LEARNING LIFE SKILLS

Martha Mueller Holden,
Trainer and Consultant, Ohio
Jack Holden,
Trainer and Consultant, Ohio

Larry stood proudly at the awards banquet accepting his award for the most valuable worker in the work program. Adding to the special meaning of the day was the knowledge that the next day he would start his first "real" job off-campus at a local printing company. It was a job he had dreamed of ever since he started working in the campus print shop six months earlier. Larry was getting ready to transfer to the independent living group home in preparation for his 18th birthday.

After two days on the "real" job Larry walked out, went back to campus and refused to return to the job. Five months after being placed in the independent living group home, Larry ran back to his home state and whereabouts were unknown.

Jeremy enjoyed his going away party. Students and staff came from all over the campus to wish him farewell and tease him about the haircut he was to receive the next day when he would join military service and learn how to fly planes. He had been a model student, receiving the highest level in the cottage and being able to come and go as he pleased. He was a good worker.

Six months later, Jeremy was hospitalized for severe depression and given a military medical (due to mental instability) discharge.

Danny was always in trouble. He was mouthy, defiant, always testing. In three months he would transfer to the group home and no one had much hope for him. His biological mother was always coming in to complain about his care, even though she and everyone agreed he could never return home due to her emotional problems. This fact upset Danny and every time his mother visited, it took days to calm him down and get him back into the program.

One year later, Danny was a freshman in college, struggling, but staying in school and working full time.

What is it that happens to youth in out-of-home care that helps or hinders them in growing into adults? These young men – their successes and failures – are a few of the many cases that influenced our beliefs about raising children to adulthood in out-of-home care. They and others like them are the force behind our work in interdependent living training and the development of *Learning Life Skills* (Holden and Holden, 1989).

Raising Children to Adulthood

The role of primary caregivers of children in the child welfare system is a complicated one. Much time and emphasis is placed, and rightly so, on developing relationships, resolving attachment issues, re-educating and socializing, teaching coping skills, handling crises, and working with families. Energy is spent on helping children to trust adults and follow program guidelines. Once a child is capable of attaching to adults and following rules, he or she is usually ready for the next placement and the process begins again.

Although many good lessons and information are learned by the children in placement, primary caregivers don't always provide the skills necessary to move a youth into adulthood. Most adults have lost touch with the variety of informal ways in which they learned to be successful adults and, consequently, have not made the necessary allowances for those lessons in out-of-home care. The concern for children in care is that they become "normal," well-adjusted children.

Suddenly, staff are faced with the task of turning an immature, angry 17-year-old into a successful adult in six months. Needless to say the adult usually panics in concert with the youth. The youth may be placed in many programs preparing him/her for interdependent living. The pressure is on and then the youth becomes resistant or unmotivated. Staff become frustrated as they run out of time. Plans are made and remade but it is too late. The youth is on his/her own with an "I told you that you needed to get serious; you ran out of time" attitude. The only way to overcome this dilemma is to begin preparing them from day one for the move towards adulthood. Our experience working with these youth has taught us that the following concepts and practices are essential in making the process successful:

Human Connections

Connecting has become a familiar concept over the last few years in working with children and families. There is a growing concern about the importance of building and maintaining connections in order to lead stable and successful lives. The youth who have grown up in a variety of settings have suffered through many disconnections. When it is time for them to think about moving out on their own, it becomes one more disconnection.

Our role in working with the youth is to help them learn how to build and maintain the connections they need in order to succeed as

adults. We start by teaching youth interdependent, not independent living skills. No one lives independently, alone. We all need to give and receive support and help from others. Interdependent living skills emphasizes the need to interact and live in a world with others. In the time we have with the youth we must be sure they have the opportunity to learn and practice the skills they will need in order to be connected and live interdependently.

Larry (the youth introduced at the beginning) had totally accepted his two-year residential placement with us. He had not lived in any one place for more than six months until this placement where he remained for almost two years, developing relationships, excelling in areas where he had failed previously. Through careful programming, Larry had many successes and became an outstanding resident. He was connected to staff, the agency, a job within the program, peers, structured activities, etc. He felt good about himself as he saw himself reflected in our eyes. We were all so proud of his (our) successes. Unfortunately we forgot to connect Larry to a larger community and adulthood.

