

**The Road to Independence:
Improving Life Skills in Youth Transitioning to
Adulthood**

by

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Abstract

Youth transitioning to adulthood from government care or youth agreement tend to experience poor outcomes in a variety of domains including education, employment, housing, income, relationships, incarceration, substance abuse and life skills. Inadequate life skills have been identified as a factor that contributes to poor life outcomes for youth leaving care. While miscellaneous life skills programs exist in BC, there has not been a coordinated effort to improve the life skills of youth leaving care. Additionally, very little academic literature has evaluated different methods of facilitating life skills development. This study identifies the most effective methods of improving life skills of youth leaving government care and examines barriers to facilitating life skills development in this population. This study provides recommendations to the Ministry of Children and Family Development on how to facilitate the acquisition of life skills among youth exiting the child welfare system in BC.

Keywords: Life skills; children in care; youth; transition to adulthood; resilience; independent living

Dedication

To Paulo, who never failed to give me exactly what I needed.

To my parents, whose love and support got me here.

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Executive Summary

Youth transitioning to adulthood from the child welfare system in BC tend to experience worse outcomes compared to their peers in a variety of domains including education, employment, housing, income, relationships, incarceration, substance abuse and life skills. Poor life skills are one factor that contributes to poor outcomes of youth leaving care. Life skills are the overarching holistic abilities and specific livelihood skills needed to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development, responsible for children and youth in care in BC, does not currently have a policy framework to guide life skills development of youth exiting the child welfare system. Life skills services that are available tend to be offered inconsistently and on a small scale.

The purpose of this research is to identify barriers and important considerations to facilitating life skills development in youth leaving care. Additionally, this research identifies effective approaches to improving life skills and makes recommendations to the Ministry of Children and Family Development on how to best facilitate life skills development of youth leaving care in BC.

Through a thematic analysis of a focus group with former youth-in-care and interviews with key informants several barriers to facilitating life skills development were identified including that youth may not be ready to prepare for independence; a mentality of dependency on the child welfare system; and transience. A number of important considerations for facilitating life skills development were also identified including the appropriate age to begin focusing on life skills development; the importance of interpersonal skills; relationships with adults; the role of foster parents; the need to cater to the needs of youth; and a discrepancy between policy and practice in BC.

Three case studies were examined to identify effective approaches to facilitating life skills development: Advocates to Successful Transition to Independence Mentoring Program, Going for Goal Life Skills Classes, and Lighthouse Independent Living Program. Findings indicate that each approach is effective at improving life skills of youth leaving care to varying degrees.

Case study findings, along with findings of the focus group and interview thematic analysis, were used to generate the policy options for the Ministry of Children and Family Development which build on programs offered in the status quo:

1. **Mentoring Program:** Volunteer mentors would be trained to use real world opportunities to facilitate life skills development with the aid of structured activity guides. Funding for the program would continue until age 25 to provide support to youth through the challenges of living independently.
2. **Life Skills Classes:** Life skills classes would deliver curriculum that varies by age to facilitate age-appropriate life skills development. Youth would be able to complete the classes at their own pace and the program would be offered to youth up until age 21 so youth had life skills development support while they experienced independent living.
3. **Independent Living Program:** Youth would be supported to live independently in scattered site apartments. Dedicated “Transition to adulthood” social workers would monitor youth and provide individualized life skills support. Youth would have access to the program until age 19.

A policy analysis of these three alternatives was conducted to determine the best course of action. Each alternative was assessed on the following criteria: breadth of life skills addressed, effectiveness, life outcomes, cost, implementation complexity and reach. My policy analysis finds that independent living programs are ranked the highest on the policy criteria and should be implemented wherever possible. However, since it is quite costly, two lower cost modifications are also proposed: semi-independent living and extended life skills support beyond age 19. I recommend that all youth receive life skills classes prior to leaving care, due to the low cost and demonstrated effectiveness of the program. Mentoring programs should also be used, but should be targeted towards younger youth and youth unlikely to be successful with in a life skills class or independent living.

Future directions for policy and research on life skills development for youth exiting the child welfare system in BC are also discussed.

1. The Policy Issue

Youth exiting the child welfare system tend to experience worse outcomes than their peers. Compared to their peers, youth aging out of government care are more likely to not complete their high school education, (Courtney et al, 2005; Schibler & MacEwan-Morris, 2006; Rutman et al., 2007), to lack personal stability and support from someone who cares about them (Collins, 2001, Courtney et al, 2005; OACAS, 2006; Rutman et al, 2003); become a parent at a young age (Mendes, 2003; Rutman et al., 2007), to experience health and mental health problems (Courtney et al, 2001), and to struggle with issues of poverty, homelessness, and underemployment (Leslie & Hare, 2000; Mendes, 2003; OACAS, 2006; McCreary Centre Society, 2007; Rutman et al., 2007). They are more likely to depend on social assistance (MCFD, 2011) and be incarcerated or involved with the criminal justice system (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004). As well, youth aging out of care are more likely to lack life skills such as grocery shopping, meal planning, budgeting, decision-making and self-advocacy (Rutman et al., 2001).

As legal guardian of children in care in British Columbia, the Ministry of Children and Family Development has a responsibility to prepare youth to successfully transition to independence. While the average youth does not become fully independent from their family until their mid 20s (Canadian Council for Social Development, 1996; Beaujot, 2004), MCFD has the difficult task of preparing youth who may have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect (Courtney et al., 1998) for independence by age 19. Failure to adequately prepare youth leaving care for independence has consequences that persist over the lifespan of former youth in care through greater usage of social services and income assistance.

Poor life skills are identified in a number of academic studies as one factor related to poor outcomes for youth leaving the child welfare system (Casey, 2003; Cook, 1991; OACAS, 2007; Reid & Dudding, 2006; Rutman et al., 2001; Stein, 2008). Youth in

BC have also expressed that they do not have adequate life skills prior to leaving care and have voiced their desire for improved life skills training (Mcreary, 2008). Life skills, defined as the overarching holistic abilities and specific livelihood skills needed to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, are the focus of this research paper.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development does not currently have a policy framework to guide life skills development of youth in care or on youth agreements. Various types of life skills programs are delivered on a small scale across the province. However, although similar life skills programs are widespread throughout North America, very little literature examines the effectiveness of different approaches to improving life skills. The purpose of this research is to identify and evaluate the most effective approaches to facilitating life skills development in youth leaving the child welfare system. Identification of the most effective approaches will allow resources to be concentrated on approaches that accomplish the greatest results for youth leaving care. Policy recommendations will be tailored to the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

2. Services provided by the Ministry of Children and Family Development

2.1. Child Welfare Services in British Columbia

Child welfare services in British Columbia are provided by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). Established in 1996, MCFD provides child protection and guardianship, adoption services, early childhood development, youth services, child and youth mental health services, services for children and youth with special needs and youth justice services. In British Columbia, *the Child, Family and Community Service Act* provides legislative authority to MCFD for the investigation of child protection concerns and for children removed from the home as a result of an investigation. Under the act, the Minister designates the Director of Child Protection, who delegates the provision of child protection services to child protection social workers across the province (Child, Family and Community Service Act, 1996). The Representative for Children and Youth in BC has the legislated responsibility to independently monitoring the performance and service standards of the Ministry of Children and Family Development under the Representative for Children and Youth Act (RCY Act, 2006), however, the legislative authority of the Representative does not extend to youth during their transition to adulthood (see Appendix A. Representative for Children and Youth in British Columbia).

Children can come into the care of MCFD in a variety of ways: as Temporary Custody Order (TCO) wards where parents have access rights and are consulted on most decisions but the child is in the legal care of MCFD; as Continuing Custody Order (CCO) wards where parents must apply for access and the child is in the legal care of MCFD and is eligible for adoption; or through a voluntary care agreement (VCA) where parents voluntarily enter their child into temporary care while maintaining custody of the child as well as decision-making rights in most matters of the child's life. Children or

youth placed “in care” may live in foster homes, group homes, receiving homes (temporarily), a relative’s home, or in an independent living program. Youth may also become involved with MCFD through a Youth Agreement (YA), a legal written agreement between the youth and MCFD that allows youth to live independently while receiving MCFD supports (MCFD, 2011a).

Supports for youth involved with MCFD end when youth reach the age of majority at 19. Youth “age out” of the child welfare system and are expected to assume adult responsibilities for their own housing, education, employment, health and well-being. Youth are then expected to access government supports available to the adult population when needed. One of the only supports for former youth in care offered by MCFD is Adult Youth Agreements, wherein a youth up to age 24 is eligible to receive financial support if they are pursuing their education, completing job training or substance use rehabilitation for a period of up to 24 months (MCFD, 2011b).

A significant number of youth age out of the child welfare system each year. In the 2009/2010 fiscal year, for every 1,000 children in BC, 9.4 were in care. Based on the estimated number of children in BC at that time (MCFD, 2011), 8548 children were in care in the 2009/10 fiscal year. As of 2005, approximately 15% of youth in care were ages 17 or 18 and would age out of care upon reaching 19 years of age (Rutman et al., 2007). In addition, in 2008/9, over 600 youth in BC were on youth agreements (RCYBC, 2009). Assuming these proportions have remained somewhat constant, 1282 youth were preparing to age out of care in 2009/10 in BC with approximately 600 youth on youth agreements.

Although the age distribution is not reported, 52% of children in care in BC are Aboriginal and so represent a significant proportion of youth aging out of care (MCFD, 2012). Improving the life skills of youth exiting the child welfare system is therefore intimately linked to Aboriginal policy. However, this research broadly examines improving life skills in youth exiting the child welfare system and exploring the links to Aboriginal policy is outside the scope of this research. Future research should address this issue.

Services for Youth Aging out of Care

In 2003, MCFD released the *Child and Family Development Service Standards*, which includes service standards for preparing youth leaving care. Children In Care Standard 16, titled “Promoting resiliency and skills for successful community living”, *“requires that every effort be made to assist a youth in care, before he or she reaches the age of 19, in developing the capacity, skills, support and resources needed to face the challenges and adversities that accompany successful living in the community”* (p. 129). The standard lists three policies to guide practice with youth transitioning to adulthood: 1) *Support a youth in developing self-care and independence skills*, 2) *Assess a youth’s capacity for successful living in the community*, and 3) *Assist a youth in living successfully in the community* (p. 129-130). The standard outlines some high level guidelines to meet these policy objectives. For instance,

Supporting a youth in developing self-care and independence skills:

Promote a youth’s resilience, and support the youth in developing self-care and independence skills, from the time he or she is admitted to care to the time he or she leaves care. Provide opportunities for the youth to develop these skills in a manner consistent with his or her age, developmental level and culture (p.129).

The full CIC standard is appended in Appendix B: CIC Standard 16. These guidelines contain few specific actions that social workers are required to take to ensure that youth are prepared for successful community living. Social workers have a great deal of discretion in determining how to meet this service standard. However, given the poor outcomes of youth exiting care, current services provided by social workers are not sufficient to prepare young people for independent living.

Guided by these service standards, MCFD does provide a number of specific services available to youth transitioning to adulthood.

Independent Living Program: The Independent Living Program is a program which provides financial and emotional support to youth in temporary or continuing care to live independently when aged 17 and over with preparation beginning at age 15 (MCFD, 2002b). Youth under 17 may be approved with additional supports when all other options

have been explored. The objective is to support the child and further enhance the child's independent living skills.

Youth Agreements: Youth Agreements are legal agreements between youth ages 16 to 18 (or younger if the youth is married or a parent) (MCFD, 2011a). Under a youth agreement, MCFD does not assume guardianship of the youth but provides financial, educational, and emotional support until the age 19. The agreement allows youth to live independently while receiving supports to build independent living skills, return to school or gain work experience, and address mental health or addiction issues. Youth may enter a youth agreement 1) as an alternative to care, 2) at the expiration of a Temporary Custody Order, or 3) if the youth is affected by a significant adverse condition, such as substance abuse or sexual exploitation (MCFD, 2004). The purpose of the agreement is to help those youth who are unable to return home to gain independence, return to school, gain work experience and life skills, and protect their rights.

Agreements with Young Adults: Agreements with Young Adults (AYA) are agreements between MCFD and young adults age 19-24 who were in continuing custody, under guardianship or on a youth agreement (MCFD, 2011b). AYAs provide financial assistance and support services to young people who want to finish high school, attend college or university, learn job and life skills or complete a rehabilitation program. Financial assistance may include living expenses, child care, tuition fees, or health care. AYAs are undertaken with the support of a social worker and last up to six months at a time, but can be renewed up to a maximum of 24 months.

Contracted Services: In addition, MCFD contracts community agencies to provide services to youth preparing for or transitioning to adulthood. Youth workers are frequently contracted to provide supports to youth in Independent Living or on Youth Agreements. Other services include life skills or employment workshops, apprenticeships programs, mentoring programs and independent living programs, which are described in more detail in Section 8.1).

Overall: Despite the provision of these services, outcomes for youth exiting the child welfare system remain poor. Access to available services is inconsistent and depends

primarily on referrals from social workers. Youth are often unaware of what programs exist and many are not be eligible for available programs. Only a small segment of youth will be considered suitable to live independently through an Independent Living Program or Youth Agreement. Similarly, the AYA program is only available to youth who wish to return to school, or participate in job training or rehabilitation. Lacking a policy framework to guide specific service provision, life skills development depends on individual efforts of social workers and/or foster parents.

Policy Window: In light of poor outcomes of children leaving care, MCFD is currently looking into revising policies and procedures for working with youth transitioning to adulthood. In particular, there is interest in aligning the practices of youth service and guardianship social workers to provide consistent transition planning for all youth in care (Interview, policy analyst). There is currently a policy window open to influence decisions made for practice standards for youth exiting the child welfare system in BC towards greater facilitation of life skills development.

3. The Transition to Adulthood

3.1. Developmental Transitions

Late adolescence is a time of multiple transitions as youth prepare to assume greater responsibilities associated with adulthood such as work, relationships, community involvement and managing their own health and well-being (Fisher et al., 1986). Adolescents begin to develop an adult identity, the capacity for intimate relationships, and adult role responsibilities (Erikson 1968).

For most youth, the transition to adulthood occurs gradually with significant support from friends and family. The average age of leaving home has steadily increased over the last decade (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw & Brown, 2005; Beaujot, 2004). Intergenerational interdependence is now the norm with young people depending on parents and relatives well into their 20s (Canadian Council for Social Development, 1996; Beaujot, 2004). Young adults are often able to return to their parent's home if they encounter challenges living independently (Beaujot, 2004). Marriage and parenting, traditional markers of adulthood, are typically deferred until the mid to late twenties (Hayford & Fursenberg, 2008; Clark, 2007) when young adults have completed their post-secondary education, and started on a career path (Ravanera et al., 2003).

In contrast, youth exiting the child welfare system cannot rely on their former supports once they reach the age of majority. The financial support of MCFD and the formal relationships with foster parents and social workers are terminated. Youth can no longer depend on their former levels of financial or emotional support in times of need,

although informal relationships with foster parents or social workers continue in some cases.¹

For youth leaving care, the transition to adulthood comes regardless of the youth's emotional, financial or practical readiness (Rutman et al., 2005). The age of majority in BC is somewhat arbitrarily set at age 19 but developmentally youth become prepared for adulthood at different ages depending on their personal traits and experiences². Without the continued supports and safety nets available to many youth, some have described the transition to adulthood for youth in care as an "expulsion" (Rutman et al., 2005).

Youth in British Columbia report feeling unprepared for the transition to adulthood at 19. The McCreary Centre Society (2008) interviewed 75 youth across BC. Many youth expressed fears about leaving care and saw the transition to adulthood as a period of losing help and connections from youth services they would no longer be able to access. Youth mainly discussed basic foundations for adult roles and responsibilities such as having a place to live, staying connected to people, gaining life skills and staying healthy. Little discussion centred on positive goals for the future such as career training or further education.

¹ A number of studies have found that a large proportion of youth leaving care (from 26-50%) move in with a relative at some point (Collins, 2001; Courtney & Barth, 1996; Courtney and Heuring, 1991; Mallon, 1998). However, while living with relatives, youth may face similar concerns to those that resulted in their placement into protective care originally.

² Several studies have found that the age of transition is not as important as the reason for leaving home; for instance, young adults who leave home to pursue post-secondary education have high educational attainment regardless of the age at which they leave home (White and Lacy, 1997). However, in this respect, youth leaving care are again more likely to be disadvantaged since youth are more likely to leave care because MCFD support is terminated or they are dissatisfied with foster care rather than for positive opportunities such as post-secondary education (Collins, 2001).

Early transitions to adult roles may have long-term negative consequences for young people (Chassin et al., 1992; Marini, Shin & Raymond, 1989). Transitions occurring early or late can put individuals “out of sequence with prevailing institutional structures” (Marini, Shin & Raymond, 1989, p. 89). Youth leaving care often take on adult experiences, such as romantic relationships or alcohol and drug use, before their peers (Benoit et al., 2006; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Youth leaving care are therefore considered to be at some developmental risk because they transition to adult roles before completing other key transitions such as graduating from high school or finding stable employment (Collins, 2001).

