

INTRODUCTION

TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD



The new “look” that is apparent in this issue of *Focal Point* signals more than a shift in visual style and layout. Instead, it represents a deeper and larger transition in the mission and activities of the Research and Training Centers (RTCs) at Portland State University. Like many transitions, the transition experienced by the RTCs is not only an exciting beginning to a new phase, but also a bittersweet ending to what had gone before. And, again as is true in many transitions, alongside change there is also continuity. In the case of the RTCs, this continuity has many aspects, but is most obvious in the values and commitments that are being carried forward into new work.

For 25 years—from 1984 through 2009—the Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children’s Mental Health was in continuous existence. At the conclusion of each 5-year grant cycle, the RTC had successfully competed for further funding. In 2009, however, no further funding was offered for Research and Training Centers focused on children’s mental health, and the RTC at Portland State began to wind down its operations. The RTC for Children’s Mental Health at the University of South Florida, which had been funded under the same grant program, also began to close down.

At the same time, however, a competition for two new RTCs was announced by the funders. The new competition was for RTCs that focused on improving outcomes for youth

and young adults aged 14-30 with serious mental health conditions. Researchers at Portland State University, working with young adults who had experience with mental health, child welfare, and other systems, put together an ambitious proposal that included eight research projects and an array of training, dissemination, and technical assistance activities. This new RTC on Pathways to Positive Futures received funding last September and launched immediately into its new work. A second RTC, focused on the same population and goals, was funded at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

The RTC on Pathways to Positive Futures carries forward the spirit and values that were integral to the work of the previous RTC, particularly the commitment to empowering the voices and perspectives of the young people and families who receive services. Staff members are energized and excited about the new work and invite you to learn more about the Pathways RTC by visiting the website (see box on next page). The website of the previous RTC will remain online, and access to resources—including back issues of *Focal Point*—will be maintained.

Given the new focus of our research, *Focal Point* will no longer be subtitled “Research, Policy, & Practice in Children’s Mental Health,” but instead take on the task of covering a broad range of topics related to “Youth, Young Adults, and Mental Health.” The articles included in this inaugural issue of the “new” *Focal Point* exemplify both the new work and

the continuing ethos of the previous issues of *Focal Point* and the previous RTC. This issue addresses “Transitions to Adulthood” from the perspectives of researchers, youth, family, and professionals. The articles included focus on two different types of transitions—developmental and institutional.¹ Developmental transitions are those that come with the natural growth and maturation of an individual, whereas institutional transitions are externally imposed changes that result from systems and policies (e.g., aging out of foster care). The articles in this issue clearly illustrate the importance of understanding these two types of transitions and how they unfold and interact in unique ways in the life of each individual young person.

The first article, written by Nancy Koroloff and Maryann Davis, two of the directors of the new Research and Training Centers, discusses the current status of the relatively new field of transition research. Following that, Jennifer Tanner challenges those working with transition-aged youth to consider how developmental psychology and its concept of emerging adulthood can influence how services for youth and young adults are designed and evaluated.

This issue also features several articles highlighting specific programs designed to support youth as they transition into adulthood. Tamara Sale describes a prevention program designed to help young people with symptoms of psychosis maintain their normal life trajectories. *Data Trends*, a research summary that will be a regular feature in *Focal Point*, outlines methods and findings from a study of the effectiveness of a state-wide transition program in Connecticut. Cinda Johnson shows how three schools in Washington state are working to support the successful transitions of students with serious mental health conditions. Finally, an article by Amy Salazar addresses the particular issues experienced by older youth in the foster care system.

The “new” *Focal Point* continues its commitment to featuring the voices of youth and family members. Two young adults—one who spent time in the foster care system, and another who went off to college—will share their perspectives on becoming an adult and living more independently. And family member Sandra Spencer, Executive Director of the National Federation of Families for Children’s Mental

Health, writes about her struggles and pride as she watches her son become a responsible young man.

When we think about transitions into adulthood, we often focus on independence, but the truth is that people rarely go through significant changes alone. We hope that this inaugural issue of the “new” *Focal Point* highlights the fact that we all need support as we take on new challenges created by transitions—developmental and institutional alike.

REFERENCE

1. Mallory, B. L. (1995). The role of social policy in life-cycle transitions. *Exceptional Children*, 62, 213-226.

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Pathways to Positive Futures RTC: www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu
 RTC on Family Support and Children’s Mental Health: www.rtc.pdx.edu