

How Can Evaluation Support Participant Engagement and Service Alignment?

Examples from Transitional Age Youth Programs

The Connections Project

The Connections Project is a five year research study of evidence-based practices to improve relational competency and successful transition to adulthood for youth ages 17-21 who are leaving foster care. YMCA of San Diego County partnered with Harder+Company Community Research to develop the Connections Project, which is funded by the federal Department of Children.

Although most transition-age foster youth (TAY) receive training on hard skills, their success depends on relational competencies or “soft skills” that involve often underdeveloped self-regulation abilities, which are the foundation for lifelong functioning. The YMCA realized that, though they could teach youth how to find housing or employment, successful transition depends on supportive relationships with roommates and employers. Without the skills to maintain positive relationships, youth were frequently evicted from housing or losing their jobs. The Connections project focuses on building relational competencies, hypothesizing that youth would have stronger permanent connections which would in turn improve their performance in school, work and life.

Evaluation

To test this hypothesis, we had youth complete assessment tools at regular time points to provide data about changes over time in areas including emotion regulation, empathy, resiliency, engagement in high risk behaviors, quantity and quality of relationships and more. We also gathered qualitative data through focus groups with youth and interviews with staff. This evaluation showed that youth engaged in Connections:

- displayed an increase in their emotion regulation, social conduct, resiliency, and the quantity and quality of their relationships.
- engaged in fewer high risk behaviors.
- were more likely to be employed or enrolled in school, and had a higher wage and higher level of education after participating.



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Grants for Transitional Age Youth

San Francisco defines “disconnected transitional age youth (TAY)” as individuals who struggle with entering the workforce, creating strong support networks, and succeeding in education, and who need additional supports and opportunities to make a successful transition to adulthood. According to the San Francisco Charter, TAY includes 18-24 year-olds who:

- Are homeless or in danger of homelessness;
- Have dropped out of high school;
- Have a disability or other special needs, including substance abuse;
- Are low-income parents;
- Are undocumented;
- Are new immigrants and/or English learners;
- Are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning; and/or
- Are transitioning from the foster care, juvenile justice, criminal justice or special education system.

Children and Youth Fund

San Francisco was the first city in the country to guarantee funding to children in the city budget in 1991. That funding was extended to include services for TAY ages 18 to 24 in 2014.

Today the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and Their Families (DCYF) grants approximately **\$60M** annually to community-based organizations and public agencies who operate over **450 programs** located across all of San Francisco’s neighborhoods. They reach over **50,000 children and youth**, birth to age 24, and their families.

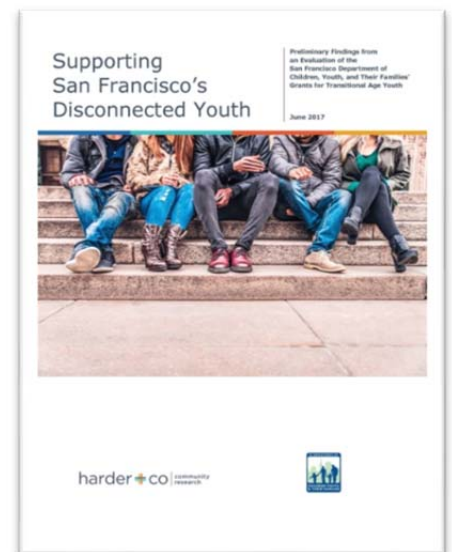
Evaluation

In its first round of funding, DCYF selected twelve pilot grants to provide a range of services that focused on different TAY sub-populations. Programs included:

- job training and childcare for TAY parents
- legal services and social work for youth pursuing legal immigration status
- help for incarcerated TAY reintegrating into the community

The preliminary evaluation found that the most successful programs draw youth in with low-barrier services, build trusting relationships, help TAY set goals, and connect them with other needed services. Specific findings include:

- **Outreach and recruitment** was a challenge for some programs. The most promising approaches meet youth where they are by drawing on formal and informal networks and meeting basic needs.
- Since many TAY have multiple needs and commitments, programs need strategies to **foster retention and prevent attrition**, including trusting relationship as well as financial incentives and wraparound supports.
- Effectively serving TAY requires meeting multiple, intersecting needs. Because most programs tend to focus on a small number of services, they often need to **make referrals** to other agencies that provide needed services.



Report available at:
<http://harderco.com/SFTAY>

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