The Peace4Kids Approach:

An anthropological discovery of the shared foster care experience and its cultural value.

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Introduction

Over the last 19 years, Peace4Kids has built a community in which youth in foster care discover that they have a shared cultural experience with others who have survived similar traumas. Historically, programs for youth in care were designed to be immediate, short-term interventions with the hope that they will change the outcome of children for a lifetime.

Quick change is not the goal at Peace4Kids. When you visit Peace4Kids, you step into long-term change in action. We do not believe you can raise a child in a few weeks or a month. There's no quick-fix idea here. We are more interested in providing a continuum of care in which youth discover that they are very connected and capable of successfully pursuing their life's goals.

Peace4Kids is a grassroots, non-profit organization in South Los Angeles that provides programs and services for youth in foster care starting at age 4, and continuing with foster care alumni until the age of 24. Through a weekly activity-based program co-located at a Boys and Girls Club, Peace4Kids creates "community as family" for youth in foster care by surrounding them with trained, caring adult volunteers who provide consistency in their lives.

Youth in foster care have experienced trauma, the likes of which are difficult to imagine. Research indicates that such trauma in early childhood affects brain development and hinders executive function.[1] We see this manifest in Peace4Kids youth as high levels of anxiety, outbursts, and extreme behaviors. A lack of impulse control combined with an insecure or disorganized attachment with adults and peers[2] and a lack of opportunity to make self-determining decisions can result in feeling powerless[3] and without a voice.[4]

So, what do we specifically do at Peace4Kids to successfully help youth in foster care beat the odds and become active and engaged members of society? **The answer is simple … we create a safe space for them to be heard**.

Peace4Kids is more than just a Saturday program. The lessons learned within the community generalize to other environments such as school and home. Because the staff and volunteers at Peace4Kids have actively observed and supported the cultural dynamics of youth in foster care, the lessons we have learned from the youth has influenced our theory of change and promises to help other youth-serving organizations and systems.

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[1] Carrion & Wong, 2012

[2] Ponciano, 2010

[3] Deci &: Ryan, 2000

[4] Ponciano, 2013

Belonging to the Community

Creating this "community as family" model, where youth in care feel safe, are engaged, and develop a sense of ownership for their behavior, starts with consistent routines, rules, and expectations that are openly shared by every youth, volunteer, and staff person. This community becomes a home and represents the unconditional love and sense of belonging found within a traditional family that has been missing from their lives.

We have applied the construct of group attachment[5] in a groundbreaking way to create an authentic environment for youth who have difficulties with trust. The adults (volunteers and staff) at Peace4Kids anchor this environment through a measured and consistent approach. All adults are trained in methods for using familiar language, routines, youth-centered conflict resolution, and trauma-informed practice. These methods ensure that adults do not dictate the youth interactions at Peace4Kids. Instead, youth feel a strong sense of ownership and are encouraged to exercise choice and personal responsibility to gain a sense of understanding of their interests and capability in critical thinking. This helps initiate the desire in youth to belong to a group, which is ingrained in every human being. The youth are encouraged to connect and form a strong attachment with the group as a whole, rather than with a single adult. In doing so, Peace4Kids youth deeply engage in group activity-based programs discovering that they are not alone in experiencing the hardship of foster care through their interactions with peers who have common histories.

The mission of "community as family" is one that emanates directly from the youth themselves. The consistency and choice that Peace4Kids provides to youth lacking in many of their lives. We know that youth in care move an average of two times annually, making it difficult to maintain consistency. As their home and school environments frequently change, they must adapt to survive. The knowledge that everything is likely to change (again) is the only consistent factor on which they can rely. Our model is longitudinal and requires a commitment – and choice – on the part of our youth. Recognizing that youth in care are often rarely given the opportunity to make decisions on their own, everything at Peace4Kids is choice-based. The fact that youth in foster care must self-select to not only attend but to actively participate in programs, strengthens their engagement, and validates our direction.

A Case Study

Equity, for populations of society that are traditionally under-represented and marginalized, can be achieved when you base your services and decisions on the idea of a moral equality that treats all people fairly.[6] For youth in foster care, an equitable approach to service is essential. Through listening to their needs and experiences, Peace4Kids has been able to consistently create relevant interventions that honor the foster care experience and youth voice through a strength-based lens.

Our Mobile Village Kitchen (MVK) is a prime example. Launched in November 2015, the MVK is an industrial, first-class kitchen – custom-built as a mobile learning environment. On the surface, the MVK represents an opportunity for youth in foster care to discover important nutrition and food preparation skills. But the MVK is more than that. The MVK is the culmination of a youth-led effort to redress food equity in Los Angeles and to collect narratives around the foster care journey in these communities.

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[5] Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999
[6] Jones, 2009

Peace4Kids youth expressed that they needed a creative a solution to their missing food legacy. Unlike most children, foster youth do not have a traditional identity around food and the generational experience family provides at the dinner table. They recognized that food is a great equalizer as everyone must eat. Through creating their own food legacy, their hope was to share their experience with the greater community. They fulfilled this desire by building a state-of-the-art kitchen, which serves as a, deeply connective environment designed to improve health outcomes through addressing food inequity trends in South LA. This epitomizes our theory of change in action. Our youth discovered a common thread that they weaved together into a physical representation of their stories, hopes, and cultural identity. To be clear, the physical construction of the Mobile Village Kitchen was designed with an architect to articulate specific assets that youth in foster care believe they possess:

1. **Side Walls Open / Close –** Youth in foster care believe they have a unique ability to perceive and empathize with others so they can choose who to "open" up to or stay "closed" off to protect themselves.
2. **Kitchen Space Adapts –** The kitchen can be a classroom, a performance stage, or food truck. This adaptability represents a key strength youth in care believe is essential to their success
3. **Trailer is Mobile –** Youth in foster care view their high mobility as an asset.

