



# Developing a Learning Agenda to Address the Needs of Young Parents in Care

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**For adolescents, becoming a parent presents both challenges and opportunities. Young parents must navigate both the normative developmental tasks of adolescence and adult responsibilities of caring for a child. At the same time, becoming a parent can also be a transformative experience, motivating adolescents to refocus their priorities, complete their education, and build a better future for themselves and their children.**

Access to services and supports is essential for adolescent parents to be successful and their young families to thrive. This is no less true for parenting young people in foster care (hereafter referred to as “in care”). Yet child welfare systems are not typically structured to provide those young people and their children the services and supports they need. For example, caseworkers and foster parents are generally not trained to work with adolescents who are parents, placement options for parenting young people and their children are often limited, and data on parenting young people and/or their children may not be collected. This brief describes the initial stages of developing a learning agenda focused on the needs of parenting young people in care and lessons learned through the process.

## Why Focus on Parenting Young People in Care?

Focusing on parenting young people in care is important for two reasons. First, they are just like other parents in that they love their children and want to do what’s best for them. However, they are different

from other young parents in that they must navigate both the transition to adulthood and parenthood while under the supervision of a system that was not designed to support them in their parenting role.

Second, until 2010, when the extended federal foster care provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act took effect, the number of parenting young people in care was relatively small in most states. This reflects the fact that the majority of young people in care who become parents do not give birth to or father a child until they are at least 18-years-old. Now that more than half of states have extended federally funded foster care to age 21 and other states have established state-funded extended foster care programs, many more parenting young people are in care today than in the past. Consequently, it is more important than ever for child welfare systems to be able to provide these young parents with the services and supports they need.

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## BOX 1

### **Planning a Next Generation Evaluation Agenda for the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood**

All young people need supports to navigate the transition to adulthood. Young people in care are no exception. In fact, research suggests that the transition to adulthood may be especially challenging for this population.<sup>a</sup>

Over the past three decades, federal child welfare policy has significantly increased the availability of supports for young people transitioning out of care and into adulthood. In 1999, the Foster Care Independence Act amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to create the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (the Chafee Program), the primary source of federal funding for services to support young people in care during their transition to adulthood. The Family First Prevention Services Act renamed the program in 2018; it is now the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood.

The Foster Care Independence Act requires that a small percentage of Chafee Program funding be used to rigorously evaluate independent living programs that are “innovative or of potential national significance.” In 2003, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) contracted the Urban Institute and its partners, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and the National Opinion Research Center, to conduct the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs. Of the four programs evaluated using a randomized controlled design, only one had a statistically significant effect on youth outcomes.

Two decades after the Chafee Program was created, we still know little about which programs for young people transitioning out of care are effective and which program components are essential to their effectiveness. To continue building an evidence base for programs that serve young people transitioning out of care and into adulthood, ACF contracted the Urban Institute and its partner Chapin Hall to carry out formative evaluation activities that could lead to future rigorous evaluations and to develop learning agendas on several topics.

<sup>a</sup>Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Gretchen Ruth Cusick, Judy Havlicek, Alfred Perez, and Tom Keller, *Midwest Evaluation of The Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21* (Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2007), <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Midwest-Eval-Outcomes-at-Age-21.pdf>; Mark E. Courtney, Nathanael J. Okpych, Keunhye Park, Justin Harty, Huiling Feng, Adrianna Torres-García, and Samiya Sayed, *Findings From The California Youth Transitions To Adulthood Study (Cal youth): Conditions Of Youth At Age 21* (Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2018), <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/cal-youth-wave3/>.

# Developing a Learning Agenda Around the Needs of Parenting Young People in Care

Despite a growing literature on young parents in care, many gaps remain in our knowledge about how best to address their needs. Developing a learning agenda is one way to prioritize the gaps that future research and evaluation activities could begin to fill. A learning agenda is a strategic approach to building an evidence base around a topic that can inform decisionmaking (Till and Zaid 2019). It typically includes (1) a set of questions that address critical gaps in knowledge and (2) plans for activities designed to help answer those questions.<sup>1</sup> Learning agendas incorporate feedback loops; new evidence is gathered and used to refine the questions of interest. This ensures that learning is a continual and evolving process. This brief focuses primarily on developing a set of questions that can be answered by future research and evaluation.

