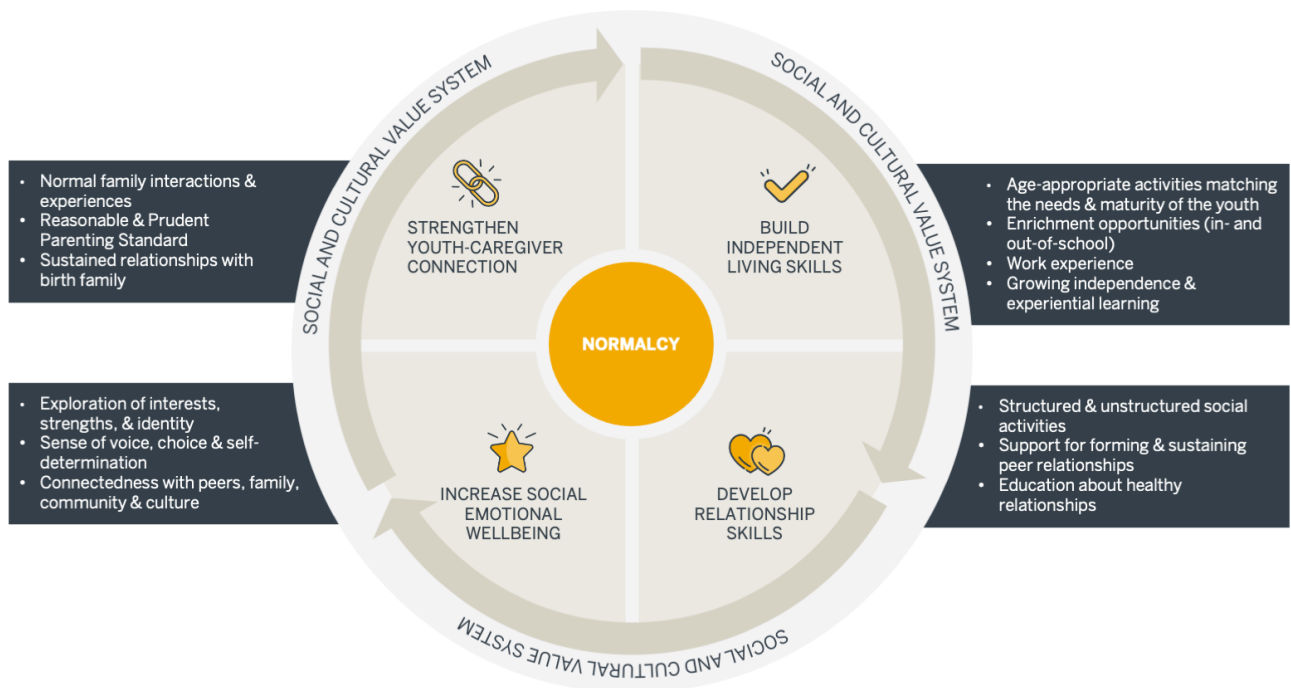


THE CONCEPT OF NORMALCY IN CHILD WELFARE

The Texas Administrative Codeⁱ defines *normalcy* as the ability of a child in care to live as normal a life as possible, which includes having normal interactions and experiences within a foster family and engaging in activities that are suitable for children of the same age, level of maturity, and development. The *Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard*, a critical component for facilitating normalcy, empowers caregivers to allow children to participate in developmentally appropriate activities while considering potential risks, the needs and interests of the child, and the cultural context of typical activities.

Cultivating normal childhood experiences while in foster care is a challenge, yet essential for healthy child and adolescent development,ⁱⁱ especially for older youth in care.ⁱⁱⁱ Implementation requires a shift in the child welfare system from a primary focus on protection to giving youth space for exploration and increasing their sense of voice, choice, and self-determination.^{iv} The Texas Youth Permanency Study (TYPS)^{v,vi,vii} has contributed to evidence that normalcy can (1) strengthen youth-caregiver connections, (2) support growing independence and development of life skills, (3) enable youth to develop age-appropriate peer and romantic relationships, and (4) increase their social emotional wellbeing. Conversely, the absence of normalcy is often associated with distressed or adversarial relationships with caregivers, frustration with the child welfare system, social isolation, risky behaviors, and lack of preparedness for living independently.

