

Design of a Positive Youth Development Program in the Digital Landscape:

TeenWise Constellation Connection App

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YDP 8880: Special Topics – Youth and Technology

June 25, 2018

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Introduction

There were over 9,000 youth in out of home care in Washington State on January 1st, 2018 (Partners for Our Children, 2018). Alumni of foster care are more likely than their peers from intact families to have mental health problems, low academic achievement, and live at or below the poverty line (Pecora et al., 2005). According to Partners for our Children, of the youth in out of home care in Washington in 2018, almost 3,000 were ages 10-17. Adolescents in the Washington foster care system are much more likely to be placed in Behavioral Rehabilitation Service (BRS) licensed foster homes (WA DSHS, 2016). BRS homes are reserved for children and youth with the highest levels of behaviors and need for support (WA DSHS, 2016). These youth are much more likely to have more placement changes, with the mean number of placements for BRS youth being 8.8 placements, compared to youth placed in kinship care who have a mean placement number of 2.6 (WA DSHS, 2016). Without a stable placement youth in care often struggle to create and maintain social networks and supports. A lack of stability in placement can increase negative behaviors and outcomes (Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007).

The Mockingbird Society is a non-profit organization in Washington State that aims to improve the foster care system and end youth homelessness (The Mockingbird Society [TMS], 2018). Since 2004, Mockingbird has encouraged the adoption of the MOCKINGBIRD FAMILY™ to improve foster parent retention and youth outcomes (TMS, 2018). The MOCKINGBIRD FAMILY™ is a unique way of foster care delivery that is based off an extended family structure, providing greater support for foster parents and youth alike. Adolescents have unique developmental needs compared to other stages of youth development (Haueser-Cram, Nugent, Thies, & Travers, 2014). As such, foster homes serving adolescents

should receive specialized training and support to adequately meet the needs of the youth. Therefore, Bernard and Tom (2017) proposed the TeenWise Constellation Program, which is designed specifically to serve youth ages 12-17. Part of the program design includes the development and use of the TeenWise Constellation Connect App to aid in communication and personal connections between members in the constellation including foster parents, foster youth, and other biological siblings. The purpose of this paper will be to describe the TeenWise Constellation Connect App as a critical component of the TeenWise Constellation Program in providing an environment for adolescent youth to thrive.

Description of Program

The MOCKINGBIRD FAMILY™ is a unique way of doing foster care that is designed to increase social supports and connections for foster families with the desired outcome of greater foster parent retention and stability for foster youth. The MOCKINGBIRD FAMILY™ essentially replicates an extended family structure for foster families (see Figure 1). It creates an intentional community, or Constellation, of 6-10 foster families centered around a Hub Home, with the Hub Home parents being experienced in the foster care system (TMS, 2018).

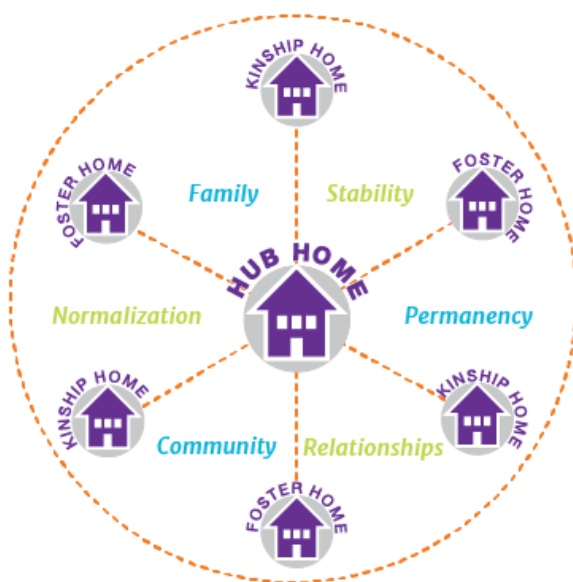


Figure 1: A MOCKINGBIRD FAMILY™ consists of 6-10 foster homes centered around a Hub Home in an intentional community that increases family bonds, stability, permanency, relationships, community, and normalization. Image provided by The Mockingbird Society (2018).

