



Evaluation of the Connections 2020 Program

YMCA of San Diego County, Youth and Family Services



YMCA OF SAN DIEGO COUNTY

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Background

Transition Age Youth

The transition into adulthood is a critical period of development for young people between the ages of 16-24.¹ During this period, young people typically begin developing important relationships, managing their own finances, attending post-secondary education, and entering the workforce.² Successfully navigating early adulthood often requires stability and a strong support system. However, compared to the general population of youth and young adults, low-income and under-resourced transition age youth (TAY), many of whom have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), face additional challenges.³ Broadly, this group includes individuals who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of high school, youth in or aging out of the foster care system, youth involved in the juvenile justice system, youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability, and pregnant and parenting youth. Currently, it is estimated that in the United States, 11% of transition age young people are neither in school nor employed. Of them, 32% are living in poverty, 25% did not complete high school, and 24% are uninsured.⁴

There are distinct opportunities for biological and social development during this age range, which highlights the importance and need for interventions that support TAY during this developmental period.^{5,6} Unlike later adult years, neurobiological development continues into the twenties, with implications for appraisal of risk, impulsivity, and other cognitive processes.⁷ Socially, it is a period characterized by progressive independence, and the establishment of careers, families, and core values.⁸ TAY's developmental trajectories are further complicated by ACEs such as experiences of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, chronic stress, substance use, domestic violence, and teenage pregnancies.⁹ In addition, some TAY are aging out of child-serving systems, which often result in loss of services that are important to support them in their transition into adulthood, including primary pediatric care, behavioral health services, and housing, among others.¹⁰ TAY are more likely to have lower educational attainment, lower earnings, and have an increased risk of commercial and sexual exploitation.¹¹ Supporting their transition and creating a bridge with education, stable housing, social experiences, mentorship and work connections can help youth develop healthy behaviors that lead to self-sufficiency, higher earnings, healthy intimate relationships, and increased social and mental stability.¹²

San Diego County Transition Age Youth

In 2019 in San Diego County, there were approximately 397,000 people between the ages of 18-24, making up about 12% of the total population.¹³ As shown in Exhibit 1, of these youth, 40% are White (non-Hispanic), 37% are Hispanic, 12% are Asian/Pacific Islander, 6% are Black, and 5% are Other.¹⁴ Additionally, there are slightly more male (54%) than female (46%) TAY in San Diego County (Exhibit 2). In 2015, San Diego County ranked 13th in poverty rate among major U.S. metro areas. Slightly below the national average (14.7%), 13.8% of the San Diego County Population live below the federal poverty threshold.¹⁵ The poverty rate is strikingly higher in cities where there is a high concentration of under-resourced, historically marginalized communities, such as El Cajon (26%), National City (25%), and Escondido (20%).¹⁶

Exhibit 1. Transition Age Youth in San Diego County by Ethnicity (2019)

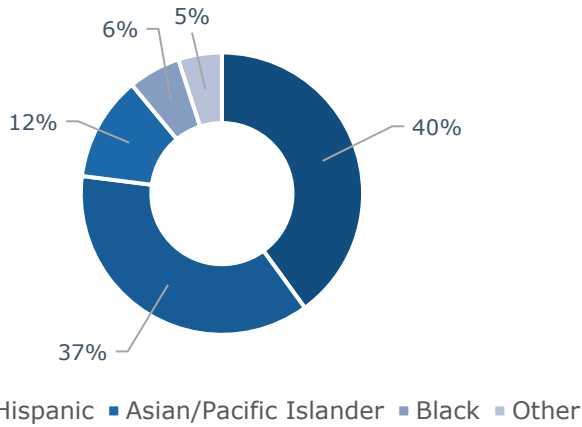
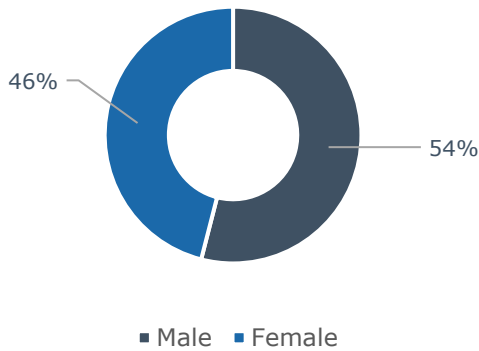


Exhibit 2. Transition Age Youth in San Diego County by Gender (2019)



As of 2019, a disproportionate number of youth in San Diego County, 42,500 (10%), were not connected to institutions of education or employment.¹⁷ Together, Black and Latinx make up nearly 30% of disconnected youth in the county.¹⁸ Moreover, in 2018, 1 out of 10 African American/Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and American Indian/Alaska Native students did not complete high school.¹⁹ Dropping out of high school makes these youth over three times more likely to be arrested by the age of 18 and more likely to need social services than those who graduate.^{20,21} For children who are involved in the foster care system, it is estimated that 50% will never graduate from high school or receive a GED, while only 15% of foster children will attend college.²²

Additionally, at the national level, 25% of foster teens will experience homelessness at least once after “aging out,” with a disproportionate number of young people experiencing homelessness being youth of color and LGBTQ+. It is estimated that more than 1500 youth are experiencing homelessness in San Diego County, making up about 12% of the county’s unsheltered homeless population.²³ Young people transitioning to independence from the child welfare system face unique challenges that can prevent a successful transition into adulthood and independent living, including housing instability and high rates of unemployment.

Exacerbated by systemic and institutional racism, these experiences make it nearly impossible for these youth to build social and economic capital to improve their upward mobility.

While various systems are in place to provide TAY services that teach basic independent living skills around education, employment, finances, and self-care, the ability to implement these skills relies on an underlying set of relational skills that allow youth to successfully interact with peers, partners, teachers, coworkers, and service providers. For youth who have experienced trauma, their relational skills can be drastically underdeveloped or based on maladaptive behaviors. The expectations placed on these youth in their transition to adulthood often exceed their abilities. Additional support is needed to build their relational competencies and help them establish the underlying skills youth need to engage with existing support systems, maintain healthy relationships and successfully navigate their transition.

The Connections Program

The YMCA of San Diego County, Youth & Family Service Branch (YFS) developed the YMCA Connections Project in 2011 as a demonstration project funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Children's Bureau. The first iteration of Connections focused on building relational capacities of current or former foster youth. Evaluation of this program showed that the Connections model is a promising intervention with the potential to impact relationship, emotional regulation, education, and employment outcomes in youth involved in the child welfare system.

