

Expectant and Parenting Youth Conferences

2021 Evaluation Report



Program and Youth Outcomes through Pandemic Adaptations



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Introduction

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (the Los Angeles County child welfare system, DCFS) and nonprofit organizations, including Public Counsel and the Alliance for Children’s Rights partner to offer every DCFS expectant and parenting youth (hereafter EPY) the opportunity to participate in EPY conferences. EPY conferences¹ are a series of strength based, case management meetings with the youth. They are attended by a DCFS EPY Conference Facilitator, an independent, non-profit Resource Specialist, the youth’s DCFS Children’s Social Worker (CSW), when possible, the Supervising Children’s Social Worker (SCSW), a Children’s Law Center (CLC) Investigator, and whomever else the youth invites (the youth’s EPY Team). Together, they review the youth’s needs and the youth selects goals which the EPY team helps to address. Youth goals and needs range widely including, but not limited to, birth plans, needed baby supplies, parenting issues, immigration concerns, family law questions, housing needs, and education and health needs. EPY Conferences are well-liked and have a high demand; frequently there is a waiting list.

Traditionally, conferences are held in-person in the youth’s community which requires the adult participants to travel across LA County. It also requires the youth to travel at times as well. In the past, the agencies discussed shifting to virtual conferences (telephone or computer) to meet the increasing demand. However, the EPY team never did it for fear that the conferences would lose their impact. They felt that in person meetings were necessary to develop a trusting relationship with their clients. While the in-person vs. virtual experience was never assessed, [a previous evaluation](#)² found the in-person conferences were effective at achieving youth outcomes (EPY goals). Within that report, quotes from the youth often mentioned feeling very supported by the EPY team. The EPY team was concerned that same support could not be achieved virtually and wondered too how virtual meetings would impact about achieving youth goals.

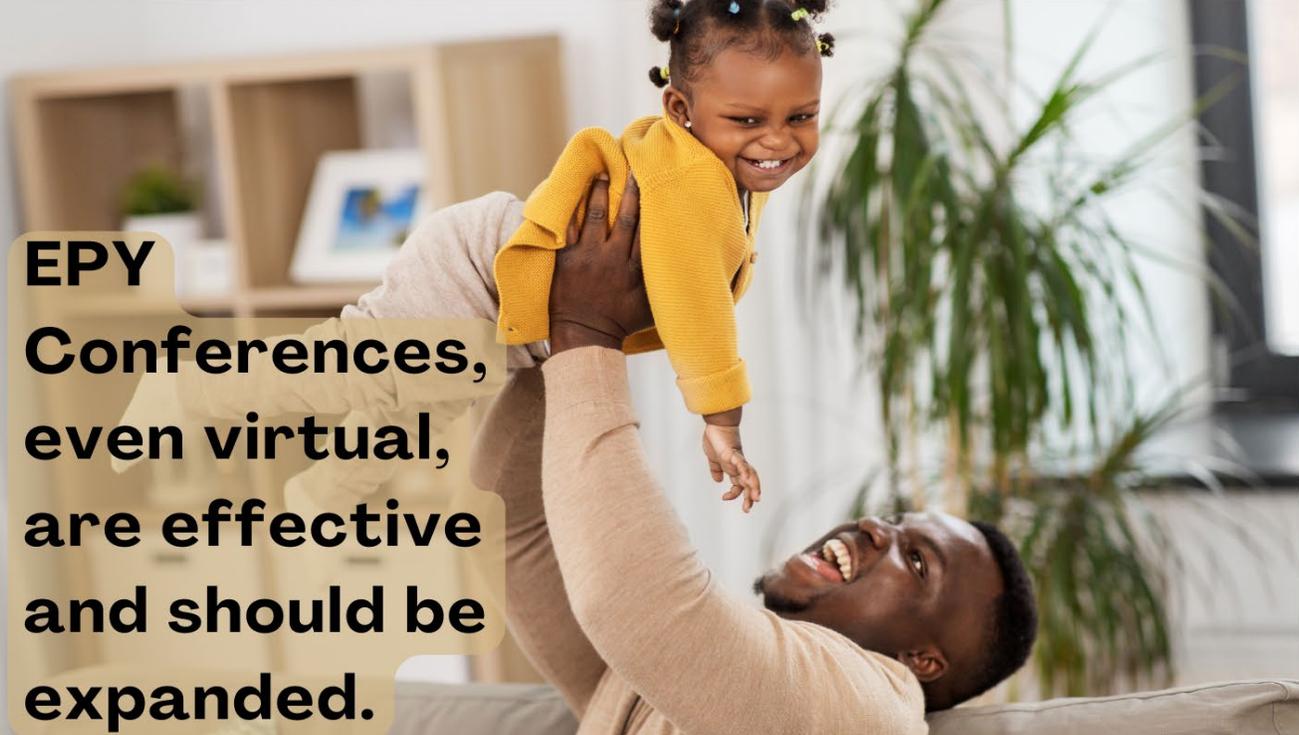
In 2020, in response to the COVID 19 pandemic, the EPY program shifted to virtual conferences via phone or video. It became clear quickly that greater numbers could be served with virtual conferences instead of the usual in-person conferences. What was less clear was how impactful virtual conferences were at 1) addressing youths’ goals and 2) the all-important relationship-building needed to establish trust between the youth and the EPY team.