## Methodology

We conducted an environmental scan to identify programs operated by nonprofit organizations around the country that serve parenting young people in care. Twelve programs were identified and six responded to requests to participate in an interview. We also sent interview requests to administrators from 14 state and county public child welfare agencies in states that extend federally funded foster care to age 21. Ten agreed to participate.

We used what we heard from our interview participants to develop a preliminary conceptual framework and an agenda for a virtual convening held in March 2021. The convening was attended by research team members, federal project officers, other federal agency staff, officials from nine of the state and county child welfare agencies that participated in the interviews, representatives from the six participating programs, and six young adult consultants who had experience parenting while in care.

As part of the convening, we presented the draft framework to participants and led small group discussions about various topics identified as important by interview participants. We then revised the framework based on the feedback provided (table 1). The rich discussions confirmed what we had heard during the interviews and enhanced our understanding of the topics. They also raised additional issues that our interviews had not surfaced.

We began our work with the goal of developing a learning agenda around the needs of both young parents in care and young people in care who are expecting a child. However, nearly everything we heard during both the interviews and convening was about young parents. Very little was said about services or supports for expecting young people in care. Consequently, the learning agenda we developed focuses exclusively on young people in care who are parenting. Understanding the needs of expecting young people in care and how those needs are being addressed could be the focus of a future learning agenda.

See the appendix for additional details about the methodology.

# Learning Agenda Questions about Parenting Young People in Care

The convening provided an opportunity for experts, stakeholders, and young adults with lived experience to share and learn from one another. Particularly valuable for attendees was the space it created for the young adults to talk about their experiences as parents who had been in care and about their needs.

Based on the discussions that took place during the convening, we have identified six topics around which to focus a learning agenda. For each topic, we briefly summarize what we heard from the convening participants and propose a set of questions for future research to address. These learning agenda topics are not intended to be exhaustive of all the issues related to parenting young people in care that merit additional attention. Rather, they represent some of the most pressing topics on the minds of the experts, stakeholders, and young adults with lived experience who participated in the convening.

## Young Fathers in Care

Like most fathers, young fathers in care want to be part of their children's lives and help provide for them financially. However, young fathers in care generally do not have custody of their children. Consequently, the child welfare system has traditionally been much less supportive of young fathers than of young mothers in care. Services for noncustodial fathers are often not available and they are frequently placed far from where their children live. For those who are custodial parents, placements for fathers and their children are difficult to find. Ironically, the child welfare system's failure to provide young fathers in care with the support they need may contribute to the (mis)perception that they are difficult to engage in services and disconnected from their children.

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*Being a young father...I wasn't ready, I was scared, I was lost, I was confused and angry...how do I be a father...if you don't have a figure to show you the characteristics where do you get them from, where do I go from here...I knew I needed my father in order to know what to do and what not to do.*

*—Young father with lived experience*

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**Supporting young fathers in care will require a better understanding of their experiences and needs.**

Key questions for future research to address include the following:

- What does being a father mean to young fathers in care, and on what is their understanding based?
- What approaches to educating young fathers in care about fatherhood work best, and who should provide that education?

- What services and resources do young fathers (including noncustodial fathers) in care most need?
- What services and resources are currently available to young fathers (including noncustodial fathers) in care, and how does the availability of those services and resources vary across jurisdictions?
- What are the barriers to engaging young fathers (including noncustodial fathers) in services, and what engagement strategies work best?
- How involved are young fathers in care in the lives of their children, and what are the barriers to young fathers becoming more involved?

