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## Adult Connections Program Implementation Guide

March 2017

## Adult Connections Success Coach Intervention Model

### **Project Overview**

The Adult Connections Team (ACT) is a federally-funded research project that seeks to improve services available to young adults emancipating from the child welfare system by using youth-driven, data-supported interventions. The project is administered through a collaborative partnership between four child welfare agencies (Children's Home + Aid, Kaleidoscope, UCAN, and One Hope United) and it is supported through a 5-year grant from the Children's Bureau. Built on the developmental assets framework, the aim of the Adult Connections Team is to prepare youth for the transition to independence by improving their educational attainment and employment opportunities, strengthening their support systems, and improving their emotional well-being. The project strives to achieve these outcomes by providing youth with supportive adult connections through a mentoring intervention; increasing their employability with job training and a paid externship; and improving their sense of belonging through a peer connections service. The processes and outcomes of the project are evaluated by an external research team at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

### *Adult Connections Success Coach Intervention*

The Adult Connections Success Coach intervention is a mentoring service designed to facilitate and support long-term connections for the project's target population. The service aids youth in identifying family members or other adults in their lives who may serve as an adult connection or mentor, referred to as a Success Coach. When no adult is identified, the youth is matched with a volunteer Success Coach to form a supportive, long-term relationship. Staff help to facilitate the strengthening of the connection between the youth and Success Coach and as a youth-driven process, the participants are empowered to tailor their mentoring relationships to meet their unique goals and needs.

### **Project Origins**

The Adult Connections Team was borne out of research concerning older youth in foster care and identified gaps in services available to this population. Each year, thousands of young adults emancipate from foster care without ties to a permanent, positive adult connections.

Research shows that emancipated youth face a number of challenges, including increased levels of housing instability and homelessness, lower levels of educational achievement, higher rates of unemployment and underemployment, greater mental health problems, and higher rates of victimization and/or involvement in the criminal justice system. While there are a number of resources in place to aid this population in transitioning to

adulthood, there is a lack of formal programs and services for emancipating youth to address their social and emotional needs. The Adult Connections Success Coach intervention was devised to support youth in developing enhanced skills and increased capacity to build and maintain healthy, lasting relationships. Its design was driven by studies pointing to the benefits of relationships with supportive adults. Research suggests that the consistent presence of a single caring adult has been shown to have a significant positive impact on a young person's growth and development. Research on mentoring programs has shown that having a mentor can improve social and emotional development, educational achievement, and health and safety.

### **Project Goals**

The goal of the project is to improve the emotional, educational, and economic wellbeing and safety of foster youth approaching emancipation by increasing supportive, lasting connections with kin and non-kin adults and providing enhanced opportunities for skill development.

Anticipated proximal outcomes include the following:

- Strengthening of social network of adults (kin and non-kin) providing positive support and guidance
- Stronger perceived adequacy of social support
- Stronger perception of psychological permanency
- Increase in strengths related to relational competencies in relationships and at work
- Expected progress in educational goals
- Increased job skill knowledge and paid work experience

Anticipated distal outcomes include the following:

- A long-lasting, secure relationship with an adult the youth can turn to for advice and support
- More positive emotional and behavioral outcomes
- Less victimization
- Greater attainment of educational goals
- More days employed and less financial hardship
- Fewer days without housing and greater housing stability
- More satisfaction with their level of contact with their family

### **Target Population**

The target population of ACT is male and female youth in foster care between the ages of 17 and 21. Participants have a permanency goal of independence and reside in Cook

County. Their case is managed by one of the project's four partner agencies. New cohorts of youth are screened into the project approximately every six months. Youth who meet the eligibility criteria and consent to participate in the research project are randomly assigned to the "enhanced services" intervention group or "services as usual" control group.

### **Staff**

The Adult Connections Success Coach intervention is supported by one full-time MSW-level Adult Connections Supervisor and two full-time MSW-level Adult Connections Specialists.

Core responsibilities of the Adult Connections Specialists include the following:

- Youth intake and ongoing engagement: 20%
- Match facilitation and ongoing support: 20%
- Volunteer recruitment and on-boarding: 20%
- Ongoing volunteer training and retention: 15%
- Project documentation: 10%
- Event planning: 10%
- Professional development and training: 5%

### **Youth Participation**

Youth assigned to the intervention group are presented with the opportunity to participate in the Adult Connections Success Coach intervention. Participation in the service is wholly optional for the youth and they are empowered to choose whether or not they want to participate and how to engage in the service. Adult Connections Specialists forge a partnership with the project's participants to ensure that they emancipate from foster care with at least one supportive adult ally and make gains towards achieving stable independence.

