youth's life. Although the DCFS EPY Conference Facilitator leads the meeting while addressing a semi-structured list of topics, the youth informs the direction of the meeting and may bring up additional issues. The DCFS EPY Conference Facilitators, as well as the RSs, travel county-wide throughout Los Angeles County. The Conferences last approximately two hours. The independent RS remains available as a support system to the youth even after the youth's DCFS case is closed.

Sample

Study participants were identified by the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services staff and by private agency staff as having had at least one conference in the past year. Each participant's dependency attorney gave permission to contact the youth.

Data collection and instrument

Eleven youth, aged 17 to 21 at the time of the interview, were each interviewed once by phone between December 2018 and April 2019. All interviews were conducted by a single person (Coatney). For 10 out of 11 interviews, case plans from the conferences were reviewed prior to the interviews and used as a guide to ask about the specific goals that had been addressed (or attempted to be addressed) during the conferences. For the 11th, the interviewer was unable to obtain the case plan prior to the interview; thus, this interviewee was asked about all possible categories of goals that could have been addressed during the interview. For youth who had multiple interviews, the case plan goals from the most recent interviews (up to 4) were used. The interview script included 1) a brief set of closed (forced choice) demographic questions, 2) open- and closed-ended questions about the goals set in the conference(s) and how they were addressed, 3) open-ended questions about impacts of the conferences on the youth's life, and 4) open- and closed-ended questions about the youth's satisfaction with the conferences. After the

first 6 interviews, to gain further depth into the conferences' broader impacts, a question was added asking how their life would be different if they hadn't had the conferences. Such iterative revision of an interview script is typical of qualitative studies.¹ See Table 1 below for a list of interview probes. All study activities were approved by the California State Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Table 1. Interview questions.

Main topic area	Sample questions
Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender, race/ethnicity • Are you currently in school? What is the last grade you completed? • Age at entry into foster care • Number of placements in the foster care system • Current housing type (group home, ILP+FC, independent, etc.) • How many biological children do you have? What are their ages? Where do they live? Do you have custody of them?
Setting and meeting conference goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your case plan shows that at the time of the conference, [description of goal] was identified. To your knowledge, was it completed? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If so, how did it go? If not, why not? ○ What ways could the conference have been more helpful? • At the time of the conference, were you having any problems or issues with, or did you need any help with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Housing / placement ○ Getting foster care or public benefits ○ School ○ Legal assistance with outstanding tickets, sealing records, custody, other ○ Pregnancy prevention and reproductive health ○ Health issues or mental health issues ○ Access to prenatal care ○ Supplies for your baby ○ Parenting support or classes ○ Child care ○ Child support, custody issues, restraining order
Overall conference impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would be different or missing in your life if you didn't have a conference? [Question added after first 6 interviews.]
Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How useful were the services in the conference? • How satisfied were you with the staff at the conference? • How easy or hard was it to schedule and attend the conference? • Would you recommend the conference to others? If so, what advice would you give them? [Question added after first 6 interviews.]

¹Lasch KE, Marquis P, Vigneux M, et al. PRO development: rigorous qualitative research as the crucial foundation. *Qual Life Res.* 2010;19(8):1087–1096. doi:10.1007/s11136-010-9677-6

Analysis

Demographic information was assessed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Thematic Analysis,² an iterative process in which main themes are identified and described before analysis, then modified during the process to reflect themes that are present in the data. Three researchers (Coatney, Brady, and Ahrens) were involved in the coding and analysis process. Specifically, Thematic Analysis is a six-phase coding process that includes: 1) familiarizing oneself with data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes among codes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the final report. During Phase One, the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy using the audio recordings and then conducted a close reading of all transcripts to establish familiarity with the data and made note of emerging patterns and themes. During Phase Two, researchers developed an initial codebook using the first two transcripts. The codebook consisted of a list of recurring topics or “codes.” In Phase Three, they iteratively added to the codebook additional themes detected in the data. In Phase Four, at least one analyst performed a second reading of all transcripts to examine them for the presence of those themes; researchers also reviewed and revised individual codes in the codebook to ensure they were detailed and accurate. In Phase Five, the Dedoose online software program was used to apply codes to all relevant corresponding quotes or sections from transcripts. Finally, preparation of this report including input from all authors and from conference leadership to ensure accuracy represents Phase Six.