Based on findings of the Texas Youth Permanency Study, we developed a *Framework for Normalcy in Child Welfare* that illustrates the practice and benefits of normalcy while developing awareness of social and cultural values that undergird our understanding of what is normal, developmentally expected, and socially appropriate.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Since the *Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act* was signed into law in 2014, multiple toolkits on how to implement the normalcy provisions^{viii} have been published, but there continue to be gaps in practice. The following recommendations are based on the *Framework for Normalcy* developed by the Texas Youth Permanency Study.

- 1.** At the core of normalcy are trusting relationships with caregivers who can provide space for growing independence, exploration, and learning through experience. Foster caregivers need training and guidance on how to implement the Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard; specifically caregivers need support balancing monitoring and supervision with giving a youth space for exploration and self-determination.
 - Provide training on adolescents' emotional, social, sexual, and cognitive development; trauma-informed parenting strategies; and working through expected conflicts and challenges.
 - Examine the impact of dominant social values and expectations, including cultural, racial and class biases on the understanding of normalcy.
- 2.** Youth learn skills for independent living through everyday experiences that include having increasing freedom to make choices, set goals, and practice tasks^{ix}. Rather than teaching skills like managing a bank account or applying for jobs in a classroom setting, youth need to be encouraged to practice these skills in everyday life, supported by caregivers and mentors. Internships and employment provide excellent opportunities for practicing adult tasks.
 - Restructure Preparation for Adult Living to allow for ongoing experiential learning.
 - Ensure that youth reach important milestones before aging out, including obtaining a driver's license, employment/ internship experience, participation in school and community activities, unsupervised outings with peers/ dating partners.
- 3.** Extracurricular enrichment activities, whether at school or in the community, build both skills and connections. Shared interests and experiences deepen relationships among participants^x which is especially important for youth in care who often feel disconnected from peers.
 - Allocate appropriate levels of funding to promote access to technology and extra-curricular activities.
- 4.** Youth look for positive relationship models and support for navigating friendships, romantic relationships, and sexual health.^{xi} They need access to trauma-informed sexual health education, ongoing conversations with trusted adults, and permission to participate in structured and un-structured social activities so they can develop skills for healthy relationships.
 - Provide training for caregivers and child welfare professionals on engaging youth in ongoing conversations about sexual health and relationships and modeling relationship skills.
 - Increase access to trauma-informed sexual health education tailored to the needs of youth in foster care.
- 5.** Normalcy reviews, conducted during permanency review hearings, can be an effective way to engage youth, caregivers, caseworkers, and other adults involved with the youth's legal case and increase accountability.
 - Increase youth participation in court hearings and develop tools for conducting a normalcy review.
 - Prioritize normalcy in case planning and service delivery, and ensure that youth and their caregivers have an understanding of their rights and a voice in planning.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Normalcy as a concept highlights the importance of creating a child welfare environment that is conducive for youths' social and emotional development, however, there is a dearth of studies to evaluate the implementation of normalcy from the perspectives of both youth and caregivers.

The Texas Youth Permanency Study (TYPS) contributed to evidence that normalcy can strengthen youth-caregiver connections, support youth' growing independence and development of life skills, enable youth to develop friendships and explore romantic relationships, and increase their social emotional wellbeing. However, TYPS also demonstrated that not all youth experience normalcy, which they associated with restrictive placement rules, the structure of congregate care settings, and stress and discord with caregivers.

Normalcy is especially important and complex for older youth whose increasing desire for freedom and independence is developmentally expected, but may pose conflicts when caregivers deem behaviors "risky or inappropriate." At its core, the *Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard* is subjective, tied to what caregivers consider to be "normal, typical, safe, or healthy" behaviors and activities of a youth. Therefore, an understanding of what normalcy should look like is inextricably linked to social and cultural value systems. The question is how standards for normalcy do justice to the needs of youth in the child welfare system who are marginalized for their lived experience and identities, including socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability.