The Los Angeles Reproductive Health Equity Project (LA RHEP) and it’s organizing entity, National Center for Youth Law (NCYL), recognized an opportunity to assess the questions surrounding virtual conferences. In 2021, NCYL contracted Seedling Consulting Group, LLC (Seedling) to assess the impact of the virtual 2020 EPY conferences on 1) EPY goals and 2) the relationships between EPY and their EPY team.

¹ For a full description of the EPY program and staff roles see *Pregnant and Parenting Teen Conferences: A Tool to Help Teens in Foster Care Achieve Better Outcomes for Themselves and their Children*. <http://fosterreprohealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/EPY-Conference-Toolkit-JBAY.pdf>

² *Supporting Expectant and Parenting Youth in the Foster Care System: Qualitative Evaluation of the DCFS Expectant and Parenting (EPY) Conferences Program*. <https://fosterreprohealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Expectant-and-Parenting-Youth-Conferences-Report.pdf>

The Big Take Away

A photograph of a man in a light-colored shirt holding a young girl in a yellow shirt. The man is looking up at the girl with a smile. The girl is also smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a plant and a shelf.

EPY Conferences, even virtual, are effective and should be expanded.

The EPY team successfully adapted to virtual EPY conferences which reached more youth and had positive impacts on youth goals, youth confidence, and parenting. The virtual format had some limitations to establishing trusting relationships between EPY staff and EPY which could be addressed with modifications. Since both virtual and in-person EPY conferences demonstrate desirable outcomes, the number of EPY youth served with EPY conferences should be expanded by 1) improving the referral process and 2) growing the number of EPY program staff. To address the limitations raised by the lack of in-person time of EPY staff with EPY and their children the program should 1) shift to a hybrid model as the pandemic evolves, 2) increase communication from EPY staff to EPY youth, and 3) go back to more frequent conferences for some EPY youth.

Methods

The Seedling team obtained aggregate, de-identified program data on the numbers and demographics of youth served for the year prior to the pandemic (2019) and the first pandemic year (2020) when the program shifted to COVID-safe virtual conferences. Additionally, several background documents were reviewed and meetings with staff were held to understand the referral processes and EPY conference procedures prior to and during the pandemic.

For youth interviews, the EPY staff went through recruitment training with Seedling researchers and co-developed the recruitment protocol that was approved by the LA County Children’s Court. EPY Staff invited youths who had received at least one virtual conference to participate. A Seedling researcher reached out to each interested youth to explain the study. Youths who agreed to participate completed a consent form; consents were also obtained from each youth’s dependency lawyer. Individual video interviews were scheduled at a time that worked for the youth.

A total of eight (8) youths completed individual, 90-minute semi-structured interviews with a Seedling researcher. The semi-structure interview covered topics such as their experiences of the conferences, conference processes, and EPY staff, as well as the barriers/successes to achieving goals, and what, if any, impact the conferences had on them. One youth cut their interview short (about halfway through) stating they were tired and did not respond to two rescheduling requests. All (8) youths received a \$50 Visa e-gift card incentive.

The Seedling team also held a semi-structured focus group with five (5) EPY staff – representing DCFS and the two nonprofit agencies - asking about the adaptations to the conferences, staff experiences of in person and virtual conferences including barriers and strengths. Additionally, program data was shared back to the staff and staff were invited to share insights, comments, and questions.

Youth Interviewee Demographics

All eight (8) interview participants identified as female and were 20 to 22 years old at the time of the interview. The majority of youth identified as Latina, one identified as Black, one identified as White, and one identified as mixed race. Seven of the eight had full custody of their child(ren); the eighth was working on regaining custody. Most youth lived independently or with relatives.