Results

Participants

Table 2 describes the demographic characteristics of the participants. Although conferences are extended to expectant and parenting youth of all gender identities, the vast majority of conference participants identify as female. In the present study, all interviewees were female. In terms of race and ethnicity, participants were roughly split into 3 race/ethnicity categories based on their self-reports: Latina, mixed race, and African American/Black. Almost all of the interviewees had more than one conference. In Tables 3 and 4 we also describe participants’ parenting status and experiences in foster care, respectively.

²Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2). pp. 77-101.

Table 2. Participant demographics (n = 11). ^{a,b}

Gender	%
Female	100%

Race/ethnicity	%
More than one race/ethnicity	36%
Latina	36%
African American/Black	27%

Education status	%
Currently in school	72%
Not currently in school	27%

Last grade completed	%
Some high school	64%
High school	18%
Some college	18%

Employment status	%
Working full or part-time	36%
Not currently working	64%

Age	Mean (range)
Age at (first) conference	17.2 (15-19)
Age at qualitative interview	18.8 (17-21)

Number of PPT conferences	%
1	10%
2-3	20%
4 or more	70%

^aNot every participant provided a response for each question. Percent is calculated by taking the number in each category divided by the total number who responded to that question.

^bPercents do not always add up to 100 due to rounding.

Table 3. Participants' parenting status.^{a,b}

	Mean (range)
Number of living biological children	1.45 (1-2)
Where do children live? (n = 15) ^c	%
With the participant – full time	73%
With the participant – part time	20%
Somewhere else	7%
Do you want to have any other children?	%
Yes	46%
No	54%

^aNot every participant provided a response for each question. Percent is calculated by taking the number in each category divided by the total number who responded to that question.

^bPercents do not always add up to 100 due to rounding.

^c4 participants had more than one child.

Table 4. Participants' experience in foster care.^{a,b}

	Mean (range)
Age at entry into foster care system	11.18 (0-16)
Number of housing placements	13.36 (1-42)
Current housing placement	%
Transitional Housing	27%
Group Home	27%
ILP/SILP	18%
Living with Friends or Family	18%
Living independently	10%
Has ever been homeless	%
Yes	50%
No	50%
Has ever missed at least 1 month of school due to placement changes	%
Yes	72%
No	28%

^aNot every participant provided a response for each question. Percent is calculated by taking the number in each category divided by the total number who responded to that question.

^bPercents do not always add up to 100 due to rounding.

Qualitative themes

Main themes described by participants included: 1) conference impacts, including a) concrete services based on the goals of the conferences, such as resources and referrals, and b) broader psychosocial impacts, including emotional support and help navigating complex systems; 2) barriers to and facilitating factors for reaching goals; and 3) satisfaction with conferences and suggestions for other expectant and parenting youth. Themes are described in detail below, with quotes included to illustrate themes and subthemes. Participants are identified by their 1- or 2-digit Study ID number.

CONFERENCE IMPACTS – RESOURCES AND REFERRALS. All of the youth we interviewed received both material resources (e.g., baby supplies) and also referrals to community or professional support. Table 6 describes the specific kinds of assistance that youth reported receiving from Conference staff.

Table 5. Youth reports of resources and referrals addressed by conferences.

Resource or referral ^a	% of youth reporting
Material Resources (Baby Supplies)	91%
Reproductive health including birth control	91%
Public and Foster Benefits	82%
Placement	82%
Legal Issues	64%
Education	64%
Parenting, Child Development, Home Visit Nurse	64%
Childcare	55%
Prenatal Care	55%
Other Health Issues	27%
Financial Education and Budgeting	18%

^aYouth who engage in conferences are routinely asked about needs in all of the above categories. Because this study aims to understand impacts from the perspective of youth, percentages reflect those who reported receiving a particular resource/referral or relevant support.

Material Resources

Nearly all youth needed and recalled being provided baby supplies such as cribs, strollers, car seats, clothing and diapers. The types of supplies received depended on youth need.