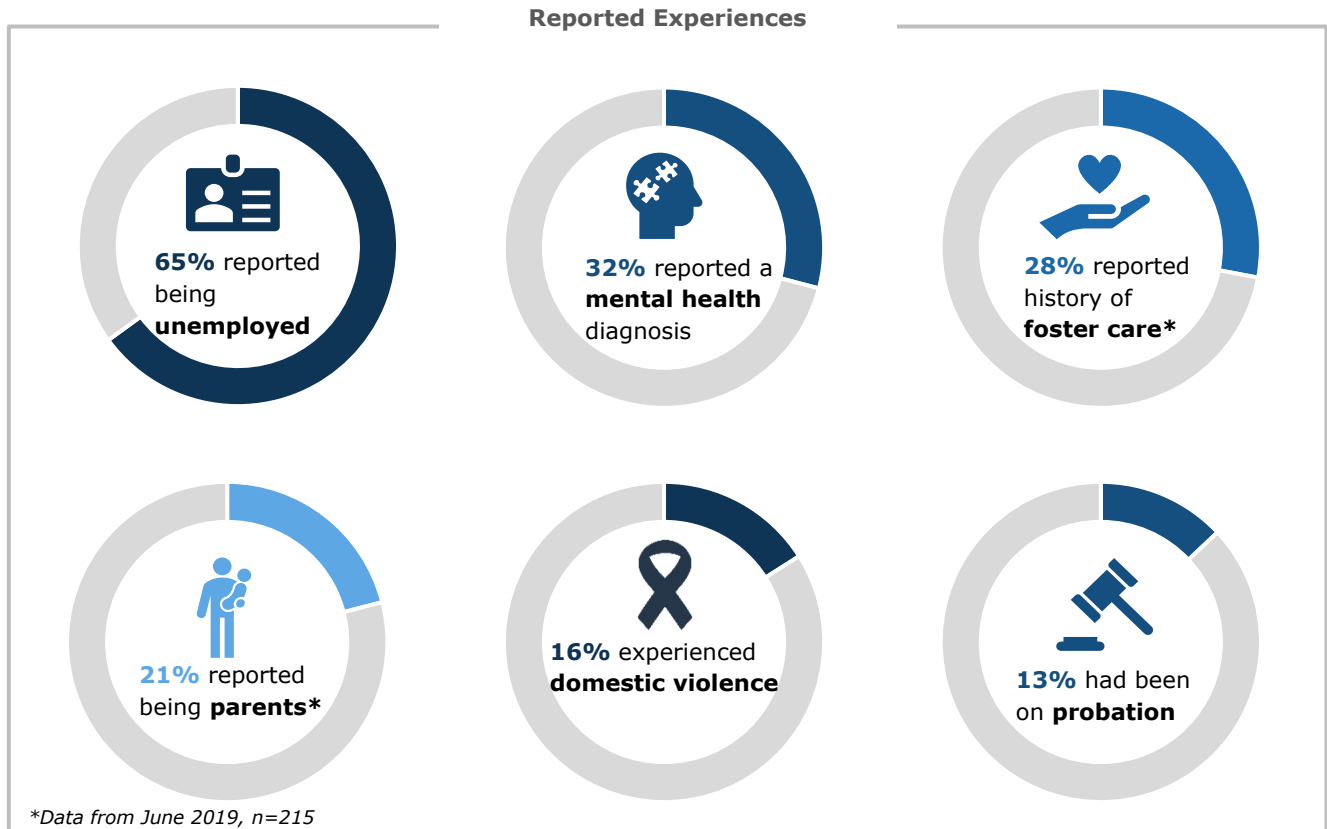
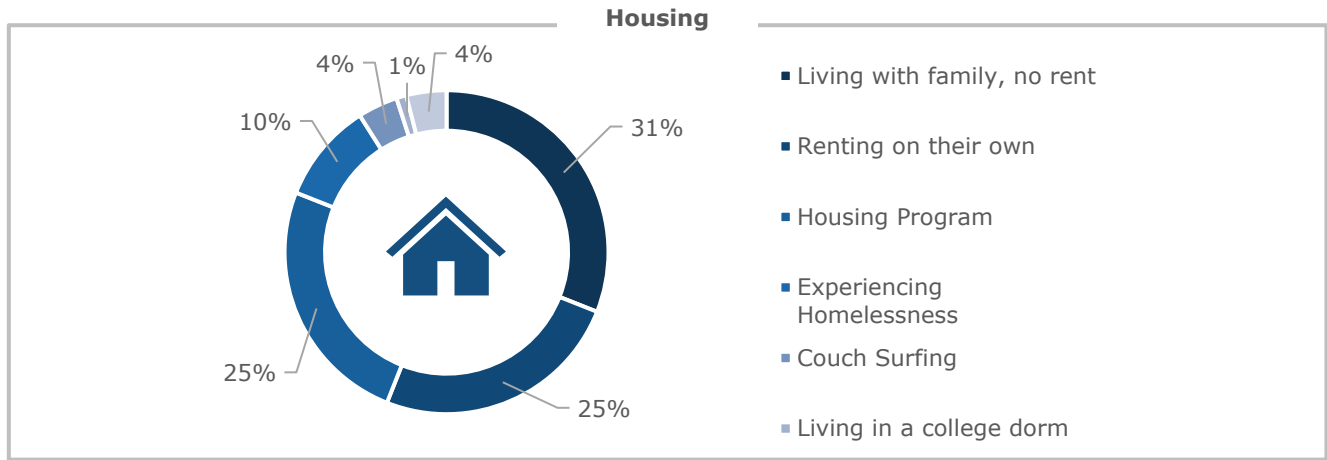
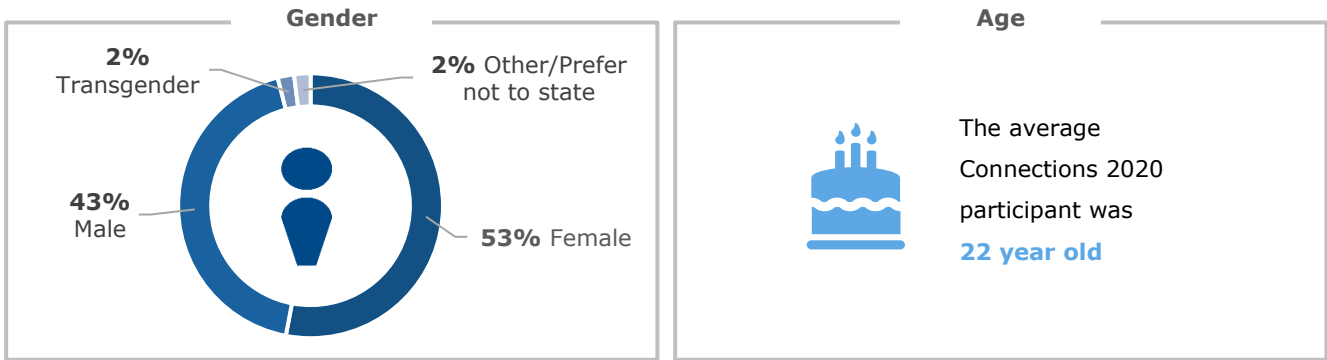
In 2015, YFS received a second round of funding from ACF's Office of Family Assistance (OFA) to implement Connections 2020, incorporating employment support in addition to building relational competencies, with a wider population of youth ages 18-24. Specifically, Connections 2020 served low-income, under-resourced and disconnected youth, including those who dropped out or were at risk of dropping out of high school, youth in or aging out of foster care, youth involved in the juvenile justice system, youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability, and pregnant and parenting youth. The program focused on helping under-resourced youth develop the relationship skills necessary to make and maintain healthy relationships leading to healthier intimate partnerships, stronger families, and employment readiness.