The Hub Home provides guidance, planned and emergency respite care, and general support for the other families in the constellation (TMS, 2018). In addition, the Constellation meets monthly to increase social connections and to provide continued education and training for the foster parents (TMS, 2018). Currently, constellations are serving foster parents and children across the United States and around the world (Cooper, 2018).

The TeenWise Constellation Program, originally proposed by Bernard and Tom (2017), modifies the MOCKINGBIRD FAMILY™ to specifically serve adolescents (ages 12-17) in foster care. TeenWise Constellations differ from the typical Constellations in several ways. First, the monthly Constellation meetings will focus on the unique needs of adolescents. This includes planned curriculum for the youth as well as the foster parents. Second, TeenWise Constellations will also host Mentor Mixer Events 3-4 times per year. The Mentor Mixer events will provide the constellation youth an opportunity to meet and connect with other community members in order to increase the youth's social support network. The final key component of the TeenWise Constellation Program is the TeenWise Constellation Connection App.

The TeenWise Constellation Connection App, or TeenWise Connect for short, offers an online platform for adolescent foster youth and families to connect and support each other on and offline. TeenWise Connect has several components that are designed to meet the Positive Technological Development (PTD) framework proposed by Bers (2012). The PTD framework recommends different strategies to utilize technology in order to provide opportunities for youth to develop Lerner and colleague's (2005) six C's of Positive Youth Development (competence, confidence, connection, character, caring and contribution). The PTD framework's technology behaviors include opportunities to communicate, collaborate, build community, create content,

be creative, and have a choice of conduct (Bers, 2012). Briefly, the main components of TeenWise Connect are:

- Online Forums – Three separate online forums will be created. There will be a foster parent forum, foster teen forum and a biological sibling forum. The biological sibling forum will be available to youth in the families who are not part of the foster care system, including biological children of the foster parents. Each forum will provide a private space for the participants to *communicate* with each other and *build community*. The forums will provide opportunities for participants to ask questions and seek advice. In addition, activities and discussion threads will be posted to encourage further use and development of skills learned during the in-person Constellation meetings. The forums will be mostly unstructured, allowing participants to *create the content* and have a *choice of conduct*. The goal in providing the separate forums is to provide an opportunity for participants to build **connections** with others in their community. Additionally, in providing opportunities to seek and give advice participants can develop their skills in **caring** and **contributing** to others. Importantly, the youth forums will be monitored by older peers/near-peers to allow youth participants more autonomy from adults in their lives.
- Gaming Platform - A team-based gaming platform will be integrated into the online app. The game design will encourage participants to *communicate, collaborate, and be creative* in solving problems and meeting the game goal. As participants play the game more they will learn new skills. In this way youth participants will have the opportunity to build their **competence, confidence, and connection** to others. Participants will be

encouraged to play the game by integrating time into the Constellation meetings to play while in the same space and celebrate successes in-person.

- Meet-Up Board – An activity board and calendar will be integrated into the TeenWise Connect App. Parents, youth, and social workers will be able to post upcoming community events and opportunities. TeenWise Connect users will also be able to post desired activities. The activity board and calendar will also function to assist in connecting families to organize event and travel logistics such as carpooling opportunities. The function of this portion of the application is to allow participants to *communicate* and *build community*. In addition, by allowing youth to post ideas of activities they would like to participate in they are given a *choice of conduct*. Overall, the Meet-Up Board functions to build community **connections**.

