



Photo courtesy of Camp to Belong  
Brothers enjoy time together at Camp to Belong.



Photo courtesy of Glamour Gowns  
Volunteers custom tailor two young persons' suits.



Photo courtesy of Glamour Gowns  
A young woman trying on formal gown.



Photo courtesy of Glamour Gowns  
A young woman posing in her new formal gown.



Photo courtesy of Treehouse  
In one of Treehouse's programs, renowned artist Barbara Earl Thomas mentors youth.

# ACHIEVING NORMALCY

## THESE PROGRAMS CAN HELP

**By Sara Tiano**

We think all the time about the major traumas that impact the youth in our care — their removal from families, the abuse and neglect they may have experienced, and the uncertainty and cyclical upheavals that too often dominate their lives.

But other, smaller symptoms of life in the system can have a huge effect on the happiness, quality of life and future trajectory of youth living in foster care. Things like having to skip out on sleepovers and school field

trips, not being able to get their driver's license, take certain classes or sometimes even cut their hair without permission.

"Far too often, social activities and non-familial relationships are left out of the discussion when considering a foster child's well-being," former foster youth Lexie Gruber wrote in 2014 for our sister publication *The Chronicle of Social Change*. "Amidst placement instability and emerging crises, a part-time job or outings with friends may seem trite. But their impact is much more powerful than believed."

Across the country, a number of community organizations and child welfare agencies are developing programs and policies designed to support foster parents in their efforts to promote normalcy for youth in their care.

### **Dream Dances**

Programs that help youth attend prom and other school dances have unsurprisingly cropped up in many cities and towns. Prom, after all, is among the most quintessential adolescent experiences — and often one of the priciest.

In Los Angeles, the Glamour Gowns and Suit Up event pairs foster youth with a volunteer "personal shopper" who helps them choose their dream outfit from a selection of donated evening wear, and seamstresses tailor each outfit to the perfect fit. Make up and hair artists offer tips and demonstrations for completing the look.

"Foster parents usually don't have the means to give girls all of this," said Sandi Romero-Boada, chair of the Glamour Gowns Committee in a CASA blog. "But it's about more than just

getting a dress. These girls feel like they're someone special. They feel like a princess for a day."

Similar programs exist across the country, like Priceless Prom in Arizona and Project 150's Prom Closet in Las Vegas. Some even go beyond providing the outfit and also hand out donated gift cards to restaurants, florists and limo services to help teens complete the prom night of their dreams.

### **Outings and Extracurriculars**

In Washington, a nonprofit called Treehouse has made it their mission to "give kids a childhood." They provide funding to help promote normalcy by funding extracurricular and community activities.

Started by a group of social workers "who grew tired of seeing the deprivation often faced by children in foster care," Treehouse is able to help foster families pay for various school costs like extra fees for lab-based science classes, sports teams, instrument rentals, school photos and yearbooks. They'll also cover things like fines for losing library books or damaging text books, understanding that foster youth are dealing with a lot and caring for school property may not always be at top of mind.

They also help youth pay for trips through their school or church and provide tickets to community events and local attractions like the ballet or professional sports games so that foster youth don't have to miss out on making memories with their friends or going on dates because of financial constraints.

"Middle class families take advantage of community-based enrichment for

their children as ways for them to have fun, to have structured activities, to learn things, to pursue passions," said Janis Avery, Treehouse's CEO. "Foster parent reimbursements could never pay for these kinds of enhancements."

Treehouse avoids strict limits and categories on their programming to allow the youth's interest to drive the investment so they can explore the opportunities the world holds for them. For example, years ago they purchased a camera for a 12-year-old girl in care — her first camera. Now, she's a famous photographer.

"It was a very inexpensive camera we bought her but it allowed her to follow her dreams," said Trent Freeman, an associate director at Treehouse.

### **Happy Campers**

Happy Trails in California and Camp Xavier in Los Angeles, among others, offer summer camp experiences to foster youth at no cost, offering a week full of classic camp activities like hiking, canoeing, campfire gatherings and talent shows.

"By taking part in camp activities with other children in foster care, our campers can escape the stress and loneliness of their circumstances, and can focus on being kids," the Happy Trails site reads.

Royal Family KIDS has developed a network of hundreds of camps across the nation that are each created and managed by a group of volunteers from an established church. Though they are run through Christian churches, they are open to foster youth of any or no faith.

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Camp Connect in San Diego and Camp To Belong with 12 locations nationwide both amp up the camp experience by reuniting siblings who have been separated via foster care. According to Camp To Belong, around 70 percent of kids in out-of-home care are separated from their siblings.

"This is the one week a year that I get to live with my siblings, this is our week and makes up for the entire year of not being together," reads one testimonial from a Camp To Belong camper named Joshua.

### Skills Building

For older youth, the idea of normalcy includes learning adult skills like cooking, driving and managing their own finances. More than just helping youth feel like a regular teen, this has an important impact on their trajectory.

"Practicing adult skills creates positive stress, which is the kind of stress through which young people learn how to manage and regulate their emotions as well as develop social, behavioral and cognitive coping resources," according to a 2015 report on promoting normalcy from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Between the red tape of protective custody and foster parents who don't always have the time or resources to teach this skill, the challenge of learning to drive and obtaining licenses has long been a common issue for foster youth.

Through their Driver's Assistance program, Treehouse provides funding and support for foster youth in attending driver's education courses, obtaining their license and paying for auto insurance through age 21.

Some child welfare agencies, like New Jersey's Division of Child

Protection and Permanency, use "flex funds" to cover the costs associated with obtaining a license, sometimes including the cost of driver training courses.

The need for normalcy for foster youth is well known, and these programs are just a small sampling of such offerings across the country. Chances are, you've got something similar in your town or state. Now that you know about the different kind of opportunities that might exist, a conversation with your local CASA network, child welfare agency or a quick Google search can point you in the right direction. •

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