The relational competencies the program intended to strengthen are often underdeveloped in under-resourced and disconnected youth. These competencies include:

- Emotion Regulation
- Mindfulness
- Social Conduct (i.e., engagement in high-risk behavior and connections)

Through a regionalized service delivery model, the YMCA served 294 youth during the last 5 years of Connections 2020. Exhibit 3 shows the demographic profile of youth served through Connections 2020 at the time of enrollment. Unlike the San Diego County Transition Age Youth gender trends, most program participants were female (53%), and 43% were male. In terms of their housing status, 31% were living with their families without paying rent; 25% were renting on their own, 25% were in a housing program, and 10% were experiencing homelessness or housing instability.

Exhibit 3. Connections 2020 Participants Demographic Profile at Intake (n=294)



The Connections 2020 curriculum is based on the principles of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) and the Compassion, Awareness, Acceptance, Validation and Empowerment (C.A.A.V.E.) approach developed during the first round of funding. Dialectic Behavioral Therapy is an evidence-based and skills-based intervention aimed at helping adolescents with emotional instability by teaching them techniques to understand their emotions without judgement.²⁴ It is structured to help individuals gain the insight and skills required to regulate their emotions and behaviors. DBT was originally designed as skill development in conjunction with individual therapy for adults with borderline personality disorder, but later adapted to treat adolescents with multiple problems, which often include drug use, depression, anxiety, and other self-harming behaviors. Connections 2020 adapted the skill development techniques to improve emotion regulation, social conduct, mindfulness, and resiliency in a nonclinical setting. These skills are crucial to young adults' personal development, employability, and relationship development and retention. In addition to DBT, staff members received professional development trainings on how to deliver services using a C.A.A.V.E approach (described in the box to the right) designed to complement DBT by promoting its inherent mindfulness component.

The program included one-on-one coaching and case management, and a series of Relational Wellness and Employment Readiness classes that were co-facilitated by Support Specialists who had similar lived experience as the participants. Additional program activities included peer-led outreach and recruitment, employment support, and data collection and analysis for program improvement and sustainability.

The Connections 2020 program intended for participants to:

- Increase their understanding of what makes a relationship healthy
- Improve their emotion regulation and mindfulness skills
- Increase the number of healthy relationships and decrease the number of negative or dangerous relationships in their lives
- Improve their positive parenting skills and relationships with child's other parent (for parenting youth)
- Improve their employment status
- Improve their economic stability and career mobility
- Reduce barriers to employment, including reducing high-risk behavior

The underlying theory of change behind Connections 2020 and YFS identifies TAY as unique and resilient individuals who can increase their own protective factors and self-regulation with the support, skill building, and resources that YFS strives to provide. By focusing on relational outcomes, youth will leave Connections 2020 equipped to develop and maintain healthy relationships and carry on down their career path to successfully contribute to their homes, workplaces, and communities.

C.A.A.V.E in Connections 2020

Compassion: Compassion is defined as empathy plus the desire to help. It refers to creating safe spaces for youth to be vulnerable so that they can reflect on their thinking, behavior, goals, and achievements.

Awareness: Awareness is about observation and suspending judgment. It facilitates connections with clients and increases meaningful engagement.

Acceptance: Acceptance is the acknowledgment of a situation for what it is, without trying to avoid or reject it.

Validation: Validation is the act of recognizing another's internal experience and communicating acceptance of that experience.

Empowerment: Empowerment is defined as offering clients access to a range of choices, even if some options may not be in their best interest. This requires recognizing an individual's ability to make his or her own choices and have control of their life.

Continuous Quality Improvement

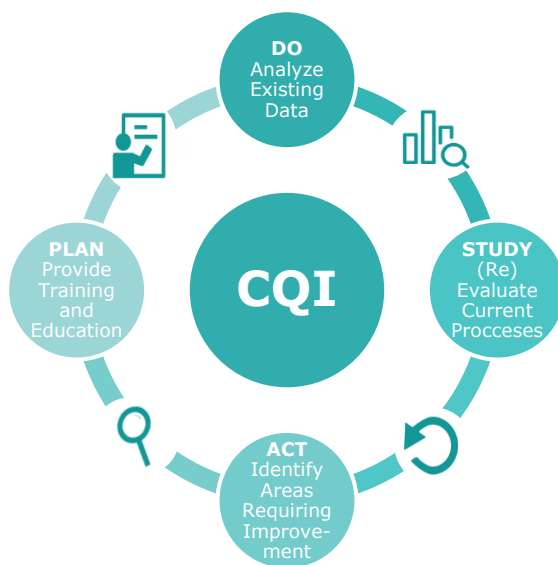
The YMCA partnered with Harder+Company Community Research to implement a process that would allow the program to incorporate continuous data-driven learning throughout the five-year period. To this end, the evaluation team implemented a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) approach that has been a key element of the YMCA Connections 2020 project’s learning agenda since the beginning. This report outlines the CQI approach used throughout the Connections 2020 program as well as related activities and participant outcomes, including gains made in the key relational and employment readiness competencies targeted by the program. Finally, the report highlights lessons learned and offers recommendations based on key learnings from the program.

Continuous Quality Improvement

CQI is an iterative approach that allowed the evaluation team to identify and propose solutions to problems learned about in small but regular increments throughout the program. Specifically, CQI uses data-driven learning to make changes that increase the likelihood of making an impact on program participants.

The CQI framework used for Connections 2020, shown in Exhibit 4, facilitates ongoing feedback loops and collaboratively identifies ways to improve the design, implementation, and impact of the program’s core elements on a responsive and real-time basis. As part of CQI, improvement strategies are tested through the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle, which is an action-oriented learning method.

Exhibit 4. Connections 2020 Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Framework




The PDSA cycle allowed the team to determine if the changes being implemented through CQI were resulting in improvements to the program. The PDSA cycle included planning changes, testing them, observing results, and acting on what had been learned. The CQI approach uses data to continuously assess and re-design strategies that are most likely to lead to impact. The methods of interpreting data during a CQI process can be customized to meet the needs of the program. The evaluation team worked alongside Connections 2020 staff to identify and assess the strategies that were most effective in reaching the program outcomes and that aligned and supported the OFA learning agenda.

CQI Activities

Connections 2020 CQI activities were systematically aligned to each of the four major components of the CQI framework to ensure the program was implemented with high fidelity and was making progress toward outcomes (See Exhibit 5). These activities included focus groups with program participants, site and class observations, staff interviews, meetings with program leadership and learning collaboratives.

Learning collaboratives were meetings designed and implemented with the intention of staff-wide discussion and common understanding of CQI findings, as well as collective identification of opportunities for program improvement. During these meetings, staff would reflect on data provided by the evaluation team and share program updates, implemented changes, and challenges with service delivery. Through shared learning, staff developed action plans that addressed many of the challenges they experienced during service delivery. Learning collaboratives were held on a quarterly basis throughout the first 3 years of the program, and bi-annually thereafter. Bringing all staff together, especially coaches and support specialists, helped them understand the purpose of data collection and increased their knowledge of the youth they were serving. It also empowered staff to participate in data-driven programmatic decisions. A timeline shown in Appendix A outlines the learning focus for each year of implementation.