Although they receive fewer supports and experience a more abrupt “transition” to adulthood, many youth exiting care have a greater than average need for support during the transition to adulthood. This is due to the fact that many youth exiting care have experienced significant trauma, abuse or neglect prior to entering care and may also have experienced the sometimes significant failings of the child welfare system (Raychaba, 1988; Courtney et al., 1998). A significant proportion of youth exiting care need emotional support and practical assistance to locate housing, educational programs, employment and to establish rewarding personal relationships (Flynn, 2003). Youth leaving care are less prepared for the transition to independence than low-income youth or the general adolescent population (Nollan et al., 2001), yet they are pressed to transition to adulthood sooner than other young adults, with fewer resources and fewer supports. Combined with existing vulnerabilities of youth in care (Raychaba, 1988), this likely contributes to poor outcomes of youth leaving care.

3.2. Outcomes of Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

A growing body of Canadian and international research has demonstrated that youth exiting the child welfare system consistently have poor outcomes in a wide variety of domains including education, poverty, homelessness, relationships, employment, life skills, incarceration, parenting, health and substance abuse.

Education: Compared to their peers, youth aging out of care are less likely to complete their high school education, (Courtney et al, 2005; Schibler & MacEwan-Morris, 2006, Tweddle, 2005; GAO, 1999). The proportion of former foster youth that do not complete high school appears to be quite consistent across time and geography. Studies in different areas of the United States found over 33% (Festinger, 1983), 38% (Barth, 1990), and 37% (Courtney et al., 1998) of former foster youth had not completed high school 12-18 months after leaving care.

Research in BC has found similar rates of high school non-completion among former foster youth. In 2009, the six year high school completion rate for youth in BC who were under a continuing custody order in Grade 8, and who have never been identified as having a special educational need, was 61.5%, compared to 79.7% for the general population (MCFD, 2011; BC Ministry of Education, 2011). For youth with a special need, the six year high school completion rate was 23.9% (MCFD, 2011). A three year longitudinal study of 37 foster youth leaving care in Victoria found that two years after leaving care 52% of youth had not completed high school (Rutman et al., 2007).

Poverty: Youth aging out of care commonly struggle with issues of poverty, and reliance on income assistance is common (Barth, 1990; Leslie & Hare, 2000; GAO 1999; Mendes, 2003; McCreary Centre Society, 2007; OACAS, 2006). 77% of former foster youth in an unnamed Canadian province were earning less than \$20,000 per year (Kufeldt, 2003). In Saskatchewan 80% of youth aged 16-17 involved with child welfare services will be on welfare sometime during their adult lives (Sask. Redesign, Phase II, address by Minister of Social Services to Association of Social Workers, December 2000). Former foster youth in BC have similarly high rates of reliance on income assistance. 43.9% of youth leaving care immediately apply for income assistance (MCFD, 2011) compared to 2.5% of the population aged 19-24 (BC Stats, 2003).

Homelessness: Former youth in care have high rates of homelessness (GAO 199; Leslie & Hare, 2000; Mendes, 2003; OACAS, 2006; McCreary Centre Society, 2007). Courtney et al. (1990) found that 14% of males and 10% of female youth who had left care 1-2 years prior had been homeless at least once. Raising the Roof (2009) estimates

that 65,000 young people in Canada experience homelessness at some point during a year, and 40-45% of those youth have been involved in the foster system (Millar, 2009).

Additionally, former youth in care experience high rates of transience. Rutman (2007) found that 30% of former youth in care sampled in BC had moved four or more times within the first 18 months of leaving care.

Relationships: Youth leaving care often lack personal stability and support from someone who cares about them (Courtney et al, 2005; OACAS, 2006). Collins (2001) found that youth leaving care rarely have family support to rely on. However, some researchers have found that youth do maintain relationships with friends and family. Rutman et al. (2007) found that 74-82% of youth leaving care reported feeling connected to siblings from the point of leaving care to two years after. 50% of youth also felt connected to their mother, and 40% felt connected to their father. However, feelings of connectedness did not necessarily relate to frequency of contact. Rutman et al. (2007) also found that over time fewer youth reported having close friends with 35% of youth reporting they did not have close friends two years after leaving care.

Relationships with service providers are also an important source of support. Rutman et al. (2007) found that 48% of youth were involved in community activities two years after care. Compared with other life outcomes, relationships appear to be an area of relative success for former foster youth, but still offers substantial room for improvement.

Employment: Youth leaving care are more likely to experience unemployment or underemployment (GAO, 1999; Leslie & Hare, 2000; Mendes, 2003; OACAS, 2006; McCreary Centre Society, 2007). Courtney et al. (1998) found that 39% of youth leaving care were unemployed. Kufeldt (2003) found that 46% of former foster youth (ages 23-31) in an unnamed Canadian province were unemployed while 32% were employed full-time but tended to have low wages. Rutman et al. (2007) found that 35% of youth leaving care were working part or full-time when they left care. Two years after leaving care only 30% of youth reported working part or full-time. Youth cited a number of barriers to employment including having children or being pregnant, anxiety/depression,

disability, lack of work experience, and insufficient time to work due to attending school/college.

Life skills: Youth aging out of care are also more likely to lack life skills such as grocery shopping, meal planning, budgeting, decision-making and self-advocacy (Rutman et al., 2001). A Wisconsin study of youth transitioning from foster care (Courtney et al., 2001) found that 70% of interviewed youth reported that they had received no training in money management, legal skills, parenting or how to utilize community resources. They reported feeling unprepared to find housing, live on their own or deal with health issues. Youth in BC also report feeling unprepared to transition to adulthood and believe they need more life skills (McCreary, 2008).

Incarceration: Youth exiting the child welfare system are more likely to be incarcerated or involved with the criminal justice system (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004). Barth (1990) found that approximately one third of youth who had left foster care one year earlier had been involved in criminal activity. Courtney et al. (1998) found that 27% of males and 10% of female former youth in care had been incarcerated at least once since leaving care 1-2 years prior. A criminal record may negatively impact youth's future employment opportunities.

Parenting: Youth leaving care are more likely to become a teenage parent (Mendes, 2003). Canadian studies have found that from 30-60% of youth leaving care become parents at a young age (Martin, 1995; Kufeldt, 2003; Rutman, 2007). In BC, Rutman (2007) found that of the youth who had become parents, 60% of them had contact with MCFD with regards to their children. This statistic is concerning given the negative outcomes for young parents including poorer psychological functioning, lower rates of school completion, lower levels of marital stability, less stable employment, greater welfare use, and higher rates of poverty (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 1994).

Health: Youth leaving care are more likely to experience health and mental health problems (Courtney et al, 2001). Former youth in care were more likely to describe their health status as fair or poor compared to a control group (Courtney et al., 2001). They were also more likely to have received psychological or emotional counselling or

substance abuse treatment (Courtney et al., 2001). Self-reported health of former foster youth in BC is also lower than the general population (Rutman et al., 2007). 57% of former foster youth in BC report mental health issues, with depression being the most frequent (Rutman, 2007).

Substance Abuse: Former youth in care are more likely to engage in tobacco, alcohol and drug use than their same-age peers (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Mendes, 2005; Rutman et al., 2007). Barth (1990) found that 56% of youth had used street drugs since leaving care. Rutman et al. (2007) found 60% of former youth in care smoked two years after leaving care compared to 33% of the general youth population. 31% of youth drank at least once or twice a week and 37% of youth reported using marijuana at least once or twice a week. In addition, youth reported varying levels of use of other substances (at their highest reporting level 15% used crystal meth, 24% used ecstasy and 19% used cocaine).

3.3. What Helps Youth Succeed?

Despite adversities faced by children who experience abuse or neglect, many demonstrate incredible resiliency and obtain successful developmental outcomes (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; McGloin & Wisdom, 2001). Resiliency is a process of *“how effectiveness in the environment is achieved, sustained or recovered despite adversity”* (Masten, 1994, p. 4). “Key junctures” of a person’s life, such as the transition to adulthood, require special attention to risk and protective mechanisms to avoid negative outcomes and promote adaptation and resilience (Rutter, 1987). Young people are likely to experience several types of stressors as they transition to adulthood including chronic stressors, past and current life events, maturational processes, and specific transitions (Collins, 2001). Identifying and nurturing factors that help promote resilient functioning offers a potential avenue to improve outcomes of youth exiting the child welfare system.

Studies of resiliency have examined risk and protective factors that influence youth development and individual’s responses to stress and adversity (see Smith &

Carlson, 1997). Recent research has focused on identifying how these protective factors contribute to positive outcomes (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Resilience literature has focused on three main areas: the individual attributes of children and young people, family relationships, and characteristics of their wider social environment (Stein, 2005). Theoretical frameworks guiding resilience research include: the three-level (community, family and child) 'protective' and 'risk' factor model; ecological perspectives that identify the influence of different contexts (culture, neighbourhood and family) on the individual; and the structural-organisational perspective, which proposes that there is continuity and coherence in the development of competence over time and that individual choice and self-organisation exert a critical influence on development (Luthar et al., 2000).

While resilience literature has extensively examined resiliency in children from disadvantaged family backgrounds (Rutter et al., 1998; Newman & Blackburn, 2002), far less research has examined resiliency of youth leaving care. However, available literature that examines children and youth in care has identified several factors related to successful outcomes (Casey, 2003; Cook, 1991; OACAS, 2007; Reid & Dudding, 2006; Rutman, 2001; Silva-Wayne, 1994; and Stein, 2005) The detailed finding of these studies are given in Appendix C: Factors Associated with Positive Youth Outcomes. Findings of these studies can be organized into the following categories: individual characteristics, in-care experiences, social relationships, education, life skills, and government support/resources.

Of these factors, life skills was selected as the focus of this study. A large body of literature has already focused on in-care experiences and social relationships, while far less research attention has focused on how to build life skills in youth exiting the child welfare system. Individual characteristics are largely outside the influence of MCFD and education is primarily the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. While government support is also an area that deserves future research, life skills was selected for its potential to influence success in all life outcomes identified in previous sections. Life skills, such as critical thinking, coping and self-management, social skills and communication, play a huge role in human behaviour and interaction with the world around us. Specific life skills, such as cooking, finding employment and budgeting, are

essential components of living independently successfully. From seeking medical help when needed, to communicating effectively with others, to ensuring bills are paid before making leisure purchases, life skills are likely to influence success in a wide variety of domains. Given the potential for life skills improvements to create improved outcomes, life skills were selected as the area of focus for this research.

3.4. Life Skills

Academic literature and youth practice diverge on the meaning assigned to the term “life skills”. Academic literature tends to define life skills as a set of holistic skills that promote well-being, positive health outcomes and productive development. For instance, the World Health Organization (1997) defines life skills broadly as the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Similarly, the OECD (Rychaen & Salganik, 2001) defines life skills in terms of three key competencies needed: 1) the ability to use a wide range of tools to interact constructively with the social context, 2) the ability to engage with others in an increasingly interdependent world, and 3) the ability to take responsibility for managing one’s life, place it in the broader social context, and behave autonomously and responsibly. Unicef (2002) defines life skills a bit more precisely in relation to specific desired outcomes as the psychosocial and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, communicate effectively, and develop the coping and self-management skills needed for a healthy and productive life. The above definitions are very broad; so much so as to be of limited use when attempting to look at specific life skills as it becomes difficult to argue what sorts of skills may be excluded from these definitions.

In contrast, definitions of life skills used in policy and practice tend to view life skills as a set of basic abilities needed to successfully navigate adult responsibilities such as maintaining a home, employment, health, self-care and interpersonal skills. These definitions have been critiqued as being limited to “livelihood skills”, the basic abilities needed to pursue individual and household economic goals (ie. job-seeking skills, budgeting, and educational goals) (Malti, 2011), while not including important

overarching life skills, such as communication, that influence success in any of the livelihood skills.

Arguably, a definition of life skills must find a middle ground between being too broad or too limited. Several frameworks come closer to this balance. Malti (2011) developed a framework of four core dimensions of life skills which included: critical thinking and cognitive skills, coping and self-management, social and moral skills and communication. Cook (1991) classified life skills into intangible and tangible skills. Intangible skills include decision making, problem solving, communication, time management, conflict resolution and social skills. Tangible skills were defined as educational, vocational, money management, home management and use of community resources. Malti's (2011) framework excludes livelihood skills but also provides a more comprehensive categorization of psychosocial and interpersonal skills than Cooks.

To achieve a definition of life skills that incorporates overarching holistic abilities as well as specific livelihood skills needed to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, this research will assess life skills based on a life skills framework that combines the core skills outlined by Malti (2011) and the tangible and intangible skills outlined by Cook (1991). Pregnancy/parenting and self-care were also added as important life skills that were absent from these frameworks. The life skills framework is outlined in Table 1

Table 1.

Table 1. Life Skills Framework

Dimension	Life skills
Intangible	
Critical thinking and cognitive skills	<i>Self-reflection; Autonomous, flexible, and creative thinking; Problem-solving; Decision-making; Time management</i>
coping and self-management	<i>Self-awareness and self-confidence; Self-esteem; Emotion regulation; Stress management</i>
social and moral skills	<i>Social responsibility and cooperativeness; Empathy and caring for others; Establishing and maintaining relationships; Respecting and appreciating other</i>
communication	<i>Adequate expression of thoughts, emotions, motives and values; Assertiveness; Conflict resolution</i>
Tangible	
Educational	<i>Educational planning</i>
Vocational	<i>Job seeking skills; Job maintenance skills</i>
Money management	<i>Budgeting; Banking</i>
Home management	<i>Obtaining and maintaining a residence; Cleaning; Nutrition</i>
Use of community resources	<i>Knowledge of community resources; Transportation</i>
Pregnancy/Parenting	<i>Prenatal healthy; Supporting healthy child development</i>
Self-care	<i>Personal hygiene; Use of health resources; Nutrition; Emergency/safety skills</i>

4. Research Questions

Many youth leaving care in BC have poor life skills which contributes to poor life outcomes. This research will identify and evaluate approaches to facilitating life skills development among youth involved with the child welfare system and recommend alternatives best suited to British Columbia's social policy landscape. This research will address the following research questions:

1. What barriers exist to facilitating the acquisition of life skills among youth transitioning to adulthood from government care or youth agreement?
2. What are the most important considerations to address when selecting an approach to facilitating life skills development?
3. What are the most effective approaches to improving life skills in youth transitioning to adulthood from government care or youth agreement?
4. How can the Ministry of Children and Family Development best facilitate the acquisition of life skills among youth exiting the child welfare system in BC?

5. Methodology

Three primary research methods were used to collect comprehensive, in-depth information on facilitating the acquisition of life skills among youth transitioning to adulthood from the child welfare system. Key informant interviews and a focus group with former youth in care were held to collect information on barriers and important considerations for life skills development among youth leaving care or youth agreements in BC. Case studies were used to examine and evaluate approaches to teaching life skills in three other jurisdictions. Policy evaluation research was also incorporated into the key informant interviews. Each method is described in depth below.

5.1. Key Informant Interviews

5.1.1. Data Collection

To answer the first two research questions, key informant interviews were conducted to collect information on barriers and important considerations for facilitating life skills development among youth leaving care or youth agreements in BC. Telephone interviews, lasting 40-60 minutes each, were conducted with six key informants including two academic researchers, a social worker, a youth worker, a youth policy analyst and a board member of a youth-oriented community service agency. Telephone interviews were chosen for their wide geographic reach, although a challenge of the method is the loss of social cues (Opdenakker, 2006). Interviews were semi-structured to allow for two-way communication and flexibility in the discussions (Kvale, Steiner & Brinkmann, 2009). Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees (See Appendix D: Verbal Telephone Consent Script). Interviews were designed to elicit in-depth information about challenges for youth leaving care, the role of life skills in the transition to adulthood, approaches to learning life skills, barriers to teaching life skills, and how MCFD could

facilitate life skills development. The full interview guide is appended in Appendix E: Key Informant Interview Schedule.

5.1.2. Interview Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify, analyze and report patterns and themes that emerged from the data about barriers and important considerations to facilitating the acquisition of life skills among youth exiting the child welfare system. The analysis was conducted using the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). I familiarized myself with the data by reading over detailed notes taken during each interview and noted initial ideas about the data. I then coded small segments of data with initial codes that related to one of this study's research questions. Codes were then sorted into overarching themes, which were then refined, reviewed, and appropriately named. Finally, I wrote the thematic analysis results into this report.

5.2. Focus Group

5.2.1. Data collection

A focus group was held with former youth-in-care also to address research questions one and two. The purpose of the focus group was to identify barriers to facilitating life skills development and to explore important considerations that influence the success and implementation of various approaches to supporting life skills development among youth exiting the child welfare system. A focus group was held instead of individual interviews since group processes can help participants explore and clarify their views in a way that is more accessible than in a one-to-one interview (Kitzinger, 1995). In addition, focus groups can encourage participation from those reluctant to participate in one-to-one interviews or who feel they have nothing to contribute (Kitzinger, 1995).

Former youth-in-care, currently aged 19-29, were recruited through a youth advisory group, *Choices of Reality (COR)*, run by the Ministry of Children and Family Development. COR members consult and provide feedback on MCFD services and

initiatives. In addition to their personal experiences with MCFD services and the transition to adulthood, COR members have some degree of familiarity with current youth issues and MCFD services. The focus group was held at an MCFD office that youth were familiar with and ground rules were outlined at the beginning of the group. A greater number of youth were anticipated to attend the focus group, but only three youth arrived at the scheduled time. The focus group lasted two hours and was semi-structured using a list of interview topics in order to connect with youth in their own language and allow for two-way communication and flexibility in the discussions. Focus group topics included: experiences transitioning to adulthood, preparation for independence, life skills of youth leaving care, experiences learning life skills, and how MCFD could help youth learn life skills. The focus group schedule is given in Appendix F: Focus Group Schedule.