So with me not having a crib, she messaged me one day and was like, "Okay. Do you have a crib? Do you need anything for the baby?" I was like, "I don't have a crib. I'll need a crib." And the next day, she was mailing me out a crib. – 24

Community and Professional Referrals

A range of professional referrals was made to support youth (see Table 6). Conference staff lead the conferences using a checklist of potential goals; primarily, though, youth described feeling that they were in charge of choosing the specific goals toward which they and their team would work. Youth reported that conference goals were established based on their individual needs and on what resources/referrals they had or hadn't already received. All youth reported being asked about reproductive and sexual health needs, and all but one of these youth accepted either information or referrals to clinical resources. Nearly all youth needed and received assistance obtaining public benefits and foster care benefits, such as SILP, Medi-Cal, CalFresh, the infant supplement, and subsidized child care.

[Conference Staff] ... helped me get financially stable with the infant supplement and just all above. – 19

For many youth, finding a new placement was an important goal. Some youth moved more than once over the course of multiple conferences.

I was pregnant and I was in a placement at first, and I'd been on the waiting list, so they helped me get a little connected faster, because the placement that I was at, they didn't let the pregnant parents and youth, so I was going to end up getting transferred to a shelter, which I didn't really want to go to, so they helped me get into my THP+FC faster. – 19

And then so once I got out of jail they reached out and found a foster home for me to go to. And I don't know. They use their resources. I felt like they tried their best. – 6

Another common theme was getting help with legal issues, primarily outstanding tickets and family law including custody and managing contact with relatives. Two youth described gaining or regaining custody of their children as a result of this advocacy.

I reached all my goals... I was homeless for a little while. I was in a motel with my baby. But like I said the light [was] at the end of the tunnel. I made it with both of my kids... But if they [staff] weren't there, I don't know, I'd probably wouldn't have my baby with me. – 20

With the help of the conference staff, many youth also worked towards educational goals.

When I was just moving into my apartment and I needed help with reconnecting with a high school, since I'm behind and I'm an adult, they helped me get into a high school that I was already in when I was a minor. – 19

CONFERENCE IMPACTS – PSYCHOSOCIAL. In addition to the goal-oriented impacts of the conference described above, youth described a number of broader impacts that the conferences had on them. Main themes in this category included emotional support and help navigating complex systems.

Emotional Support

Most youth described emotional support as an unexpected impact of the conference. Participants consistently discussed how conference staff provided encouragement and support, and expressed genuine care beyond that of doing their jobs (*...To have people there that I had a relationship with. I did not expect that. – 5*). This support was described as having a powerful impact as illustrated by these quotes:

The best part about it was I was able to voice what I needed for my kids... because living in a foster home... they don't want to help you or what you need is way out of their capabilities.... So, to have people willing to provide for you and your baby because they know you can't, that was a lot to me. – 6

If I didn't have that conference I feel like I would be AWOL...because I wasn't thinking clearly and they made me who I am. ...They made me feel good about myself... They just made me laugh – I didn't want to have that meeting because I was in such a bad place but –. Okay. They had it and I needed it. – 28

Three of the youth described conference staff as feeling like family:

I experienced them as, they like family to me because I really didn't have a family when I grew up. – 18

Assistance Navigating Complex Systems

Participants frequently described confusion or frustration with the many complex systems they needed to access to receive benefits and supplies for their babies. This was particularly true of the public benefits, housing, and educational domains. Conference staff helped by problem-solving and by advocating for the youth by phone and in person. Support ranged from being very “hands on” for some youth to more distant mentorship and support so that the youth could self-advocate. The type of support appeared to be tailored to youth requests and developmental needs.

Hands on support: Everybody in the team has somewhere to do, something to do. One person takes me here and the other person tells me I need to do this. It's just a lot of people – the team actually helped me be more concentrated and more focused. So, one person would be like, "We could meet up and do this work." Or one person would take me up to my school and get stuff done. – 18

Mentorship/Support for self-advocacy: [The EPY conference] taught me to learn to reach out and to advocate for myself. – 26

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING GOALS. A variety of barriers made it more difficult for youth to achieve their goals. The most common barriers related to difficulties communicating with people who were not a part of their conference staff, such as group home staff, social workers, or school personnel.

