

**Letting Kids Be Kids:
Promoting Normalcy for Connecticut's Youth in Foster Care
Executive Summary
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Having access to the daily experiences of childhood and adolescence is essential to healthy development. Youth in foster care need “normalcy,” or the ability to experience the age- and developmentally-appropriate social, extracurricular, and work opportunities associated with growing up. These experiences allow youth to develop the relationships, interests, and skills critical to a successful transition to adulthood. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) has existing programs and policies to encourage access to normative experiences for the youth in its care, but access to these experiences is frequently limited by bureaucratic approval procedures and liability concerns. In response to the requirements of the federal Strengthening Families Act, Connecticut passed Public Act 15-199, which includes the establishment of a “reasonable and prudent parent” (RPP) standard, along with several other provisions intended to make it easier for youth in foster care to access normalcy activities. In order to fully implement this law, the State must address the issues of training, funding, and monitoring that may arise. This paper explores national best practices and identifies policy and practice recommendations designed to ensure that normalcy is fully implemented for all youth in care across the state.

Recommendations

The state must provide practical, more detailed training to caregivers. Without more detailed guidance, caregivers may feel unduly limited in their ability to use the RPP standard, resulting in the same cumbersome DCF approval process the standard was created to avoid. DCF should:

- Go further in illustrating what a reasonable and prudent parent should do in the “sticky situations,” those in which there may be no clear answer.
- Guide and train foster parents on how to fairly weigh their own preferences against those of the child’s biological parents, (especially as these preferences concern issues of cultural, ethical, religious, or moral significance).

The state must provide universal, statewide guidance on funding for normalcy activities. To ensure full, equal access to age- and developmentally-appropriate normalcy activities for all youth in care, DCF should:

- Establish a central, statewide process for securing funding for normalcy activities.

- Issue clear guidance to foster parents, caregivers, and social workers across the state regarding what types of funding are available for fees associated with normalcy activities and how to access those funds.

The state must directly address the challenges of transportation across all placement settings.

Connecticut lacks fully integrated statewide public transit. In order to access normalcy activities, youth will need to use public or private transportation, which will increase overall costs. DCF should:

- Issue clear guidance on the transportation options and funding available to youth for normalcy activities.

The state must issue direct guidance to congregate facilities regarding implementation of normalcy provisions, and should incorporate the expectation of access to normalcy activities into future contracts with these facilities.

Logistical challenges to normalcy implementation are most acute at congregate facilities and therapeutic foster homes, whose youth often require more intensive therapeutic services, limiting both their ability and time to access normalcy activities. When staff work only select shifts per week, and each staff member is responsible for a number of youth at once, designated caregivers at each facility may not be as familiar with the youth in their care, leading to overly restrictive interpretations of the RPP standard for approval of normalcy activities. Living in congregate facilities also worsens the challenge of transportation, since staff cannot transport multiple youth to various places at once. DCF should:

- Provide direct guidance to congregate facilities and therapeutic foster homes about how to address these unique challenges.
- Include contractual requirements for normalcy promotion for these institutions going forward.

The state must commit to annual reporting on normalcy progress and a grievance procedure that is accessible to youth.

Conversations with DCF suggest that the agency plans to collect normalcy data for all youth in care. While this is a remarkable first step, true accountability requires reporting. To measure normalcy implementation and use of the RPP standard, DCF should:

- Administer regular surveys of caregivers and youth in various placements.
- Report normalcy data publicly, so that all stakeholders can remain apprised of the progress of implementation.
- Establish an independent grievance process through which youth who feel that they have been unjustifiably denied access to normalcy activities can express their concerns without fear of jeopardizing their current placement.
- Train all youth in use of the grievance process for normalcy concerns.

To ensure that all youth in state care have access to normalcy activities, Connecticut must balance the safety concerns that drive its child welfare system with the goal of healthy child development. By establishing comprehensive training, guidance, and accountability procedures, the State can ensure that all of the youth in its care get the chance to succeed.