5.2.2. Focus Group Data Analysis

Focus group data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report patterns and themes that emerged (Bruan & Clarke, 2006). The six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which were described previously, were followed to analyse the data.

Case studies address the third and fourth research questions of the study.

5.3. Case Studies

Case studies were used to identify and evaluate different approaches to facilitating life skills development among youth leaving care. Case study analysis involves the “intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units” (Gerring, 2004, p.342). Different approaches to teaching life skills were used as the unit for case study analysis. Information on similar variables was gathered for each case to allow for an informed comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

5.3.1. Identification of Case Studies

Approaches to facilitate life skills development were identified through a literature review as well as by asking key informant interviewees to identify methods of facilitating life skills development. The literature review was conducted using Academic Search Premier and the search terms were: life skills, youth, foster, at risk, mentoring, independent living, and groups.

5.3.2. Rationale for Case Selection

Criteria were used in the selection of each case to ensure that 1) findings of the case studies will be informative for improving life skills of youth transitioning to adulthood from the child welfare system; and 2) findings of the case studies will be applicable in a British Columbian context.

Criteria used for case selection are as follows:

- 1) Each case selected represents a different approach to facilitating the acquisition of life skills. This ensures that a wide variety of approaches to facilitating life skills development are evaluated and increases the likelihood that an effective approach will be identified.
- 2) Each case has been subjected to a formal evaluation with publicly available evaluation documents so that characteristics that contributed to the successes and failures of each approach can be identified.
- 3) Each case must have generated life skills improvement in one or more areas for program participants, as shown by evaluation documents. Limiting case selection to only those approaches where improvements were observed increases the chances of identifying effective approaches to improving life skills.

Three additional criteria were also applied in case study selection to increase the generalizability of findings from the case study analysis to youth exiting the child welfare system in BC.

- 1) Cases were selected from economically developed countries.
- 2) Approaches to facilitating the acquisition of life skills were used with at-risk, high-risk or foster youth.
- 3) The life skills approach targets a broad range of life skills as opposed to focusing on one specific area. This criterion excludes a number of life skills programs that are solely designed to prevent substance abuse.

Three cases were selected using these criteria: ASTI, GOAL and LILP. These are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Case Study Criteria

Selection Criteria	Case One: Advocates for Successful Transition to Independence (ASTI)	Case Two: Going for the Goal (GOAL)	Case Three: Lighthouse Independent Living Program
<i>Unique approach</i>	Mentoring	Life skills classes	Independent Living Arrangements
<i>Publicly available evaluation</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Demonstrated life skills improvement</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Economically developed country</i>	United States of America	United States of America	United States of America
<i>Applies to at-risk, high-risk or foster youth</i>	Foster youth	At-risk youth	Foster youth
<i>Targets a broad range of life skills</i>	Yes- Tangible & Intangible life skills	Yes- Tangible life skills	Yes- Tangible & Intangible life skills

5.3.3. Case Exclusions

Sports-based programs were also identified as a possible approach to facilitating life skills development. However, as participation in sports-based programs is limited by interest, ability and the high level of transience among youth in care, it was not included as a plausible method to improving life skills. Casey Family programs has also developed a life skills learning curriculum that is freely available to download and is designed to be used by youth with their foster parent or possibly another adult in their life. This approach was also excluded due to the lack of program evaluation information.

5.3.4. Case Study Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews: Semi-structure interviews were used to complement secondary sources of information where they were incomplete and provide rich, contextual information about each case. Telephone interviews, lasting approximately 40 minutes each, were conducted with a professional from each of the three case study sites to provide primary data about each case study. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for two-way communication and flexibility in the discussions (Kvale, Steiner & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews were designed to elicit in-depth information about the strengths, challenges and outcomes of each case. The full interview guide is appended in Appendix G: Case Study Interview Schedule.

Secondary Data: Secondary data about each case were gathered from program websites and published evaluation reports. Using a variety of evidence, such as documentation and interviews, produces a more robust analysis (Yin, 2006). Secondary data were examined to obtain information on breadth of life skills, effectiveness, and strengths and weaknesses of each case.

5.3.5. Case Study Evaluation Criteria

Cases were evaluated on two key components: breadth of life skills addressed and overall effectiveness. Transition to adulthood draws upon a wide range of life skills as youth assume responsibility for all aspects of their lives. Cases were evaluated based on breadth of life skills addressed, as measured by the total number of life skills dimensions

addressed (see Table 1

Table 1). Life skills programs that address a greater number of life skills are assumed to be preferable to those that address fewer. Breadth of life skills is evaluated in two categories: explicitly addressed life skills and opportunities to learn life skills. Some life skills are explicitly addressed as indicated in the approach's curriculum or mandate. However, some approaches also offer opportunities for life skills learning depending on a youth or program staff's individual characteristics and experiences. These two categories are evaluated separately and receive equal weighting in the overall consideration of breadth of life skills addressed.

Cases were also evaluated based on the effectiveness of the life skills approach at improving youth's knowledge of life skills. When possible, mastery, application and retention of life skills were also assessed. Effectiveness was determined based on evaluation reports of each approach, as well as anecdotal and contextual information from interviews with professionals involved with each case.

5.3.6. Case Study Data Analysis

Case study program materials, including website information and program curriculum, were compared to the life skills framework in Table

Table 11 to analyze the breadth of life skills addressed. Effectiveness of each case study was determined by examining published program evaluation reports. Information collected through interviews supplemented secondary data sources. Notes recorded from each interview were examined to identify relevant contextual information to include in the evaluation of the program.

5.4. Ethics

Ethical considerations around consent and confidentiality, particularly related to speaking with former youth in care, were accounted for and this research study followed an ethics protocol approved by the Ministry of Children and Family Development and the Simon Fraser University ethics board.

6. Interview and Focus Group Analysis: Barriers and Considerations for Facilitating Life Skills Development

This chapter describes the main themes identified through thematic analysis of interviews with key informants and the focus group. Findings address the first two research questions of the study: 1) what barriers exist to life skills development among youth transitioning to adulthood from government care or youth agreement and 2) what are the most important considerations to address when selecting an approach to improving life skills. Results of the interview are integrated with findings from the focus group to address each theme from the perspectives of both key informants and former youth in care.

Although only three former youth-in-care participated in the focus group, their experiences echo the research findings of youth leaving care in other jurisdictions. Youth described feeling unprepared and fearful when they aged out of care, as well as lacking a plan to guide them as they became independent. They experienced a wide range of challenges when transitioning to independence, which are also identified in the literature, and struggled with finding housing, experiencing homelessness, finding and maintaining employment, finishing their high school education, mental health issues, addiction, and reliance on criminal behaviour. In the following sections, analytic focus is placed on barriers to learning life skills and important considerations for life skills learning.

6.1. Barriers to learning life skills

The first thematic cluster examines barriers to facilitating life skills development among youth leaving care that arise from youths' characteristics and experiences in care.

6.1.1. Youth may not be ready

Youth may not be ready to engage in discussions about preparing to leave care and often do not take advantage of the opportunities they are provided. Leading up to a youth's 19th birthday, many social workers attempt to engage the youth in discussions about preparing for transition or offer services to assist them. However, both focus group participants and interviewees described situations where youth did not avail themselves of opportunities to improve their life skills.

I actually felt that my social worker did a lot for me during and leading up to the fact that me turning 19 and the fact that he tried to get me prepared and ready for independence but because I wasn't ready he was just wasting his time- Focus group participant

In part, readiness to begin discussions about leaving care is determined by the youth's stage of development (Interview, Social worker). Some youth in care are developmentally behind their peers and may not be at a stage of their development to meaningfully engage in these discussions. However, it's also dependent on the youth's state of mind. Many youth are not psychologically prepared to face the fact that they will soon lose MCFD's support.

There are real challenges, including that youth aren't ready to participate or engage in those discussions... [They aren't] ready to engage in the separatory processes in practicing life skills or discussions about planning. - Researcher A

There are several reasons why youth may not be ready to engage in discussions about planning for independence. Firstly, up until the youth's 19th birthday, youth continue to receive the same supports they always have and may not grasp the realities and challenges of living independently. Secondly, youth may avoid thinking about it because the concept of transitioning and losing all their current supports is frightening. Denial may be a coping strategy for youth to deal with the deadline of their 19th birthday.

There are experiences where workers are frequently making the effort and offering services to adolescents to take advantage of and to some degree the

youth don't use it. Within months or weeks they see the reality and it hits them. You frequently hear them say I should have taken your advice for the last two years – Social worker

...I had an actual opportunity to prepare myself for my independence but I think it was the fear of turning 19 and the fear of knowing that everything gets cut off and just the fact that it really scared me to even wanna think about preparing myself for independence until the day that I turned 19- Focus group participant

The experience of having one's support cut off at a particular deadline is one that is unique to youth exiting the child welfare system. Youth living in their family home can usually remain there until they are ready to move out, and can draw on family support or return to the family home if necessary. Youth in care do not have that luxury and are aware of this fact.

It's really weird because you don't have to do that anywhere else for anything else you know. You don't. I mean except maybe for school where you move on to other things. I think it's a weird concept for me that you're out of care, you know, we stopped caring about you or whatever.- Focus group participant

For a variety of reasons, youth may be difficult to engage in discussions about transitioning to adulthood and learning the necessary life skills which presents a major obstacle to preparing youth for independence.

6.1.2. Dependency on the system

Youth exiting the child welfare system may possess a skill set that allows them to obtain what they need from the system. Youth may have learned to ask their social worker when they needed something or have come to expect that the child welfare system will provide for them. This can be a very adaptive skill for youth who may need to learn to advocate for themselves to have their needs met by social workers who often have little time to spend with individual youth due to high caseloads. However, this skill set may act as a barrier when youth are living independently and are now required to rely primarily on themselves.

An obstacle to learning [life skills] is if you don't shift them out of the mentality of dependency. [If you've] learned to support yourself by getting what you want from the system... Your skill set is to be dependent on the system and work it to your benefit not how to get a job or make yourself more employable... – Social worker

Although focus group participants did not identify dependency on the system as a barrier for themselves, they told stories that reflected how they themselves had developed a mentality of dependence on the child welfare system.

The one thing I learned from my social worker was how to talk with adults.... I wouldn't say manipulate but just get things through my social worker. It's not manipulation when they're getting paid.” – Foster group participant

One of my friends told me, “Anything you need the ministry will give you, anything you need the ministry will do for you” and ... I took that with me. And so anytime I had a tooth ache or I had a body ache I called the doctor or I called my social worker like, “I need to go to the dentist” or you know, “I need this” or, “I need clothing” and I got it. – Focus group participant

Youth who learned to rely on the child welfare system instead of developing skills to become self sufficient are likely at a disadvantage when they live independently. Youth may not take initiative to work towards bettering their circumstances and instead turn to income assistance and social services to receive supports as an adult.

The mentality of dependency acts as a barrier for youth to engage in or benefit from life skills preparation. Youth who perceive supports as coming from an external source, or who look outside of themselves to have their needs met, may not fully comprehend the importance of developing life skills to support oneself when living independently or invest the energy required to develop those skills.

6.1.3. Transience

Finally, even for youth who do engage in life skills preparation, transience of many youth in care can present a barrier to learning life skills. Youth in care who move in

and out of care or move to different geographic regions may have their learning opportunities disrupted or be unable to complete a life skills program.

*“Transience [is a barrier to learning life skills]. They start but seldom finish. But if a life skills model were to travel with them they wouldn’t have to start at zero” –
Community service agency board member*

Transience may prevent youth from completing life skills programs they are enrolled in or disrupt any progress towards goals the youth was working towards with their social worker. While youth who move frequently may develop strong coping skills in response, they are less likely to receive consistent support towards developing tangible life skills or other intangible skills they lack. Providing a consistent life skills model across the province would allow a youth’s life skills progress to travel with them and prevent disruption in their learning experience.

6.2. Important considerations for life skills learning

This thematic cluster identifies important considerations and concerns that may affect implementation, delivery, and success of any approaches to teaching life skills to youth exiting the child welfare system.

6.2.1. Appropriate age to teach life skills

Two key issues influence the appropriate age to begin life skills preparation. One argument suggests that life skills preparation should begin much earlier than it does currently. Beginning life skills training earlier would provide more opportunities for youth to learn and practice life skills. Adopting a phased approach to teaching life skills over time would allow youth to learn life skills that were developmentally most appropriate to them at certain ages.

When we talk about youth we’re talking about 16-18 year olds. It should happen a lot earlier. I’m suggesting that for certain aspects [of life skills training] it starts at age 13-14. Get a bank account and have knowledge of financial planning. It’s a

stage thing. At 13-14, it's a good time to start talking about career aspirations. It's a good time to start doing life skills for cooking. As they grow older...continue with other life skills. It should be a phased program. – Policy analyst

However a conflicting argument is that youth only learn life skills when they need them. Youth learn life skills when they are faced with a particular task that requires them to develop the corresponding life skills. For instance, when youth are looking for work they develop life skills to find employment. Attempting to facilitate the development of life skills before youth need those skills is not normative and contrasts with the manner in which youth not in care learn life skills. Youth are likely to forget any life skills that they were taught before they actually needed to use those skills in their day to day life.

Most people learn those things when they have to... The skills that social service agencies want to teach young people, it's not that they're not important, it's that you learn them in vitro and in the situation. On the one hand they're important, but in terms of training young people while they're still in care it's not normative. – Researcher B

Life skills training outside the context where youth need that skill is not very useful. Training people in housing when they're not confronted with the need for housing- those are not useful things to do. – Researcher B

The core issue at play in these arguments is the age range for which MCFD provides supports. MCFD primarily provides services to youth up until age 19 and it is MCFD's responsibility to adequately prepare youth for adulthood. However, many of the life skills that youth need for successful adulthood only begin to develop after MCFD services have ended. The two solutions that logically flow from these conflicting realities are to 1) require youth to live independently before they leave the child welfare system so they can receive supports while they are learning to live independently or 2) to extend MCFD supports to youth beyond age 19 and into early adulthood so that they have supports while they are developing the life skills required to live independently successfully.

However, the developmental ability of youth must also be considered when determining the age at which it is most appropriate for them to begin living independently. Furthermore, it may be harmful for some youth to continue receiving MCFD supports into adulthood when they are fully capable of living independently. For youth with a mentality of dependence on the system, supports beyond the age of 19 will extend their dependence on the ministry.

I sometimes see youth who in all respects are quite capable of moving on to be independent but when I see them go to AYA [Agreement with Young Adult Program] they're extending their dependency on the government. For youth that are capable of being independent they'll go off and be independent. They need to be on their own now. – Social worker

An exception to this argument was interpersonal skills, which were seen as important for youth to learn at any age.

6.2.2. Interpersonal skills are critical skills

Several interviewees highlighted interpersonal skills as the most important life skills for youth to learn. Interpersonal skills can be applied across all domains of one's life and were seen as important for all age ranges. Although some youth in care may have well developed interpersonal skills, others will not have learned these skills or have seen them demonstrated by a positive role model. Teaching these skills to children and youth of all ages was seen as an important task.

There are behavioural interventions that have been used to help young people learn social skills, relationship building. Those are important for a good percentage of people aging out of care. Building those interventions into how we operate the child welfare system is a smart thing to do.- Researcher B

The ability to build and maintain relationships with others is crucial in all areas of one's life from building friendships, maintaining healthy connection with family, interacting with coworkers and conducting day to day business. In addition to preventing loneliness, which is common among youth who have transitioned to adulthood, it also

ensures that youth have a support network that can help them through various challenges they face in their lives.

The most important are social skills- if you have those you can maintain relationships with caring adults – then as you progress towards independence those people will help you through that. – Researcher B

Interpersonal skills are required across all areas of one's life and are therefore considered the most important life skills for youth to learn. Strong interpersonal skills will help youth build their own support networks of people who they can access to assist them through difficult periods of their life.

6.2.3. Importance of relationships

Relationships with a caring adult play an important role in life skills learning for youth. Relationships with a caring adult role model both facilitate life skills learning and also provide supports that youth can draw on to navigate challenges. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the importance of relationships with caring adults for youth exiting care. *“In order for a young person to be successful they have to have an adult to back them” –Researcher B*

Interviewees viewed relationship-based programs as key to improving life skills in youth. Relationship based programs foster trusting relationships between youth and workers and increases young people's receptivity to learning from workers. Additionally, connections built through relationship based programs persist over time and reduce the likelihood that youth will not have a supportive adult to turn to in times of crisis.