Exhibit 5. Continuous Quality Improvement phases and activities

Phase	Purpose	Activities
 <p>PLAN: Provide Training & Education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide ongoing training opportunities to support project fidelity • Identify and address challenges or barriers staff are facing when implementing changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C.A.A.V.E trainings • DBT trainings • Follow-up during one-on-one and group supervision

DO:
Analyze
Existing Data



Determine:

- Were the expected outcomes met?
- Did action plans result in an improvement? By how much/little?
- Was the action worth the investment?
- What are the data trends?
- Were there unintended side effects?
- Data cleaning and analysis

STUDY:
(Re)Evaluate
Current
Processes



- Foster data driven decision making.
- Identify internal and external factors that impact project outcomes.
- Develop and assess plans to improve and enhance the program.
- Learning collaboratives
- Staff interviews
- Participant focus groups
- Site and class observations.

ACT:
Identify Areas
Requiring
Improvement



- Develop action and implementation plans, including necessary staff/resources and timelines.
- Discuss risks the project may encounter during implementation of action plan.
- Document problems, unexpected effects, and general observations.
- Learning collaboratives
- Project team meetings
- Follow-up during supervision

Relational Wellness

Background

Connections 2020 was specifically designed to serve low-income, under-resourced youth. Low-income is defined as being at or below 80% of the median household income for San Diego County based on family size.²⁵ Any youth who met this definition was eligible for participation, except for those with severe mental illness or severe substance use that prevented them from engaging fully in the intervention. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) methods, adapted for adolescents, guided the curriculum used with Connections 2020 participants. Research suggests that DBT is effective in treating adolescents because many experience symptoms similar to those with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD).²⁶ These symptoms include non-suicidal self-injury, suicide attempts, dichotomous thinking, impulsive behaviors, labile moods and unstable interpersonal relationships.²⁷ There is increasing evidence that DBT skills training is a promising intervention for a wide variety of both clinical and non-clinical populations across various settings, which made it a good fit for the Connections 2020 program.²⁸

Connections 2020 aimed to support youth in developing and sustaining healthy relationships by helping them build relational competencies including emotion regulation, mindfulness, and social conduct. Due to social and economic disenfranchisement, under-resourced youth often experience unmet needs that lead to under-development of these specific competencies. Each competency is defined in the context of the Connections 2020 program; related CQI activities and outcomes are presented in the sections below.

Methods

To measure the changes experienced by youth in relational competencies, staff collected data using a set of validated tools, as well as a survey developed specifically for the Connections program. Each tool was administered at three timepoints: enrollment, 6-months, and exit. The table shown in Exhibit 6 offers the description of each tool, including the competency it relates to, and subscales measured in each. It is important to note that the Connections 2020 staff experienced challenges with data collection that included barriers with engagement resulting in varying timepoints for follow-up assessments. The evaluation team also conducted focus groups with participants, utilizing human-centered protocols to capture qualitative data.

Exhibit 6. Tools used to measure relational competencies in Connections 2020

Name	Description	Subscales
Emotion Regulation Checklist for Adolescents (ERCA)	ERCA is a 27-item, self-report instrument suitable for use with adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expression of emotion• Social conduct• Impulse control
Child Acceptance and Mindfulness Measure	CAMM is a 25-item, self-report measure suitable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of external experiences

(CAMM)	for use with adolescents ²⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acting with awareness Accepting internal experiences without judgment
Connections Assessment	Connections Assessment is an 18-item, self-report tool designed for the population served within the Connections program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing support network Level of safety in relationships Level of stability Engagement in high-risk behaviors
High-Risk Assessment Checklist	The High-Risk Assessment Checklist is a 22-item, self-report tool developed in collaboration with at-risk youth advisors to assess changes in high-risk behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement in high-risk behavior, such as alcohol and drug use.

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation, often referred to as self-regulation, is recognized for its important role in promoting wellbeing throughout a person’s life. Specifically, emotion regulation can support wellbeing in physical, emotional, social, and economic health as well as educational attainment.³⁰ Emotion regulation can be defined as the practice of appropriately controlling emotions and thoughts. Development of self-regulation skills in youth can support their integration in society, as strong emotion regulation can be a predictor of lower health costs, decreased engagement in high-risk behaviors, such as substance use, and increased earnings.³¹ Research has shown that, given the major changes in neurobiological development in adolescence, emotion regulation support during this period can be critical. Further, the development of self-regulation skills is influenced by internal and external factors, including poverty and trauma.³² Often, for youth who have experienced trauma, their ability to manage impulses and refrain from high-risk behaviors can be impaired. Thus, for youth with history of trauma and ACEs, interventions during their transition into adulthood can build resilience and reduce their engagement in high-risk behaviors.³³

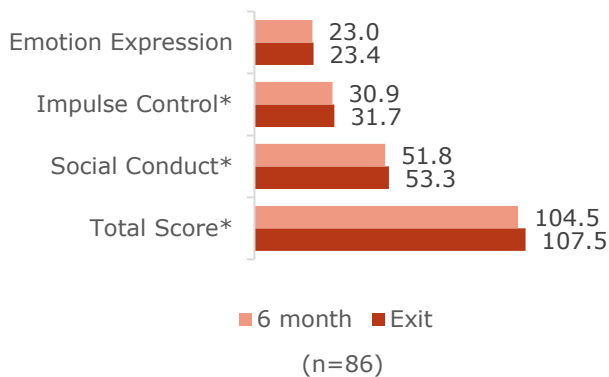
In order to support youth to improve their emotion regulation skills, the Connections 2020 incorporated self-regulation into the program, such as in wellness classes co-facilitated by a Wellness coach and Support Specialists,¹ and one-on-one coaching activities. The DBT-inspired skill building activities included as part of emotion regulation improvement involved open discussions on positive emotions, and how to improve them, opposite actions (i.e., deliberately attempting to act opposite of their emotion urge), and observe and describe (i.e., observing and noticing the environment and describing their experience). Implementation of these activities was supported by a DBT consultant who provided ongoing staff

¹ Support Specialists are youth with similar life experiences as that of program participants. They receive DBT training by a DBT Specialty Consultant to understand DBT principals and essential skills, facilitate groups effectively, and set appropriate boundaries with participants.

training and support as needed to ensure model fidelity.

Emotion Regulation Outcomes. Youth who participated in the program for one year showed gains in emotion regulation. Specifically, between the 6-month and exit timepoints, statistically significant gains were made in the Impulse Control and Social Conduct subscales, indicating improvements in these areas take between 6 to 12 months to take hold. Exhibit 7 shows the differences in emotion regulation between timepoints throughout the program for all subscales.

Exhibit 7. ERCA Domain and Total Scores between 6 months and Exit timepoints



*indicates statistical significance at $p < 0.05$

This improvement is also captured during focus group conversations with participants in which they confirm learning these skills. When asked about what some of the skills were the program was teaching them, one participant shared:

Monitoring my behavior; being more self-aware, more understanding of what someone else is going through, being mindful, mindful of the situation.

Participants further articulated skills they have gained, citing examples of when these skills were helpful. When asked about what they have learned in the program, a participant shared that:

I have so many good coping mechanisms like in a stressful situation whether someone is having a baby or someone passed away. It's pretty cool. I've learned how to handle my emotions and keep my emotions in check and not let it be known, at least not in the public eye at least. And on top of that, you know, just communication, establishing a relationship, that's pretty cool too.

