

Fostering Hope:
The Transformative Role of Community Support
for Foster Children and Families

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Most foster youth entering the child welfare system have experienced trauma and instability, and continue to face these challenges through frequent placement changes and inconsistent access to support. These disruptions can create lasting emotional, behavioral, and academic difficulties, especially when mental health and educational resources are limited. This thesis explores how community-based support systems can strengthen the resilience of foster youth and caregivers to mitigate the challenges posed by the foster care system. Through a literature review, I examine how consistent community support and positive social connections influence foster youths' well-being, development, and sense of identity. Kids at Heart is a Northern Colorado nonprofit focused on providing structured respite and enrichment programs for foster and adoptive families. Volunteering for and interviewing this organization's director has given me insight into how a reliable, caring environment can help rebuild trust and promote emotional growth among foster youth, while reducing caregiver stress. My findings indicate that a strong sense of community can make a meaningful difference for families navigating the foster care system, and this thesis highlights the importance of consistent, supportive networks for helping foster youth and caregivers thrive.

Introduction

It is estimated that 5 percent of children in the United States are placed in foster care at some point during childhood (Bald et al., 2022), with many of these youth having already experienced significant instability, trauma, or loss before placement. In 2023, U.S. child protection agencies received over 4 million “screened-in” reports of child abuse and neglect, affecting approximately 3 million children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). When a child is found to be in an unsafe or unfit environment, child protective services may intervene and place that child into foster care. The foster care system operates under state control, meaning the government assumes legal custody of children and makes decisions about their placement, services, and permanency goals on behalf of the court (Gross, 2019). This can mean a temporary placement while reunification is pursued, or permanent removal if returning home is not safe or possible. Foster care placements vary in type and include kinship care (placement with relatives), traditional foster care (placement with licensed non-relative families), therapeutic or treatment foster care (for youth with significant emotional or behavioral needs), group homes (residential facilities), and pre-adoptive placements (when adoption is the permanency goal) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). In 2016, youth entered foster care due to neglect (61%), parental drug abuse (34%), caretaker inability to cope (14%), physical abuse (12%), behavioral problems (11%), abandonment (5%), and sexual abuse (4%), among other reasons (Gross, 2019).

The foster care system's primary goals are to ensure child safety, achieve permanency (through reunification, adoption, or guardianship), and promote child well-being (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). Despite these goals of providing stability and protection, the foster care system often struggles to meet the emotional and social needs of the

children it serves (Pecora et al., 2009). Frequent placement changes, educational disruptions, and inconsistent access to supportive relationships can lead to long-term challenges in emotional regulation, academic achievement, and self-esteem (Gross, 2019; Clemens et al., 2017). Foster youth frequently report feelings of helplessness, isolation, and a lack of control over their lives as a result of these disruptions (Clemens et al., 2017). For both foster youth and caregivers, a lack of consistent community support can deepen feelings of isolation and instability (Piel et al., 2017).

Community-based networks can help bridge these gaps through programs like peer support groups, mentorship, and respite events; respite refers to a short period of rest or relief for caregivers. When foster youth are connected with peers and caring adults in consistent, positive settings, they begin to build resilience and a sense of belonging that helps them handle life's challenges (Haddow et al., 2021; Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023; Schofield, 2002). Similarly, when foster parents receive emotional and practical support, they experience less burnout and are better able to maintain stable placements (Piel et al., 2017; Cooley et al., 2019). Understanding how community engagement contributes to the well-being of foster families is important for improving outcomes within the foster care system.

Through literature review and analysis, I will explore the challenges that foster youth face within their lived experiences and ultimately discuss the impact that community-based support systems can have on the emotional, social, and developmental well-being of foster children, as well as the resilience of their caregivers. I will also review my experience volunteering with Kids at Heart, a Northern Colorado nonprofit that provides supportive networks for foster and adoptive families (Kids at Heart, 2021), as an example of how community programs aid in addressing the challenges faced by both foster youth and caregivers.

Personal Motivation

I have always felt a natural connection to working with children; it is something that comes easily to me and that I find extremely rewarding. I believe foster youth deserve the greatest care and attention, as they are often the ones most in need of patience, understanding, and consistent support. Many of these children have faced difficult and often traumatic experiences that no child should have to go through, and that reality is what inspired me to focus my Honors Thesis on this topic. As someone pursuing a career in elementary education, I want to learn more about how to better support vulnerable children and respond to their emotional and developmental needs.