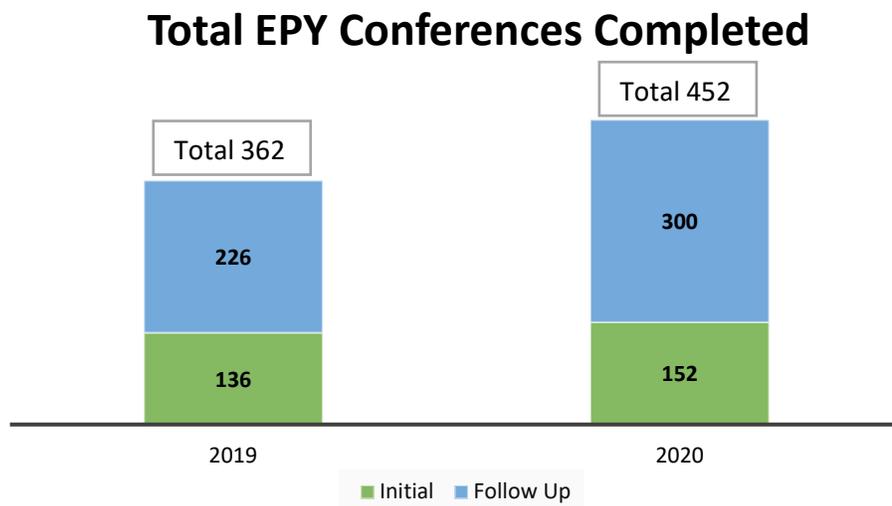
Five (5) youths had participated in virtual conferences only, indicated with a “v” throughout this report. Three (3) youths had participated in both virtual and in person conferences, indicated with a “b” throughout this report. All youths attended more than one conference. The average age for their first conference was 19 years old; one youth had been participating in EPY conferences for 4 years.

Findings

We first present program data on number of youths served and available demographic data, comparing pre-pandemic 2019 to the 2020 pandemic year. We then share findings from the referral process through the conferences and time in between conferences. Next we share the pros and cons of virtual conferences compared to in-person conferences. Finally, we share findings on the impact of virtual conferences on EPY goals.

Numbers Served: Pre-pandemic (2019) and Pandemic (2020) Findings

As previously stated, more youth were served as a result of shifting to virtual³ conferences in 2020. More youth were seen for a first conference (Initial EPY conference) in 2020 than in 2019. Follow-up conferences (conferences that followed the first, initial conference) were also greater in 2020.



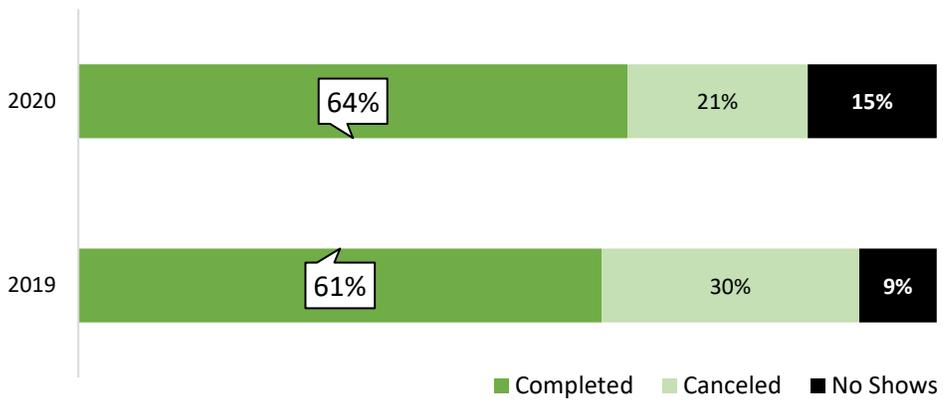
³ “Virtual” almost always meant phone. EPY staff and youth reported that even if a video platform was used/offered, the youth kept the camera off. Youth in evaluation interviews also kept cameras off.

Show Rates

Staff reported that there were greater no-show rates for virtual conferences and the data supported their suspicion. However, the percentage of appointments kept (e.g., Show rates) were about the same, and even slightly higher, in 2020 compared to 2019.

What changed in 2020 was that youth were less likely to cancel ahead of time and more likely to “No show” for virtual conferences than they were for in-person conferences.