## Specialized Training for Caseworkers and Foster Parents

In most jurisdictions, caseworkers have children and young people of all ages and with varying needs on their caseload. Consequently, parenting young people are typically assigned to caseworkers who have not been specially trained to address their unique needs and who face other competing priorities (i.e., addressing the needs of young children). Specialization is generally feasible only in counties with a large foster care population, and hence, a “critical mass” of parenting young people in care. Similarly, relatively few foster parents have been trained to care for young people who are parenting. As a result, foster parents don’t know how to provide young people with the support they need in their role as parents while also supporting their development as adolescents and young adults. This may explain why some parenting young people feel that their foster parents are trying to take control of their child’s care rather than providing them with the guidance and support they need. Lack of specialized training for caseworkers and foster parents may also contribute to the sense among some expecting young people in care that they are being judged, and especially by foster parents with whom they were living when they became pregnant.

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*There is a lack of understanding of the developmental needs of expectant and parenting youth in foster care...Understanding that where they are in development, risk-taking is normal and will happen...Understanding that helps me understand where your behavior is coming from. Instead of calling in a report, how do I best support you in your transition to adulthood? Helping youth support the development of their child.*

*—Other stakeholder*

*You can have a mixed caseload. Infant, five-year-old, seven-year-old, twenty-year-old. When you have such a huge gamut, and then now a pregnant person, they don’t know what to do.*

*—Child welfare agency administrator*

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**Specialized training could help caseworkers and foster parents support parenting young people in care, but additional information is needed about what the content and format of that training should be.**

Key questions for future research to address include the following:

- What training is currently available to caseworkers and foster parents who work with parenting young people, and what evidence exists that this training is effective?
- What supports do parenting young people in care need from their caseworkers and foster parents?
- How should specialized training on supporting parenting young people in care be delivered to caseworkers and foster parents?

## Child Care

Finding high-quality, affordable child care that meets their needs is difficult for many parents. It is even more challenging for parenting young people in care who require child care to work or go to school. Some young parents in care are eligible for child care assistance, but navigating the application process can be difficult and the cost of child care can exceed the amount of financial assistance young parents receive. Others are not eligible for child care assistance because they earn too much (despite working at jobs paid low wages) or because they are not working or in school enough hours to qualify. Some young parents in care prefer to leave their child in the care of an unlicensed but trusted friend or family member; others have little choice but to rely on family or friends because they work nontraditional hours. However, young parents whose children are cared for by an unlicensed provider may be ineligible for child care assistance. Moreover, depending on the state in which they live, young parents in care may not be eligible for subsidies (regardless of whether they are working or in school) unless their child also has an open child welfare case. Finally, some states require young people who are age 18 or older to be working or going to school to remain in care. In those states, parenting young people may become ineligible for extended care without the child care assistance they need to work or go to school.

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*My clinician and everyone at my group home didn't know any other options for child care. Even though I had my case manager she didn't know either. Who do I go to? Who are my resources at this time being pregnant?*

*—Young mother with lived experience*

*The system can be really difficult to navigate...[Young parents] will submit applications and then those applications will get kicked out of the system or closed because of one little error...We have young people who have been waiting to get child care for several months...Only certain providers who are approved. Limits your choices. That's one of the big things we have been trying to deal*

*with—the time frame. Just not an efficient system especially when our girls and our parents are trying to work and go to school.*

*—Program administrator*

*Child care need is a root issue. All the domains we were discussing (education, work, and income)—all of that can only occur if our young people have adequate child care.*

*—Program administrator*

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**Little attention has been paid to how the child welfare system can help young parents in care address their child care needs.** Key questions for future research to address include the following:

- How do young parents in care typically search for child care?
- What supports are currently available to help young parents in care find child care, and what additional supports do they need?
- How do young parents in care decide who should care for their children, and what information do they need to make that decision?
- What types of child care do young parents in care prefer and why?
- What is currently being done to help young parents in care pay for child care, and what additional help could be provided?
- How do policies regarding eligibility for child care assistance and other benefits for young parents in care vary across states?
- What are the barriers to accessing child care assistance faced by young parents, and what help do they need navigating the process?