My group home has tendencies to not communicate well because there's so many people involved. – 26

Frequently, participants described being appreciative to conference staff for helping to address these communication barriers.

The school would say, "Oh no, we can't accept her," and then they got involved and then they said, "She was a part of foster system, so she's able to go back to that school that she was at." So, they connected me back to that school. – 19

Placement changes also had the potential to reduce conference impacts, particularly if referral systems no longer applied in the current placement.

I think every situation is different, but I think it's important to take into consideration that we are unstable and we are having children too. And our living situation can change, as you know,

in like five seconds... when I moved, everything changed. Nothing we made or nothing we planned in the conference happened. – 06

Several youth reported that their jobs kept them from achieving a goal because the schedule was inconsistent or because they might lose their job if they took time away, for example, to meet with a child care provider.

I had to go to work and it was hard for me to schedule anything with her. So, I was like I can't miss work because I was on my 90-day probation thing with the jobs. If I'm late for work or something...I guess I'll get fired. So yeah, I was just not taking the risk. – 18

Two youth described either a long delay before receiving supplies, or not receiving them at all.

So, to get the stroller it took like a few months and it would have been useful a lot sooner. – 5

I did get a car seat. I didn't get the stroller combination though. ...It made things a little harder because I didn't have a car at the time. My car broke down, so I had to try to either carry my baby everywhere and she was heavy. – 24

Finally, some youth stated their own limitations were barriers to achieving goals set in the conferences.

Like the only thing I have to do is get-- I keep forgetting what I have to get up. I think it was proof. Of something. It was something. I forgot. We didn't get through it all the way. – 18

Yeah, I met up with her and everything but I had – how do I say it – I had so much still going on I just didn't meet up with her after that. – 18

FACILITATING FACTORS TO ACHIEVING GOALS. In addition to barriers, youth described several facilitating factors that helped them accomplish the goals they set in the conferences. The most common factors described were conference staff characteristics. For example, almost all youth thought that staff were skilled at communicating in a respectful, non-judgmental manner.

She's very helpful and they were very just friendly. – 29

They weren't judgmental. It was always comfortable. – 20

Many youth described that conference staff were proactive and efficient in placing referrals for resources.

Well the PPT facilitator, she's amazing. She will put in real directed as far as inputting all the goals and getting all the team members following up with emails that I'm included in. – 19

[The Resource Specialist] was just like, "Okay. Priority. I'm going to get this quick," like, "I'm going to do this for you fast." You know what I'm saying? That shows they care. It was more than just a job. Most people take their time and get it done but not right away. They were, right away, on it. – 24

Many youth also described that staff were available and willing to help not only during but also after the conferences.

It was a lot of different things that I needed help with that all I had to do was just call one of the ladies from the meeting, and they were like, "Okay, here you go." You know what I'm saying? They were really helpful. I loved it. – 24

Everybody in the team has somewhere to do, something to do. One person takes me here and the other person tells me I need to do this. It's just a lot of people – the team actually helped me be more concentrated and more focused. So, one person would be like, "We could meet up and do this work." Or one person would take me up to my school and get stuff done.... – 18

A third staff characteristic that youth felt made it easier for them to engage and reach their goals was demonstration of genuine caring.

They not deep into our business or nothing, but they're really concerned. They'll be like, "Did you go here?" Basically, what a mom and parents does. They check in on what I'll be doing and stuff, and some various times they'll text me or email me, letting me know what's any updates and stuff, and email back and forth. – 18

They care. You can tell they're not just doing it because that's their job. They actually care about the people that they – give their clients and stuff. They care, and it shows. It goes farther than it ever being a job. – 24

Some youth described that the youth-focused, youth-led nature of the conferences made it easier for them to both engage staff and achieve goals.

I was very comfortable and they made me feel good. They made the meeting about me and I appreciated it. They kept asking questions about my life. – 28

Youth also described their own innate personality traits or strengths that helped them to reach their goals. These included self-determination (gaining confidence in achieving one's own goals),

self-advocacy (gaining confidence in one's ability to effectively communicate needs), and persistence in the face of adversity.