Developmental Milestones

Adolescents have unique developmental needs. During adolescence, youth are undergoing rapid changes physically, cognitively, and psychosocially (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). Youth in this stage are exploring their self-identity or sense of self (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). According to Marcia's patterns of identity status, adolescents work towards identity achievement based on two dimensions, commitment and exploration (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). Additionally, adolescents increasingly desire a sense of autonomy (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). In searching for autonomy, teens begin to look for approval, connection, and emotional support from peers rather than from parents (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). The change from family focused to peer focused relationships often causes conflict between youth and their parents or guardians (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). Another developmental task for youth in this age group is working through determining their personal ethical and moral belief systems and how they will socially

engage with their community (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). It is important that adolescents be given the opportunity to explore their identity and belief systems (Hauser-Cram et al., 2014). Technology and specifically social networking sites may be providing youth a mode to meet many of their developmental needs including opportunities to explore identity and to connect to peers (Felt & Robb, 2016). In connecting with peers through social media sites, youth have the opportunity to build social supports outside of their immediate family which supports their developmental need to grow autonomy.

Curriculum

The TeenWise Constellation Program is designed to create stronger connections between all those participating in the constellation including foster parents, foster youth, biological children of foster parents, and social workers. The core of the program is the in-person monthly Constellation meetings. The Constellation meetings will follow structured curriculum including activities and education related to healthy relationship and communication skills, team work and collaboration skills, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation techniques, among others. Importantly, the youth will provide feedback to the social workers and Constellation meeting facilitators on which topics are most relevant for them. Furthermore, alumni of foster care will serve as peer/near-peer mentors and co-facilitators during the Constellation meetings.

The TeenWise Constellation Connect App design is based on the co-construction model of adolescents' online behavior. This model posits that adolescents are not passive users of technology, but rather that youth are actively creating, or co-constructing, their online environment (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). The co-construction model also suggests that an adolescent's offline and online environment are connected, with similar strengths and challenges appearing in both venues (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). TeenWise Connect provides a

platform to strengthen the connections created and lessons learned during the in-person Constellation meetings through opportunities to connect, build community, and practice skills learned throughout the month in an online environment. The peer/near-peer mentors will post discussion questions and activities in the youth forums that will build off the activities from the previous month's Constellation meeting. Importantly, TeenWise program staff will emphasize to the parents and youth that the TeenWise Connect forum is a space for them to use how they would like, empowering them to co-create the space.

TeenWise Connect offers both structured and unstructured environments for youth to connect with each other in a secure setting. Both the forum and the gaming platform allow for youth to connect synchronously and asynchronously with other youth and peer/near-peer mentors. The gaming platform will utilize Game Based Learning theory with the overall outcome to build communication and critical thinking skills. Game Based Learning theory is a framework that posits that game content and play can enhance knowledge and skill development, especially when games include problem solving tasks and opportunities to feel achievement (Qian & Clark, 2016). Youth participants may choose how often they utilize the TeenWise Connect App and which portions of the app they utilize most. In addition, the teen forums are not monitored by the foster parents or social workers but rather a peer/near-peer mentor. These program characteristics meet the adolescent developmental need for exploring and gaining autonomy.

Technology

There are two main types of technology utilized in the TeenWise Connect App. The forums and meet-up board function as a social networking site. Current research shows mixed results as to potential benefits and risks to using social networking sites (Best, Manktelow, &

Taylor, 2014). However, some literature shows that social networking sites provide a medium for youth to expand their social networks and support system (Best et al., 2014). Since the primary goal of the TeenWise Constellation Program is to build and strengthen social supports for youth, a social networking site is an appropriate use of technology. In addition, literature suggests that adolescents may be more willing to disclose personal information online and that online forums may provide an emotionally supportive environment for youth (Best et al., 2014). However, social networking sites also provide opportunities for youth to be exposed to cyber-bullying. For the forums and meet-up board to function as a beneficial component of the program, they will need to be monitored for inappropriate or harmful posts.

The second type of technology utilized in the program design is the gaming platform. The gaming platform provides a fun and interactive medium for the youth in the TeenWise Constellation Program to connect and build skills. The inclusion of the gaming platform in the TeenWise Connect app was based on two goals. First, the gaming platform is meant to recruit and bring TeenWise Constellation youth to the TeenWise Connect App. The idea being that youth may come initially to play the online game and then be encouraged to use the forum and meet-up board functions as well. Second, game-based learning can be used to help youth develop 21st century skills (Qian & Clark, 2016). In addition, prosocial gaming interactions have been shown to be positively correlated with prosocial behavior and empathy in-person (Harrington & O'Connell, 2016). Since teens in foster care are more likely to be exhibiting high negative behaviors as shown through the high BRS placements, providing opportunities for them to practice and learn prosocial interactions may be beneficial. Importantly, the gaming platform will need to be updated in order to stay relevant with the type of content and gaming styles that the youth find interesting and appealing.