Future research should contribute to the development and testing of a practice model to guide the implementation of normalcy. Most importantly, research needs to elicit the perspectives of youth and their caregivers to gain a deeper understanding of how normalcy is currently implemented and whether implementation meets the needs of youth. We propose a research-to-practice translation project in three phases:

PHASE 1: EVALUATION OF CURRENT NORMALCY PRACTICES FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTH AND THEIR CAREGIVERS THROUGH A MIXED METHODS STUDY.

1. How do caregivers and youth understand normalcy? How do their perspectives align or differ?
2. How do caregivers interpret the *Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard*? How do they make decisions? What guidance, training, or tools do they receive or need?
3. To which extent do dominant social values and expectations shape the implementation of normalcy?

PHASE 2: DEVELOPMENT OF A BEST PRACTICE MODEL IN COLLABORATION WITH YOUTH, CAREGIVERS, AND CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS.

1. Normalcy screening tools to assess youth and caregiver perceptions, needs, and desired outcomes.
2. Training and assistance for caregivers, child welfare professionals, judges and other supportive adults on normalcy practices that may include adolescent emotional, social, sexual, and cognitive development; and trauma-informed parenting strategies.
3. Examination of dominant social values and expectations, including cultural, racial and class biases in the implementation of normalcy.

PHASE 3: TESTING AND EVALUATION OF BEST PRACTICE MODEL.

1. Evaluation of normalcy practices based on best practice model.
2. Evaluation of impact on youth outcomes including relationship with caregiver, placement stability, independent living skills, relationship skills, and social emotional wellbeing.

ⁱ Texas Administrative Code, Title 26, Chapter 748.701. (2017). What is “normalcy”?

ⁱⁱ Texas Children’s Commission. (May 2019). Normalcy for Children and Youth in Foster Care – Roundtable Report. Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth, and Families.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2015). What young people need to thrive – Leveraging the Strengthening Families Act to Promote Normalcy. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, Maryland

^{iv} Texas CASA. (September 2021). Normalcy Matters – A Guide to Supporting Children & Youth in Texas Foster Care. Texas CASA and Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth, and Families.

^v Ball, B., Sevilano, L., Faulkner, M., & Belseth, T. (2020). Agency, genuine support, and emotional connection: Experiences that promote relational permanency in foster care. Children and Youth Services Review, 121, 105852

^{vi} Ball, B., Marra, L. Belseth, T., & Faulkner, M. (2021). Feeling connected and empowered. Protective experiences for youth in foster care. Interim Report Texas Youth Permanency Study. Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing. University of Texas at Austin

^{vii} Ball, B., Marra, L. Belseth, T., & Faulkner, M. (2022). Relational Permanency, Normalcy, Competency, and Social Emotional Wellbeing. Final Report Texas Youth Permanency Study. Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing. University of Texas at Austin.

^{viii} The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2016). Toolkit - Advancing SFA Normalcy Provisions. The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

^{ix} Pokempner, J., Mordecai, K., Rosado, L., & Subrahmanyam, D. (2015). Promoting Normalcy for Children in Foster Care. Philadelphia, PA: Juvenile Law Center.

^x Schaefer, D., Simpkins, S. D., Vest, A. E., & Price, C. D. (2011). The contribution of extracurricular activities to adolescent friendships: New insights through social network analysis. Developmental Psychology, 47(4), 1141–1152

^{xi} Dworsky, A., & Courtney, M. E. (2010). The risk of teenage pregnancy among transitioning foster youth: Implications for extending state care beyond age 18. Children and Youth Services Review, 32(10), 1351-1356.

CONTACT FOR FUTURE RESEARCH:

Barbara Ball, PhD, Research Scientist, barbara.ball@austin.utexas.edu

CONTACT FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS:

Tymothy Belseth, Senior Research Coordinator, tymothy.belseth@austin.utexas.edu