Programs that are relationship based programs [are important]- The ability to connect and develop relationships to learn and foster skills. A relationship based approach is important... Relational programs may mean the case load is lower but people will maintain connections [with workers] for longer. There are less issues of people falling through the cracks. - Researcher A

Ideally, you get into a trusting relationship, and they're more open to guidance. – Community service agency board member

Focus group participants described learning life skills from a variety of sources including youth workers, counsellors, foster parents, friends, the Federation of BC Youth in Care Network, home economics class, juvenile detention, groups provided by a community service agency, and various workshops on budgeting, conflict resolution, and cooking. They highlighted their relationships with those providing life skills learning opportunities, and life skills learning was only mentioned in the context of positive relationships with others

I think my youth worker [taught me life skills]. He was awesome. I was dealing with a lot of mental health so he was helping me to figure out what problems I had with myself... to realize that I'm not alone and there are services out there. But I didn't like any of the services and I didn't trust anyone. So I didn't talk to anyone except my youth worker because I found out he had smoked pot and I trusted him. – Focus Group Participant

Relationships with adults not associated with a particular program are also important for a youth's success and life skills learning. Relationships with a caring adult role model can carry on into adulthood and act as a resource to teach new life skills when young people encounter new challenges. However, whether it's program staff or an adult from another area of the youth's life, many young people still lack a caring adult to provide that support. Unfortunately, *"For many it's the exception, not the rule"* – Community Service Agency board member.

6.2.4. Importance of foster parents

For youth in care, foster parents offer opportunities to learn life skills in the context of a caring relationship. Youth living in a foster home have a wealth of opportunities to learn life skills if they are supported by a foster parent. Foster parents can teach youth tangible life skills such as cooking and cleaning, as well as intangible skills such as time management and conflict resolution. Since youth are living in the

home, foster parents are capable of providing life skills learning opportunities on a far greater scale than a service provider who may meet the youth just once a week. The responsibility for teaching life skills could be included in foster parent's contractual responsibilities.

We really need to involve foster parents more. Kids are living there. A foster parent should be responsible for ensuring the kid has a bank account, teaching financial literacy... The problem is few adults [have those skills] either. At least make sure they have bank account, do savings, foster parents can play huge role in hygiene, cooking skills, these are done in the home anyway it's just involving the young person. It should be mandatory. - Policy analyst

Additionally, relationships with foster parents offer the potential to continue on after a youth has left care and could act as a source of support throughout their lives. Relationships between foster parents and youth could be encouraged to continue as well.

Foster parents have a role in teaching life skills. Youth leaving care no longer have support- whatever relationships they had moves to an ad hoc basis. It would be nice if there were mechanisms in place to encourage those relationships to continue – Community service agency board member

However, some interviewees expressed concerns that some foster parents may not be able to adequately facilitate life skills development. Firstly, not all adults are knowledgeable about particular life skills areas themselves to be able to facilitate acquisition of the skills in someone else, particularly in areas of financial literacy. This issue could be addressed by providing training to foster parents or supplementing life skills learning opportunities in the foster home with formal group curriculum. Secondly, however, some interviewees expressed concerns that some foster parents were not adequately involved in youth's lives and would not show enough commitment to youth's life skills development. Contractual responsibilities of foster parents are not always enforced, and one interviewee believed that foster parents were given too much leeway

when they did not perform some of the basic responsibilities that would be expected from a biological parent.

Some foster parents aren't that involved. Resources social workers could crack the whip and could make them perform [parenting duties outlined in their contract]... [Some foster parents] won't do [parenting tasks that are] so basic. If we found a parent doing that, we'd be screaming at them but somehow the foster parent does it and what's that about? That's an obstacle... I'd say my bet is that a lot of foster parents aren't performing. – Social worker

Despite these concerns, foster parents do still offer valuable opportunities to ensure that youth leave care with appropriate life skills. Foster parents could integrate activities that develop life skills into daily living and tasks. Youth would have a wide range of applied opportunities to learn and practice life skills.

6.2.5. Catering to the needs of youth

Life skills services should cater to the needs of youth. Youth vary according to developmental ability, learning style and personality and these variations must be considered when designing life skill opportunities and services for youth. Additionally, programs must be flexible in their delivery to facilitate full participation of youth dealing with various obstacles or periods of crisis. Flexibility and personalized design was emphasized as the only way to meet the needs of a wide variety of youth.

People have different learning styles. Lots are developmentally delayed... You need multi-faceted delivery of any life skills programs... We should be aiming the service towards where the young person is at. [Currently] kids have to meet the delivery model instead of the other way around. - Community service agency board member

Assessment was seen as an important first step to determining the ability and learning style of youth so they can then be offered life skills services that are personalized to fit their unique needs.

Especially with [continuing custody orders] there should be an assessment of learning style...so that services match the youth's needs. It's about understanding what they need and then delivering it.- Community service agency board member

Flexibility in program delivery is important to accommodate youth who are dealing with unpredictable life events or who are developmentally less able to meet the expectations of rigidly designed programs.

If there's cookie cutter approach and it's not individual, you will create barriers to people who don't do well in group situations. If there's a requirement that you must attend every session at a certain time and a person has FAS and doesn't show up, the structure or format could act as a barrier. - Researcher A

A combination of group services and one-to-one support was seen as a particularly effective combination in many cases that offered flexibility to respond to youth's individual needs: *"Combining a group or peer based approach with one-to-one support is often seen as the most effective way". – Researcher A*

6.2.6. Discrepancy between policy and practice

Interviewees raised concerns that MCFD lacks a coherent policy framework to guide services for transition aged youth (For more information refer to Section 3.2). Transition services are provided inconsistently and often through pilot projects. Furthermore, where satisfactory policy exists, it is often not translated into practice and youth are not aware of their options.

There is good policy but practice is almost non-existent. Policy is well written, well done but practice in the province is not there. A lot of post majority or transition services are underfunded, they're usually pilot projects. There's lots of media spin about the kinds of things the ministry is doing but youth aren't aware of what they're entitled to.- Community service agency board member

However, MCFD is currently revising standards and policies about youth exiting care:

We're working on standards and policy and procedures around transitioning. Right now there's nothing. What the standards will do is try to align the planning process for youth service workers and guardianship workers. – Policy analyst

Interviewees also noted that the responsibility for children in care does not fall solely on MCFD. Other ministries and organizations must also do their part to provide opportunities and facilitate successful outcomes for youth exiting the child welfare system.

We always think that MCFD has the responsibility. But it's a shared responsibility. They're in the care of the government. Every ministry should be involved in doing their part. [The Ministry of] Social Development is in charge of labour market planning but in order to participate in employment programs you have to be on income assistance. Youth on AYAs can't participate in employment programs. MSD should consider themselves as a parent as well".- Policy analyst

6.3. Summary of Key Findings

- Youth may not be developmentally or psychologically prepared to begin planning to transition to adulthood.
- A mentality of dependency may act as a barrier to engaging in life skills development.
- Transience prevents some youth in care from completing life skills programs.
- While ideally life skills facilitation could begin as early as possible, youth primarily learn life skills when they require them.
- Interpersonal skills are critical for youth in care of all ages.
- Relationship based programs may facilitate life skills learning.
- An adult role model can support life skills learning for youth beyond age 19.

- Foster parents offer a valuable opportunity to facilitate life skills development in the foster home.
- Life skills services must cater to the unique needs of each youth.
- Life skills services must offer flexibility to youth dealing with unpredictable life events.
- There is a gap between life skills policy and practice in BC.
- All ministries have a responsibility to care for youth in care.

The following section describes three case studies of approaches to facilitating the acquisition of life skills. The case study analysis focuses on answering the third research question of identifying effective approaches of facilitating life skills development among youth exiting the child welfare system.

7. Case Studies: Three approaches to facilitating life skills development

This chapter describes and evaluates three case studies of different approaches to facilitate the acquisition of life skills among youth transitioning to adulthood from government care or youth agreement. The case studies include a mentoring program (Advocates to successful transition to independence program- California), a life skills class (Going for goal program - United States), and an independent living program (Lighthouse Independent Living Program- Ohio). Cases are analyzed based on their effectiveness at facilitating life skills development and the breadth of life skills addressed.

7.1. Advocates to Successful Transition to Independence Program

7.1.1. Program description

The Advocates to Successful Transition to Independence Program (ASTI) provides mentoring and advocacy to foster youth ages 14 to 21 in California. Advocates, the title for volunteer mentors in the program, assist youth in developing life skills in preparation for their emancipation from the child welfare system. Advocates assist youth with different tasks to prepare for independent living and development of life skills including: assisting youth in obtaining personal documents, opening a bank account, and reviewing topics covered in life skills classes from an outside provider. Advocates also advocate for youth in the child welfare court and submit court reports that measure youth's progress towards emancipation. Advocates facilitate collaboration with the youth's social worker, caretaker, and other service providers and are expected to keep in regular contact with them. Advocates are expected to spend time with youth each week.

One aim of the program is that the youth and mentor develop a life-long relationship. Information about selection and training of advocates was not available.

7.1.2. Evaluation

7.1.2.1. Breadth of life skills Addressed

The ASTI program explicitly encourages mentors to teach tangible life skills such as opening a bank account, obtaining important personal documents, and completing homework (ASTI case study interview). Youth and mentors also reported learning a variety of intangible life skills through their experiences together (Osterling & Hines, 2006). In addition, mentors can potentially offer opportunities to learn a wide range of tangible and intangible life skills by acting as a role model when doing a variety of different activities with youth. The extent to which ASTI mentors assist youth in learning the whole range of life skills depends upon the life skills of the mentor, the activities mentor and youth participate in, and the relationship between youth and mentor. Overall breadth of life skills addressed is fairly large, although the absence of explicitly addressed intangible skills means that learning opportunities will vary depending on a mentor's own individual skills and ability to impart these skills to youth.

Table 3. Case Study ASTI: Breadth of life skills addressed

Dimension	Explicitly addressed	Opportunities for Learning
Intangible		
Critical thinking and cognitive skills	No	Yes
Coping and self-management	No	Yes
Social and moral skills	No	Yes
Communication	No	Yes
Tangible		
Educational	Yes	Yes
Vocational	Yes	Yes
Money management	No	Yes
Home management	Yes	Yes
Use of community resources	No	Yes
Pregnancy/Parenting	No	Yes
Self-care	Yes	Yes

7.1.2.2. Effectiveness

Osterling and Hines (2006) conducted an evaluation of the ASTI program. Data were collected in two phases over two years through questionnaires, interviews and focus groups with youth and advocates. In total 52 youth and 18 advocates completed a questionnaire, while 7 youth and 18 advocates participated in either an interview or focus group.

Most youth improved their psycho-emotional/social skills to a greater extent than their concrete skills. No pre- or post-tests were conducted but youth reported that their knowledge of life skills had improved since beginning the program. Questionnaire results found that knowledge of various tangible life skills varied from 19% to 83% of youth currently participating in the program knowing how to do a particular independent living task. Youth's knowledge of psycho-emotional/social skills was higher, ranging from 50% to 89%. Although both youth and advocates reported doing life skills tasks together and felt that hands-on learning was beneficial, 55% of youth reported that they mainly learned independent living skills on their own. Advocates reported fairly low rates of assistance to youth on particular independent living skills, ranging from 6 to 44% of advocates who had helped youth with a particular task. Low rates of assistance may be explained because particular life skills needs did not arise for some youth or because some life skills were more difficult to facilitate (ASTI case study interview). Advocates expressed doubts that they were doing enough to prepare the youth for independent living.

Youth with a strong relationship with their mentor tended to have better outcomes. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with youth and advocates revealed that the relationships that developed between youth and advocates were one of the most important benefits to the youth. Youth described their relationships with advocates as supportive and helpful. Advocates felt that building rapport and trust with youth was necessary prior to working on independent living skills with the youth. Questionnaire data demonstrated that most mentors and youth established a strong relationship: 96% of youth reported that mentor and youth trusted each other, 90% said

their relationship with their mentor was important to them and 92% reported that they had a good connection with their mentor (Osterling & Hines, 2006).

Key challenges and recommendations were identified. Advocates found a great deal of learning was required to find appropriate resources for youth and wanted more program support to assist youth in accessing various resources. A key recommendation of the evaluation was that the program link more closely with the Independent Living Program (ILP), a program in the United States that offers a variety of services to help current and former foster care youth reach self-sufficiency.

Other areas for improvement include recruitment of older youth and recruiting volunteer advocates (ASTI case study interview). The program initially experienced difficulty recruiting older youth for the program. Advocates also found that it was difficult to establish a relationship with older foster youth (ASTI case study interview). The strongest youth-advocate relationships were those that started when the youth was younger, around ages 11 to 13. Eventually, the ASTI program shifted focus towards recruiting and building relationship with youth at younger ages (ASTI case study interview).

The evaluation has several limitations. No comparison group or pre-post test was used so no conclusions can be made as to how much life skills learning can be attributed to advocates as opposed to normal life experiences. The sample of youth and advocates included in the evaluation was self-selected and therefore may represent participants who had a more positive experience than others or exclude those with a very negative experience. A confounding factor in this research is that 53% of participating youth were already enrolled in an Independent Living Program. Life skills improvements may have been due to participation in ILP rather than ASTI. The study may also be affected by biases inherent in self-report.

7.2. Going for the Goal (GOAL) program

7.2.1. Program description

The Going for the Goal (GOAL) Program is a life skills program for adolescents designed to increase self-confidence and a sense of personal control (Danish, 1997). GOAL is typically taught in schools to all enrolled students, through a series of 10 one-hour workshops taught over 10 weeks. Workshop content centers around goal-setting, problem solving and seeking help. A detailed list of workshop topics can be found in Appendix H: GOAL workshop topics. Workshop content is delivered by high school students to younger adolescents, with a ratio of 2-3 high school students to 10-15 younger students.

The GOAL program is delivered using an “educational pyramid” which is premised on the idea that teaching life skills at all levels of participation will maximize the benefits to program participants. Life Skills Center staff teach a condensed version of GOAL to community and school personnel. These personnel then teach the curriculum to high school student leaders, who are selected as positive role models for younger students based on their academic record, leadership qualities, involvement in extracurricular activities and a history of exemplary conduct in and out of school. Student leaders both participate in the GOAL program themselves and learn how to teach it to others. Student leaders receive a detailed training manual to guide each workshop that they then deliver to younger students.

7.2.2. Case Study Evaluation

7.2.2.1. Breadth of life skills addressed

The course curriculum focuses on intangible life skills. Life skills taught by GOAL include goal setting, problem solving, personal control, self-efficacy and seeking social support. These skills fall into the first three dimensions of intangible life skills, however since seeking social support also requires communication, the dimension of communication is included as a life skills addressed. Overall, breadth of life skills addressed is limited as it is constrained to explicitly addressed intangible skills.

Table 4. Case Study GOAL: Breadth of life skills addressed

Dimension	Explicitly Addressed	Opportunities for Learning
Intangible		
Critical thinking and cognitive skills	Yes	No
Coping and self-management	Yes	No
Social and moral skills	Yes	No
Communication	Yes	No
Tangible		
Educational	No	No
Vocational	No	No
Money management	No	No
Home management	No	No
Use of community resources	No	No
Pregnancy/Parenting	No	No
Self-care	No	No

7.2.2.2. Effectiveness

O’Hearn & Gatz (2002) conducted an evaluation of GOAL in a multi-ethnic urban community near downtown Los Angeles. GOAL was taught in two middle schools located in a school district with a large at-risk population; 50% of families live below the poverty level, 25% receive aid to families with dependent children (AFDC), and 30% speak limited to no English. 525 students participated in the program and were tested before and after the program. Half of participants were also tested 10 weeks after completion of the program. Compared to the control group, participants experienced a number of benefits from participating in the program.

Knowledge of intangible life skills increased significantly ($F(2171)=58.61, p<0.01$) as a result of participating in the program. Pre-program scores on a knowledge test were 39%, compared to 53% after completing the program and 52% 10 weeks after completion of the program suggesting that learning from the program is retained over time. Life skills knowledge and problem solving scores were correlated, suggesting that life skills learning was generalizable to other real world situations. While students improved their knowledge of life skills, 52% on the knowledge test still leaves a great deal of room for improvement. O’Hearn and Gatz (2006) suggest that there may be a ceiling to the extent of life skills learning that can be accomplished through a classroom format.

In addition to knowledge of life skills, participants also experienced improvements in their intangible life skills (O'Hearn & Gatz, 2006). Participant's problem solving skills improved compared to the control group. However, participants did not show an increase in their sense of personal control compared to the control group. In a separate evaluation of GOAL, Forneris, Danish & Scott (2007) found that participants had greater knowledge of specific goal setting and problem solving strategies than the control group. Participants also recognized differences between different types of social support compared to the control group. However at the time of evaluation only one youth reported that he had experienced a problem that required seeking help so it is unclear whether participants applied this knowledge in their everyday lives.

As part of GOAL, participants set goals on a goal ladder outlining the necessary steps to achieve the goal. Participants had difficulty selecting goals that could be achieved within the program's time frame (O'Hearn & Gatz, 2006). Approximately 25% of all participants reached their goal. When participants who set inappropriate or unachievable goals were excluded 55% of participants reached their goal. It was therefore extremely important that leaders ensure participants set appropriate goals.

Participants reported that one of the most enjoyable and helpful aspects of GOAL was interaction with high school role models. Student leaders reported similar satisfaction with teaching younger students. Student leaders of the program also experienced improvements in life skills knowledge which was very robust over time (GOAL case study interview).

A number of challenges were identified with GOAL. One limitation is teacher and student trainer's grasp of the curriculum (GOAL case study interview). Some trainers do not grasp all the components of appropriate goal setting and are not able to accurately facilitate learning of this skill. As well, between 30-50% of youth do not grasp the core principles of goal setting during the program (GOAL case study interview). Another challenge is that each time the program material is taught from program staff to school staff, and then again to student leaders, there is some loss of learning and understanding of the materials (GOAL case study interview).