Key Learnings. To better understand what makes participants more likely to improve emotion regulation competencies, the CQI process incorporated gallery walk and world café activities² that explored emotion regulation findings during learning collaboratives to encourage staff to think about the changes they were

² A gallery walk entails large posters with data hung on the walls of a room and guided opportunities for the participants to walk around the room and discuss each poster in small groups. World Cafés include small groups that rotate around to different tables discussing a different topic at each table.

observing in participants and the circumstances that were most effective in supporting their relational growth.

During the learning collaborative conversations, staff shared that participants that showed improved emotion regulation skills typically were those who were more engaged in program activities, more willing to be vulnerable, able to name their needs, and showed openness and willingness to learn. A key theme that arose during the sessions included the importance of establishing trust with participants prior to addressing their emotion regulation needs. As a result, the Connections 2020 team prioritized meeting with the participants more often and incorporated ways to get to know the youth earlier on, such as an intake form that included questions about the youth's interests and hobbies. Meeting with participants more often provided more comfort to participants and allowed staff to learn about them on a deeper level, opening them up to be vulnerable and willing to learn new skills.

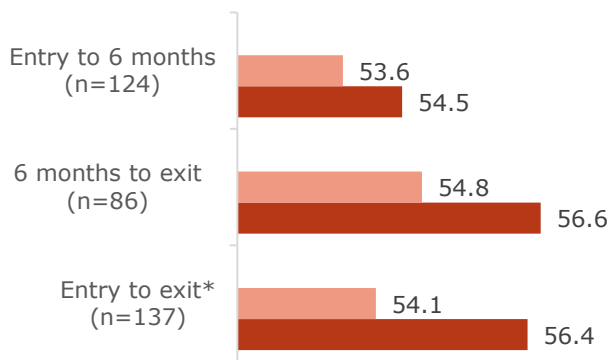
Mindfulness

Mindfulness is often described as a state of consciousness in which there is enhanced attention to moment-to-moment experiences.³⁴ Specifically, it is the practice of being fully aware of internal and external sensations in the present moment without judgement.³⁵ While science related to mindfulness and youth development is an emerging area, neuroscience and psychological research suggests that the practice of mindfulness improves the immune system and increases gray matter in the brain involved with memory processes, emotion regulation, empathy and perspective taking.³⁶ As a mechanism, mindfulness helps young people respond to situations without reacting by developing emotional resilience, self-awareness, and regulation skills that can support them in behavior changes, decision-making, and relationships.³⁷ This can be especially helpful for TAY, whose brain development is not complete, leading to impulsivity, and engagement in high-risk activities.³⁸

Mindfulness was incorporated as part of the relational wellness curriculum of Connections 2020 and infused into all classes offered through various activities. The activities ranged from meditation and aromatherapy in class settings to work environment role play in one-on-one meetings to connect mindfulness and interpersonal effectiveness. Similar to emotion regulation, all activities aligned with the DBT-skills building approach and were supported by a DBT consultant.

Mindfulness Outcomes. Youth who participated in the program for one full year showed gains in mindfulness. Specifically, as shown in Exhibit 8, youth showed statistically significant gains at the exit timepoint. This suggests that while youth who participated in the program were improving mindfulness skills to some extent, more benefits are seen when they were part of the intervention for a full year.

Exhibit 8. CAMM Scores between Entry, 6 months, and Exit timepoints



*indicates statistical significance at $p < 0.05$

During focus groups, participants would often share situations in which they used tools learned through the program to employ mindfulness skills. One participant recalled a time when they experienced and recognized they were having a panic attack triggered by various compounding crises, including issues with childcare. They described that during that stressful period,

I remembered the mindfulness app [from class] and I turned it on. I know it relaxes me. I put it on and started to concentrate and started to relax. My stress levels started to go down. I noticed a change, that I had relaxed.

Participants also recognized their relationship with their wellness coach as a facilitator to learning and applying these skills; through modeling non-judgement and empathy, wellness coaches promoted participant’s application of these skills. One participant shared about their wellness’ coach role that:

I was thinking that I was wrong, and it was all my fault. She said don't think about on all the bad, you're trying to take care of yourself and think about all the good that you are doing for your daughter. You are trying to improve. She made me realize that out of something bad came something good and that's what I like... she helps me remember that it's okay if I have a crisis but now, I know what I can do to control myself and my emotions because [before] I wasn't reacting in a correct manner.

Key Learnings. Through the learning collaborative activities that supported deeper understanding of youth’s improvement in emotion regulation competencies, the CQI team also highlighted gains in mindfulness per the CAMM assessment. Staff recognized that modeling mindfulness, especially responding in a non-judgmental way was one way they were able to connect and build youth’s trust more strongly. The need to reinforce and further promote mindfulness skills arose during learning sessions, prompting staff to leverage social media as a space to encourage participants to do so. To this end, staff created challenges and giveaways through various social media platforms, by sharing reminders of mindfulness practices and inviting participants to share ways in which they were using those practices. In addition, staff agreed that beyond modeling mindfulness, it was also important to practice positive reinforcement with participants and highlight whenever they incorporated mindfulness into their interactions to help them make the connection between their actions and the skills they were developing.

The organization recognized that it would be helpful to continue to update staff on evolving literature on mindfulness, and to continue building the staff's mindfulness toolbox. To this end, leadership committed to identifying and sharing new literature or tools related to mindfulness on a bi-weekly basis, supporting staff staying current with learnings from the field of mindfulness.

Connectedness and support networks

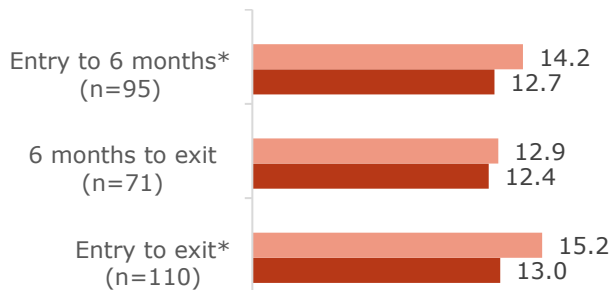
Transition age youth's outcomes are heavily influenced by their experiences early on, the opportunities to develop essential life skills, and their relationships. Youth transitioning out of foster care without permanent connections to family and a community are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness, not achieving education goals, becoming system-involved, and becoming pregnant at an early age.³⁹ Creating and sustaining social connections can help individuals lower anxiety and depression, it can also help regulate emotions and leads to higher self-esteem and empathy.⁴⁰ Additional to being key for development of positive identity, connectedness can support youth's sense of belonging and overall feelings of wellbeing.⁴¹

The YMCA and evaluation team developed a survey during the first round of funding, to assess a youth's existing support network, level of safety in relationships, level of stability and engagement in high-risk behaviors. The program engaged participants with individualized support and case management to support their varying needs around connections and systems of support. The program focused on helping youth understand the importance of relationships, and in turn create and expand a network of healthy relationships and be able to identify negative relationships.

Connectedness Outcomes. Participants of the Connections 2020 program showed improvement in their relationships at different timepoints. Specifically, they showed statistically significant gains at the 6-month follow up and exit timepoints (see Exhibit 9). Building a network of support takes time; especially because different relationships serve different purposes and fill different needs. Similarly, the skills to identify positive relationships and learn how to navigate negative ones are developed over time.