#### *Youth Intake*

When a new youth is screened into the enhanced services group, the assigned Adult Connections Specialist mails a letter (see appendix A) to the foster parent giving information about the program. The Adult Connections Specialist then reaches out to the youth by phone to provide them with a brief overview of Adult Connections and NEXT and assess their basic interest in participating in the project. The Specialist works to address any initial questions, concerns, or anticipated barriers to engagement, all while respecting the youth's right to decline participation. The youth is encouraged to schedule an in-person meeting to discuss the service in further depth and complete the intake

paperwork (See Appendix B). If the youth is interested in an in-person meeting the meeting includes both the Adult Connections Specialist and the NEXT job specialist.

### *Intake Meeting*

The intake meeting typically occurs in the youth's home but the Specialist also offers to meet in a community setting. At the meeting, the Adult Connections Specialist and NEXT job specialist first engages the youth in casual conversation to begin to establish a rapport and lay the foundation for building a positive, trusting relationship (which is believed to play a significant role in the youth's initial and ongoing levels of engagement). Both specialists meet with the youth for the first time together to reinforce the idea of a holistic program and that both specialists work closely together. After a rapport has been established both specialist describe in detail their piece of the program. The Adult Connections Specialist thoroughly describes the Success Coach intervention, taking care to communicate the design of the project in a manner that is interesting and engaging to each unique personality. To distinguish the service from other programs and help the youth recognize their stake in the service's processes, there is an emphasis on the voluntary nature of the youth's participation, as well as the youth's role in selecting a Success Coach and helping to design the nature of the mentoring relationship to meet their individual goals, needs, and interests. It is stressed that they are eligible to receive the service until age 21 (noting that should a youth not wish to participate initially, it is possible to change one's mind at any time). The Specialist ensures that the youth has an opportunity to ask questions, takes time to think about the project, and understands what engagement in the project looks like before making any decisions about their individual level of engagement.

After reviewing the intake paperwork, the Specialist conducts a brief interview to gather demographic information and better ascertain the youth's education and employment status (including future goals/aspirations), as well as interests/hobbies. The Specialist inquires about supportive adults currently in the youth's life, as well as previous relationships with supportive adults. The youth is asked whether he/she is interested in participating in the service and if so, there is a discussion surrounding whether they wish to be matched with a volunteer Success Coach or a supportive adult who is already known to him/her (see appendix C). In the earlier years of the project, if seeking to be matched with a volunteer, the youth reviews profiles of eligible Success Coaches and decides who he/she wants to meet. To increase the likelihood of establishing a compatible match, youth are encouraged to meet more than one Success Coach (however, it is not a requirement to do so). If requested or warranted, the Specialist may guide the youth in selecting a volunteer(s) that is a good match for his/her needs, interests, or personality. In the last two years of the project if the youth is seeking to be matched with a volunteer

several profiles are pre-selected based on the volunteer's flexibility, location and access to transportation. From these profiles, youth are able to select three to four Success Coach profiles to review in their own time. For youth wishing to be matched with a known adult, there is a discussion in regards to transitioning the relationship to a formal mentoring relationship and strengthening their connection. The Specialist collects information about the supportive figure and they devise a plan for approaching the adult concerning the matter.

Youth who do not express an initial interest in being matched are reminded that the service will remain available to them until age 21. They are encouraged to notify the Specialist if they change their mind and it is also noted that they will be contacted from time to time. The Specialist reaches out to all youth on a quarterly basis to remind them of the project.

#### *The Match Process*

For youth who wish to be matched with a volunteer, the Adult Connections Specialist notifies the chosen volunteer(s) and provides them with preliminary information about the youth. The Specialist then arranges and facilitates an in-person meeting with the youth and Success Coach (typically in a community setting or at the youth's home). The conversation is casual, with a focus on getting-to-know you topics and determining common interests. Following the meeting, the Specialist follows up with both individuals to gauge their interests in moving forward with the match. If there is a mutual interest, the youth and Success Coach meet in-person (without the presence of the Specialist) to continue the process of getting-to-know one another. The Specialist again follows up with both individuals and if they remain interested in moving forward, a third in-person meeting is held with all three parties. At that meeting, the match contract is devised and signed and the pair is considered to be officially matched (see appendix D).

For youth wishing to be matched with an adult with whom they share a pre-existing relationship, the Specialist reaches out to explain the project, discuss the expectations of the Success Coach role, and gauge their interest in forging a formal mentoring relationship. If interested in serving as a Success Coach, meetings will be conducted between the Specialist and both parties and the match contract will be signed.