I first learned about Kids at Heart a few years ago through a podcast project where I interviewed the organization's director. That conversation left a lasting impression on me and was something that opened my eyes to ways that I could make a difference, so I wanted to revisit the program as part of this Honors Thesis.

Challenges Faced by Children in Foster Care

How am I supposed to succeed when I have nothing? I'm working from nothing.

—Former foster youth, as cited in *Clemens et al.* (2017)

The foster care system is designed to temporarily care for children who cannot safely remain with their families, with the goal of either reunification or finding permanent placements. However, the reality of life in care often tells a different story. Many children enter the system already carrying the weight of trauma, neglect, or loss, only to face further disruption once placed. Constant moves between homes, schools, and caseworkers can make it difficult for them to form trusting relationships or feel any sense of control over their lives.

These experiences take a significant emotional toll. Even if it is the best decision for the child, being separated from their family can be deeply traumatic, with placement itself often bringing new challenges. Some children are moved into homes that are no better than the ones they left behind, while others struggle to adjust to unfamiliar rules, caregivers, and expectations. Foster youth experience, on average, nine placements before entering residential care (as cited in Ramsay-Irving, 2015), and each transition compounds feelings of loss and vulnerability.

This constant instability in relationships can leave youth in care feeling completely helpless and isolated. Over time, these experiences shape how they see themselves and the world around them, influencing their mental health, educational performance, and overall sense of belonging (Pecora et al., 2009; Gross, 2019). These long-term effects are especially pronounced among youth of color and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who face disproportionate barriers within the system.

Mental Health

Most children who enter foster care carry a history of trauma that can be difficult to process. The experiences that lead to removal are often followed by the additional stress of adapting to new homes and unfamiliar people. Unsurprisingly, research has shown that youth in foster care face a much higher risk of developing mental health disorders compared to the general population (Pecora et al., 2009). Many of these challenges trace back to the compounded effects of trauma associated with child maltreatment or foster care experiences (Gross, 2019). The instability of multiple placements and constant adjustment to new caregivers only deepens the emotional impact of those early experiences, and the emotional burdens follow them throughout their lives. A study cited in Clemens et al. (2017), found that transition-age foster youth were about twice as likely as their peers in the general population to meet the criteria for

post-traumatic stress disorder at some point in their lives. The Casey Field Office Mental Health Study (as cited in Pecora et al., 2009) revealed how widespread mental health diagnoses are among adolescents in care. About three in five youth (63.3 percent) had at least one lifetime diagnosis, and nearly one in four (22.8 percent) had three or more. The most common conditions included oppositional defiant disorder (29.3 percent), conduct disorder (20.7 percent), major depressive disorder (19.0 percent), panic attacks (18.9 percent), and ADHD (15.1 percent). These results emphasize the recurring pattern of emotional and behavioral difficulties among foster youth.

Despite the extensive need, access to effective mental health treatment is inconsistent in the foster care system. The National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-Being found that three out of four children who came to the attention of child welfare agencies for abuse or neglect with clear clinical impairments received no mental-health care within twelve months of the investigation (as cited in Pecora et al., 2009). This gap between need and service is disproportionately wider for some groups; race and ethnicity have been shown to influence who gets referred for care and who stays in treatment. African American youth, for instance, were significantly less likely to receive mental-health services. Racial bias in assessment and referral patterns, combined with the challenges of engagement and retention, may explain part of this disparity (as cited in Pecora et al., 2009). Beyond systemic access issues, there is also the matter of consistency. Many youths lose progress when they change placements and must start over with a new therapist or provider. Others encounter providers who lack trauma-informed training, leaving them feeling misunderstood or mistrustful of the process. Together, these factors create a system where mental health needs are high, but sustained, meaningful treatment is rare. The

picture that emerges is of young people navigating immense emotional challenges with limited, fragmented support.

Unlike formal mental health services provided through the foster care system, which often suffer from inconsistency due to placement changes and provider turnover, community-based programs offer a different kind of support. These programs exist outside the traditional foster care structure and include peer support groups, mentorship programs, respite events, and recreational activities. Rather than focusing solely on clinical treatment, they emphasize connection, belonging, and peer support.