## **Heightened Fear**

An important theme that emerged from the convening across conversations was the notion of heightened fear. Parenting is not easy or intuitive. It is normal for parents of any age to make mistakes and learn through trial and error. Young parents in care have experienced removal from their families of origin. Further, young parents in care are almost always under the watchful eyes of foster parents, caseworkers, group care staff, and other child welfare professionals. Because their parenting behaviors are constantly surveilled, young parents in care fear being reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) and having their children removed for even minor missteps. They are also afraid of being perceived as unable to care for their children if they ask for or show signs of needing help. This heightened fear may explain why some young men in care choose not to reveal that they are fathers. From their perspective, disclosing that they have children would only lead to additional scrutiny and to their children becoming “system-involved.”

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*It's a fishbowl effect, with all kinds of people scrutinizing everything they do. Reports and investigations. One of the contributing factors to the ongoing generational child welfare involvement.*

*—Other stakeholder*

*Sometimes they put unreasonable expectations. Like you wouldn't ask that of anyone else, but you put a lot of unreasonable expectations on young mothers. No one has to be 100 percent perfect. I was like oh my god what's going on, are they trying to take my son....it made me feel like I didn't have any control and they were going to take my child away.*

*—Young mother with lived experience*

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**The surveillance of young parents in care can, ironically, prevent them from accessing the supports they need to care for their children.** Key questions for future research to address include the following:

- How are young parents in care surveilled by the child welfare system?
- What supports (e.g., home visiting or other parenting programs) are available to young parents in care, and how could they be connected to those supports before CPS becomes involved?
- What would help build trust and understanding between young parents in care and their caseworkers?
- What can be done to encourage young parents in care to reach out for help without fear of being reported to CPS?

## **Mental Health**

Becoming a parent is a life-changing event, and it is normal for new parents to experience a range of emotions. Postpartum depression is common among new mothers, and caring for an infant can leave new mothers feeling isolated or overwhelmed. Young mothers in care are no exception, especially because they often lack a natural support system. Even when they need help dealing with their emotions, young mothers in care may be reluctant to seek out services for fear of being stigmatized or deemed incapable of caring for their children—and potentially having their children removed. Some young parents in care do struggle with unresolved trauma related to the maltreatment they experienced as children, family separation, placement instability, preexisting mental health and/or substance use disorders, or intimate partner violence. This unresolved trauma may adversely affect their ability parent. Additionally, young parents in care who have been involuntarily separated from their child may also need help coping with the trauma of that separation.



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*With myself, I did experience a little postpartum depression after I had my son. It was just out of nowhere I felt like I was just a failure and that I didn't deserve my precious baby boy and that I felt hopeless. I feel like I didn't have anyone to talk to that would understand because I was in the foster home of someone who hadn't had kids before. I felt like I couldn't talk to anyone.*

*–Young mother with lived experience*

*I want to hear more about the idea of how our past trauma has affected our ability to parent. And so that can sometimes be a barrier in learning to parent...Part of me knows this is normal and just part of my lived experiences. But sometimes it does get in the way of me being able to effectively parent. So I think that we need to address more, especially around mental health.*

*–Young mother with lived experience*

*If they need to reach out because they need mental health services, they are put under a microscope. You were in care so what are you doing that you aren't being a good parent. A lot of times they don't even seek services...don't want to take the chance of losing children in the first place.*

*–Young mother with lived experience*

*Some young people do not trust and do not want to engage. That makes it very hard when you know you're dealing with someone with other mental health conditions, not just postpartum depression. Already coming into motherhood with preexisting mental health issues.*

*–Child welfare agency administrator*

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**Significant gaps remain in our knowledge about how best to meet the need for mental health care services among young parents in care.** Key questions for future research to address include the following:

- How prevalent are mental health care service needs among young parents in care?
- What mental health supports are currently available to young parents in care?
- What mental health supports do young parents in care think they need?
- What role could peer support play in addressing the feelings of isolation that some young parents in care experience?