Mentoring Model

The peer/near-peer mentors hold the main adult role in the delivery of TeenWise Connect. They will function to co-construct the youth forum environment following the youths' lead. Ensher and colleagues (as cited in Shpigelman, 2013) proposed three typologies of E-Mentoring, computer-mediated communication (CMC) only, CMC-primary, and CMC-supplemental. According to the descriptions, TeenWise Connect utilizes the CMC-primary type of E-mentoring as more than 50% of the interactions are conducted online. Furthermore, Shpigelman (2013) discusses two focuses of E-mentoring programs. Developmental programs focus on personal development and empowerment while instrumental programs are more goal and task oriented (Shpigelman, 2013). TeenWise Connect has a dual focus with both developmental and instrumental aspects. The peer/near-peer mentors provide intentional tasks and interactions to expand skill-based learning from the in-person Constellation meetings as well as opportunities for personal empowerment of the youth. The peer/near-peer mentors will need training in Positive Youth Development programming and Positive Technological Development practices. In addition, the mentors will need to understand methods for effective and clear online communication.

Access Environment

The TeenWise Connect App will be designed for access through computer, tablet, and smartphone. In addition, there will be both Android and Apple versions of the application developed. Adults and youth in the TeenWise Constellations will receive unique username and password information. Each designated constellation social worker will have administrative access for account registrations and password resets. To access TeenWise Connect participants will need access to either broadband, WiFi, or mobile data. In establishing the multiple

interfaces, the greatest variety of access points will be created. In this way, participants will be able to access TeenWise Connect in the mode that is most convenient for them. This may be at a school or library computer lab, on their personal Smartphone, or on the home computer. In addition, the application information will be fully stored on a private server so that information can be retrieved from anywhere as long as the participant has their unique login information.

Institutional Context

The overall context in which the TeenWise Constellation Program will operate is within the child welfare system, with The Mockingbird Society providing technical assistance and support. Working within the child welfare system comes with inherent challenges including increased oversight of youth and family communication and activities. Furthermore, youth in foster care are part of ongoing court proceedings and should understand that TeenWise Connect content can be reported to the court and therefore clear communication surrounding privacy expectations should be designed and given to all participants. As an extension of the increased oversight, youth in care often have restrictions on their access to technology and internet. However, with the nearly ubiquitous access to technology and internet in homes and schools TeenWise Connect has the potential to provide a needed medium for youth to maintain connections with their social networks despite placement changes. Currently, these connections are often lost due to geographic and other barriers. Importantly, clear policies will need to be established surrounding who has access to TeenWise Connect and when accounts will be shut down. Also, clear guidelines on appropriate forum and meet-up board use will need to be created and consistently communicated to all program participants. In addition, policies on consequences for inappropriate TeenWise Connect use or posts should be written. On a final

note, funding in the child welfare system is often difficult to maintain which will pose a challenge in keeping the TeenWise Connect App current and relevant for program participants.

Summary/Conclusions

Adolescents who are part of the foster care system have unique needs including opportunities to practice autonomy and connect with other peers. The TeenWise Constellation Program is designed to provide specific supports for foster families serving adolescent youth. The TeenWise Constellation Connect App enhances the opportunities for youth to connect with their peers and develop essential cognitive and psychosocial skills. In providing both online and in-person opportunities to connect to others and build skills this program sets out to improve the mental health, educational, and economic outcomes for the young people it serves. If TeenWise Connect proves successful for adolescents participating in TeenWise Constellations, a similar online application could be developed for all adolescents in foster care regardless of their placement. This expansion would create an opportunity for all adolescents involved in the foster care system to build skills, connect with peers, and find social supports and a sense of community.

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