Having consistent and caring adults outside the home, like mentors or program leaders, can contribute to a sense of safety and belonging for foster youth that formal services sometimes fail to provide (Schofield, 2002). Peer relationships built through community programs can also have powerful benefits (Haddow et al., 2021), giving youth a space to connect with others who understand their experiences. These bonds help reduce isolation, build trust, and encourage emotional growth (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). In this way, community support can be a vital source of stability and healing.

Education

Students in foster care face educational barriers that reflect the instability of their environment. Across the country, foster youth drop out two to four times more often than their peers, and fewer than half earn a high school diploma by age eighteen. In Colorado, fewer than one in three graduate with their class, compared to the national average of 82% (as cited in Clemens et al., 2017).

Many of these challenges stem from instability and circumstances that make school a secondary priority to survival. When students are dealing with uncertainty about their safety or

next placement, focusing in school becomes increasingly difficult. One student stated, “you’re sitting here dealing with so much that you don’t even know how to deal with your own mind” (Clemens et al., 2017). Some youth skip school to care for younger siblings when foster parents neglect that responsibility, while others drop out entirely to work full-time and afford basic needs (Clemens et al., 2017). For many, focusing on school feels unrealistic when day-to-day survival requires their full attention.

Frequent placement changes also make it incredibly difficult to stay on track academically; approximately 80% of former foster youth moved schools at least once, and one-third changed schools five or more times while in care (Gross, 2019). Each move can mean lost credits, missed lessons, and new teachers unfamiliar with their background. As one student shared, “You might go to one school where they’re learning something this semester, transfer schools and they’re learning something different—maybe something you already learned. But what they learned the first semester is something you missed out on” (Clemens et al., 2017). Stigma within schools further isolates them, with some students hiding their foster status to avoid judgment.

The academic effects of instability are compounded by social and structural inequities. Youth of color comprise 44% of the foster care population and face disproportionate educational barriers. Research shows that foster youth are more likely to attend lower-performing schools, not necessarily because of the foster care system itself, but due to broader socioeconomic and racial inequalities that affect which children enter care and where they live (Gross, 2019). In 2015-2016, 45% of Black youth and 45% of Hispanic youth attended high-poverty schools, compared to only 8% of White youth (as cited in Gross, 2019). This concentration in

underfunded schools limits foster youths' access to advanced courses and extracurriculars, causing them to fall behind academically at earlier ages than their peers.

Even for those who persevere, barriers continue beyond high school. Only 64% of 19-year-olds with foster care history earn a diploma or GED, compared to 90% of their peers, and while more than 70% aspire to attend college, just 20% actually enroll (Gross, 2019). Financial hardship, lack of family guidance, and minimal academic support all play a role.

Community-based programs that provide tutoring, mentorship, and stable social networks can help fill this gap. When foster youth are supported by adults who understand their experiences and believe in their potential, they are far more likely to stay engaged, succeed academically, and envision a future beyond just getting by.

The Transformative Role of Community Support

The formal foster care system operates under state oversight with mandated services focused on safety, permanency, and well-being. However, community-based programs occupy a distinct space outside this official structure. These programs do not replace formal placements or casework services; instead, they provide a supplemental layer of support that addresses relationship and belonging needs the system itself cannot consistently deliver due to high caseloads, frequent staff turnover, and limited resources. Operating independently of state control, community programs offer peer connections, mentorship, and respite care across all placement types. While the system manages placements and legal processes, community networks provide the steady human connections that foster youth and families need to build resilience and stability.

Navigating the foster care system can be an overwhelming and isolating experience for both children and caregivers. To gain an inside perspective on this, I interviewed Kids at Heart's

executive director, Ethan Dexter. Overall, Dexter explained that a caring, consistent community benefits both children and caregivers, allowing each to return home feeling more connected, supported, and ready to navigate challenges together. He stated, “I have seen many of the kids who come repeatedly grow beyond expectations.” The following sections explore the importance of these networks for foster youth and caregivers and detail Kids at Heart as an example of community support in action.