#### *Youth Pre-Match Training*

To prepare the youth for participating in the service, the Specialist has a conversation with them concerning engagement in a mentoring relationship. There is an emphasis on clarifying the role of a Success Coach versus other adults in their lives and outlining expectations for the youth's role, such as maintaining consistent contact, communicating

changes in contact information, being realistic about one's schedule and time commitments, attending scheduled in-person meetings, and the appropriate manner for canceling/rescheduling appointments. They also discuss the youth's right to discontinue participation in the service and the appropriate process for doing so. Discussions are designed to help the youth feel accountable for their role in the relationship, as well as to aid them in feeling comfortable with the service.

### *The Match Contract*

The match contract is an agreement between the youth and Success Coach in regards to fulfilling their roles in the mentoring relationship. It outlines the type and frequency of contact that the youth wishes to have with his/her Success Coach, locations where they would like to meet, support the youth would like to receive, and goals he/she wishes to achieve with the help of the Success Coach. The document helps to solidify the commitment of both parties and serves as a tangible reminder of their dedication to the relationship. The contract is also considered to be fluid, in that it can be modified at any point to reflect relevant changes (i.e. modifications in goals, frequency of contact, etc.).

While matches are encouraged to collaboratively determine the frequency/type of communication that will work best for them, it is recommended that they meet at least once in-person each month and maintain one form of virtual contact weekly. These minimum recommendations are based on successes and challenges that matches have experienced. Activities completed together will vary based on the match's interests and the youth's goals and needs.

### *Ongoing Match Support*

The Adult Connections Specialists offer constant guidance and support to make the experience more meaningful and effective for the match. After a match is made, the assigned Specialist monitors the initial development of the relationship by maintaining frequent contact with the youth and the Success Coach. The Specialist works with both parties to address any issues or concerns that may arise, such as changes in one's level of engagement, lapses in communication, and scheduling conflicts. Once the match seems stable, the Specialist contacts the Success Coach on at least a monthly basis to determine the amount of interaction the match has maintained and monitor the strength of the relationship. In the beginning of the project the youth were contacted on a quarterly basis to complete an assessment gauging his/her satisfaction with the mentoring relationship as well as progress towards educational goals. Over time the Specialist decided that none of the youth were responding to this assessment and this was phased out. Although this was phased out, the Specialist is typically in touch with the youth on a more frequent basis and works to develop an individual relationship with him/her. Relationship building

between the youth and Specialist helps to cultivate a culture of support around the project and offers the youth an expanded community of trusted adult allies. Since this relationship is developed, the youth are more inclined to disclose any concerns about their match. Both the youth and the Success Coach are highly encouraged to reach out to the Specialist at any point to share successes, questions, or concerns. Participant feedback is highly important to the project and the Specialists continually work to identify ways that the team can modify its structure to be more supportive of individual need.

#### *Match Events*

Adult Connections holds two social events each year, which matches are invited to attend. The events allow youth and Success Coaches to meet other project participants and connect with Adult Connections staff. Subsequently, youth are provided with an opportunity to strengthen their support network by interacting and building relationships with peers (more specifically, peers who can share their experiences in foster care and relate to one another). Youth are also able to practice communication and socialization skills through networking with the Success Coaches in attendance.

#### *Match Termination*

While the Adult Connections Team aims to facilitate lasting relationships, participation in the project is finite for youth and Success Coaches. At the time that a match is made, both the youth and Success Coach are asked to make a minimum one-year commitment. As a match begins to approach the one-year mark, the Adult Connections Specialist consults with both parties to assess their interest in either extending or terminating the formal mentoring relationship. Should either the youth or Success Coach wish to terminate, the Specialist speaks to both individuals about appropriate, healthy manners to handle termination and aids them in navigating the process. The Specialist also holds an official termination meeting with the youth and Success Coach, who sign a closure agreement (See Appendix E) formally documenting the termination of the match. If they choose to do so, the parties can continue to maintain contact outside of the supervision of the Adult Connections Team. Youth are also dismissed from the intervention upon turning 21-years-old and emancipating from foster care. As such, the Specialist guides matches through the same process as the youth approaches their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Following the termination of the formal mentoring relationship, it is hoped that the individuals will remain connected and they are encouraged to do so.

At times, matches are terminated in an unplanned or premature fashion by either the youth or Success Coach discontinuing their participation. The Specialist works with the individuals to address these situations and aids them in processing the termination. This may include helping the youth or Success Coach to understand that they are not to blame,



providing a space for them to express disappointment to the other party or the Adult Connections Team, and guiding the dissenting party in taking ownership of their actions and effectively communicating their decision to terminate. If feasible, both the youth and Success Coach are encouraged to participate in a closure meeting. There are some times that the volunteer will no longer respond to the Specialist during the monthly check-ins. If this does occur a strongly worded letter is sent out explaining the importance of frequent communication. If there is still no response to this letter then discussion around termination will be had and a different letter will be sent out explaining why the match was terminated (See Appendix F).