Youth in foster care are not the only highly mobile children in our midst. Children in military families and in migrant families also experience frequent change as well as other emotionally challenging factors. Yet, children raised in foster care feel inherently stigmatized by society. They avoid identification as a foster child and wall themselves off from the possibilities of finding their cultural group.

Individual elements of Peace4Kids programs and services, along with the youth themselves, collectively serve to form an incubator for our ongoing learning and evolution about how to support youth in foster care. Each week and each interaction, year after year, reveals what we have discovered as a "culture of foster care" – with strengths and assets that are common across all youth.

Fostering Culture

As part of our programmatic model, we work with youth to find a vehicle through which they share and claim their personal story (e.g. poetry, music, writing, art, etc.), thus our youth shift from feeling like the "victim" to the "victor" as they gain a sense of ownership of their life's journey.[7] These narratives become the impetus for youth in care to discover their strengths and abandon the idea that they have permanent deficits. Furthermore, as youth hear each other's stories of resilience they recognize that they belong to a greater community of youth with a specific set of assets that have resulted from their shared experience. These foster care experiences are analogous to superheroes who have long hidden their abilities to appear normal. Yet, in time, they discover that they must accept their forbidden identity and master their talents in order to survive and contribute to society. Our youth have written and produced documentaries, directed music videos, organized awareness events, shared their spoken word poetry, conducted research and inspired political reform because of these discoveries.

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[7] Gayle, Ponciano, & White, 2014

*"Peace4Kids taught me that my story had value… the experiences that I endured
weren't sob stories but beacons of light in the stormy seas of life that could guide
others, just like me, to shore."*

Learning with Others

Through consistent interactions with volunteers and staff, and each other, youth find creative outlets to express their discoveries, and begin asking important questions about their identity and experience:

- Why are there so many of us who live through these traumas?
- What is being done to address the issues that impact all our lives?
- Who do we hold accountable for our collective experiences?
- How can we actively engage in improving the outcomes for future foster care generations and become agents of change?
- How can we use our collective foster care history to recognize cultural trends that can improve our personal growth?

This ongoing "learning" has evolved into more formal research and publication activities. With mixed methodology research designs grounded in community-based research values, we have discovered that resiliency is a key trait of youth in foster care.[8] Peace4Kids leverages that core strength by initiating learning-based activities and workshops to activate resiliency and rise above their challenges. This resiliency is deepened through the relationships formed in the community. Using trauma-informed practice, volunteers support youth in discovering that they are "capable" and have the skills and abilities to manage the challenges they will face in their life. The change we promote is seeing our youth become sustainably self-sufficient, socio-emotionally sound, and leaders for future generations to follow.

Because youth in foster care have higher rates of teen and young adult pregnancy their generational cycles are more truncated than other populations.[9] Peace4Kids has embraced this reality as an opportunity to expand the definition of multigenerational engagement. The benefit of serving the foster care community for 19+ years is that we have evolved our service delivery model to include Peace4Kids graduates and foster care alumni. Leaders ranging in age from 18 – 60 years return to actively engage, mentor and steward younger generations. With the support of staff and volunteers, former foster youth who have been in the system build connections with Peace4Kids youth to relate their shared foster care experience. The specific developmental needs of youth in foster care require a different and more nuanced interaction between themselves and other generations (as they define them). Since youth in foster care typically lack secure attachments and positive relationships with adults, Peace4Kids has created a trusted community in which youth actively choose to embrace older foster care alumni.

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[8] Ponciano, 2013

[9] Svoboda, Shaw, Barth, & Bright, 2012

Our theory of change has been validated. Peace4Kids destigmatizes the foster care experience by creating a vehicle through which youth have a voice. Our youth come to realize that they are the ones who can make change in the very system that serves them; they are the ones who have the power to make change in their larger community. With the support of Peace4Kids staff, their peers, and volunteers, our youth have identified causes, created plans, and effectively advocated for change. This process creates the foundation for our youth to sustain a high level of self-sufficiency after they transition to adulthood.

Changing the World

Through our practice and work, we have discovered that these shared traits of youth in foster care are not regional or based on gender or racial identities. Our leaders have traveled both nationally and internationally to investigate the shared experiences of youth in foster care outside our base in South Los Angeles. While some cultural differences naturally exist, we have found a remarkably large set of commonalities. This past summer, our Peace4Kids leaders traveled to New Zealand where they served as both keynote speakers and workshop facilitators. What they found was that youth in care in a country across the world have similar developmental strengths, traits and challenges.

Our work has only just begun, but our impact continues to amplify the voices of children who have historically been silenced by their sense of shame and stigma about their foster care journey. While our mission is to continue serving youth in our programs, we are expanding our model into a research-based practice that articulates how our theory-of-change can benefit youth beyond our South Los Angeles base.

Peace4Kids seeks to refine and propagate our theory-of-change. We are committed to taking what we have discovered and inform the very systems that serve youth in foster care. Fundamentally, this will change the way these youth experience health care, education, housing, and even the workplace. This year, we are initiating a pivot in our approach that expands our outreach. This will likely influence policy decisions at local, state, and federal levels. However, at the heart of this movement is the clear goal of shifting the perceptions that youth in foster care have about themselves. By amplifying a collective voice that inherently identifies the assets and strengths that youth in foster care possess, those that serve them can effectively and equitably meet their needs.

We recognize that by providing an expansive, safe and sacred space where youth in care claim their stories with strength and dignity ignites a flame of hope and possibility that burns eternal for all to see.

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