Importance of Community Support Networks for Foster Youth

Consistent community support helps foster youth understand that they are capable of growth despite the challenges they’ve faced. This support plays a major role in their emotional, social, and academic success, contributing to long-term resilience and well-being. To enter adulthood with confidence and hope, foster youth need to feel secure in their ability to rely on meaningful support from others and access the resources they need to succeed. Having people they can lean on, especially others with similar experiences, helps build an essential sense of belonging and stability.

Many foster youth face barriers to forming positive peer relationships and may struggle with feeling included and understood, which makes community support particularly important. In my interview with the Kids at Heart director, Ethan Dexter, he explained that most of the children the organization serves have trauma related to being removed from their homes, which often creates trust issues. According to Dexter, the first few times a child attends their community events can be difficult; there are often behavioral issues, volatile emotions, and a reluctance to engage with others. However, he shared that the predictable routines, familiar staff, and consistent group of peers provide a sense of safety that helps many youths open up and learn to trust again. After attending regularly, Dexter has seen children begin forming friendships,

regulating emotions more effectively, and showing noticeable social and behavioral growth. He described this as “practicing trust,” emphasizing that these repeated positive experiences allow foster youth to begin healing from the trauma they’ve experienced in their own lives. They are able to develop their sense of self in a positive way, rebuilding confidence and envisioning a more hopeful and stable future for themselves. Dexter emphasized that many caregivers report their children asking to attend the events, which he sees as a sign of emotional safety.

Programs that bring foster youth together in safe, structured environments can be both beneficial and healing, offering consistency that may be missing elsewhere in their lives. Social connectedness and belonging are fundamental human needs (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). Research shows that a lack of these connections can have serious consequences for both mental and physical health, with risks comparable to those associated with obesity or smoking (as cited in Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). This emphasizes how essential consistent and supportive relationships are for the long-term well-being of foster youth, who are already navigating instability.

Unfortunately, peer relationships in alternative care settings are often viewed as problematic. This can lead to restrictions that unintentionally increase isolation. While it is true that some youth in care may be vulnerable to high-risk behaviors, separating them from peers is not a solution. Research suggests that healthy peer relationships can instead promote resilience and emotional regulation, offering vital emotional and practical support as youth approach adulthood (Haddow et al., 2021). Young people in care have expressed that shared experiences with other foster youth allow them to form especially strong bonds, helping them feel understood and less alone. They may feel more comfortable being around other fostered peers in situations

where they feel stigmatized or devalued based on their living situation. One interviewee in the Clemens et al. (2017) study described how stigma affected her experience at school:

As soon as I told one person, “Hey, I’m in foster care,” kids over here, they made judgments automatically. “Oh, she’s in foster care because she’s a bad kid. I don’t want to hang out with her. I don’t want to be friends with her. I don’t even want to get to know her.” Then there’s this social barrier that’s like, I don’t really want to be at school. All they’re going to do is judge me. All they’re going to do is stereotype me.

This experience highlights how stigma can isolate foster youth and limit their confidence in social and academic settings. Having access to spaces where they are accepted and understood can make an enormous difference in how these youth see themselves and their potential.

The stigma surrounding foster care can also shape identity and self-perception. Negative assumptions from others may lead youth to lower their expectations or withdraw from opportunities. As Clemens et al. (2017) explain, when students internalize low expectations, they often adjust their goals to match them. This makes community programs even more vital; when foster youth have supportive adults and peers who believe in them and recognize their accomplishments, they are more likely to develop motivation, confidence, and a positive self-concept.

Research from Haddow et al. (2021) supports these ideas. Their analysis showed that positive peer networks were associated with fewer internalizing problems, higher self-esteem, and stronger coping skills. Youth with supportive peer groups also exhibited lower levels of anxiety and aggression, and when these relationships were combined with strong caregiver connections, the effects of negative life events were reduced. These findings highlight how positive social networks can buffer the impact of early adversity and foster lasting resilience.

Haddow et al. (2021) also discussed a strength-based intervention that provided customized support to both the child and all surrounding systems involved in their care. Results showed that children who participated in the program formed stronger, more positive peer relationships, which in turn led to reduced delinquent behavior among both male and female participants. These results reflect the central theme of this thesis: when a child is surrounded by a supportive community, they are better equipped to grow, overcome adversity, and develop a positive sense of belonging.