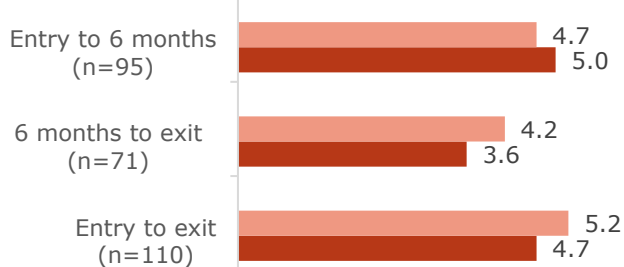
Reducing high-risk behavior was also a targeted outcome of Connections 2020. While providing the tools for youth to increase their relational wellness by strengthening areas of emotion regulation, mindfulness, and connectedness, the program was indirectly supporting participants to reduce their engagement in high-risk behavior. Although not statistically significant, participants showed reduced high-risk behavior overall after a year of participation in the program (See Exhibit 10).

Exhibit 9. Connections Assessment Scores between Entry, 6 months, and Exit timepoints³



*indicates statistical significance at $p < 0.05$

Exhibit 10. High-Risk Assessment Scores between Entry, 6 months, and Exit timepoints⁴



Being able to develop a network of support also requires improvement in the overall relational skills targeted by the program; and often, participants shared how these skills were helping them identify negative relationships and letting go of them.

Key Learnings. Through learning collaborative activities, including the gallery walk, Connections 2020 staff unpacked a wealth of data that highlighted areas where youth showed improvement. However, early findings also showed less change than expected in some areas, for example, in the Connections Assessment. In response to these findings, staff proposed implementing more targeted activities, such as “team builds”, which were less structured opportunities for youth to get to know each other and apply the relational skills they were learning in a safe space like a cooking class or hiking excursion. Giving youth these opportunities to get to know each other supported their connectedness, especially because staff were able to identify participants with similar interests or goals and organize activities to bring them together. At following learning collaboratives staff shared that youth who had participated in some of these targeted activities started following each other on social media and hanging out together, signaling that this was an important step taken to help them connect with other young people. Altogether, developing connections and healthy relationships created opportunities for them to practice the emotion regulation and mindfulness skills they were learning, which in turn helped them reduce engagement in high-risk behaviors.

³ The scores for this tool are reversed and the lower the score the better a participant’s social connections are likely to be.

⁴ The scores for this tool are reversed and a lower score shows a reduction in high-risk behavior.

Employment Readiness

Background

Transition age youth often miss key educational and employment experiences that increase the chances of negative outcomes, including unemployment, poverty, criminal behavior, substance use, and incarceration.⁴² During this critical period, these missed experiences can have long term consequences well into adulthood, eventually influencing earnings and self-sufficiency.⁴³ Reaching self-sufficiency is highly influenced by employment; beyond generating an income, employment supports social and emotional aspects that help us see ourselves as productive members of society.⁴⁴ As young people transition into adulthood, obtaining and preserving a job can often rely on the development and strengthening of soft skills such as mindfulness and emotion regulation. Specifically, research shows that youth's chance of successfully entering and participating in the workforce can be increased through the development of social skills, communication, higher-order thinking, self-control, and positive self-concept.⁴⁵

In addition to building relational wellness, Connections 2020 aimed to support participants' economic stability, focusing on skill attainment and employment. The program supported the development of the skills necessary for youth to navigate career paths and incorporated economic stability and mobility services as a central focus of the employment readiness component. The goal of economic stability and mobility services was to provide youth with the skills necessary to gain and sustain long-term unsubsidized employment. Connections 2020 provided services to all participants through employment coaches to identify each participants' goals, conduct career assessments, assess strengths and growth areas, and provide one-on-one assistance.

The employment curriculum included workshops on communication, problem solving and critical thinking, and professionalism, as well as one-on-one sessions where employment coaches provided tailored support on resume development, job search techniques, labor market education, mock interviews, and job maintenance skills. While the program did not require participants attend any specific workshop, they could choose those that were relevant to their individual goals and had the opportunity to discuss with employment coaches as often as needed. The Connections 2020 program offered various opportunities for youth to participate in employment readiness activities, including subsidized employment, and internships.

Subsidized employment. The program allocated approximately 100 hours of subsidized employment for up to 80 youth. To participate in subsidized employment, participants would meet with an employment coach to discuss areas of interests as well as the result of various assessments. Having initial discussions about interests was intended to support employment coaches find the right placement for youth and develop a plan to support them through that placement. While participating in subsidized employment, youth continued to receive support from their wellness and employment coaches; additionally, program staff offered training and support to employers to ensure they were equipped to successfully integrate transition age youth into their workplace. A total of 54 youth participated in subsidized employment, 22 of whom completed their placement, and 13 who

were subsequently hired by their employer.

Internships. Connections 2020 offered internships to youth who were enrolled in the program; internships were available within the YMCA of San Diego County as well as other partner organizations and companies. Participants were hired and compensated through the YMCA of San Diego County for their internships. Internships were valuable opportunities for youth in gaining access to and experience in a field of interest; this allowed them to practice learned skills in a low-stakes environment, confirm their interests, and to explore different career options. Through these opportunities, participants were able to decide if they wanted to further pursue these interests or explore additional ones.

Additional Opportunities. Leadership opportunities were available for youth interested in serving as a support to their peers and assisting with community outreach and program coordination. These were short-term, hands-on opportunities that helped youth build specific skills. In addition, over the course of the program, leadership recognized the value in supporting participants who were interested in creative careers to identify viable sources of income through entrepreneurial means. Initially, program leadership experienced challenges identifying opportunities for creative work experience or best practices for aligned programming. As a result, a pilot program was proposed to a small group of Connections 2020 participants. This pilot program leveraged community partnerships that allowed youth to meet local working artists, tour museums, and access new museum installations. Cultivating these interests through the pilot program generated positive feedback, that led to the development of the Connections Creative program, supported by a small grant that allowed for two cohorts to participate in the program.

Methods

To measure changes in employment readiness, staff collected participant information at intake, 6 months, and exit timepoints through the Employment and Education Addendum, a questionnaire which was added to the Connections Assessment. The Employment and Education Addendum questionnaire assesses employment readiness, employment-related skills and attitudes, and financial literacy. A higher score indicated greater employment readiness. Additionally, coaches recorded instances when a participant experienced a change in their employment, education, or housing status through the Employment, Education and Housing Follow-Up. Finally, subsidized employment data were collected through a brief survey to track length of employment, completion, and whether it aligned with the participant’s career choice.

Exhibit 11. Tools used to measure employment readiness in Connections 2020

Name	Description	Subscales
Employment and Education Addendum	The Employment and Education Addendum is a 22-item self-report tool, developed to assess career preparedness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment readiness such as having reliable transportation and awareness of job/educational requirements

Connections Creative is a program that supports young artists interested in pursuing art as a meaningful career pathway. Participants join a small cohort where they explore entrepreneurialism, create, or expand their portfolio and resumes. Some of the art they create is then used by the YMCA to create apparel and promote the awareness of social issues important to youth wellness and support the sustainability of the program. With community partnership, the YMCA hosts an art show for the young artists.