In work done by Brin et al. (1985), Polowy, Wasson, Wolf and Pasztor (1986, 1988), it was determined that people need basically nine essential connections in order to live stable, satisfying lives. These connections are the relationship between specific human needs and the way the needs get met. Another word for connection is attachment. If we can work with youth in helping them have positive connections or attachments, we will help them lead better lives. The nine essential connections are:

Information/Knowledge	What we need to know in order to live in the world
Significant Person	A person who is important in our lives
Group	People we associate with and belong to
Meaningful Role	What we do that gives meaning to our lives
Means of Support	How we support ourselves and our families
Source of Joy	What makes us happy
Systems of Value	What we believe in
History	How we know where we come from and how we preserve our past

Place   The location or spaces that are
                                 important to us

Jeremy was scheduled to return to his father at the end of his place-
ment. He had been going home every weekend, had a job lined up in his
community upon his return and had a girlfriend waiting for him. Two
months before his discharge, his father cut all contact and refused to see
him. Staff scrambled around and came up with the plan for Jeremy to go
into the military service. When he left placement, he lost all of his con-
nections.

Danny maintained his connection to his mother throughout place-
ment experiences. Although she couldn't physically care for him, she
lent him the emotional support he needed as he moved from place to
place.

Adolescent Development

As staff focus on adult-living skills it is easy to forget that we are
dealing with adolescents. Adolescence is that period of time that often
defies description. One minute they are children – giggling, acting silly,
throwing spitballs – and the next minute they are planning for college,
having babies, making statements wise beyond their years. The most
normal part of adolescence is its unpredictability. We can expect great
variance in behavior.

The most important aspects of adolescent development to keep in
mind for the purposes of helping youth learn life skills are:

The peer group has the most influence on the individual.

There is a big difference between early adolescence and late ado-
lescence.

Depending on where they are developmentally, adolescents
fluctuate in their cognitive ability to plan ahead.

Adolescents need to "look good."

Adults don't know anything – especially parents.

Adolescents are moody.

Adolescents experiment and struggle in order to form their own
identity.

Adolescents are dependent on adults and it bugs them.

With these points in mind, it is easier to stay flexible and use peers
to help maintain focus on the issues. Teaching life skills in group ses-
sions is one of the most valuable methods available. By using groups, we

help youth build connections to other youths and provide opportunities to practice skills needed for adulthood in a supportive environment. Youth can discuss issues, share information and practice with each other. With an adult in the facilitator role, they can be encouraged to share and follow practical advice.

Another key is to assess the developmental level at which youth are functioning. Many youth are developmentally delayed emotionally, physically, socially, morally, or cognitively.

For example, Larry went off to work at the print shop in the community with high hopes. He was able to follow directions, was personable and behaved like a young adult. He walked off the job in two days. No one could find out the reason. His supervisor reported that Larry was doing a fine job. The supervisor had told Larry to run the press for twenty minutes and then take a break. When the supervisor came back, Larry was gone. After much conversation, Larry finally shared his secret: he couldn't tell time. He was too embarrassed to let anyone know. When the supervisor asked him to do something for twenty minutes, he had panicked and left. Somehow he had been able to compensate for his disability the entire time he was in placement.

Jeremy was bright, able to make good ethical decisions, and behave appropriately for his age. However, emotionally Jeremy did not trust adults. It had taken months for him to adjust and become comfortable in his placement. Once he left for the service, he was unable to make friends or feel supported by anyone. He became overwhelmed with his feelings of isolation and disconnectedness and went into a severe depression.

Identity

The main task of adolescence is identity formation, which is accomplished through testing, experimenting, and struggling. If a youth has experienced multiple placements, abuse, and/or neglect, it may compound or delay the process. Within a family, a youth is able to struggle safely. He or she can fight, be mouthy, break rules, test, but still know deep down inside that mom and dad will be there. The parents may be angry and dislike the behavior, but will be there to reinforce their love and concern for the youth as a person. When youth in placement struggle, they are often discharged, locked up or rejected in some form. They are rejected along with their behavior. Thus first and foremost, these children need to know that we will be there when they fail as well as when they succeed.

By allowing the youth some safe struggles within the program, they can work toward accomplishing the task of forming identity. This means

that the youth must take risks and fail and staff must be there to help
put the pieces back together. Through group work, adolescents are able
to try out new behaviors in a safe and supportive environment. Helping
a youth improve his/her self-concept will also aid in the task of forming
an identity. By acknowledging the youth's effort, praising accomplish-
ments, giving real responsibility and encouragement, you can have a
positive effect on the youth's self-concept.