Haim-Litevsky et al. (2023) further emphasized the strong connection between belonging, participation, and well-being. Their study found that participation in meaningful, everyday activities helps strengthen an individual's sense of belonging and community connectedness. This sense of connection was shown to be a key factor in improving overall well-being, acting as a bridge between social participation and emotional health. The researchers explained that belonging is built through mutual trust, reciprocity, and feeling like a part of a larger group of individuals.

Attachment theory also helps explain why this kind of community support is so valuable. Schofield (2002) describes how a sense of "felt security" frees children to explore, learn, and build confidence in their abilities. When that secure base is missing at home, community programs can help fill the gap by offering stability, trust, and encouragement. Schofield also found that constructive activities like art, recreation, or problem-solving help youth develop identity, competence, and autonomy. These opportunities allow children to "act rather than react," a key component of resilience. Community-based programs and respite events create these opportunities. By helping youth engage in creative, collaborative, and skill-building experiences, they strengthen each child's belief in their own abilities and future potential.

Importance of Community Support Networks for Caregivers and Family Resilience

Being able to provide a child coming from hardship with stability and a caring home can be extremely rewarding for foster parents, although emotionally demanding at times as well. Piel et al. (2017) examined how foster families build and use support systems to maintain resiliency in the face of the challenges that come with fostering. They found a pattern in nearly every participant describing social support as essential to their ability to continue fostering. One foster parent emphasized, “Building your supports is huge... whatever that support is, make sure you utilize them.” Many caregivers also spoke about the value of reciprocity; mentoring newer foster parents and building relationships that were mutually beneficial. They explained that this helped them feel more connected within their caregiving communities and strengthened their confidence in their own abilities. This reinforces the idea that resilience is built through connection.

Foster parents play a key role in providing safety, structure, and care to children who have often experienced trauma, and social support is especially important given the intense behavioral and emotional challenges that come with this role. Cooley et al. (2019) reported that approximately one-third of youth in state custody display behavioral or emotional problems, including depression, aggression, and low self-worth. These difficulties can be overwhelming for caregivers and can sometimes lead to placement disruptions or cause foster parents to stop fostering altogether. Piel et al. (2017) found that caregivers who reported higher levels of social support also experienced greater confidence, satisfaction, and overall well-being. In contrast, those with limited support described more difficulty managing behavioral issues and higher levels of stress. These results emphasize the importance of strong support systems in managing these stressors, as placement disruptions can further harm children who are already struggling with instability.

Programs and community networks can play a major role in reducing caregivers' burnout. Cooley et al. (2019) found that foster parents ranked respite care among the most valuable forms of support. These opportunities for temporary relief give caregivers time to recharge and allow them to connect with other foster parents, share strategies, and gain perspective from those with similar experiences. In my interview with Ethan Dexter, Kids at Heart's executive director, he also emphasized how essential consistent respite is for caregivers. He noted that nationally, nearly half of foster caregivers stop fostering within their first year, often due to exhaustion and burnout. Kids at Heart's events give caregivers several hours to rest, recharge, and regroup while knowing their children are safe, which Dexter described as crucial for helping adults maintain long-term caregiving stability. Piel et al. (2017) highlighted that informal support from other foster families, friends, and community organizations often compensates for the lack of formal support within the foster care system. Sharing experiences in these spaces can reduce isolation and remind caregivers that they are not alone in their efforts.

Together, these findings show that strong community connections are critical to the resilience of foster families. Supportive relationships through both formal programs and informal networks help caregivers manage stress and maintain stable placements. When foster parents feel supported and confident in their role, the children in their care benefit from greater consistency and emotional security.

Case Study

Kids at Heart is a non-profit organization that offers respite, peer connection, and enrichment programming for foster and adoptive families in the Northern Colorado area. This organization offers summer camps and trips, where kids are able to build friendships while strengthening confidence and independence in a supportive environment (Kids at Heart, 2021).