- What are the barriers to seeking help among young parents in care?
- What policy or practice changes are needed to address those barriers?
- What strategies could be used to encourage young parents in care to seek out mental health care services when they need them?

## Equity and Inclusion

Services should be available to parenting young people in care regardless of their age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or geographic location. However, some parenting young people felt that they have less access to the services they need than others. Additionally, some service providers—particularly those with religious affiliations—may be perceived as not inclusive of all parenting young people in their practice.

Inclusion is also an issue for parenting young people who want their voices to be heard when decisions are made that affect their lives and the lives of their children. Yet they are frequently excluded from the decisionmaking process (e.g., court hearings are held while they are working or in school; policies are formulated and programs are developed without their input). Despite their age, young parents in care are the experts when it comes to their experiences and needs.

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*I want to reinforce [an] idea around equity...how do we help jurisdictions think about targeted supports to even more segments of a segmented population? You have EPY but you're talking about black and brown kids of color. How do you apply targeted universalism to raise outcomes for an entire population? What does that look like?*

*—Other stakeholder*

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**Parenting young people in care should have equitable access to services and be active participants in shaping their lives and the lives of their children.** Key questions for future research to address include the following:

- How equitable is access to services for parenting young people in care, and what could be done to make access more equitable?
- How inclusive are services for parenting young people in care, and what could be done to make services more inclusive?
- How can parenting young people be more meaningfully involved when decisions are made that affect their lives and the lives of their children?

- What opportunities could parenting young people be given to ensure their voices and perspectives are included in their own child welfare case and/or in discussions about how the system treats young people more broadly?
- How can technology be leveraged to facilitate participating in decisionmaking by parenting young people?

## Conceptual Framework for Addressing the Needs of Parenting Young People in Care

In addition to use in organizing the convening discussions, the information gathered through these interviews was summarized and used to develop a preliminary conceptual framework for addressing the needs of parenting young people in care. The framework included the needs identified by interview participants, which we grouped into four domains (housing, health and well-being, parenting, and human capital and life skills), strategies that are currently being used or that could be used to address domain-specific needs, and systemic changes to address needs across domains. Some of the domain-specific needs are for services for which pregnant and parenting young people in care are categorically eligible under the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018. The framework was revised based on feedback we received from convening participants (table 1). Given the iterative nature of a learning agenda, answers to some of the research questions posed above may lead to revisions of the framework.

TABLE 1

Conceptual Framework for Addressing the Needs of Parenting Young People in Care

Domain	Youth needs	Strategies to address domain-specific needs	Systemic changes to address needs across domains
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Placement options for young people with children</li> <li>Post-discharge housing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster parents with specialized training to care for young parents and their children</li> <li>Safe and affordable housing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed services that are responsive to the needs of young people of color, those who identify as LGBTQ+, those with disabilities, and other historically marginalized young people</li> <li>Services available to young people regardless of where they live</li> <li>Funding for parenting youth-specific programming and supports</li> <li>Data system for tracking parenting young people in care and their receipt of service</li> <li>Caseworkers trained to work with parenting young people in care</li> <li>Nonjudgmental service providers</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Context</b></p> <p>Parenting young people must navigate the transition to adulthood and parenthood simultaneously while under surveillance by a child welfare system that has not always been responsive to the needs of young people from historically marginalized groups including young people of color, those who identify as LGBTQ+, and those with disabilities.</p>
Health and well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mental health services</li> <li>Reproductive/sexual health care</li> <li>Social supports</li> <li>Healthy relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to trauma-informed mental health services</li> <li>Access to reproductive and sexual health services</li> <li>Opportunities to connect with supportive peers and adults</li> </ul>	
Parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parenting/coparenting education and supports</li> <li>Noncustodial parent engagement</li> <li>Understanding parent rights and responsibilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to home visiting services and other parenting education</li> <li>Services for noncustodial parents</li> <li>Supports for young fathers</li> <li>Legal services or resources around parents' rights</li> </ul>	
Human capital and skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Secondary and postsecondary education</li> <li>Employment</li> <li>Child care and child care assistance</li> <li>Life skills</li> <li>Financial resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education and employment opportunities that allow young parents to balance school or work and parenting responsibilities</li> <li>Help to find and pay for high-quality child care that meets the needs of young parents</li> <li>Life skills training</li> <li>Help to enroll in public assistance programs (e.g., TANF, WIC, SNAP, child care subsidies)</li> </ul>	