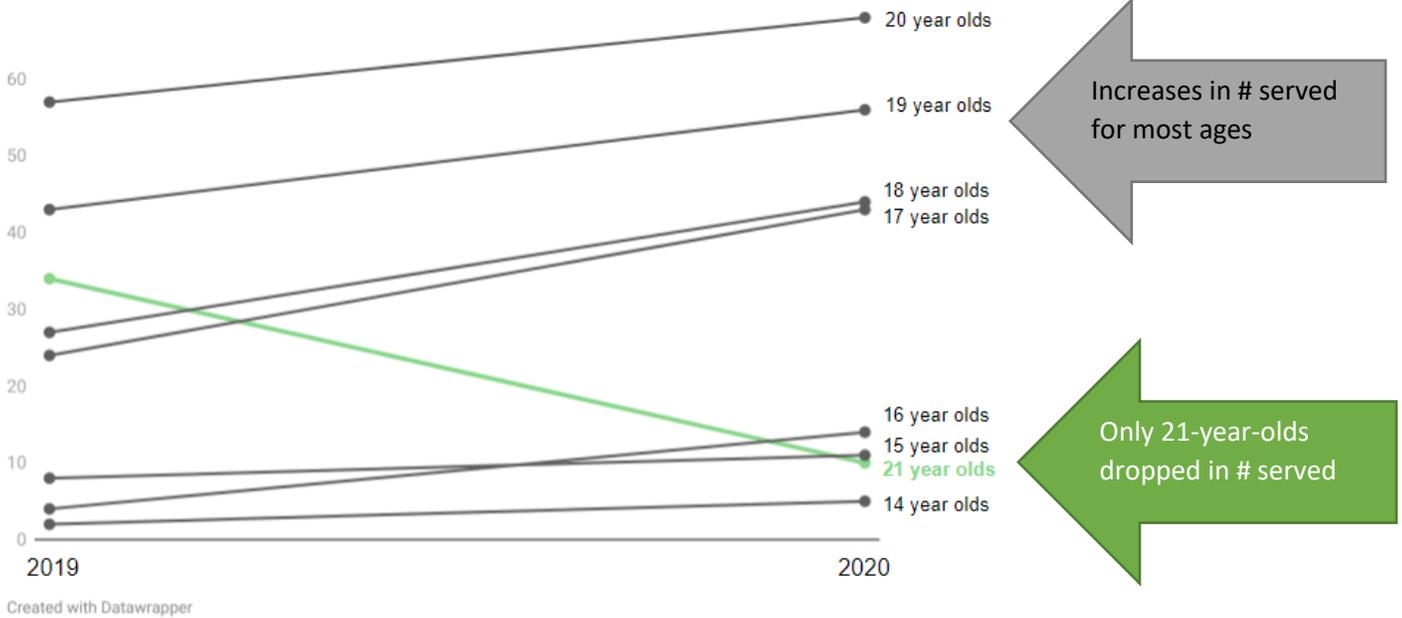
"Show" Rates for EPY Conferences



Demographics of Youth Served

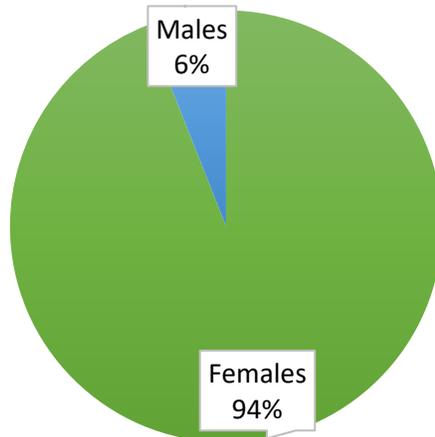
Age. For all but twenty-one-year-old youths, the number of youths served in each age group increased from 2019 to 2020. The increase was consistent especially for 17- to 20-year-old youths. According to the EPY team, in 2020 there was a greater number of open cases for 21-year-old youths so the finding that fewer of them received EPY conferences was surprising to the EPY team.