While it was not found in the evaluation by O'Hearn & Gatz (2006), other evaluations have found a loss of participant's life skills knowledge over time (GOAL case study interview). The GOAL interviewee suggested that refresher sessions would be useful to reinforce life skills knowledge and reduce learning loss over time. Finally, GOAL does not include opportunities for youth to practice newly learned life skills in real world settings.

7.3. Lighthouse Independent Living Program

7.3.1. Program description

The Lighthouse Independent Living Program (LILP) is a scattered site housing independent living program in Cincinnati, Ohio (Kroner, 2007). The program offers, on average, a 10 month transitional living experience before youth reach independence. Youth between ages 16 and 19, who are in care or delinquent, are placed in apartments typically rented from private landlords to ease the transition from care to independence. Workers help youth find an apartment close to public transit that they will be able to afford when they leave the program. Care is taken to place youth in neighbourhoods close to their school, work and social network. LILP furnishes the apartment, pays the security deposit, rent and utilities, signs the lease and assumes responsibility for the youth's behaviour with the landlord. Youth are provided with \$55 per week, \$10 of which is placed into a savings account. Youth are then responsible for food, transportation and personal care items. Youth are expected to find employment to cover any additional expenses and to gradually assume responsibility for their bills as the program progresses. Youth are allowed to keep their apartments, furniture, supplies and security deposits if they are employed at discharge and have demonstrated that they are a responsible tenant to the landlord. Youth without a stable source of income at the termination of the program receive assistance in obtaining alternate living arrangements such as low-income or subsidized housing.

LILP has several other living arrangements for youth who are temporarily unable to live independently including a boarding house, semi-supervised shared homes with

live-in staff, and supervised apartment buildings with staff who live in on-site apartments. Youth may be removed from their individual apartments if they continuously violate program or landlord rules. Youth are placed into a more supervised setting and given the opportunity to earn their way back to independent living. The program has found that youth learn from their mistakes and are often more successful on their second or third attempt (Lighthouse case study interview).

Youth are provided with additional supports in the program as well. Each youth is assigned a social worker who has a caseload of ten to twelve youth. Social workers assist youth with individualized life skills learning related to current circumstances of the youth's life. LILP believes that the greatest opportunity for learning occurs when youth need to learn, as is the case when they are living on their own. Youth learn life skills while living independently and are assisted by their social workers to develop the required skills. Additional program staff connect youth with educational, vocational, therapeutic, medical, dental and other resources. Youth are contacted several times a week in person or by phone and newcomers receive additional support. Twenty-four hour crisis management is available to youth and youth should be able to reach a staff member within five to fifteen minutes at any time. Program staff aim to support youth in being as self sufficient as possible given the limited program length and the developmental capabilities of the youth.

LILP also offers a ten module life skills class which is open to all foster children, not just those already enrolled in LILP. Classes are each 3-4 hours long. Topics include an assessment of current functioning, money management, time management and planning ahead, use of community resources, apartment management, nutrition and food preparation, use of public transportation, social skills, employment and job seeking skills, problem solving and decision making, self-care and building a support network. Youth are not required to attend the sessions in sequence and can begin at any time. They are paid \$10 to attend a class. Life skills trainers offer a flexible curriculum that includes guest speakers, videos, real life examples from current LILP participants and discussion.

LILP is unique in providing a range of housing options and in giving participants the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. This approach means that participants are rarely terminated. To provide learning opportunities, the program makes a point of not being too helpful to youth. Youth who make mistakes are allowed to fail. For instance, if a youth spends their grocery money on something else, Lighthouse staff do not provide them with additional money but would instead instruct them to eat at a friend's house or refer them to a local soup kitchen.

7.3.2. Case Study Evaluation

7.3.2.1. Breadth of life skills addressed

LILP facilitates acquisition of life skills in a variety of ways. The life skills classes explicitly address life skills in 8 of 10 dimensions. Personalized life skills support from social workers and real world experiences offer opportunities to learn life skills in all life skills dimensions. Overall, a large range of life skills are addressed both explicitly and through opportunities to learn.

Table 5. Case Study LILP: Breadth of life skills addressed

Dimension	Explicitly Addressed	Opportunities for Learning
Intangible		
Critical thinking and cognitive skills	Yes	Yes
Coping and self-management	Yes	Yes
Social and moral skills	Yes	Yes
Communication	No	Yes
Tangible		
Educational	No	Yes
Vocational	Yes	Yes
Money management	Yes	Yes
Home management	Yes	Yes
Use of community resources	Yes	Yes
Pregnancy/Parenting	No	Yes
Self-care	Yes	Yes

7.3.2.2. Effectiveness

No literature is available that examines the effectiveness of Lighthouse Independent Living Program at improving life skills of youth. However, several published studies examine outcomes of youth who participated in the program. Kroner & Mares (2011) found that when given a range of housing options the majority of youth discharged from LILP chose to live independently: 55% of youth chose independent living, 21% chose to live in someone else's home, 11% chose to live in a housing arrangement with a higher level of care than independent living and the whereabouts was unknown for the remaining 13%. While youth who choose to live independently may not feel entirely prepared to live on their own and may not be successful at doing so, at the very least they view independent living as a more appealing alternative than the others. 60% of youth exiting the program had completed a high school/GED program and 31% were employed (Kroner & Mares, 2009). Youth with mental health problems, delinquency issues, teen parenting or cognitive impairments attained less positive outcomes than other youth (Kroner & Mares, 2011).

Without a comparison group, it is not possible to conclude whether LILP participants achieved more positive outcomes than non-participating youth. However, youth participating in the life skills classes report finding the information very helpful (Lighthouse case study interview). Youth who complete the life skills classes also tend to do better living independently than those who do not (Lighthouse case study interview).

A separate research study by Mech et al. (1994) provides evidence to support the effectiveness of the Lighthouse Independent Living program. Mech et al. (1994) surveyed life skills knowledge of 534 youth in state care in Illinois. He found that youth living in scattered-site apartment placements had the greatest life skills knowledge, followed by youth in foster family placements. Youth in group homes scored the lowest. This study provides concrete support for the effectiveness of programs similar to LILP.

8. Policy Alternatives

This chapter presents policy options available to MCFD to address poor life skills of youth exiting the child welfare system in BC. The status quo is described first, followed by three policy alternatives which each build upon services and programs available in the status quo.

8.1. Status Quo

MCFD does not have policy guidelines to ensure that all youth exiting the child welfare system receive adequate life skills preparation (refer to Section 3.2 for more information). Youth receive varying levels of support and life skills preparation from their social workers. Many social workers have high caseloads of 30-50 families, far above the recommended 22 cases, and may have limited time for each youth (Kinna, 2011). A number of life skills programs are available to youth exiting the child welfare system. Programs tend to be offered on a small scale and vary by region. Access to these services depends on a referral for a social worker or community agency, although some programs accept self-referral. Many youth are not aware of all the services available to them and many youth do not receive life skills services. Programs currently available are described below.

Status Quo Mentoring:

There are currently several mentoring programs for youth in BC, including Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Kidstart Mentoring Program and Kinnections Youth Mentorship Program. Kinnections is the only program that specifically targets youth in care. It also includes a small element targeted towards building life skills (Rutman, Hubberstey &

Hume, 2009), although this is not emphasized in the program description (MCFD, 2012) and depends on the preferences of the youth and mentor.

In addition, several MCFD service delivery areas in BC have youth worker programs that are similar to mentoring programs in a number of respects. For example, the Transition Youth to Adulthood (TYA) Program in Vancouver contracts service providers to provide a youth worker to youth-in-care preparing to leave care. TYA workers help youth accomplish goals set with the youth's social worker. Goals include concrete steps to prepare for independence, such as opening a bank account, and personal development goals, such as setting boundaries with friends. Typically TYA workers meet with youth once a week. The program is similar to mentoring in that a TYA worker may act as a mentor to a youth and assist them in developing life skills by working towards their transition goals. TYA programs differ from mentoring in several important respects. The relationship between youth and TYA worker, however positive, is a professional one that may change the tone and authenticity of the relationship. The program is also time limited; TYA workers do not have the ability to maintain a long-term supportive relationship with youth. Additionally, the program has been critiqued for providing crisis-oriented services as TYA workers respond to events that arise in a youth's life, which may take priority over efforts to systematically build life skills (Interview, Policy Analyst).

Status Quo Life Skills Classes

Various community service providers offer life skills classes in BC including Aunt Leah's, Prince George Native Friendship Centre, Nanaimo Family Life Association, Family Services of Greater Vancouver, and MCFD itself. These programs are delivered in a community setting by program staff and range from 6 to 15 sessions in length. Each of these programs includes tangible life skills although some do not cover intangible life skills. Some programs address a broad range of life skills while others are tailored to address one specific domain of life skills, such as job-seeking and employment skills. Some programs are also paired with an apprenticeship component where participants gain employment skills and experience.

Status Quo Independent Living Programs

There are currently a few small scale independent living programs in BC including those offered by Covenant house, Okanagan Boys and Girls Club, and the Youth Empowerment Society. Each is offered in conjunction with other specific services, including life skills support, job training, and counselling. These program have a limited capacity and can serve a small number of youth each year.

A larger scale program is the Youth Agreement Program offered by MCFD, described previously in section 2.2. Under this agreement, youth live independently and MCFD provides rent payment, security deposit and a monthly allowance for living expenses as well as an allotment for clothing and a cell phone (Interview, Social worker). Youth are allowed to earn employment income up to \$500 per month but must save 75% of their earnings or their monthly support payment will be reduced by an equivalent amount. On average, youth have weekly contact with their social worker and home visits once a month (MCFD, 2002a). Approximately 600 youth are currently on youth agreements in BC (RCYBC, 2009). Youth Agreements were originally designed for high-risk youth but have been expanded somewhat to a larger range of youth (MCFD, 2002).

Support services provided by the ministry to youth on a youth agreement include: monitoring, life skills assistance, referrals, budgeting and educational support, counselling, home visits, involving family, and preserving cultural identity (MCFD, 2002a). Seventy-four percent of youth in the program also have a contracted worker to support them (MCFD, 2002a). Thirty-nine percent of youth also reported receiving life skills training while on a Youth Agreement (MCFD, 2002a).

Life skills learning through the Youth Agreement Program has not been evaluated, however a social worker interviewed questioned the effectiveness of the program on the grounds that the youth receive little supervision in some cases:

My educated guess is there's a lot we don't know because we're not a witness to what they're doing. We see them for a blip when they come into the office. Most likely when they're looking their best to continue on the program. Really I think we're living in a fool's paradise, that's my criticism of the program... You see so

*frequently so many professionals ... who seem to look at youth agreements and blindly recommend them and think the kid's going to do wonderfully... I don't think it's anywhere near as good as we think it is. If we're going to cheap out and let them live independently so they're living on their own, largely 98% of the time without adult monitoring, guidance, structure, other than what landlord imposes. If you do that and the results are poor it's because the supports are not there.-
Social worker*

8.2. Policy Alternatives

Three policy alternatives are described below: mentoring programs, life skills classes and independent living programs. Each builds on services available in the status quo.

8.2.1. Mentoring Program

This policy option proposes building on mentoring programs that are currently available in the status quo by incorporating more evidence-based practices and including a specific focus on building life skills of youth preparing to exit the child welfare system. As a relationship-based program, mentoring programs promote trust between youth and mentor and facilitate life skills development (Interview theme 6.2.3). Additionally, mentoring programs are particularly effective at building intangible life skills (ASTI case study, Interview theme 6.2.2) and offer flexibility to meet the particular needs of youth based on their age, development and personality (Interview theme 6.2.1, 6.2.5).

The mentoring program would be provided through a community service agency contracted by MCFD. The service provider would be responsible for recruitment of youth and mentors through advertising and networking with child welfare professionals. Funding to support the relationship between youth and mentor would continue through the youth's transition to adulthood up until age 25 so that youth are able to draw on their mentor for support as they face new challenges and require new life skills to live

independently (Interview theme 6.2.3). The intent would be for youth and mentor to develop a life-long relationship.

The mentoring program should follow best practices in mentoring identified by DuBois (2002a) (see Table 6). Best practices were identified based on theory or empirical evidence from mentoring program evaluations. These practices are outlined and expanded upon in the following section.

Table 6. Best Practices in Mentoring (DuBois, 2002a)

Best Practice	Theory-Based	Empirically- Based
Monitoring of Program Implementation	X	X
Non-school setting for Mentoring Activities		X
Screening of Prospective Mentors	X	
Mentor Background: Helping Role or Profession		X
Mentor/Youth Matching	X	
Mentor Pre-Match Training	X	
Expectations: Frequency of Contact	X	X
Expectations: Length of Relationship	X	
Supervision	X	
Ongoing Training	X	X
Mentor Support Group	X	
Structured Activities for Mentors and Youth	X	X
Parent Support/Involvement	X	X

Prospective volunteer mentors should be screened for suitability and mentors with a “helping” role or profession should be actively recruited (Dubois, 2002a). Efforts should be made to identify and recruit natural mentors in a youth’s life to participate. Natural mentors, with a pre-established relationship with youth, are preferable to volunteer mentors because the likelihood of relationship breakdown is reduced, thereby avoiding harmful effects caused by experiencing, potentially, yet another failed relationship (Interview, Researcher B). Where natural mentors cannot be identified, program staff should attempt to match youth & mentors based on interests and

personality to improve the likelihood that a genuine relationship develops (Dubois, 2002a). When possible mentor and youth should also be matched by gender and culture.

Mentors should receive training prior to being matched with a youth (Dubois, 2002a). In this case, mentors should receive in-person training as well as printed reference materials to assist them in teaching and practicing life skills with their youth match. The program should train mentors to use real world opportunities to teach both tangible and intangible life skills to youth. For example, grocery shopping and preparing a nutritious meal with youth provide opportunities to teach budgeting, food nutrition, cooking, and food safety. Structured activity guides should be provided to mentors and youth that outline age-appropriate activities and discussion youth and mentor can engage in to build a particular life skill (Interview theme 6.2.1). For example, one activity might include step by step instructions to creating a monthly budget for youth or practicing goal setting. As well, structured activities should be provided for mentors and youth in the form of periodic group outings that all mentors and youth can attend (Dubois, 2002a).

The program should outline expectations for frequency of contact and length of relationship to mentors (Dubois, 2002a). Keating et al. (2002) suggests that programs without intense contact between youth and mentor are ineffective and may have harmful effects on youth, therefore mentors should be expected to meet with youth at least once a week for a period of three hours. As well, mentors should be expected to commit to the mentoring relationship for a period of at least one year and relationships should be encouraged to develop into life-long relationships. Additionally, building on a lesson learned by the ASTI program, which found it was more difficult to recruit and build relationships with older youth, eligibility for the program would begin at age 12 (Case study interview A).

Program implementation should be monitored to ensure expectations are met and any challenges are addressed (Dubois, 2002a). Mentor supervision should be provided in the form of mandatory monthly reporting and mentor support meetings, with additional support available to mentors as needed (Dubois, 2002a). Ongoing training

opportunities should be provided to mentors (Dubois, 2002a). Mentoring activities should take place in a non-school setting, in this case in the community (Dubois, 2002a). Dubois (2002a) recommends that parent support and involvement be encouraged. As this is not always appropriate for youth in care, instead mentors should be required to maintain contact with and facilitate collaboration between the social worker, foster parent and other important adults in the youth's life.

8.2.2. Life Skills Class

This alternative proposes establishing life skills classes that are delivered in a group setting. By following a structured curriculum, life skills classes ensure that youth encounter opportunities to learn key life skills, which cannot always be guaranteed in a less structured, relationship-based approach (Interview, policy analyst).

The program should be delivered in a community setting to attract a wide range of youth, including those who are not connected to a school setting, and run by a community service agency. The program should be delivered by trained, full-time life skills facilitators to ensure consistency and quality of instruction. To capture the element of peer-to-peer learning identified as a strength of the GOAL program (Case study interview B), the program should be co-facilitated by older youth or former youth in care who have also been taught the life skills curriculum along with facilitation skills. The program staff and youth facilitators should be encouraged to build relationships with youth to both engage youth and facilitate learning (Interview theme 6.2.3).

Life skills curriculum should vary depending on the age of the youth (Interview theme 6.2.1). Classes for younger youth should focus primarily on intangible skills which are important for youth at any age (Interview theme 6.2.2) and developmentally appropriate (Interview theme 6.2.1) while classes for youth who are preparing for independent living in the near future should have a greater focus on tangible skills thereby taking into account findings regarding appropriate age (Interview theme 6.2.1). Curriculum should be culturally sensitive and designed to be appropriate for all genders and cultural backgrounds. These classes should be offered to youth in care, on youth agreements and youth who have aged out of care up until age 21 so that skill

development support is available to youth when they are experiencing the challenges associated with independent living (Interview theme 6.2.1). Classes for older youth should include a combination of different life skills domains, as opposed to focusing on a particular area, to improve the effectiveness of the program³.

