

Independent Living: Preparing Teens for the Adult World

With little or no family support and years of dependence on the public child protection system, teens in foster care can approach adulthood with little sense of how to survive on their own. That's why, in 1988, Children's Services began the Independent Living Skills program, designed to help older teens become self-reliant.

Following a skills assessment, 16- and 17-year olds learn about everything from budgeting to job searching. Discussion ranges from general issues such as problem solving and decision making to specifics like handling sales pitches from credit card companies.

The 13-week program covers many topics

Independent Living Skills training runs 13 weeks. Teens attend a five-hour session each week. Topics include: An Overview of Self-Sufficiency, Problem Solving and Decision Making, Understanding My Community, Taking Care of My Life, Anger Management, Job Issues (two sessions), Money Management, Budgeting, Apartment Management, Credit and Insurance, and Healthy Relationships.

Teens undergo skills test

Children's Services assesses the independent living skill level of each teen before the program begins. The one-hour test measures 16 areas such as money management and job-search skills. Some with lower skills – such as an inability to read or to make change – may be referred to tutoring.

Outside providers offer training

Children's Services contracts with a vocational school teacher and two social service agencies for some of the training.

A Celebration of Dreams

"Working with teens can not only help them, but also the community. I find them refreshingly honest, but they can be a puzzle of saying one thing – 'Get out of my face' – and meaning another – 'Help me.'"

~ Independent Living Coordinator Bobette Arnold

In 1999, the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services held the first annual *Celebration of Dreams*, a banquet and awards ceremony for foster youth who complete high school or earn a GED. It marks a major achievement for some young people who have had every strike against them. Guests include the graduates, Children's Services staff, county officials, Juvenile Court judges and magistrates, officials from the county Public Defender's Office, foster parents and school counselors and teachers. In addition to a certificate, each student receives an array of gifts made possible by many generous donors. A scholarship fund started in 2001 helps buy books for students continuing on to college.

Program moves teens into their own apartments

Independent Living is coupled with a program provided by Lighthouse Youth Services in which qualified foster youth receive their own apartments. Together, the programs are considered a national model for helping foster youth to achieve self-sufficiency.

The teens who receive apartments are monitored by Lighthouse caseworkers and must attend school and/or be employed. In 2000, 58 teens were living independently. Youth in good standing who emancipate from the child protection system, usually at age 19, may keep the furnished apartment, while paying the rent themselves.

Many of the young people enter the child welfare system for the first time when they are 16 or 17 – often too late to find an adoptive family or a foster home willing to take in an older teen with a tattoo and an attitude. Since 1986, we have assisted nearly 700 youth who are trying to make the difficult transition from foster care to living on their own. We see a lot of successes and even some miracles from time to time. But we also see a larger group of youth leaving us with a long way to go before they are totally self-sufficient. We know we are not yet doing enough.

~ Mark Kroner, Director of Independent Living, Lighthouse Youth Services

Mike's Story

Mike, 17, a long-term resident of foster homes and residential facilities, faced life on his own at a time when his more fortunate peers were still very much dependent upon their parents.

An assessment of his basic living skills found he had some knowledge but lacked confidence and a sense of purpose. Harsh as it seemed, he needed a reality check.

In the Independent Living Skills program, Mike attended more than a dozen Saturday classes over eight months. He also participated in a week-long session, said Bobette Arnold, Independent Living coordinator.

"Certain people like Miss Arnold and Sharon Ross, my caseworker—mainly those people—I feel like they care for me," Mike said. "I really do. They want me to do good."

The program helped Mike overcome an aimless adolescence. He had dropped out of school in 11th grade. An explosive temper sometimes got him into trouble.

Thanks to the program, Mike learned how to deal with the hair-trigger temper that led to violent outbursts. He used strategies from an anger management class to calmly handle situations that would have caused him to "go off."

"For a long time, I never thought about doing anything," he said. "I lived day be day. I was just out there having a good time with my friends. I never had any idea about goals or what I would do with myself. It changed my whole outlook on things."

In addition to the classes, Mike found talks by successful graduates from the program — now in their early 20s — to be particularly helpful.

"They've been in the same situation that I've been in," he said. "When you listen to their stories and situations, it's inspiring. You feel if they can go to school, go to college and get a job, you can, too."

Mike looks forward to the future. His five year plan: graduate from high school; learn a trade at a vocational school; use money from a job as an electrician or plumber to pay for a college degree, possibly in criminal justice.

"He deserves the credit," Ms. Arnold said. "He's the one who set the goals. The program can't do that. That's a choice the person has to make."