Number of EPY Youth Served by Age



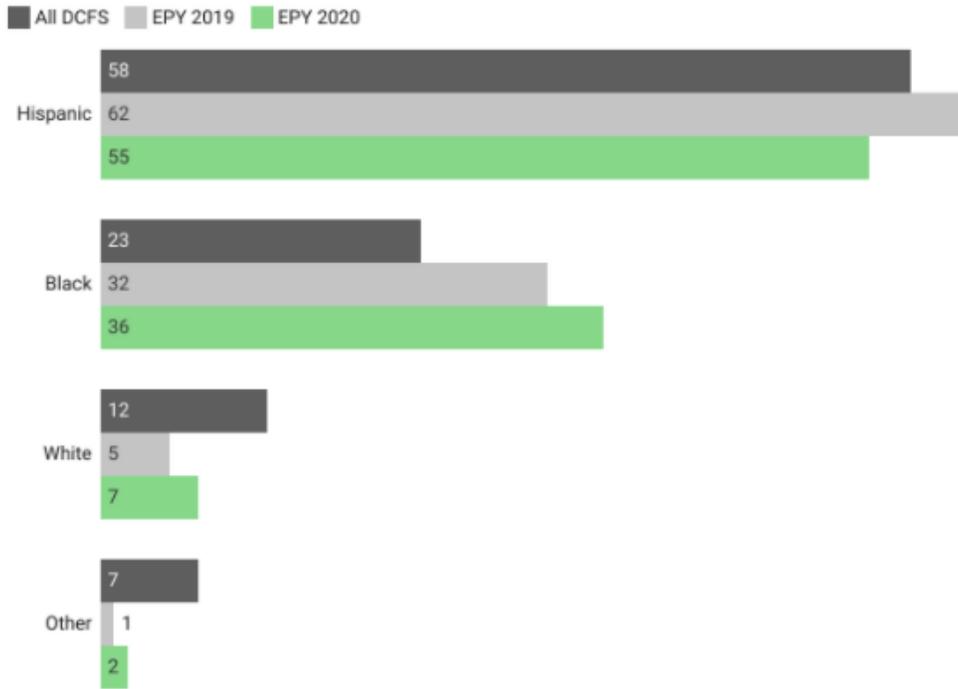
Gender. The majority of youth served were female. The percentage of conferences held for fathers remained at a steady 6% both years (22 of 362 conferences in 2019, 27 of 452 conferences in 2020). In 2020, DCFS started to track data on the number of unique individuals served and again the percentage of unique males served was 6%.

Gender of EPY Conference Youth



Race/Ethnicity. In 2019, the largest group of minorities served by DCFS – Hispanic/Latino and Black – were both slightly overrepresented in those who received EPY conferences. In 2020, during the pandemic when conferences were virtual, Black EPY rates went up slightly (4%) while Hispanic/Latino dropped by 7%.

Percentage of Youth by Race/Ethnicity



Created with Datawrapper

The rate of Hispanic/Latino youth served in 2020 was still close to the overall rates of Hispanic/Latino youth in DCFS. The rate of Black youth is about 13% higher than the overall rates of Black youth in DCFS. There is no available data on actual rates of all the youth in DCFS who are expecting or parenting; only the numbers served by the EPY program.

Findings Across Virtual and In-Person Conferences – The Service Journey

The Referral Process. The referral process was the same from before and throughout the pandemic; the EPY youth’s DCFS case worker completes an internal DCFS referral form. Not all youth share their pregnancy with their DCFS case worker but when they do, all youth should be invited by their DCFS case worker to receive an EPY conference. As a safeguard, each DCFS Regional Office provides a quarterly report to the DCFS EPY team listing all the EPY youths and the EPY team follows up with the youth’s DCFS case workers. The EPY team shared concerns about whether or not all EPY youths are invited to participate, what is said to youths, and what follow-through looks like. “We hear from a lawyer that they have an EPY youth who wants a conference. We ask the DCFS case worker who says ‘They don’t want it’ and we are left wondering, ‘Why? What was said?’”

Referral data was not available for this report. The data kept by the DCFS EPY team is only for those who participate in the EPY conferences. The data available for this report was presented earlier, aggregate data on demographics such as age and only for the youth who had an EPY conferences. No data was available on youth who were referred and did not have an EPY conference.

Conferences. All youth interviewees rated the EPY conference services as “Very Useful” and all but one youth said they were “Very Satisfied” with the EPY staff. One youth rated their satisfaction with the EPY staff as “Neutral” but that youth reported a lot of dissatisfaction with their DCFS case worker and included that in their rating. These findings on youth quantitative ratings of the satisfaction with and utility of the conferences are consistent with the previous evaluation mentioned earlier. Additionally, this evaluation like the previous evaluation also found that the conferences were highly effective at accomplishing goals in all content areas (see the Impact section of this report).