Although Danny had many problems, he had a sense of who he was.
Many of the struggles staff experienced with Danny were based on his
struggle to find out who he was and what his boundaries were. Through
careful programming and tremendous teamwork, staff worked to main-
tain Danny in the program. He was allowed to fail and start again. The
relationship with his mother was encouraged and with this constant
relationship his sense of identity continued to form and develop.

Separation

Whenever the subject of interdependent living is broached, the issue
of separation lies underneath. Separation is difficult for everyone, but
most often very painful for youths who have experienced many trau-
matic separations.

All adolescents approach adulthood with mixed feelings. 'Normal'
adolescents often prolong leaving home as long as possible. Youths who
lack the history of a stable family life are facing the unknown when they
are told to prepare for their own family life. They have had no consistent
role model to emulate. This may be compounded by not having emo-
tionally worked through being separated initially from their families
when brought into placement. Many youths in placement have spent
years denying their separation from their families or remaining angry
about it. Without working through the separation issues, it is nearly
impossible to help the youths accept the fact that they need to learn
interdependent living skills. Soon they will be on their own but emotion-
ally they are still struggling to be back with their families.

Often staff spend much time trying to help youth face "reality." The
fact is their parents are not going to come back into their lives and take
care of them. The position taken by staff is that the youth need to give
up the dream of going home and work toward becoming independent.
However, we need to realize that coming to terms with 'family' issues is
a major task of entering adulthood. When working in groups, youth are
encouraged to talk about their families. Youth share experiences and
find common ground with each other. Experience tells us that a youth
cannot move forward until he/she deals with the past. In group discus-

sions, this often results in high emotions and arguing, but it is the single most important emotional issue that youth in out-of-home care face. We need to spend much time, energy and support first reconnecting and then separating youth from their past.

Larry left the independent living program to go find his mother in another state. He hadn't seen her for over 10 years. Staff were unable to help Larry work through family issues. She was unavailable and discussion about her was discouraged because of the distress Larry experienced when he spoke of her. He was obsessed with the thought of her and was immobilized. He could not move forward until he found her so he went back.

Jeremy was so overwhelmed from the rejection by his father, he slipped into a more severe depression that resulted in his discharge from the military service. Staff overlooked the depth of Jeremy's feelings of rejection in helping him plan for the future. The pressure of time took over and staff planned *for* Jeremy instead of *with* Jeremy.

Although Danny's family situation was less than ideal, his mother was available. This allowed him the opportunity to work through feelings of rejection/abandonment. Issues concerning Danny's mother were dealt with on a daily basis by Danny and staff. At the time it seemed to get in the way of planning for the future but in retrospect it was the core of his preparation for adulthood.

What Else Can We Do?

The special needs of adolescents present major challenges for our programs. As a system we have not been very adept at emancipating youth from care. Based on experience and the limited research available, several key themes surface that may promote better care and preparation for interdependent living for the young people we serve.

Links to birth parents. The adolescent needs to know and understand his/her roots. Whether the parents and/or family are available or not, this connection needs to be maintained. It is a major issue in the development of identity. While many connections in life are temporary, this is a life connection and one that provides a reference point for the adolescent. If visits and contact are not possible, life books or scrapbooks should be developed with the youth.

A relationship with at least one caring adult to provide stability and permanence. We need to provide permanence for our youth. If the birth parents or other family members are not available for an ongoing,

supportive relationship, another person needs to be connected to the adolescent. This might be a foster family, child care worker or volunteer. Every youth needs someone to be there for support and help from childhood into adulthood.

Aftercare programming. We cannot cut ties with a youth on his/her eighteenth birthday. When we assume the responsibility for raising a child, we have the responsibility for seeing that child into a successful adult situation. We cannot wash our hands of a responsibility because of a birthday. Aftercare support and programs are a necessity. Everyone needs support in early efforts at interdependent living.

Skill development and educational opportunities. With all of the changes in the lives of adolescents in out-of-home care, the informal and formal learning opportunities in preparing youth for adulthood are disrupted. Tangible (education, job training, money management, shopping, etc.) and intangible (social skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, etc.) skills need to be addressed. For most of us, these skills are learned through observation and practice within the family and community, or in more formal educational situations such as school. For the adolescent in out-of-home care, these skills need to be learned through special efforts on the part of caregivers. Substitute placements should program for the acquisition of these skills through daily routines and group experiences.