The curriculum should be delivered in a variety of methods that appeal to different learning styles including guest speakers, videos, real life examples, field trips and discussions (Interview theme 6.2.5). Hands-on activities should be incorporated whenever possible (Interview theme 6.2.5). For example, youth could do mock-interviews to practise job-seeking skills. To offer flexibility for youth who have challenges attending regularly due to developmental stage or unpredictable life circumstances, youth should be allowed to complete the program at their own pace and not required to attend each session in sequence (Interview theme 6.2.5). Instead, the class should be offered on a continuous basis with youth allowed to drop in (Case Study Interview C). After youth have completed all the modules they should be allowed to continue to attend for an additional 6-12 months to reinforce skills learning and prevent disincentives for completing the class⁴.

8.2.3. Independent Living Program

This alternative proposes implementing a scattered-site independent living program for youth ages 16-19 based on the Lighthouse Independent Living Program which would replace the Youth Agreement program currently available in the status quo. Independent living facilitates life skills development to a greater extent than group home or foster home placements (Mech et al., 1994). Independent living programs provide opportunities for youth to experience the challenges of independent living in a supported

³ Cook (1991) found that youth who received a combination of life skills training in budgeting, obtaining credit, consumer credit, education and employment had better outcomes.

⁴ This program parameter is based on a suggestion by Case Study Interview B that youth be offered “booster sessions” to reinforce life skills learning 6 months after they had completed the GOAL program.

environment and learn from their experiences before access to MCFD supports is terminated. The proposed alternative would provide greater levels of support, a greater focus on life skills development and a greater focus on learning from mistakes than the current Youth Agreement program.

Social workers should assist youth participating in the program to find an apartment in a neighbourhood close to transit and their social network. Furniture, damage deposit and rent payments would be provided for the youth along with a weekly allowance for the youth to purchase food, transportation and personal care items. \$10 of this allowance should be placed in a savings account each week to help youth learn how to save⁵. To encourage independence from the child welfare system (Interview theme 6.1.2), youth should be required to seek employment to cover any additional expenses and should gradually assume full payment of all their expenses.

Social workers should have a reduced caseload of 10-14 youth in order to have enough time to provide support to each youth. Practically, the easiest way to accomplish a reduced caseload will be to have dedicated “transition to adulthood” social workers for youth who enter the program⁶, as opposed to trying to reduce the caseloads of all social workers, which is a much larger issue. Each week, social workers should be required to meet youth in person as well as conducting an additional home visit. High risk youth should be seen more often if necessary. Social workers should be trained to provide individualized life skills support to each youth based on their particular needs (Interview themes 6.2.1, 6.2.3, 6.2.5). When possible services should be provided to Aboriginal youth through delegated agencies, or an effort to provide culturally competent services must be made. Upon discharge from the program, youth should be allowed to keep their

⁵ Focus group participants identified budgeting and saving as a key challenge for them throughout their youth and continuing into their adulthood.

⁶ A researcher interviewed also suggested youth transition specialists. Specialists would be experts on resources and issues related to transitioning to adulthood, while social workers do not necessarily have this specialized knowledge.

apartment, furniture and damage deposit if they have proven to the landlord that they are a responsible tenant. Youth who are unsuccessful in an independent living placement should be moved into a more supervised housing arrangement and be given the opportunity to work towards living independently again. Crucial to the success of the program is that youth be allowed to make mistakes without the intervention of a social worker and that they be allowed to continue in the program and learn from mistakes they have made (Case study interview C).

9. Policy Criteria and Measures

Policy options are evaluated based on six criteria. Criteria include breadth of life skills addressed, effectiveness, life outcomes, cost, administrative feasibility and reach. Measures for each criterion and the corresponding measurement scale are outlined in Table 7. Options receiving high rankings are preferred.

Table 7. Policy Criteria

Criteria		Definition	Measure	Measurement scale
Breadth of life skills addressed	Intangible skills	Breadth of intangible life skills addressed	Range and quality of learning opportunities to develop intangible life skills	0.5: Low 1: Medium 1.5: High
	Tangible skills	Breadth of tangible life skills addressed	Range and quality of learning opportunities to develop tangible life skills	0.5: Low 1: Medium 1.5: High
Effectiveness	Intangible skills	Extent that an alternative improves intangible life skills	-Case study program evaluation data -Interview & focus group findings	0.5: Low 1: Medium 1.5: High
	Tangible skills	Extent that an alternative improves tangible life skills	-Academic literature including theoretical support and program evaluations	0.5: Low 1: Medium 1.5: High
Life Outcomes		Long-term life outcomes of youth	-Case study program evaluation data -Academic literature including theoretical support, program evaluations, and improved life outcomes theoretically linked to life skills	1: little to no improvement 2: moderate improvement 3: large improvement
Cost	Annual Cost	Annual operating costs per youth	Dollars	1: High (>\$5000) 2: Medium (\$1000-\$5000) 3: Low (<\$1000)
	Program length	Length for which each participant can access the program	Years	1: Long (>5 years) 1: Medium (2-5 years) 1.5: Short (0-2 years)
Implementation complexity		Significance of challenges to implementing each option as intended	Difficulties serving the target population, administrative or bureaucratic barriers, and staffing requirements	1: High 2: Medium 3: Low
Reach		Number of youth impacted by each alternative	Number of youth potentially served by each option each year	1: less than 30% 2: 30-60% 3: More than 60%

9.1. Breadth of life skills addressed

Breadth of life skills addressed is assessed based on both explicitly addressed life skills and the presence of opportunities to learn life skills. The quality of learning opportunities in each life skills domain is also considered when evaluating the breadth of learning. Breadth of life skills addressed is divided into intangible and tangible life skills which are assessed separately. Each is measured on a scale of low (0.5), medium (1), high (1.5) and then summed to provide the overall ranking of breadth of life skills addressed. Alternatives addressing 1 intangible life skills dimension receive a ranking of 0.5; those addressing 2 dimensions receive a ranking of 1; and those addressing 3-4 dimensions receive a ranking of 1.5. Alternatives addressing 0-2 tangible life skills dimension receive a ranking of 1; those addressing 3-4 dimensions receive a ranking of 2; and those addressing 5-7 dimensions receive a ranking of 3.

9.2. Effectiveness

This criterion assesses life skills improvements of youth who participate in each policy alternative. Effectiveness is assessed separately for intangible and tangible life skills. Effectiveness of each policy alternative is based on findings from the interview analysis, case study analysis, and published academic research. Alternatives have been pre-screened to ensure that all alternatives have some evidence of life skills improvement therefore the lowest ranking on the measurement scale will begin at small improvements in life skills. Since the primary objective of this policy analysis is to improve life skills of youth, this criteria is weighted to be twice as important as other criteria. Alternatives will be ranked low (1) if there are small improvements in life skills; medium (2) if there are moderate improvements; and high (3) if there are large life skills improvements. Rankings for intangible and tangible life skills will be summed to provide an overall score for effectiveness.

9.3. Life Outcomes

This criterion assesses the extent to which each policy alternative improves youth's outcomes in various life domains identified in the background section of this report, namely education, poverty, homelessness, relationships, employment, life skills, parenting, incarceration, health, and substance abuse. Assessment of each alternative will be based on case study findings and academic literature including theoretical support, program evaluations, and improved life outcomes theoretically linked to life skills. Alternatives that create little to no improvement in life outcomes will receive a ranking of low (1); those moderately improving life outcomes will receive a ranking of moderate (2); and those creating large improvements will receive a ranking of large (3).

9.4. Cost

Cost assesses the annual per youth operating costs of a policy option over the full length of the program. Costs are measured in dollars. Costs may include staffing, administration, advertising, facility rental, program materials, and direct program expenditures. MCFD receives a limited budget from the province, therefore cost effective alternatives are preferred. Cost is assessed based on annual cost and length of the program. Each of these components is equally weighted and summed to provide the overall rank. Alternatives that cost less than \$1000 per youth per year receive a rank of low (1.5), those that cost between \$1000- \$5000 per youth receive a rank of medium (1), and those that cost over \$5000 per youth receive a rank of high (0.5). Alternatives that provide service to each youth for 0-2 years are ranked short (1.5), those that last 2-5 years are ranked medium (1), and those that last longer than 5 years are ranked long (0.5).

Effective approaches to improving life skills (and therefore life outcomes) will likely generate a cost savings to the province of BC from reduced income assistance payments, fewer incarcerations, and increased tax revenue from improved life-time earnings as a result of higher educational attainment (Packard et al., 2008). A cost benefit analysis of each policy option was not possible given the scope of this research

and so cost benefits are excluded from this criterion. However, cost savings are an important consideration and will likely result in lower net costs to the province for each policy option than what is reported here.

9.5. Implementation Complexity

This criterion assesses the significance of challenges to implementing each option as intended. Challenges may include, but are not limited to, difficulties in serving the target population, administrative or bureaucratic barriers, and staffing requirements. Alternatives with challenges that are easily addressed receive a rank of low (3); those with challenges that can only be partially addressed or require moderate levels of effort are ranked medium (2), and those with challenges that cannot be addressed or that required extensive effort to address are ranked high (1). Rankings are assigned based on interview analysis, case study analysis, and my own work experiences with MCFD.

9.6. Reach

This criterion assesses the number of youth that will likely be impacted by each alternative. Reach may be affected by stages of youth development, geography, transportation, recruitment, or other factors. Reach is evaluated based on the proportion of youth that each option can reach. Although precise estimates for this criterion cannot be determined, alternatives assessed to reach less than approximately 30% of youth preparing to exit the child welfare system receive a rank of low (1), those reaching approximately 30-60% of youth are ranked medium (2), and those reaching approximately over 60% of youth are ranked high (3).

10. Policy Evaluation

This chapter evaluates policy options according to the criteria described in the previous chapter.

10.1. Mentoring

10.1.1. *Breadth of Life Skills Addressed*

Intangible Life Skills: Relationship-based approaches, such as mentoring, offer a wide range of opportunities to learn intangible life skills in response to life events and circumstances (Rhodes et al., 1999), particularly because the relationship is not time limited. However, learning is limited by the amount of time youth and mentor spend together each week. This policy option also provides explicit instruction of intangible life skills through structured exercises. This option can address all intangible life skills dimensions, but is limited by the time spent together each week, and therefore receives a rank of moderate.

Tangible Life Skills: Mentors will facilitate life skills learning by providing real world opportunities to learn various life skills, as well as by providing some specific life skills instruction through discussions and activities. Mentor training will enlarge the range of life skills each mentor is comfortable facilitating. Youth and mentors will be able to address a wide range of life skills since the relationship is not time limited. This option can potentially address all tangible life skills dimensions and therefore receives a rank of high.

10.1.2. Effectiveness

Literature specifically examining the effect of mentoring programs on the life skills of youth is scarce. However, mentoring is proposed to buffer youth from poor outcomes through 1) providing a supportive and trusting relationship, 2) serving as a positive role model, and 3) assisting youth in acquiring independent living skills (Mech et al., 1995; Rhodes, 2002). As a relationship-based program, mentoring promotes trusting relationships which facilitates life skills learning for youth (Interview Theme 6.2.3). By using structured guides for life skills activities, youth are more likely to benefit from this option than from an unstructured mentoring program (Interview, policy analyst). Effectiveness is also likely to be improved since activities are age-appropriate (Interview theme 6.2.1). Relationship duration is key factor in effectiveness (Rhodes & Lowe, 2008), and relationships that break down may have a harmful effect on the youth (Interview, Researcher B).

Intangible Life Skills: This policy alternative is likely to be very effective at improving intangible life skills. Rhodes et al. (1999) found that foster children who participated in a mentoring program showed improved social skills, greater trust and comfort interacting with others, improvements in pro-social and self-esteem enhancing supports compared to a control group. The ASTI case study analysis also found that youth reported improvements in their intangible life skills. The recommended policy alternative should have greater effectiveness than the ASTI program at improving life skills, due to the introduction of reference material to guide specific activities and discussions about life skills. This policy option is ranked as high for effectiveness.

Tangible Life Skills: Mentoring programs may be less effective at improving tangible life skills than intangible. Case study findings about the ASTI program showed that youth reported greater improvements in their intangible than tangible life skills. While youth participating in ASTI attributed some of their life skills knowledge to the efforts and activities of mentors, they reported learning life skills mostly on their own and a fairly low percentage of mentors reported helping youth with specific life tasks. However, mentors in the ASTI program found that a great deal of learning was required to discover appropriate resources for youth and requested greater program support. The proposed

mentoring policy alternative includes a more explicit, structured focus on improving both tangible and intangible life skills which should increase the effectiveness of the program compared to ASTI. Interview analysis also found that using hands-on, real life situations to teach tangible life skills is an effective strategy (Interview Theme 6.2.5).

A challenge for mentoring programs, identified in the interview analysis (Theme 6.2.1), is that youth learn life skills when they need them. By beginning the program at age 12 in an effort to recruit and retain youth, tangible life skills learning may be quite low until youth begin to require a range of tangible life skills when they begin to live independently. Given the importance of relationship-based approaches and with the addition of life skills resources for mentors, this policy alternative receives a rank of moderate.

10.1.3. Life Outcomes

Evaluations of the benefits of mentoring programs to youth have yielded mixed results. One of the largest evaluations of a mentoring program, Tierney & Grossman (1995) found that youth participating in Big Brothers/Big Sisters were less likely than their peers to start drinking or skip school. Youth were also more likely to have more positive relationships with their parents and peers. Also examining the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program, Frecknall & Luks (1992) found participating children had better school performance, relationships with family and peers, self-esteem, behaviour and greater responsibility. In contrast, a number of other studies found no significant effects of mentoring programs (Abbott et al., 1997; Nelson & Valiant, 1993; Royse, 1998; Shiner et al., 2004; Slicker & Palmer (1993). Meta-analyses of mentoring programs have found only small positive effects (Dubois et al., 2002; Eby et al., 2008). Where positive effects are found however, they may fade over time (Aseltine, Dupre & Lamlein, 2000; Herrera et al., 2007).

In light of conflicting findings, a number of factors have been identified that contribute to the likelihood that a mentoring program will have a positive impact. In a meta-analysis of 55 mentoring program evaluations, DuBois et al. (2002) found that mentoring programs had the greatest benefit for youth experiencing forms of

environmental disadvantage, such as foster youth. However, youth with personal vulnerabilities, such as at-risk behaviour, emotional problems or academic difficulties, had less positive outcomes. In one of the few studies examining the effects of mentoring on foster youth, Rhodes et al. (1999) found that foster youth had improved social skills, improved ability to trust adults, improvements in pro-social support and self-esteem compared with non-foster youth.

Evidence therefore suggests that by incorporating the best practices identified by DuBois (2002a) this policy option will have a positive effect on youth's life outcomes. Overall, this option receives a rank of moderate.

10.1.4. Cost

The annual budget of a mentoring program would cover operational expenses such as staff, facilities rental, advertising to recruit mentors and youth, and program activities. Kinnections mentoring program has a similar operational structure to ASTI and would likely have similar costs. Kinnections received an annual budget of \$420,000 in 2008-2009 to support 90 youth-mentor matches, which works out to a cost of \$4,666 per youth (Rutman, Hubberstey & Hume, 2009). However, this cost is quite high compared to an average per child cost of \$1000 in a "well-run" mentoring program in the United States (Grossman & Garry, 1997). Converted to Canadian dollars and adjusted for inflation this equals an annual cost of \$1321 per youth. Taking the average of these two estimates, this option has an annual cost of \$2833 per youth. The program potentially provides services to each youth from age 12-25 so program length is ranked long.

10.1.5. Implementation Complexity

The mentoring program would be administered by a contracted agency, which is a common practice in BC. Departments already exist within MCFD to contract and monitor a service provider therefore minimal administrative or bureaucratic resources would be required.

One significant challenge would be recruitment of youth and mentors. Kinnections mentoring program struggled to recruit both youth and mentors, although

this may have been due in part to the pilot status of the program (Rutman, Hubberstey & Hume, 2009). As discussed in the ASTI case study, recruiting older youth can be particularly difficult and this option may miss its target population of youth transitioning to adulthood, at least until participants who join the program earlier reach late adolescence. Another obstacle is that youth who moved to another geographic region who no longer have access to their mentor (Interview theme 6.1.3). Overall, this option receives a rank of high.

10.1.6. Reach

The reach of mentoring programs would be significantly affected by the number of youth and mentors willing to participate. Recruitment of older youth to mentoring programs can be difficult, as noted in the ASTI case study. Participation is limited by the availability of mentor matches, geography (with youth in rural areas likely having to wait longer to be paired with a mentor), and willingness of foster parents to allow youth to participate. In BC, the Kinnections program had difficulty reaching their target of 90 matches within 3 years of program start-up (MCFD, 2002a). Due to likely limitations in the availability of mentors, low youth interest (particularly concerning older youth) and barriers to access, this alternative receives a rank of low. This option also excludes youth in Temporary Custody Orders.

10.2. Life skills classes

10.2.1. Breadth of Life Skills Addressed

Intangible Life Skills: Life skills classes would teach a range of intangible skills that could be presented in a classroom setting, such as time management or problem solving. However, learning may be constrained by the artificial classroom setting of the program. Since the curriculum varies by age, younger youth will receive more intangible life skills instruction than older youth. Depending on a youth's age, this option is ranked as moderate to high.

Tangible Life Skills: The full range of tangible life skills could be addressed in a life skills class. However due to the time limited nature of life skills classes, only the highest priority skills will be covered. The ability to provide youth with hands on practice of life skills is also limited by the classroom setting (Case study interview C). For example, depending on the classroom facilities, it would not be possible for youth to practice doing laundry. Since curriculum varies by age, younger youth would not receive as much tangible life skills training as older youth. Depending on a youth's age, this option is ranked as moderate to high.