Source: Interviews with federal project officers, other federal agency staff, state and county child welfare agency officials, program staff, and young adults with lived experience.

## Appendix. Methodology

A team of researchers from the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall conducted an environmental scan to identify programs operated by nonprofit organizations around the country that serve expecting and parenting young people in care. A total of 12 programs were identified. Team members sent emails to program administrators inviting them to participate in a telephone interview. Representatives from 6 of the 12 programs responded and agreed to participate: Teen Parent Connection (Georgia), Moms Plus (Illinois), Teen Parenting Services Network (Illinois), Inwood House (New York), Personal Best (New York), and Palmetto Place (South Carolina). The interview included questions about the young people their programs serve, the services they offer, their funding sources, the data they collect, the successes they have experienced serving these young people, and the challenges they have faced.

Team members also used data collected as part of a project led by the Center for the Study of Social Policy and funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation to compile a list of state and county child welfare agencies in states with federally funded extended foster care that varied with respect to whether they (1) collected data needed to identify and serve expecting and parenting young people in care and whether they (2) collected data on expecting and parenting young people in care. The resulting list included 14 state and county public child welfare agencies.

For each agency, team members identified the person or people best positioned to talk about parenting young people in care and invited them to participate in a telephone interview. Officials from ten state or county public child welfare agencies were interviewed: the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, the Hawaii Department of Human Services, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, the Indiana Department of Child Services, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, the New York City Administration for Children's Services, the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, the Tennessee Department of Children's Services, the Washington, DC, Child and Family Services Agency, and the Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families.

The interview questions asked about their expecting and parenting youth population, the services and placement options available to those young people, their funding sources, the data they collect, the successes they have experienced serving this population, and the challenges they face.

The information gathered through these interviews was summarized and used to develop an agenda for a virtual convening held in March 2021. That convening was attended by research team members, federal project officers, other federal agency staff, officials from nine of the state and county child welfare agencies that participated in the interviews, representatives from the six participating programs, and six young adults with lived experience parenting while in care. Four of the young adult consultants were Jim Casey Young Fellows recruited by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and two were from one of the programs represented in our interview sample.

During the first part of the convening, research team members presented a draft conceptual framework that was developed based on the information gathered through the interviews and elicited

feedback from convening participants. During the second part of the convening, participants engaged in a series of small group sessions on topics related to parenting young people in care that surfaced during the interviews as being especially important. These topics included child care, young fathers, parent mental health, youth voices, specialized training for caseworkers and foster parents, and financial supports. The convening generated a rich discussion that confirmed what we had heard during the phone interviews, enhanced our understanding of the topics, and raised additional issues that had not previously emerged.

Nearly everything we heard during both the interviews and convening was about the needs of young parents in care; very little was said about young people in care who are expecting a child. Hence, the learning agenda we developed focuses exclusively on young parents. Understanding the needs of expecting young people in care and how those needs are being addressed could be the focus of a future learning agenda.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Monalisa Salib, “Establishing a Learning Agenda and Learning Agenda Template,” USAID Learning Lab, 2017, [https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/establishing\\_a\\_learning\\_agenda\\_guidance\\_and\\_template\\_201702.pdf](https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/establishing_a_learning_agenda_guidance_and_template_201702.pdf).

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