Participation in decision-making. Adolescents need to have a say in not only where they are placed, but in all major decisions in their lives. Children are bounced from placement to placement, often without any input from the child. By the time a child enters adolescence, it is crucial that he/she be involved in the decision-making process. If the youth has no control over his/her life, he/she will take control by ruining or sabotaging plans.

Opportunity to take risks. Placements need to provide the adolescent with opportunities for taking initiatives and then being held accountable. In addition to the genuine role adolescents should take in the decision-making process affecting placement, the adolescent needs to experiment and take risks in his/her effort to establish his/her identity. The establishment of life outside the family is a critical part of the adolescent developmental process. The availability of a community network, peer group support and appropriate activities should be an important part of the adolescent placement experience.

Training for caregivers. Adults working with children and adolescents should be prepared to offer them not only a secure, therapeutic and safe environment, but also the opportunities to grow and learn skills that prepare them for adulthood. As the needs of children in out-of-home care become more and more complex, the demands and expectations placed on direct care givers increase. Taking care of children in out-of-home care is no longer simple parenting. Training is a necessary tool to help prepare care-givers to meet the challenge of working with these youths.

Finally, we must make sure our programs are responsive to the needs of the youths and their families. It is important to reflect on what we do and to ask questions. Why are we doing what we do? Does it make our job easier or does it help the youth? The continual assessment of our impact on youths and their families is part of our job. Taking an objective look at what motivates our actions is critical. Most importantly, *listen to what the youths have to say.*

READINGS AND REFERENCES

Aldgate, J., Maluccio, A., and Reeves, C. (1989). *Adolescents in foster families,* Lyceum Books, Inc., Chicago, IL.

Alwon, F., Budlong, M., Clark, P., Holden, J., Holden, M., Kuhn, I.F., and Mooney, A. (1988). *Connecting essential elements of residential child care practice,* Child Welfare Institute, Atlanta, GA, 1988.

Brin, M., Polowy, M., Wallace, W., Wasson, D. and Wolf, M. (1985). *Training foster parents of adolescents,* Buffalo, NY, New York State Child Welfare Training Institute, State University College at Buffalo.

Erickson, E., (1968). *Identity: youth and crisis,* London, Faber and Faber.

Holden, M., and Holden, J., (1989). *Learning Life Skills,* Mueller Holden and Associates, Grove City, OH.

Pasztor, E. M., and Associates (1988). *Preparing youth for interdependent living,* Child Welfare Institute, Atlanta, GA.

Pasztor, E. M., Clarren, J., Timberlake, E. M., and Bayless, L. (1986). "Stepping Out of Foster Care into Independent Living," *Children Today* vol. 15: pp. 32-5.

About the Authors:

Martha Mueller Holden received her Masters degree in counseling from Wright State University and began her career working as a direct care worker for a children's services board in Southwest Ohio. She has served as director of a youth services bureau, juvenile justice planner for the State of Ohio, and Director of Treatment Services of a residential treatment center for emotionally and behaviorally disturbed adolescent boys. Ms. Holden has been an advocate for child care workers for many years as demonstrated by her continued involvement with the Ohio Committee for Child Care Worker Training and the development of direct care worker training curriculum. She has been involved with developing and presenting programs nationally with Cornell University, Child Welfare Institute, The Trieschman Center, and Case Western Reserve University. She has also presented workshops at conferences throughout the country, and is currently the president of Mueller Holden and Associates.

Jack C. Holden began his career in child care work as a direct care worker in a residential treatment center for emotionally and behaviorally disturbed adolescent boys located in Ohio. During a seven-year period with the center, he also worked as a supervisor and staff trainer. Mr. Holden founded the national training and consulting firm of Mueller Holden and Associates in 1986 specializing in work with youth residential and foster care programs. He received a Masters of Child Care Administration from Nova University in 1988 and has co-authored and co-developed the curriculum *Connecting: Essential Elements of Residential Child Care Practice, Basic Course for Foster Parents,* and *Learning Life Skills: A Curriculum for Group Leaders Helping With the Move Toward Interdependent Living.* Mr. Holden served as a board member of the Ohio Association of Child Care Workers for six years and has presented workshops at state, national and international conferences.