The organization also hosts “Fundango” events every other weekend that offer a safe and positive environment for foster and adoptive children to come together and just be kids, while caregivers are given the chance to rest and recharge. Children ages 4-12 are split into cohorts of up to 10 children each in the following age groups: 4-5 years, 6-8 years, and 9-12 years. Each cohort has a staff leader and at least one volunteer helper. These groups rotate through a variety of activities, including games, arts and crafts, recreational activities, and STEM-based projects. Infants and toddlers (ages 1-3) are cared for in a nursery setting, and teens (ages 13-17) have their own area to hang out in, following a more flexible schedule. Because many foster youths are constantly going through changes out of their control, Fundango is focused on providing them with a place of consistency and structure where they can come and know what to expect.

In my interview with Kids at Heart’s executive director, Ethan Dexter, he noted that they had seen a clear gap in support for foster teens in the system and implemented teen-specific programs to help address this. Kids at Heart offers a variety of Teen Connect programs for youth ages 13–17, such as Teen Connect: Rock Climbing. This program gives teens a fun outlet that promotes goal setting, responsibility, decision making, and teamwork, while also helping them build confidence and trust in both themselves and others. It allows them to put effort into something challenging and experience the rewards of their persistence. Another program, Teen Connect: Homework Hangout, provides a supervised space for foster and adoptive teens to come together and focus on their schoolwork, promoting academic success and accountability (Kids at Heart, 2021). This program serves as a great example of how community-based support can help address the educational challenges foster youth often face by giving them structure and encouragement to stay on track with their studies. Teens also often visit a community garden, which gives them the chance to work together toward something meaningful and visible, offering

a sense of purpose and contribution. Alongside benefiting the community, it gives the teens something they can take pride in, seeing their work make a difference. Activities like these embody the idea highlighted by Haim-Litevsky et al. (2023), showing how participation in meaningful, shared experiences can foster belonging and promote overall well-being.

Initiatives like Kids at Heart give youth a consistent community to rely on where they can build meaningful relationships and develop important social skills. These community events help children connect with others who share similar life experiences, creating an environment where they feel understood and accepted. For many foster youths, this sense of connection can be a relief; they can talk openly about their foster siblings or living situations without fear of being judged or misunderstood. In this setting, those experiences are normalized rather than stigmatized.

The different programs offered by Kids at Heart encourage growth and confidence by allowing children to explore their abilities in supportive settings. Activities like the STEM projects during Fundango events give even the youngest participants a chance to problem-solve and experience accomplishment, helping build a foundation of self-efficacy that can be carried into other areas of their lives. Instilling confidence and capability in foster youth is especially important, as many face low expectations or self-doubt shaped by their experiences. Through these programs, Kids at Heart empowers children to challenge those limitations and build relationships grounded in trust and encouragement (Kids at Heart, 2021).

Caregivers also benefit from these events, as they get a temporary break to relax and de-stress. Additionally, many stay in the parking lot after drop-off, talking and sharing advice; these conversations give them a space to connect with people who understand the challenges of fostering, allowing them to vent frustrations and exchange strategies that have worked for them.

Having other adults to talk to helps reduce feelings of isolation and reminds them that they are not alone in their efforts to provide care and stability for the children they support. The ways children grow through these events are often noticeable at home too, helping make day-to-day caregiving feel a little easier and less overwhelming.

Volunteering for Kids at Heart: Experience and Observations

I volunteered at one of these Fundango community events for Kids at Heart to observe first-hand how programs like this can have a positive impact on foster youth. All identifying details have been modified to protect the privacy of the children and families involved. I completed a background check and fingerprinting before the event, as well as volunteer training. This training started with an overview of the organization's mission, emphasizing how its structure and consistency help create a sense of safety for the kids. They prepared us for what to expect from the event, difficult experiences some of the kids have been through, and how this might appear in their behaviors or emotions. The training also covered important rules and boundaries put in place to ensure that the kids felt comfortable and safe. For example, no adult is ever allowed to be alone with a single child; another volunteer, staff member, or child must always be present. Physical contact was to be kept minimal and appropriate. We were also encouraged to use inclusive language that acknowledged each child's unique family situation, using terms such as "the adults who brought you here," rather than "parents," "mom," or "dad."