An additional finding from this evaluation not previously document or reported elsewhere, was how much action the youth themselves take to accomplish several types of goals. What stood out was how the EPY staff approached supporting youths with a complexity to match the youths’ control over the situation or goal. For example, if a youth needed diapers or a crib; the barrier was not the youth’s initiative, but simply a lack of money. Sometimes the barriers were navigating system obstacles. When youth could not get SSI because the office was closed due to the pandemic, the EPY team used their connections to get what was needed. In those cases, there wasn’t a need for the youths to learn a particular skill and the EPY staff got it done. On the other hand, for more complicated goals requiring internal motivation or learning on the part of the youths, the EPY staff took a step back. Examples included changing a housing situation or going back to school; the EPY staff did not do the work but rather provided support and guidance on resources and next steps and it was up to the youth to act on those. As one youth said, “It’s on me.”

As a result of EPY staff matching their support level to the youth control over goals, youths reported increased confidence in being able to do what was needed as a parent.

“Got kids MediCal in a week! I don’t even know how.”
-Youth(v)

“SSI Office was closed. Shire knew how to do it...during pandemic!”
-Youth (b)

“Helps you know you can do it on your own.”
-Youth (v)

The Pros and Cons of Virtual Conferences

The difference between the service experience for a virtual conference compared to an in-person conference was the priority question for this evaluation. The evaluation results suggest that the virtual conferences were highly useful and well-liked but the cost to losing in-person meetings was losing some familiarity and comfort as well as trust.

It should be noted that in the pandemic, with public offices closed and a scarcity of resources (e.g., diapers), accomplishing goals took longer. Those delays were not a result of how the conferences were held - virtual or in person - but rather the context of the pandemic in which virtual conferences took place. Youth and staff mentioned the additional barriers and length of time to getting things done in the pandemic. Staff shared “We used to be able to go to the office and drop things off that day. With the pandemic, it’s several days, weeks”. Youth made comments such as “lots of waiting from the system” or “things took longer”. Despite this, on a rating scale provided in interviews, almost all youth rated the virtual conference services as “Very Useful” and the EPY team as “Very helpful”.

Q: How could staff/conferences improve?

“Meeting, perfect. Everything, calls texts, was perfect.” -Youth(v)

Pros to Virtual Conferences

Convenience. The most frequent positive mentioned regarding the virtual meetings was the convenience of everything from scheduling to holding the meeting. Staff also liked the ease at which youth could join, “We remind them and even if they forgot and they’re in bed, they can get on the phone.”

One youth who was pregnant and participated in both in-person and virtual conferences said, “I was pregnant and I could take the conference from bed.”

No transportation. Los Angeles traffic is notoriously difficult and stressful for drivers; for non-drivers, the public transportation is limited and more complicated than other metropolitan areas. Both staff and youth appreciated not driving/getting to meetings.

Saving time. Consistent with the above, virtual conferences saved time in scheduling and the time it takes to get to and from meetings.

Cons to Virtual Conferences

Communication Challenges. Three of the five youths with only virtual conferences wanted more communication. About half of the virtual-only youth talked about it being more difficult to get their point across and express themselves, “In person your point could be seen, could see feelings, expressions.” One youth felt they weren’t heard, “Through zoom or video...I just didn’t really get to interact with them. Like I didn’t know if they were listening to me.”

“Well, I know them, know their voices, so (on the phone) I know who’s talking.”

-Youth(b)

One youth who had both types of conferences shared that knowing the staff’s voices made it easier to follow phone conversations.

Lack of Staff Time with EPYs’ Children. The staff shared the gap felt by not spending any in-person time with the EPYs’ children. EPY youths talked about this as well, “They’d bring little things (for the baby) when it was in person.” For those with virtual conferences only, the staff never meeting the EPYs’ children impacted youths’ trust (next) for at least one of

the three virtual only youth.

Trust. When asked about child development, a youth with only virtual conferences said they wouldn't talk to the EPY team because the EPY staff didn't know her children, "I just know them through the phone...so I wouldn't be like, let me explain my kids to you because like how would they know, you know?" This statement is significant and consistent with EPY staff concerns and indicates that some in-person time may be important for establishing trust.

Less Comfort and Familiarity. Youths who had both types of conferences shared that in-person meetings felt more comfortable and personal compared to phone meetings. Even a youth who first said, "Doesn't feel different on the phone" then added, "In person, you get closeness, got comfortable. If it was phone first, that could be awkward."