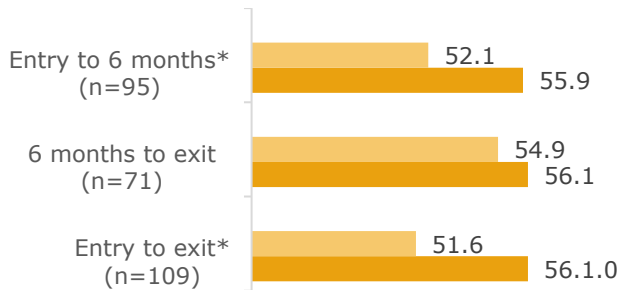
In 2019, five young artists participated in Connections Creative. In 2020, another 7 artists completed the program.

Employment, Education and Housing Follow-Up	This follow-up assessment was used as needed to capture any changes in participant employment, education and/or housing status during the program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment changes, such as gaining full-time employment, promotions, loss of employment • Education changes, such as enrollment in secondary or post-secondary education, enrollment in technical school • Housing status changes, such as renting, college dorm, housing program
Subsidized Employment	This survey was developed to capture participation and changes in subsidized employment for Connections 2020 participants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subsidized employment completion status, date, length, wage, outcome

Employment Outcomes. Youth who participated in the program between six months and one year, reported statistically significant gains in employment readiness with the largest gain happening in the first six months (see Exhibit 12 below). This suggests that participants were able to apply their learnings and shift their attitudes toward employment soon after joining the program. Through various focus groups, the team learned that participants’ motivation to join Connection 2020 were largely driven by a desire to seek and gain employment. In fact, many participants were unaware of the relational wellness component offered by the program. However, once enrolled, staff were able to support participants in making the connection between developing relational skills and being able to gain and sustain meaningful employment. During a focus group conversation, a participant shared:

I’m looking for a job and it’s something that I’d like in something specific they can help me. They give me guidance on how to work some equipment and they’re [helping] me look for the job I really desire. That is what mainly made me pick this program. They can help me [prepare] for the interview and that’s what motivated me.

Exhibit 12. Employment & Education Addendum Scores between Entry, 6 months, and Exit timepoints



*indicates statistical significance at $p < 0.05$

Unemployment rate substantially decreased for participants who spent one full year in the program. Namely, 70% of youth were unemployed when they first joined the program, but this figure is reduced to half (35%) by the time participants exit the program (See Exhibit 13). Many participants also reported gaining part-time or full-time employment during their time in Connections 2020 (see Exhibit 14). During a focus group with youth, a participant shared their success in finding a job through Connections 2020 after experiencing difficulties before joining the program, and being able to get exposure to the career which they wanted to pursue:

It was really difficult to find a job before Connections 2020, I applied to various ones and they kept turning me down...now I'm getting the experience and knowledge about my career of interest.

Exhibit 13. Unemployment rates at Entry and Exit timepoints (n=115)

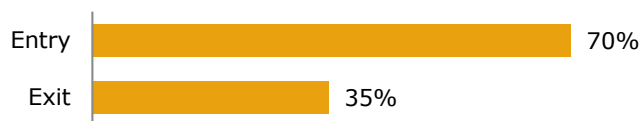
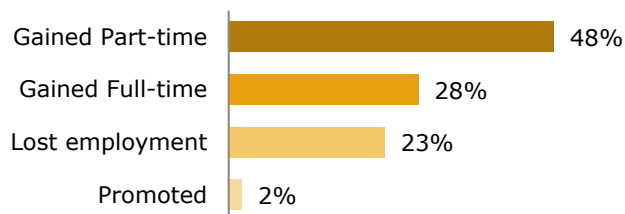


Exhibit 14. Employment status change at Exit timepoint (n=182)



Note: Participants may have been counted multiple times if they underwent more than one change in employment status

Key Learnings. During reflective CQI activities such as the SWOT analyses⁵, identifying staff work styles, and journey mapping⁶, the evaluation team and Connections 2020 staff explored ways in which they could better support participants to increase their employment readiness. Through the SWOT and work style activities, staff learned and discussed the preconceptions or biases they may be holding about youth’s readiness for employment placement. One coach shared a realization they came to during one learning collaborative, that they felt like they were giving participants a rope to climb, and they were being more supportive of those who were ‘on it’ and climbing, while being less supportive of those who they did not see ‘touching’ the rope. This made them realize that some youth, especially those not ‘touching’ the rope, did not know what it was or how to start climbing it

⁵ A SWOT analysis is a method that helps a person identify their strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to their work

⁶ Journey Mapping is a human-centered activity that begins with compiling a series of actions revolving a goal in a chronological format, then the participant(s) elaborate on their thoughts and emotions to create a narrative about their experiences

and that they had to start at that level of support with those youth.

This conversation helped coaches realize the importance of their own self-reflection to identify any additional barriers they may be unwillingly creating for participants; that youth who were not as readily engaged or participating, often had challenges preventing them from prioritizing the program. One participant shared that:

Sometimes life gets in the way. It's not that I don't want to come to class or don't want to be here. When I don't come to class is because other things came up that I cannot change.

Another CQI activity included conducting journey mapping focus groups with participants that asked them about their experiences before, during and their plans for after Connections 2020. Similar questions were asked of the staff during a learning collaborative about their perspectives of youth's experiences before, during and after Connections 2020. Staff then reviewed the responses from youth and identified similarities and differences in their perspectives. This process revealed that many participants did not see the connection between the job placements the program was helping them get and their desired career path. It also revealed the effects that their trauma and previous negative experiences had on their ability to focus on employment and their futures. As a result, coaches incorporated slight shifts in their engagement with participants, more intentionally focusing on empathetic and supportive practices to help address participant's trauma and negative experience. Staff also started leveraging each opportunity to discuss career goals and pathways with youth, and explicitly helping them see and make the connections between their current employment and their desired career pathway.

Conclusion

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Applying a continuous quality improvement approach to the Connections 2020 program allowed for real-time learning and adjustments that informed and improved the program delivery and engagement of participants. Key lessons learned for implementing a relational work readiness program with TAY participants, and subsequent recommendations for future programming, include the following:

Hire the right people to work with TAY populations. Although the experience and skills of staff is important for most programs, it is especially crucial when hiring someone to work with young people who have experienced trauma and ACEs. Connections 2020 coaches were trained to embody the C.A.A.V.E. approach in their engagement with the participants and their team. Additionally, employing team members who had similar lived experiences to the participants was essential to building trust and providing the youth with a staff person who could relate and connect with them on a different level than someone without shared lived experience.

- **Recommendation:** Assess candidates for employment on their inherent ability to implement the C.A.A.V.E. approach. Test for implicit biases that staff may hold and remove barriers that may exist around recruiting and retaining staff who reflect the diversity of the participants and have shared lived experience.

Be creative and flexible with outreach and engagement strategies. TAY are generally entering a phase of life where they can make their own decisions and have many competing priorities. Program outreach and engagement strategies need to be creative and flexible enough to meet TAY where they are, respect the time and effort that the participants will give to it, and show why they are worth attending. Connections 2020 leadership and staff were open to brainstorming and testing different outreach and engagement strategies over the course of the program to find the program delivery model that worked best for their participants.