### *Family Finding and Engagement*

To continue to expand the youth's community of support, the intervention also offers family finding and engagement services (see appendix G) to youth interested in locating and connecting with family members whose whereabouts may be unknown. In line with the goals of the Success Coach intervention, these efforts are intended to create an enhanced support network for the youth post-emancipation by establishing or strengthening familial relationships. When participants express an interest in the service, the assigned Adult Connections Specialist works with the youth and their care network (i.e. caseworker, caregiver, etc.) to collect information about the individuals. The Specialist may utilize databases and various search activities to identify their whereabouts. When appropriate and feasible, contact will be made with the family members and the Specialist will assist in facilitating the development of a permanent, caring relationship between the parties. Youth also have the option of requesting that the identified family member serve as their Success Coach, in which case the Specialist guides them through establishing a formal mentoring relationship.

### **Volunteer Recruitment**

The Adult Connections Team continuously works to recruit new volunteer Success Coaches through a variety of outlets, including volunteer recruitment websites, social media, professional associations, local universities, and the professional and social networks of the staff and partner agencies. The project strives to attract individuals with diverse backgrounds, personalities, and interests, who are truly committed to building a lasting relationship with an adolescent in foster care.

### *Volunteer Eligibility Process*

In order to become a Success Coach with the Adult Connections Team interested volunteers must complete a thorough eligibility process. This process is a tool to be used to screen out volunteers that will be a poor fit for this type of mentoring program. The eligibility steps are as follows (more details provided below):

1. Attend an Information Session
2. Participate in an in-person interview with program staff (see appendix H)
3. Complete required paperwork (see appendix I)
4. Submit to a fingerprint/background check (see appendix J)
5. Attend an Orientation
6. Submit a “Success Profile” to be considered by potential mentees (see appendix K)

### *Information Session*

Interested volunteers are asked to attend an information session, during which time Adult Connections staff provide a detailed overview of the program (see appendix L). A youth participant and volunteer Success Coach are also invited to speak at the session to share their firsthand experiences with Adult Connections. To provide a highly transparent depiction of the service and the Success Coach role, there is an emphasis on the expectations of the volunteers and the potential challenges they may face. The aim is to support volunteers in deciding whether they are an appropriate fit for the unique structure of the project and the relationship building process that the population requires.

### *Volunteer Interview*

Following their attendance at the information session, interested volunteers schedule a one-on-one interview with the Adult Connections Specialists. The interview is used to learn more about the volunteers’ experiences and backgrounds, their interests in the Success Coach role, and their expectations for the project. To continue to aid individuals in feeling fully informed about the service and their roles, the Specialists further discuss the struggles that may arise and the need to be committed to working through the challenges. Those interested in proceeding are provided with the information to complete the remaining steps of the eligibility process, including a fingerprinting background check and reference check (see appendix J).

### *Pre-Match Training and Orientation*

Once volunteers have completed the eligibility process, they attend a pre-match training and orientation session to better prepare them for engaging in the mentoring relationship. Adult Connections Specialists share an overview of frameworks for successful mentoring, the goals of the mentoring relationship, expectations regarding relationship building, working with youth who have experienced trauma, the match process, and the role of the Specialists once a match is made. Volunteers are provided with a volunteer handbook (see appendix M), as well as training materials for mandated reporting and universal precautions (see appendix N).

During the session, volunteers also fill out a Success Coach profile (see appendix K) which is used to capture a snapshot of who they are and introduce themselves to youth interested in being matched with a volunteer Success Coach. They provide information about their educational background and career, their interest in becoming a Success Coach, unique skills/talents, hobbies and interests, and challenges and successes they faced as a young adult. Adult Connections Specialists guide the volunteers through filling out the profile and provide helpful suggestions about the type of information to include.

### *Ongoing Training*

In the beginning years of the program, to support Success Coaches in effectively fulfilling their roles, the Specialists facilitated trainings to all Success Coaches (matched and unmatched) on a quarterly basis. In the last year, due to complications in participants schedules, information was shared via email about any relevant information that could aid Success Coaches. Examples of training topics include cultural competency, trauma-informed care, working with LGBTQ foster youth, substance abuse, and understanding the child welfare system. Specialists rely on feedback from the Success Coaches (as well as observations of their relationships with the youth) to determine the types of trainings that will be most beneficial to aiding them in supporting youth and tailor the topics accordingly.

### *Volunteer Meet-Ups*

To further support Success Coaches, one of the project's veteran volunteers hosted a monthly meet-up to provide Success Coaches with the opportunity to network with one another, build supportive relationships, and discuss successes and challenges associated with being a Success Coach. However, this was discontinued due to the lack of participation. This was an idea that was good in theory but did not survive in practice as there were not enough participants.