Self-Determination. I had things for my baby, but when it comes to my living situation, when it came to my happiness and my comfort, people couldn't help me with that. So, I had to find that within myself. I had to find that for myself... Everybody [was] giving me the tools, and I was able to use them and maintain to where I am now. – 6

Self-Advocacy. Like I said before, it's very important, you have to participate. You can't just sit back and be like, 'Hey, I want a brand-new car seat and brand-new stroller.' Things like that...I'm big on advocating. – 20

Persistence in the Face of Adversity. My first child, when I was in a system, when I got pregnant, they took her from me. She was gone for three years. So now I got her back. So, the system really didn't help that much. PPT didn't really help. What helped was the trauma and the suffering that went through in the system. – 6

Finally, most youth described the conferences as easy to schedule and indicated that conferences typically took place in locations convenient to them, including their own group homes. Most described staff as going out of their way to ensure that this was the case.

Whatever time I give them, or day I give them, they try to see if they could postpone any other plans or what they have to fit my schedule. – 24

SATISFACTION WITH CONFERENCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR OTHER YOUTH. All participants reported that they were satisfied with the conferences and/or found them useful. Although several participants experienced frustration with other attendees at the conference, including housing staff, caseworkers, and family members, dedicated conference staff were described nearly uniformly as helpful (“Well the PPT facilitator, she’s amazing...So I feel like it’s really good.”). All of the youth who were asked if they would recommend the conference for other expectant and/or parenting youth said that they would.

Well, actually, [I have] positive feedback where I could recommend this to other people. ...I think that's because they help you... I know they have other services for you as well, but they will sit down and get the main ones out of the way. – 18

Their advice to others was to ask for information or help with anything they needed.

Just ask, everything you can think of, say something. – 29

I would say don't be nervous. And if you're nervous, know that they're there for whatever.
– 20

One youth had advice for staff, noting that not all expectant or parenting youth may be interested in participating in a conference.

Some people – I don't know if they are gonna engage. So, I don't know if they're gonna be like, you know, 'I'm good.' – 20

Limitations of the Evaluation

This evaluation consists of a qualitative study designed to explore impacts of EPY/PPT conferences, barriers to and facilitating factors of meeting pregnancy and parenting goals developed in the conferences, and overall satisfaction with conferences. The two main limitations of the study are its convenience sample (i.e., participants were not randomly sampled) and its small sample size. It is possible that those youth who were willing to participate in a research interview might be more likely to have had a positive experience in the EPY Conferences. Another possibility is that greater number of participants might have revealed additional themes. It should be noted that a sample size of 11 is not an atypical sample size for a qualitative interview study, and even in this small sample clear repetition of major themes is evident. It is outside the scope of this report to provide conclusive data regarding conference impacts for all expectant and/or parenting current or former foster youth. However, qualitative studies such as this one can help to identify common themes, as well as variability among participants, by focusing on specific individual experiences. This sheds light on the impact the program has had on the lives of youth who participated, and provides direction for future research.

Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative study evaluated the impacts of the EPY Conference program on expectant and parenting current and former youth in foster care, from their own perspectives. Youth were uniformly positive in their description of the EPY Conferences. Impacts were reported in multiple realms including receipt of material resources, effective linkage to community and professional support, and broader psychosocial impacts. All of these have potential to affect non-pregnancy related outcomes in multiple other domains of adult functioning. Indeed, some youth directly credited their EPY Conferences with helping them to achieve their larger goals, like obtaining consistent housing, working towards educational goals, addressing legal issues including parking

tickets, and, for two youth, resolving custody issues. Overall, the impacts described by study participants have potential to improve a variety of long-term outcomes, not only for them but for their children as well.

This evaluation provides exploratory and supportive data suggesting that EPY Conferences may be an effective strategy to support expectant and parenting foster youth in meeting the goals they deem most critical in their lives. We recommend continued evaluation of the EPY Conference program to assess its long-term impacts on youth and their children. Ideally, future research would compare youth who participated in an EPY Conference to a control group with similar demographic characteristics but without EPY Conference participation. It would assess outcomes quantitatively, in multiple domains of young adult functioning, to identify those aspects of EPY Conferences that most positively affect long-term outcomes.