- **Recommendation:** Build in time during planning to test different outreach and engagement strategies, as well as program delivery models. Include participants and staff with lived experience in the design and testing phases, as well as in the evaluation and sensemaking of CQI data.

Determine who the program is best fit for. In broadening access to the program to a wider range of TAY, the Connections 2020 staff had to undergo some trial and error to identify the participants that the program was not suited to serve, specifically TAY undergoing extreme and frequent crises or who exhibited complex mental health needs. Identifying the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the program allowed the staff to focus their support and resources on those they could help most.

- **Recommendation:** Consider incorporating a readiness assessment to understand both the extrinsic and intrinsic factors that may impact a participant's ability to fully engage or benefit from the program. Be clear with referring partners about who the program is best suited to support and

maintain positive working relationships with programs that participants may need to be referred to.

Provide opportunities for developing peer relationships. In addition to the skill building classes, the social activities provided through Connections 2020 served to provide opportunities for participants to put their relational competencies into practice with their peers. Through activities like cooking classes and hiking trips, participants were able to use their newly learned skills in more natural settings, as well as build peer support networks for life beyond the program.

- **Recommendation:** Provide social activities in addition to educational activities to allow TAY participants to engage with each other and practice their relational skills in more natural settings.

Ensure youth employment opportunities are in line with their desired career paths. A common piece of feedback from youth connected to subsidized and unsubsidized employment through the program was that they did not see the connection between their employment and their career path. Based on that feedback, staff were more intentional about connecting youth with employers that could provide learning and skill building opportunities that would open doors for the next step in the participants' career trajectories. Staff were also more explicit with youth about how their current employment would lead to the next step in their career.

- **Recommendation:** Continue to build out the network of partnerships with employers of all different sectors and industries to expand the opportunities to offer participants. Develop various career pathways that undecided youth can choose from and explore. Partner with college career guidance programs and resources to support youth career development. Engage local businesses by offering information on the benefits of such programming to the local economy, as well as the positive public relation opportunities that stem from engaging in youth development partnerships.

Sustainability

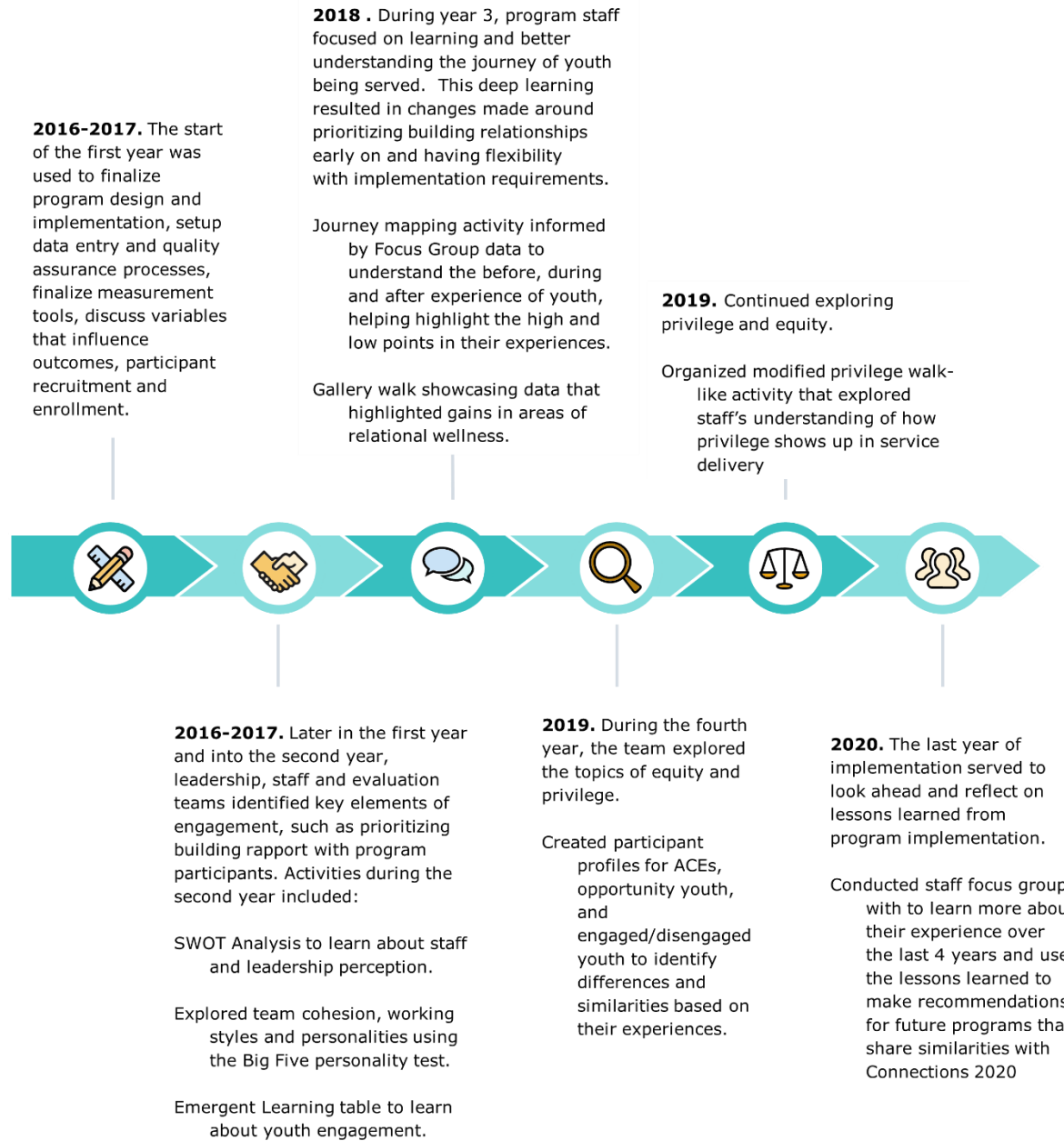
The lessons learned and experiences of YFS through implementing a decade of Connections work has led to the incorporation of relational wellness, increasing social connectedness, staff connectedness to participants, neuro-informed approach, and C.A.A.V.E. approach into YFS' theory of change and day-to-day practice. Examples of how elements of Connections 2020, specifically C.A.A.V.E. and DBT adaptations, have been built into the YFS infrastructure include the following:

- **Employee recruitment, onboarding, and retention** are centered on supporting staff to apply the C.A.A.V.E. approach. C.A.A.V.E. has been incorporated into job descriptions, interview questions, reference check language, trainings, and supervision protocols.
- All YFS staff receive **mandatory C.A.A.V.E. trainings** during onboarding and refresher trainings are available approximately twice a year. The YFS staff responsible for developing the C.A.A.V.E. approach have also provided trainings to hundreds of social service workers across the country.
- All YFS programs serving TAY or caregivers or TAY or their caregivers **incorporate elements of emotion regulation skill building**, such as distress tolerance skills, into their programming.

- YFS has created a staff position that is specifically tasked with supporting the implementation of C.A.A.V.E. and social capital-building into programming across all YFS departments.
- All YFS programs serving TAY include **increased social capital** as one of their program outcomes.

Additionally, YFS continues to seek opportunities for ongoing funding of the Connections program.

Appendix A



End Notes

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