10.2.2. Effectiveness

The few studies that have evaluated life skills learning that results from life skills classes have drawn mixed conclusions. Some program evaluations have found significant improvements in life skills (Liebold & Downs, 2002; Mallon, 1998; Thurston, 2009), while other have found none (Forneris, Danish & Scott, 2007). Similar to GOAL, participants in the Preparation for Adult Living classes showed mastery of 50% of life skills items, suggesting there may be a ceiling for life skills learning in a classroom setting.

Several factors identified from the interview/focus group analysis were incorporated into the program design and are likely to improve effectiveness of the program.

- The curriculum varies with age to facilitate life skills learning that is most useful for youth (Interview theme 6.2.1)
- Use of diverse teaching methods and hands on learning opportunities (Interview theme 6.2.5)
- The program uses a relationship based approach to facilitate life skills learning (Interview theme 6.2.3)
- Peer to peer facilitation of the program (Case study interviewee B)
- Allowing participants to take the program at their own pace (Interview theme 6.2.5, Case study interview C)

- Allowing participants to continue to attend the program, or attend sporadically to refresh life skills learning (Case study interview B)

Overall, this option is ranked as moderately effective for both intangible and tangible skills.

10.2.3. Life Outcomes

Scholarly literature on life skills training classes has generally found that participation in a life skills class is often associated with more positive outcomes for foster youth. The Westat evaluation (Cook, 1991) of 810 youth found that life skills training led to better life outcomes, particularly when youth who received a combination of training in budgeting, obtaining credit, consumer credit, education and employment, as they do in the proposed policy option. Similarly, in a large study by Casey Family Programs (2003) of 1609 former youth in care, youth who participated in life skills training were 1.8 to 2.8 times more likely to complete high school than youth who had not depending on the extensiveness of the training. Various studies have found that youth who complete life skills training as part of an independent living program are more likely to live independently, participate in social activities, have greater housing stability, complete vocational training, graduate high school, be employment and self-supported than youth who do not (Shippensburg university, 1993; Harding and Luft, 1994; Scannapieco, Schagrin & Scannapieco, 1995; Lindsay & Ahmed, 1999). In contrast, Courtney et al. (2008) evaluated the impact of a five week life skills class on the outcomes of 482 foster youth over two years and found little impact on outcomes of the transition to adulthood. Given the finding of Casey Family Programs (2003) that find likelihood of graduating high school varied based on the extensiveness of life skills training, it may be the case that the 5 week program evaluated by Courtney was too short to create any lasting life skills improvement in youth.

Overall, there is evidence that life skills classes improve outcomes for youth leaving the child welfare system in a wide range of domains. This options receives a rank of moderate.

10.2.4. Cost

Costs of the program would include salaries for program staff, youth facilitators, facilities rental and program materials. Cost calculations are based on one full-time staff person and one youth facilitator paid by the hour. The program is assumed to operate 5 days a week for 50 weeks of the year. Facility rental is calculated based hourly facility rental from community centres. Since youth are not required to attend each session in sequence the program is assumed to operate at 80% capacity at all times. Youth who continue to attend after they've completed all 10 classes could be accommodated in the remaining 20% capacity. Based on the calculations below, the cost per youth is to participate in the 10 week program is \$366⁷. The program length would be 0-2 years for each youth which receives a rank of short.

10.2.5. Implementation Complexity

Implementation of a life skills program would require contracting a service provider, however this practice is already established within MCFD. Youth who move to another geographic region or who move in and out of care would still be able to continue the classes due to a consistent course curriculum and the ability to complete the course

⁷ Cost Calculations

Annual salary for one full-time staff person = \$40,000

Hourly salary of youth = \$15. Assuming the youth works 20 hours per week & 50 weeks per year, the annual salary = \$15,000 youth staff costs

Number of youth served per week assuming 5 groups per week with 15 students each at 80% capacity= 60 youth

Assuming 10 unique classes, 300 youth could participate each year

Facility rental= \$25/hr for 4 hours per class (Vancouver Parks Board rate for a room with a 20 person capacity) <http://vancouver.ca/parks/info/roomrentals.htm>

Program materials per youth = \$100

\$40,000 staff cost per year + \$15,000 youth staff cost per year + \$25 hourly room rental*20hrs per week*50 weeks + \$100 program materials*300 youth = \$110,000 per year

\$110,000/300 youth = \$366 per youth

at their own pace (Interview Theme 6.1.3). Depending on the location of life skills classes, youth may have difficulty finding transportation to attend the classes. Administrative and bureaucratic barriers and barriers to serving youth are considered low.

10.2.6. Reach

By offering life skills classes in the community, the program is available in principle to all youth, even those who are disconnected to school. However, reach was identified as one of the challenges in the Lighthouse life skills classes (Case study interview C). Youth may have difficulty finding transportation to the class, may not have the support of their foster parents to help them attend, or may not be aware of or interested in the program (Case study interview C). Offering life skills classes in a variety of neighbourhoods and allowing youth to complete the classes at their own pace will lower some of these barriers and has been successful with the Lighthouse life skills classes (Case study interview C). However, life skills classes will not be appropriate for some youth depending on their developmental ability. For example, as classroom setting may not be appropriate for a youth with FASD. This option can be provided to up to 375 youth per week within a given geographic region and is limited primarily by youth interest, development and ability to attend. This alternative receives a rank of medium.

10.3.Independent living programs

10.3.1. Breadth of Life Skills Addressed

Intangible Life Skills: Individual life skills instruction from social workers can explicitly teaches a range of intangible life skills. Individual life skills instruction, role modelling of the social worker, and independent living experiences offer opportunities to learn skills in all of the intangible life skills domains, however it depends heavily on the skill of the social worker. This alternative receives a rank of high.

Tangible Life Skills: Individual life skills instruction from social workers explicitly teaches a wide range of tangible life skills required by the youth, although not all

domains may be addressed if the need for those skills does not arise. Tangible life skills can also be learned through independent living experiences, particularly since the youth will be supported by the social worker and also allowed to make mistakes which offer powerful learning opportunities (Case study interview C). This alternative receives a rank of high.

10.3.2. Effectiveness

Academic literature on independent living programs emphasizes the importance of real world life skills learning opportunities for youth, which is a key characteristic of this independent living policy option (Nixon & Garin, 2000; Nollan et al., 1997; Cook, 1998). Nollan et al. (1997) also found that hands-on experiential learning reinforced independent living skills training. Additionally, learning opportunities occur when each life skill is important and relevant to the youth's daily life (Interview theme 6.2.1). The combination of the opportunity to practise life skills in a real world setting, with life skills support from social workers is one of the key strengths of the program (Case study interview C). Cook (1998) recommended that youth be provided with opportunities to make and learn from mistakes in a supervised setting prior to independence. This policy option provides both opportunities for real world learning and opportunities to make and learn from mistakes safely.

Independent living placements offer the greatest opportunities to learn life skills over other housing placements. Mech et al. (1994) conducted a large scale evaluation of life skills of foster youth in three types of placement settings; foster family homes, group homes/institutions, and apartments. Both cluster-site apartments, where several units are located in the same building, often with a staff person residing in the building, and scattered site apartments, which are located separately from other program participants or staff, were examined. 534 youth preparing for emancipation completed a life skills inventory. Life skills were highest in youth living in scattered site apartments, then foster family homes, followed by cluster-site apartments and group homes/institutions. These results suggest that living arrangements of this policy option offer the greatest opportunities for youth to learn life skills over other living arrangements. However, the authors acknowledged that the study is possibly affected by selection bias, as more

competent youth may have been selected or felt confident to accept placements with a greater degree of independence.

Effectiveness is ranked high for both intangible and tangible life skills. Research evidence suggests that this policy options will be effective at improving intangible life skills, as youth encounter and learn from independent living situations where they are able to make decisions independently, and, supported by their social worker, perform daily tasks required to live independently.

10.3.3. *Life Outcomes*

Research on outcomes of youth placed in independent housing is scarce but suggestive that independent living placements lead to more successful outcomes. Colca and Colca (1996) conducted an exploratory study of a transitional foster home program where foster parents assume the role of a resource or mentor rather than parent. The investigators concluded that most youth demonstrated improvements in daily living skills, including cooking, banking and shopping. However, the study methodology was unclear and does not appear to have followed a systematic approach for evaluation. Mech and Fung (1999) found that youth discharged from less restrictive housing placements, such as transitional apartments and foster family homes, attended post-secondary education at a higher rate than those discharged from more restrictive settings. The authors concluded that less restrictive housing arrangements are the most effective setting to prepare youth for independent living. However, the study results may have been influenced by existing differences in the capabilities of foster youth that are placed in each setting.

In a more rigorous study, Georgiades (2005) compared 49 foster youth exiting an independent living program to a smaller comparison group of 18 youth living in other arrangements. She found that independent living participants had better outcomes in education, employment, income, housing, early parenting-prevention, transportation, criminal prevention, anger control, and self-evaluation. There was no evidence that the program led to better social support, parenting competence, substance abuse

prevention, sexual risk prevention, lower levels of depression, or increased knowledge in interpersonal skills, money management, job seeking skills, and job maintenance skills.

Although the outcomes of youth are unknown, 55% of youth discharged from the Lighthouse Independent Living Program chose to live independently (Kroner & Mares, 2011), suggesting that they felt prepared enough to live independently that it was their preferred living arrangement.

While research on life skills learning in independent living programs is still in nascent stages, available research is strongly suggestive that participating youth exit these programs with improved life skills and better life outcomes. This option is ranked as high.

10.3.4. Cost

Estimates of cost are based on the Lighthouse Independent Living Program. In 2009, the Lighthouse Independent Living Program received funding of \$65 per day for youth in scattered-site apartments and \$85 per day for youth in other living arrangements such as shared-home or supervised apartments (Kroner & Mares, 2009). An additional \$10 per day was received for pregnant or parenting youth. This funding covered 85% of program expenses. Converted to Canadian dollars and adjusted to reflect additional costs, the per diem rate for youth in scattered site apartments was \$76. The annual cost for a youth would be \$27,740. Since this per diem rate includes staffing costs, the cost of hiring additional social workers in order to have lower caseloads is not explicitly estimated.

However, the MCFD will not bear this full cost since youth will no longer require a placement in a foster or group home. The monthly foster care rates in BC in 2009 ranged from \$909.95 to \$1,816.66 depending on the level of care (MCFD, 2011c). Therefore, depending on the level of care, the annual cost per youth ranges from \$10,919 to \$21,799.92. Costs for a youth on a youth agreement are \$878.02 per month and \$10,536.24 annually. However, monthly rates for foster homes and youth agreements do not include the staffing costs of providing a social worker to each youth. Social worker's

caseloads range from 30-50 families (Kinna, 2011) and salaries range from \$48,406 - \$64,052 (BC Public Service, 2012). The staffing cost per youth therefore ranges from \$968 to \$2,135. The total annual cost for a youth in a foster placement is then approximately \$11,887 to \$23,934, and the total annual cost for a youth agreement ranges from \$11,504 to \$12,671. This does not include operational or infrastructure costs.

Depending on the youth's original placement, the per youth incremental cost of an independent living program would range from an additional \$3,806 to \$16,236. Since youth requiring a lower level of care are more likely to be suitable for the independent living program, the cost of the program will likely be on the higher end of this range. This alternative is ranked as high.

10.3.5. Implementation Complexity

In many respects, the youth agreement program could be adapted to offer the additional services proposed by this policy option. However, implementing these services does introduce some complexity. A new position for transition to adulthood social workers would need to be created and social workers would need to be trained to support life skills development of youth. Social workers would likely require 1 to 3 days of training for this. Changes to the approach to locating housing to the youth and allowing youth to make mistakes would also require requiring some training that could be included within an average annual training budget. Providing furniture to youth would require administrative support and coordination with a moving company. As youth are receiving housing as part of this option, transience is unlikely to be an issue (Interview theme 6.1.3). Overall this alternative requires some training and additional staff and receives a rank of moderate.

10.3.6. Reach

This alternative would automatically apply to approximately 600, or 32%, of transition aged youth who are already on youth agreements. Additionally, many youth who are currently in foster placements can be moved into this independent living

program, particularly if this program were incorporated into transition to adulthood policy and social workers were encouraged to refer youth to the program. As well, this independent living model includes greater support to youth and may allow youth who were not considered a good fit for the youth agreement program to participate. Some youth will require higher levels of support and independent living programs will not be considered appropriate. Some youth also may not feel ready to live independently (Interview theme 6.1.1). However, if, regardless of their current level of functioning, youth will be expected to live independently when they turn 19, then high needs youth may actually benefit most from the program and could also be included in the program. Youth in Temporary Custody Order are excluded from this option. While not all youth will be eligible or appropriate for this program, with an automatic base of 600 youth plus many other youth currently in foster care, this option has the potential to reach a large proportion of foster youth in BC. This alternative receives a rank of high.

10.4. Policy Analysis Summary

Policy analysis results are presented in Table 8. Policy options ranking on each criteria is color coded so that green represents the highest score, yellow the midrange score, and red the lowest score. Independent living programs rank the highest at 18.5, followed by life skills classes and mentoring programs which achieve similar rankings of 14 and 13.

Table 8. Policy Analysis Summary

Criteria		Mentoring	Life Skills Class	Independent Living Program
<i>Breadth of Life Skills Addressed</i>	<i>Intangible</i>	Moderate 1	Moderate 1	High 1.5
	<i>Tangible</i>	High 1.5	Moderate 1	High 1.5
<i>Effectiveness</i>	<i>Intangible</i>	High 3	Moderate 2	High 3
	<i>Tangible</i>	Moderate 2	Moderate 2	High 3
<i>Life Outcomes</i>		Moderate 2	Moderate 2	High 3
<i>Cost per youth</i>	<i>Annual cost</i>	\$2833 1	\$366 1.5	\$3,806 to \$16,236 0.5
	<i>Program length</i>	Long 0.5	Short 1.5	Medium 1
<i>Implementation Complexity</i>		1: high	1: low	2: moderate
<i>Reach</i>		<30% 1	30-60% 2	Over 60% 3
TOTAL		13	14	18.5

11. Policy Recommendations

All policy options are effective at improving life skills and life outcomes, although to varying degrees. As found in the interview analysis, no one approach will be suitable for every youth (Interview theme 6.2.5). I therefore recommend that each policy option be implemented by modifying programs that are currently available in the status quo according to best practices identified in this research.

However, as MCFD moves forward in developing a policy framework to facilitate life skills development, recommendations for appropriate and consistent use of each of these approaches to life skills development are useful. Independent living programs, appropriate for older youth, rank highest because of their effectiveness, breadth of life skills learning, improved life outcomes, and wide reach. I recommend that whenever appropriate, youth participate in an independent living program prior to exiting the child welfare system. However, costs of the program are high and depending on budgetary constraints, widespread use of the program may not be possible.

In light of the high costs of the program, I propose two lower cost modifications. These modifications are likely to capture some, but not all, benefits of independent living programs and further investigation into these possibilities is required prior to their implementation. The first modification is to move youth into semi-supervised foster placements, for instance in a basement suite of a foster home. Social workers should provide the same level of life skills support recommended in the independent living policy option. Youth will likely receive some of the benefits of an independent living program by having greater independence and more responsibilities. However, as youth will not be truly living independently, youth are unlikely to receive the full benefits of an independent living program. One advantage of this modification is that youth who feel unprepared to start an independent living program (Interview theme 6.1.1) may be more able to

participate. This program would operate at roughly the same costs as a foster placement.

The second modification is to extend the life skills supports of an independent living program to youth beyond the age of 19. Youth aging out of care would receive the same life skills support and support locating a residence, but would not receive financial assistance from MCFD. The modification will not capture one of the key strengths identified in the Lighthouse Independent Living case study, which was the ability to temporarily move youth to more supervised placements if they were not able to live independently. While this program is less forgiving to youth who make financial and other mistakes, youth will benefit from the extra supports while experiencing the full challenges of independent living. Costs of this program would include staffing and program materials and would be quite low compared to the full expense of an independent living program.

As for the other two policy options, I recommend that all youth in care or on youth agreements receive life skills classes prior to leaving care. This option is very cost effective and produces substantial benefits for participants. Mentoring programs should also continue to be used but should be targeted towards younger youth to facilitate development of intangible life skills which are both extremely important (Interview theme 6.22) and age appropriate (Interview theme 6.2.1). Mentoring programs should also be used for youth who are unlikely to be successful in a life skills class or independent living program due to their developmental stage, learning style or high risk behaviours.

12. Discussion & Future Directions

This research identified several barriers to facilitating the acquisition of life skills including youth not being ready to prepare for independent living; a mentality of dependency on the child welfare system; and transience. As well, several important considerations for facilitating life skills development were identified including the appropriate age to begin focusing on life skills development; the importance of interpersonal skills; relationships with adults; the role of foster parents; the need to cater to the needs of youth; and a discrepancy between policy and practice in BC.

This research identified several effective methods of facilitating life skills development in youth exiting the child welfare system. Each approach promotes resilient functioning and leads to improved life outcomes for youth transitioning to adulthood from government care. This study also made several recommendations to MCFD on how to best facilitate the acquisition of life skills among youth exiting the child welfare system. The key element in moving forward will be the investment of time, effort, and financial and human resources in youth exiting the child welfare system. Establishing a life skills development policy framework will be the first step in prioritizing life skills development of youth in care. It must also be followed by changes in practice and continual monitoring as new programs and practices are implemented.