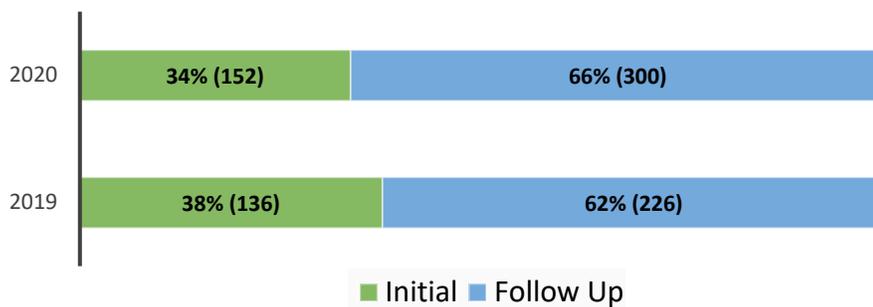
Focus. Less frequently mentioned but significant because it was mentioned by one staff and one youth, was a challenge with focusing on the conference when it was virtual. One youth who only had virtual meetings said they found it hard to focus in virtual meetings. One EPY staff had her own children at home and shared it was harder to focus and find a quiet space at home compared to in-person meetings.

Frequency of Conferences

Another adaptation made in the pandemic to serve more youth was increasing the time between conferences from 3-months to 6-months for most youths. Staff expressed concern that 1) youths were less likely to show-up to follow-up conferences with more time in between conferences and that 2) youths did not know they could reach out to staff in between conferences.

Show Rates for Follow-Up Conferences. The data indicate that there was no change in youth showing up for follow-up appointments.

Percentage of Initial vs Follow Up EPY Conferences

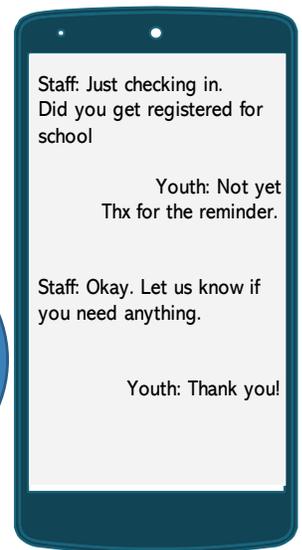


Communication. Staff worried that more time between meetings resulted in youth problems growing because youth didn't know to reach out to staff. There was no data on communication in between conferences, but all the youth shared they knew they could reach out to the EPY team. However three youths shared that they wanted more communication from the EPY staff to them.

Impact on Goals. For youth, the concern around the time lapse between conferences or frequency of conferences was on how it impacted their goals. Two youth said the extra time helped because the pandemic caused delays and they had more time to reach their goals. Another said less time between would be better "to keep everyone on what they need to do". That youth was about to "age-out" of the system (services are available for EPY up to age 22) and she offered that more meetings would be helpful as EPY approach aging-out so they can reach their goals. Another youth about to age-out shared they were stressed about reaching their goals in time.

"Responding more between conferences. Communicate"

"They check on you. I always know I can call."
-EPY youth



Youth Suggestions.

- One youth suggested that increasing the frequency of meetings for youth about to age-out of the program could help youths reach their goals before their services end.
- Three youth said they wanted more communication from EPY staff to EPY youth.

Impact

EPY Goals

Despite the delays caused by the pandemic, youth were very satisfied with the EPY conferences and the support they received helped them reach varied goals. In many cases, youth were still in the process of working on their goals but they reported that the EPY team helped guide them, provided valuable resources, and emotional support. Youth felt confident in their ability to reach their goals even for things they didn't think of or currently need. They shared that the EPY team would ask about different things and give resources they didn't ask for, "just in case." In one example, a youth who didn't currently need childcare had already learned from the EPY team where she could go, "It's ready when I need it."

Below are some examples of the EPY conference goals and numbers of youth who reported meeting those goals.



Baby needs met – 8 of 8



Health Insurance goals met – 4 of 4



Legal goals met – 4 of 4



Housing goals met – 1 of 4
In progress – 3 of 4



Childcare goals met – 2 of 2



Job goals met – 2 of 2

Impact on Parent and Child

Ultimately, what is important is the impact of the EPY conferences on the youth as parents and on their children. The youth shared they could be better parents to their children because they weren't worried about or spending time on basic needs. Without the conferences they said they would not even have been able to provide those basic needs. The table below includes some direct quotes from youth responding to a question about impact. The comments were similarly positive from youth whether they received virtual conferences only (V) or both virtual and in-person conferences (B).

Q: How did the EPY conferences impact you as a parent/your child, if at all?

