

# Youth with Lived Experiences Provide Important Recommendations for Improving Child Welfare: An Interview with Dr. Heather Taussig & Michelle Munson Transcript of Episode 3

## Dr. Heather Fox

Welcome to the Translating Child Welfare Research Podcast. The goal of this podcast is to provide child welfare professionals with timely and quality research information to help them support their well-being and the well-being of the families they serve. Each month we invite researchers to highlight key findings or implications from their research. Visit our webpage to explore our podcast, read biographies of our guests, and access information about the research we feature. I’m Dr. Heather Fox, and I’m your host for this episode of the Translating Child Welfare Research Podcast. In this podcast, we invite Drs. Heather Taussig and Michelle Munson to talk about their research which captures youth perspectives on their experiences with child welfare and what prepared them for adulthood. Welcome Drs. Taussig and Munson, we are excited to meet with you today. Let’s start with a brief introduction. Please introduce yourself to our audience. If you could share your name, title, affiliation, research areas, and maybe something your proud of.

## Dr. Heather Taussig

Thank you so much for inviting us to be part of this important podcast series. My name is Heather Taussig, and I am a professor at the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver. And I also hold an adjunct professor appointment at the Kempe Center, which is at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. My research interests include positive youth development and preventive interventions for young people with child welfare involvement. As well as youth voice and child welfare related topics, when I think about something I'm proud of, the first thing that comes to mind is the Fostering Healthy Futures, mentoring and skills training program that my team has developed over the last two decades, which has demonstrated positive impacts in a number of areas. Most recently, a reduction in long term suicidal and self-harm outcomes, and substance use. And the fact that we're now disseminating this program through community-based organizations.

## Dr. Michelle Munson

Hi everybody. My name is Michelle Munson, and I'm a professor at New York University. And similar to Heather. I'm also interested in positive youth development, culturally responsive interventions aimed at improving the lives, and particularly the mental health of young people from historically marginalized groups. And increasingly, I'm interested in ways to improve how prepared young people are and feel for increased independence as they near developmental periods where they have less support from public systems of care. I'm proud of the intervention research that we're doing at NYU and the research that we're about to talk about today related to fostering healthy futures.

## Dr. Heather Fox

That's wonderful. Would you provide a brief overview of the research you're going to talk about today?

## Dr. Heather Taussig

Sure. As I talked about before, Fostering Healthy Futures is a preventive intervention, but it's also a longitudinal study of young people with care experiences. For the studies, we're going to talk about today, we enrolled young people ages nine to 11 who were recently placed in out of home care in the Denver Metro area over about a decade and all were in again out of home care at the first wave of interviews. We re-interviewed those young people and the participants in our study almost a decade later, at a fifth wave of interviews when they were ages 18 to 22. We have about 200 a little bit over 200 folks in this these studies we're going to talk about today. The studies use mix methods, which means we had both close ended or quantitative questions as well as open-ended or qualitative questions at the different interview time points. Another important thing to note is that the participants in this study were very diverse in terms of race, ethnicity. Living situations at each time point when we interviewed them, and about a quarter aged out of care.

## Dr. Heather Fox

This sounds like a really exciting study. Can you highlight a few key findings from your recent research studies for our podcast audience?

## Dr. Heather Taussig

Absolutely. The first study that Michelle and I collaborated on is entitled *It's Complicated, A longitudinal exploration of Young People’s Perceptions of Out of Home Care and Their Reflections on How to Change the Child Welfare System*. So as I talked about, the design was that we interviewed over 200 preadolescent children and get ages nine to 11 who had been placed in out of home care over the prior year a new entry to out of home care. And we asked them about both the difficulties and helpfulness of being placed in out of home care and how their lives might have been different had they not been removed. Participants were then asked these same questions when they were interviewed a decade later, with good retention rate, I will say we were at over 88% retention of the participants who were enrolled at baseline. And we also asked them how they would change the child welfare system at this long term follow up interview again when they were ages 18 to 22. And in both preadolescents and young adulthood, over 80% of the participants reported that it was somewhat or very helpful to have been placed in out of home care. However, this is a big one. Many participants reported that they did not get enough information from their caseworkers during their placement into out of home care and that they almost never had enough to say about what happened to them while they were in out of home care. We asked only the young adults in the study. This open-ended question. If you could change the child welfare system, what would you do? And response is varied from nothing to highly impassioned answers about the need for change. For example, giving birth parents more time before they were removed, keeping siblings together and out of home care, caseworkers providing better oversight of foster homes. And maybe most importantly, listening truly listening and making connections with children, with whom caseworkers were working.