Program costs for youth transitioning to adulthood should be considered an investment. Program costs may be recuperated through savings in other areas as youth outcomes improve over time. Packard et al. (2008) conducted a cost benefit analysis of youth transition services and found that they would result in a net benefit to the government over a 40 year period. Transition youth to adulthood services were projected to result in reduced costs from income assistance payments and reduced prison services, as well as increased incomes tax revenue due to improved lifetime

employment earnings. Overall they found that even with a 75% success rate, the ratio of benefit to cost was 1.2 to 1, indicating a net benefit to society from transition services.

A number of issues should be considered and explored in greater depth as youth transition policy moves forward in BC. Other jurisdictions have extended supports to youth beyond age 19. In the United States, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 allows states to provide support to former youth in care until age 21, as well as extends Medicaid coverage until age 21. Given findings of poor outcomes for former youth in care, unpreparedness for transitioning to adulthood, and particularly compared to the experiences of youth who are not in care, this is a natural area for future consideration.

The role of foster parents in preparing youth to leave care should also be investigated further. Foster parents were identified as playing a key role in youth life skills development and this role could be strengthened in the future (Interview theme 6.2.4). Foster parents may be able to offer a wide range of opportunities for foster youth to develop life skills in the context of the foster home. Foster parents could receive training to support life skills development in foster youth. Alternately, relationships with foster parents could be extended past the age of 19 so that foster parents could provide support in the form of knowledge, advice and moral support as a youth experiences the challenges of independent living.

However, in order to fully consider the benefits and challenges of recruiting foster parents to facilitate life skills development, extensive consultation with foster parents, resources social workers and youth is required. The number of available foster parents in BC has been declining and foster parents report that current levels of support from MCFD is inadequate to deal with the challenges of foster parenting. Adding life skills development to the contractual responsibilities of foster parents may not therefore be a feasible option. Additionally, some child welfare professionals have concerns about the ability and commitment of foster parents to be able to fill this role (Interview theme). Further research is required to determine whether foster parents offer a viable avenue of facilitating life skills development for youth in care.

Finally, we must stop viewing youth in care as the sole responsibility of MCFD. Youth exiting care are a shared responsibility and other government ministries must be involved to ensure their success in multiple life domains, including education, employment, and health. As well, external partnerships should be explored and encouraged as other industries have a vested interest in the success of young people in BC.

This research had a number of limitations. There is little literature about life skills development and program evaluations are scarce and vary in the quality of data collection and analysis. Due to time constraints, a relatively small number of youth and key informants were consulted. As well, none of the key informants represented rural BC which may have unique issues compared to urban areas. Issues around providing culturally competent and gender appropriate services should also be explored further. Future research should consult with a broader range of stakeholders and consider implementation issues of each policy option in greater depth. Future research should also investigate the impacts of various life skills programs on youth themselves and measure their long-term life outcomes.

Future research should also explore life skills development from an Aboriginal policy perspective. Over half of children in care in BC are Aboriginal and any changes to MCFD policy must be tied closely with Aboriginal policy. Further research is required to identify which approach to facilitating life skills development will best meet the unique needs and challenges of this population.

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Appendix A. Representative for Children and Youth in British Columbia

Although the Representative for Children and Youth in BC has the legislated responsibility to independently monitoring the performance and service standards of the Ministry of Children and Family Development under the Representative for Children and Youth Act (RCY Act, 2006), the legislative authority does not extend to youth during their transition to adulthood. The legislation is conflicted as it defines a child as “a person under 19 years of age”, but then defines “designated services” to include “services for youth and young adults during their transition to adulthood” (ages 19-24). Currently, the Representative for Children and Youth has interpreted this legislation to mean that youth in transition are outside of her legislation, however she has proposed an amendment to the legislation to include youth ages 19-24 in transition to adulthood (RCY, 2011).

Appendix B: CIC Standard 16

CIC Standard 16: Promoting Resiliency and skills for successful community living	
<p>STANDARD STATEMENT</p>	<p>Before a youth leaves care because he or she is reaching the age of majority, assist him or her in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • finding an appropriate place to live • obtaining basic living essentials • obtaining adequate financial and social support • obtaining information about health care coverage, therapeutic support and emergency assistance when necessary • securing funding for post-secondary education or training • identifying or maintaining relationships with family members, natural helpers, informal and formal supports, cultural community and other significant people, and • if the youth has a trust fund, obtaining information about the fund from the Public Guardian and Trustee. <p>If the youth is Aboriginal, provide information and documentation about his or her rights, Aboriginal community membership and entitlements. For more information, see Children in Care Service Standard 1: Preserving and Promoting the Identity of an Aboriginal Child in Care.</p>
<p>Intent</p>	<p>This standard requires that every effort be made to assist a youth in care, before he or she reaches the age of 19, in developing the capacity, skills, support and resources needed to face the challenges and adversities that accompany successful living in the community.</p> <p>The director works collaboratively with others to prepare the youth well in advance of leaving care:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • through an ongoing process of building and assessing the youth's independent living skills, and providing education and opportunities to test skills • by establishing and strengthening the youth's connections with family, extended family, friends, community and informal and formal supports, and • by assisting the youth in obtaining basic living essentials such as food, clothing, shelter and stable income are in place before the youth leaves care.
<p>References</p>	<p>Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessments:</p> <p>http://www.caseylifeskills.org/pages/assess/assess_index.htm</p>
<p>Policy</p>	<p>Supporting a youth in developing self-care and independence skills Promote a youth's resiliency, and support the youth in developing self-care and independence skills, from the time he or she is admitted to care to the time he or she leaves care. Provide opportunities for the youth to develop these skills in a manner consistent with his or her age, developmental level and culture.</p> <p>Assessing a youth's capacity for successful living in the community</p>

	<p>Regularly assess a youth's capacity for successful living in the community and develop plans to build on the strengths and address the vulnerabilities identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by using standardized, culturally appropriate assessment tools • according to the youth's developmental level and plan of care, and • by involving others involved in the plan of care. <p>Assisting a youth in living successfully in the community Involve others included in the youth's plan of care to provide information and support in obtaining:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic living essentials, such as clothing, food, furniture and household supplies • adequate financial and social support, including employment or financial assistance • a place to live • information about the youth's rights and responsibilities as a responsible member of the community (e.g., a tenant, an employee, etc.) • informal or formal services or networks to support the youth in the community • health care coverage • community-, regionally and provincially based advocacy services, and • funding for post-secondary education or other training programs, including bursaries, scholarships and grants (e.g., Youth Education Assistance Fund). <p>Provide the youth with or assist the youth in obtaining identification and personal records (e.g., birth certificate, life book, social insurance number). Provide the youth with information about how to request access to his or her file after leaving care.</p> <p>If the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee is holding funds in trust for the youth, meet with the Public Guardian and Trustee to account for and transfer funds to the youth at 19 years of age.</p>
Administrative Procedures	
Additional Information	<p>For those youth who are not capable of managing their legal and financial issues after they have turned 19, the Public Guardian and Trustee will ensure that the youth has the necessary support, by establishing a Committee, Representative or Power of Attorney to manage his or her financial issues.</p>
Key Definitions	

Appendix C: Factors Associated with Positive Youth Outcomes

Table 9. Factors Associated with Positive Youth Outcomes

Study	Casey (2003) Examined data from case records and interviews with over a thousand youth who received foster care from Casey Family Programs from 1966 to 1998 in 23 communities across the United States. They examined characteristics that predicted successful outcomes for former foster youth, defined as a composite of educational attainment, income, mental and physical health and relationship satisfaction.	Cook (1991) A multi-stage research project to evaluate Independent Living Programs in the United States. Case record data was obtained for 1,644 youth discharged from foster care between 1987 and 1988. 810 of these youth were interviewed 2.5 to 4 years after discharge from foster care. The impact of receiving independent living skills training was assessed using regression modelling.	OACAS (2007) Held interviews and focus groups with over 300 youth and 300 Children's Aid Society (CAS) staff.	Reid & Dudding (2006) Performed a literature review to identify factors related to success of youth leaving care, defined as educational attainment, employment, positive relationships and other factors that can lead to happiness in adult life.
Individual characteristics	- male gender -minimized use of alcohol or drugs -not being homeless within a year of leaving care			-identity -emotional healing
In Care Experiences	- less positive parenting by their last foster mother		-obtaining government documentation before leaving care	-youth engagement in care planning
Social relationships	-participation in clubs or organizations for youth while in foster care		-emotional/ social support	-relationships
Education	- completing high school or having a GED before leaving care -minimized academic problems	-High school completion		-education
Life skills	-life skills preparation	-Life skills training in money management, credit, consumer, education and employment	-knowledge/ life skills	-life skills
Government support/ resources	- scholarships for college or job training		-financial support -health benefits -community services -mental health services	-financial support -housing

Table 10. Factors Associated with Positive Youth Outcomes (Continued)

Study	Rutman (2001) Interviewed 20 youth who had recently left care or anticipated leaving in the near future.	Silva-Wayne (1994) Looked at 19 “successful child welfare graduates” in Ontario from 16 to 26 years old. “Successful was defined as individuals working, in school or who were parents; who had a permanent address; who had one significant person in their lives; and who had a social network and a positive self-image.	Stein (2008) Used an ecological framework to examine different stages and contexts of young people’s experiences.
Individual characteristics		-developed positive self-image through supportive relationships -engaged in positive thinking strategies-were self-reliant and assertive	-positive sense of identity -self-efficacy -made sense of family relationships so they could psychologically move on from them -participation in further education, parenting or satisfactory employment helped them feel “normal” and improved their confidence
In Care Experiences	-foster parents who engage youth in decision making and who instill self-confidence in youth		-placement stability -transition planning -gradual preparation for leaving care -left care later
Social relationships	-ongoing supportive relationships -peer mentoring for youth leaving care	-Role models -involvement in group activities	-secure attachments
Education			-positive school experience
Life skills	-life skills: cooking, cleaning, budgeting, banking, nutrition, job-finding, anger management and conflict resolution, time management, maintaining relationship, decision making -transitional skills development programmed group support		-possess practical skills (finances and managing accommodation)
Government support/ resources	-hands on practical support -semi/supported independent living housing or foster homes -post-majority programs that all youth leaving care can access	-exposed to opportunities	

Appendix D: Verbal Telephone Consent Script

Hello, my name is Stefanie de Best. I am a Masters Candidate in the Public Policy Program at Simon Fraser University. Information from this interview will be used to develop and inform my public policy Masters research project about improving life skills in youth transitioning to adulthood from government care or from a youth agreement as part of my masters degree requirements.

The objectives of this interview are to:

- Identify life skills associated with positive outcomes for youth transitioning to adulthood from government care or youth agreement
- Identify and assess various approaches to improving life skills in youth transitioning to adulthood
- Identify barriers to teaching life skills to youth transitioning to adulthood
- Make practical recommendations about how the provincial government and community service agencies can improve life skills in youth transitioning to adulthood.

Your answers will be anonymized: Although confidentiality over the telephone cannot be guaranteed due to relatively insecure telephone networks, any identifying details will only be used in the reports or publications if you give your written consent. With your permission, this interview will be recorded. All interview data will be stored on a flash drive, which will be kept in a locked drawer when not in use. As per university policy, the data will be stored for a period of two years following the completion of the study and then be destroyed. If you have any complaints or concerns please contact Judith Sixsmith, Professor at SFU's School of Public Policy, at jsixsmit@sfu.ca or 778 782 867 or contact Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director of SFU's Office of Research Ethics, at hal_weinberg@sfu.ca or 778-782-6593. Research results can be obtained by contacting Stefanie de Best at sdebest@sfu.ca.

There are no risks associated with the study other than those encountered by you in the aspects your everyday life. You have been contacted personally and the researcher has not obtained permission from your organization to conduct this interview. You are free to stop participation and exit the interview at any time. Refusal to participate or withdrawal after agreeing to participate will not have an adverse effect on your standing, evaluation, membership, employment, etc with your employer, organization or project in my community. The principle researcher for this study is Stefanie de Best (sdebest@sfu.ca). The faculty supervisor for this research is Judith Sixsmith (jsixsmit@sfu.ca).

With this information in mind, do you agree to participate in this study? Yes/No.
Do you consent to having the interview recorded on a digital recorder? Yes/No

Appendix E: Key Informant Interview Schedule

1. What are some of the challenges youth face when they transition to adulthood from foster care or youth agreements?
2. How well do you think MCFD, as the legal guardian of children in care, prepares youth for the transition to adulthood?
3. What life skills areas are important?
4. What role do you think life skills play in youth's successful or unsuccessful transition to adulthood?
5. What life skills areas do you think youth are fairly skilled in when they transition to adulthood? What life skills areas do you think youth are unprepared in when they transition?
6. How do youth best learn life skills? (For example, mentoring)
7. What different approaches or programs are you aware of for teaching life skills?
8. Have you had any experience with life skills programs for youth?
9. What factors contribute to the success of life skills programs? (staffing, mandate, organization structure)
10. What are the challenges or barriers to teaching youth life skills?
11. Who might be the best placed to teach life skills to youth transitioning to adulthood?
12. What do you think the long-term impact of life skills programs are?
13. How can MCFD, and the community as a whole, better prepare youth for the transition to adulthood?

Appendix F: Focus Group Schedule

1. Think back to when you turned 19 and your supports from MCFD ended. What are the first few words that pop into your head when you think about your transition to independence?
2. What are some challenges you've faced since you turned 19?
3. What areas of your life do you think you've been successful in since you turned 19?
4. What helped prepare you for independence? What or who is helpful for you now that you've living on your own?
 - a. *Was there a person, program, experience, or a skill that was helpful when you turned 19 and became independent?*
 - b. *Who provided you with support? What sorts of support did you receive?*
 - c. *What didn't you receive that would have helped you be able to deal with problems?*
5. What are life skills?
6. Think back to when you turned 19 and support from MCFD ended. What kind of life skills did you have that helped you get by in life? What life skills do you wish you had had?
7. How has having good or bad life skills affected your life since you turned 19?
8. How did you learn life skills? From who?
9. Has anyone participated in a life skills program? How was the program helpful/unhelpful for you?
10. How do you think the way MCFD and government support is set up now affects youth's life skills?
11. How could we help youth learn life skills?

Appendix G: Case Study Interview Schedule

1. What are some of the challenges for youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care or youth agreements?
2. What role do you think life skills play in youth's successful or unsuccessful transition to adulthood? What life skills areas are important?
3. What life skills areas do you think youth are fairly skilled in when they transition to adulthood? What life skills areas do you think youth are unprepared in when they transition?
4. What do you think is the most important consideration for teaching life skills to youth?
5. What are the challenges or barriers to teaching youth life skills?
6. Can you tell me a bit about Program X?
7. What are the strengths of Program X? What are its weaknesses?
8. What characteristics of the program do you think contribute to its success? What characteristics of the program present challenges or obstacles to its success?
9. What are the outcomes of youth who participate in Program X?
10. What do you think the long-term impact of Program X will be for participating youth?
11. How could the program be improved?
12. What could the provincial government do to improve life skills in youth transitioning to adulthood? *(BC only)*
13. Are you aware of other successful programs for teaching youth life skills?

Appendix H: GOAL workshop topics

(Source: <http://dornsife.usc.edu/labs/scrap/projects/goingforgoal.cfm>)

Workshop 1. DARE TO DREAM-

Introduces the GOAL Program and the high school leaders. Students discuss the importance of dreams and learn to express their dreams about their future.

Workshop 2. SETTING GOALS-

Presents the four characteristics of a reachable goal (positive, specific, important to you, and under your control). Students learn that dreams can be turned into reachable goals.

Workshop 3. MAKING YOUR GOALS REACHABLE-

Enables students to apply the four characteristics of a reachable goal to their own goals. Students commit their goal to writing and receive a GOAL button.

Workshop 4. MAKING A GOAL LADDER-

Focuses on the importance of making a plan to reach one's goal. Students place their goals at the top of the goal ladder and then identify the steps needed to be taken to reach the goal.

Workshop 5. ROADBLOCKS TO REACHING GOALS-

Considers how drug use, violence, teen pregnancy, or dropping out of school can prevent students from reaching their goals. Students generate their own examples of roadblocks.

Workshop 6. OVERCOMING ROADBLOCKS-

Presents a problem solving strategy called **STAR** (**S**top and chill out, **T**hink of all your choices, **A**nticipate the consequences of each choice, **R**espond with the best choice).

Workshop 7. SEEKING HELP FROM OTHERS-

Presents the importance of seeking support in order to achieve goals. Two types of help--"doing help" and "caring help"--are presented.

Workshop 8. REBOUNDS AND REWARDS-

Uses the students' goal ladders to discuss how to reward oneself for accomplishing a step on the ladder as well as how to rebound when a goal or step on the goal ladder becomes too difficult.

Workshop 9. IDENTIFYING AND BUILDING ON STRENGTHS-

Enables students to recognize and build on personal strengths and to transfer skills from one area of life to another.

Workshop 10. GOING FOR YOUR GOAL-

Involves a series of games that give students a chance to integrate and apply the information covered in the previous 9 weeks.