V/B	Impact on Parent	Impact on Child
V	Confident in what I'm doing. They have something to do with everything I've accomplished.	He has daycare. He's around kids so he can play. I would've never known he could get childcare.
B	Financially gives the opportunity to be with kids, spend time with them.	He has me. He knows I'm there for him. I pick him up, drop off. When he's sick, I'm there. Mom's always there.
V	Helps you know you can do it on your own.	I'm willing to get help, like with (child's) schooling.
B	Made my transition to being a mom and adult easier. They're not going to let me make mistakes.	Nurse Family Partnership, knowing his milestones.
V	Confident because I felt prepared.	Educate me on his development through Nurse Family Partnership.

Additional Responses About the Impact of EPY Conferences

At the end of the interview, the researcher asked each youth if there was anything else that they wanted to share. Interestingly, most responses conveyed impact. Below is the question as it was delivered and some statements from youth.

Q: That's all our questions, is there anything else you'd like us to know about the EPY conferences before we end?

"I don't have help from my parents. They gave me that help. I'd reach out to them before my family." -Youth(v)

"Remind you of your personal goals. They care, say 'I'm proud of you.'" -Youth(v)

"Helped with my son's daycare, me getting a job... The emotional support, having people there. Even talking about (me) going back to school" -Youth(v)

"EPY conferences are necessary for foster youth. Social workers and therapists come and go. My EPY team have always been there. It helps a lot." -Youth (b)



Summary

Three positive things stood out in this evaluation in addition to the findings that greater numbers were served and the conferences had a positive impact on EPY goals. First, the EPY youths rated the EPY conferences and the EPY staff very highly. Second, the way the EPY staff support the youth is complex in that they match the support level they give to the amount of control that youth have over their goals and this results in greater confidence in the youth. Third, the referral process is dependent on the youth's DCFS case worker and EPY staff suspect that not all youth who would want EPY conferences are getting them or even aware of the conferences.

Two key learnings came forward in terms of the limits of virtual conferences. First, communication was more difficult without face-to-face contact and youth sometimes felt they were not understood. Second, the lack of in-person time may impact youths' feelings of trust of the EPY staff especially in regards to their children. This is because without in-person opportunities, the staff don't meet EPYs' children.

Recommendations

The recommendations are meant to inspire discussion as not all could reasonably be implemented at one time.

Improve the referral process. First, to facilitate youth getting the EPY conferences, if possible, expand who can refer youth to receive conferences. Second, keep data on the referrals. With referral data, analyses could be completed to see who uses the services and if service use/delivery is equitable by location as well as race/ethnicity and other demographic variables. Additionally, comparisons could be made to public benchmark data. Such data might support expanding the program in general.

- Expand who can refer youth to the EPY team (e.g, therapist, dependency lawyer, EPY youth themselves).
- Track incoming referral data (district/Service Area, demographics, referral source).
- Track who accepts services separately from, and in addition to, who follows through with using services.

Shift to a hybrid model as the pandemic evolves to allow for safe in-person conferences. This would provide staff with the time needed to meet with EPY's child(ren) and allow youth and staff to get to know and trust each other. Suggestions include;

- First conference – in-person
- After the birth of a child – in-person
- Annual and/or final conference - in-person
- Other conferences – virtual

Make communication explicit in conferences and more frequent outside of conferences. Especially for virtual conferences where body language and facial expressions are absent, youth do not always pick up that what they said was heard/understood. Suggestions to help youth know they are heard and understood include;

- Reflect back to youth what they share, “You said finding a job is your new top priority. Is that right?”
- Ask youth about and reflect emotions, “That sounds stressful”
- Possibly offer training such as *Reflective Practice for Home Visitation*.

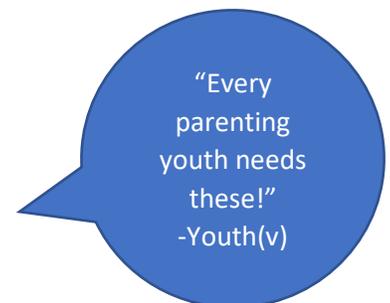
In between conferences, youth reported wanting more communication from staff. Increased communication could be especially helpful in the following circumstances;

- Services are close to ending
- Most recent conference was virtual
- Longer than three months passed since last conference

Conference frequency of 6-months for most, 3-months for others. The 6-month timeframe seems to work for many with communication from EPY staff between meetings.

- Consider a policy of more frequent meetings for youth about to age-out of the program so they can achieve their goals prior to closing.
- Continue to individualize the need for more frequent conferences.

Expand capacity for EPY conferences by increasing EPY-serving personnel to allow for increased reach of the EPY conferences to more EPY youth in care.



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