As the kids were dropped off, they were checked in and went to hang out in the gym until we began the first rotation. Children were split into age groups to rotate through a variety of activities, with the exception of infants/toddlers and teens; infants and toddlers were taken care of in the nursery, and teens hung out in their own separate area. Each cohort was led by a staff member as the group leader, and volunteers were paired with a staff member. I was assigned to

the 4-5-year-old age group, which was the youngest category aside from the infants and toddlers. We went to the STEM rotation first, where the kids worked on a hands-on project making small zipline harnesses for easter eggs. Next, we rotated to recreation, where they had a chance to burn off energy and play freely in the gym, with options like soccer, frisbee, and basketball. We then went to the games rotation, which had options like air hockey and ping pong. After three rotations, all cohorts had dinner together, allowing the kids to spend time with any siblings or friends they may have had in other age groups. Our final rotation after this was art, where they created paper pumpkins using strips of paper and pipe cleaners.

It was great to see these young kids critically think and help each other work through problems when completing the STEM and art activities. These rotations helped them practice patience and explore their own creative ideas, and I could tell they all felt excited and accomplished about the things they made. For the STEM and art rotations, different age groups had different levels of difficulty in tasks, allowing them to be challenged and participate in something they could feel accomplished with. I noticed that the recreation and games rotations facilitated a lot of bonding and teamwork, and it was great seeing the kids connect and just having fun with each other. These moments showed how community events like this can help foster social skills and create a sense of belonging among children. At the end of the night, kids all gathered back into the gym and waited until their caretaker arrived to check them out.

Once all the kids had been picked up, we had a group meeting to discuss how the night went, including what went well, challenges people had, and anything else noticeable that people wanted to share. It was insightful hearing staff and volunteers from other age groups talk about their experiences that I didn't get to see directly. One group leader shared that a few kids experienced emotional difficulties involving talk of self-harming; while it is difficult to hear,

these kinds of thoughts and emotions are not uncommon among foster youth. The group leader noted that peer support from siblings and other foster youth helped the children process difficult emotions. Foster children sometimes struggle to communicate distressing feelings to caregivers due to the fear of being misunderstood or facing negative reactions. They often feel safer confiding in peers who have gone through similar experiences, allowing them to express emotions they might otherwise withhold at home.

Throughout the evening, I noticed how comfortable many of the kids seemed with the group leaders. It was clear that the consistency of seeing familiar adults each time helped them feel secure and cared for. The same was true for their interactions with one another; many of the children were excited to see friends they recognized from previous events. For kids whose home or school environments may change often, these familiar faces and routines can offer an important sense of stability and belonging.

I also noticed how eager a lot of the kids were for attention and interaction from the adults around them. They would call out for me to watch when they scored a point, pull me into different games, and sometimes even compete with one another to be noticed. It seemed less about the activities themselves and more about wanting to feel seen, valued, and cared for by an adult, something that may not always be consistent in their daily lives. When one child received attention or praise from an adult, many of the others wanted to join in and do the same thing. This kind of imitation reflected their desire for connection and positive attention.

While some children were shy or withdrawn at the start of the evening, many gradually opened up as they grew more comfortable. One girl in my group, for example, arrived in tears; she was very quiet and didn't want to be separated from siblings in an older age group. During our first rotation, I spent some extra time talking to and helping her, and by the time we got to

the next rotation in the gym, she was laughing and playing with the others. Watching her confidence grow over the course of the event was heartwarming and showed how powerful patience, encouragement, and a supportive environment can be for kids like her.

One thing that really stood out to me was the way the children looked after one another, especially the bonds between siblings, both biological and foster. A lot of the children get to see siblings who they have been temporarily separated from at these events. The older siblings seemed to take on a caring, protective role, checking in on their younger siblings and making sure they were having a good time. Many of the younger children were eager to point out who their foster siblings were, and it was evident how much they looked up to and trusted them. Some even wanted to stay with their siblings' groups throughout the day. Moments like these revealed how strong these siblings' bonds can be, and how essential those relationships are in giving these children someone to rely on and feel connected to.

At times, a few of the kids seemed to struggle with managing their emotions or staying focused. One child in my group was constantly running toward different activity stations or trying to go through the exit door, and it was difficult to get them to stay with the group. Their behavior seemed more like restlessness and impulsiveness than intentional disobedience. However, this behavior improved when we were able to get them engaged and interested in activities. Another child became frustrated and had outbursts when things didn't go their way, such as losing a game or struggling with an activity. Still, even after these moments, they came back and kept trying. These behaviors reflected both the challenges many foster children face with emotional regulation and the progress that can happen when they're in a safe, supportive space.

