

Beyond Foster Care

Helping Older Youth Prepare for Independence

Turning 18 or 21 is an exciting leap into independence for most young adults, who view these milestones as opportunities to spread their wings and begin life on their terms.

For foster care youth approaching those birthdays, however, the realization that they may soon be on their own – both legally and age-wise, can leave them anxious.

The State of Virginia has services and laws in place to help these youth become productive citizens, especially those who may find themselves transitioning out of foster care without a support system.

Developing and maintaining healthy relationships with older adults is essential for these youth. Any caring adult can be a positive influence, whether you're a foster parent, a coach, a teacher, mentor or acquaintance.

Here are ways you can help a teen in foster care gain daily life skills that will benefit that youth for years to come:

- Teach him how to wash his clothes, cook simple meals and clean house for himself.
- Give her opportunities to show responsibility by babysitting, running to the post office or grocery shopping for you.
- Help him think about options for his future, such as whether to pursue college, a trade, a job or the armed forces.
- Reassure her that it's okay to not know everything. Encourage her to seek advice from responsible adults and teach her to search for accurate information to help with decision-making.
- Model responsibility, dependability, honesty and a strong work ethic.
- Remind the youth that everyone, even adults need a support system, and encourage him to maintain relationships with positive friends and mentors to help them become their best.

Here are things you can do to offer a healthy support system to an older youth in and transitioning out of foster care:

- Invite her to join your family for a meal once a week, once a month or occasionally.
- Invite him to participate in fun outings with you or your family, such as a visit to the movies, bowling, shopping or a bike ride.
- If he has expressed an interest in a particular career, introduce him to professionals in that line of work, who may offer to serve as a mentor.
- Help the teen shop for appropriate clothing for a special occasion, such as job interview, school awards function or special community event.
- Accompany the youth to the doctor if he is sick, to help communicate with the doctor and assure that he gets the proper medicine and follow up required.
- Offer a listening ear. Sometimes all a foster youth needs is to know that you care.