It is important to note that my observations at Kids at Heart reflect the Northern Colorado context, where demographics, resources, and community structures may differ from other regions. Foster care experiences and the effectiveness of community programs can vary significantly between urban and rural areas, as well as across regions with different racial and socioeconomic compositions. While these findings demonstrate the value of community support in this specific setting, similar programs in other areas may face different challenges or yield different outcomes.

Broader Context and Significance

An interdisciplinary lens involving psychology, education, social work, and public policy is necessary to fully understand the complex challenges rooted in the foster care system and how these can best be addressed. The neglect, instability, and trauma that most foster youth experience from a young age are consistently shown to have lasting effects on brain development, emotional health, and academic performance. Although foster parents and caseworkers hold significant responsibility in ensuring the success of youth in their care, it is also essential that all community members influencing a child's environment take steps to support these youth as best as they can. In talking about their struggles, former foster youth consistently mentioned a lack of understanding and resources from the educational system, compounded by frequent school changes and limited academic support at home. Educators can use this insight to create more supportive classrooms by recognizing and accommodating the unique challenges foster youth face. Those in social work and policy should take note of the results highlighted in this thesis, as they have the power to prioritize outreach and respite programs needed to supplement lacking areas in the foster care system.

Strengthening community support networks where people are actively invested in each other's well-being has countless outcomes that benefit society as a whole. Educational outcomes improve significantly. Placement disruptions are reduced when caregivers receive respite and emotional support. Foster youth gain a stronger sense of belonging and can develop better coping skills, promoting overall resilience. Increasing support helps children become confident, capable adults who contribute positively to their communities, and the number of youths entering into adult life unprepared decreases greatly. Community support, in turn, reduces the long-term strain on schools, health care systems, and social services. Additionally, providing foster children with these resources helps break cycles of trauma and instability that might have otherwise continued into the next generation.

Resilience is rarely built in isolation; it is cultivated through shared care and collective responsibility. Community support doesn't require solving everything at once. Anyone can create meaningful change through simply volunteering a few hours of their time at an event, supporting a local nonprofit, or even just educating themselves and others about foster care.

Personal Reflection

Researching this issue and volunteering for Kids at Heart opened my eyes to the extreme disparities foster youth face and helped me understand the effects their experiences can have on their learning, behavior, and relationships. Their need for support motivates me to get involved in areas where I can help contribute to this, and seeing the way that staff members interacted with the kids and the strong relationships they built inspires me. As someone pursuing a career in elementary education, I believe the knowledge I have gained through this experience will help me become a more compassionate and effective educator. Although there are challenges in

working with vulnerable youth, the success of my experience made me feel confident in my abilities and further reinforced that working with kids is what I am meant to do.

Conclusion

The purpose of this Honors Thesis was to research the specific challenges foster youth face and explore how community-based support systems can make a positive difference in the emotional, social, and developmental well-being of foster children and families. Through a review of existing literature and my own experiences volunteering with Kids at Heart, I found that community support lays the foundation for stability, resilience, and a sense of belonging among foster youth.

Instability, trauma, isolation, and stigma were consistently highlighted as the main challenges these kids face. The constant inconsistency of frequent placement changes leads to difficulties in emotional development, inconsistent education, and an overall lack of security. Mental health diagnoses among children in care are extremely high due to the experiences they've lived through, and foster parents often struggle to deal with the way these behaviors manifest. Insight from former foster youth and foster parents consistently reflected the positive difference they felt community support made in the challenges they faced. For caregivers, forming relationships with other foster parents and having support to lean on greatly increased satisfaction and resilience, leading to fewer changes in placement for children. Community programs like Kids at Heart can help in providing a secure base for young people when the foster care system comes up short, and the sense of belonging they feel can change how they view themselves and the world around them. Volunteering for this program allowed me to observe this directly, and it was evident that these kids benefited from this safe, supportive place where they were surrounded by peers going through similar situations.

Meaningful change begins at the community level; when people come together to provide care, consistency, and understanding, the effects are significant. Strengthening community networks and building more compassionate and informed communities lays the foundation for a stronger future.

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