## Dr. Michelle Munson

The second study, Heather and I worked on together was titled Preparedness for Adulthood Among Young Adults with Histories of Out of Home Care. We asked closed ended questions on how prepared young adults perceived that they were when they turned 18, related to five critical areas, employment, education, healthcare, housing and managing money. And we also asked an open-ended item. What has been the most helpful thing in preparing you to live as an adult? Interestingly, results indicate that youth felt most prepared to manage their money and pursue employment. They felt more prepared in those areas, than for example, healthcare and housing, and this was true in both the quantitative items, and it was present more in the qualitative data as well. Overall, six themes emerged from the qualitative data, including young people talking about forced independence being helpful, the instructive role of mistakes, particular programs and services, family support, structure, and role models. To highlight just one finding that could be instructive to listeners of the podcast. Data suggested that young adults view making mistakes and recovering from them with support as helpful in preparing them for adulthood. For example, one participant said, “If you have to work it out and you got it wrong and you saw when you got it wrong and then you're given a tool, maybe not somebody just helping you with that tool. But you're given a tool and you're told this is how it works. And you figure it out on your own. You go through the phases of fail and continue, fail and try again, fail and try again. You're going to learn more.”This is something I've heard personally when I was working as a social worker, discussed among professionals this value of learning from mistakes, and it was really powerful to hear young people themselves voice how this was helpful. I would also like to give voice to a more sobering result, from the second study that I think we all need to pay attention to. And that was that many participants reported that difficult childhoods were the most helpful in preparing them. I think we can all do better and provide more supports and services. I want to acknowledge. You know, difficult experiences, while they were reported as the most helpful in preparing some of our participants, they're difficult and I don't want to suggest that this is a good thing. But I think it's something that we need to pay attention to.

## Dr. Heather Fox

You're ready. Your research captured youth perspectives on their experiences with child welfare. Why was it important to you to talk directly with Youth who have experienced substitute care about their experiences?

## Dr. Michelle Munson

That's a great question. In both my research and Heather's research, we have long valued the perspectives of young people with lived experience and the expertise that comes from those experiences. In my professional experiences, I have found that often policymakers and practitioners, even myself, can find themselves making decisions, really important decisions and actions without the critical input of young people, we aim to serve. And so, I think these studies really show the importance as you listen to the voices of the young people themselves, about that kind of expertise. And you can see through these studies. How that expertise, that distinct knowledge and insight you have when you have lived through something adds its own unique value. It is its own distinct knowledge. When we talk to young people, we learn that they often have excellent suggestions about how to improve youth serving systems, what types of tangible and intangible supports might most benefit them. So I think, his study, which Heather has been directing for so many years, really has shown the value of talking to young people and these studies, I think, are a good example of how these kinds of results can inform supports and services.

## Dr. Heather Fox

I really appreciate you highlighting the value of working with individuals with lived expertise. I think it's far too often we draw on these individuals just to tell us their stories, but we don't recognize their expertise. How are you hoping what you learned will impact child welfare practice.

## Dr. Heather Taussig

In echoing what Michelle just said, I think both of these studies findings really highlight the importance of not making assumptions regarding how young people feel, what their needs are, and how we can best support them.

## Dr. Michelle Munson

Exactly, I think our findings suggest overwhelmingly, that the experiences of youth are nuanced and complicated, as in the title of the first study we discussed. It's complicated. They highlight the importance of youth voice in child welfare decision make. For example, many participants reported it was positive or necessary to have been removed from their homes, but that was also difficult.

## Dr. Heather Taussig

Right, as we know, things can be necessary and difficult. And from the participants narratives in response to the open-ended question about how they would change the child welfare system, we identified three overarching themes that could improve child welfare services. First, attending to youth and family needs. The young people talked about how they really wanted to have their input in decision making valued. They needed better supports and especially highlighted needing educational support. And helping caseworkers helping them maintain family connects. A second overarching theme that came out of their open-ended responses was caseworkers needing to make some changes in how they interacted with children and families. Taking more time to communicate with children and their families, and to spend time with the youth and not making it feel that it was a check mark on a box coming out to visit them. Providing more tangible assistance to families. The final sort of overarching theme we identified were system level changes. Young people didn't exactly use the word leniency, but they talked about essentially the system providing more leniency for parents, giving them more time before removing children, improving the quality of out of home care, and ensuring and checking up on foster parents and improving visitation, the process of visitation. One thing that I think we know from our practice experience but came out loud and clear in their narratives was the importance of maintaining sibling connection. Even if they couldn't live with their siblings and out of home care, maintaining and supporting that connection was so important and came through over and over again.

## Dr. Michelle Munson

So powerful, powerful results. Some of the important implications from the second study we talked about the paper on preparedness are to recognize that a lot of care experienced young adults report forced independence and this kind of hard learning they experience. Due to having to take care of themselves and not being able to rely on the system and other adult supports. One significant implication of this is to provide and garner more funding to be able to provide consistent supportive healthy adults to be in the lives of youth. Adults who can support them as opposed to adults who need support from them. Similarly, also the results suggested that independent living programs may want to develop core modules on healthcare and housing. So, in addition to considering strategies to develop healthy relationships with adults, also possibly focusing more curricular modules on healthcare and housing.

## Dr. Heather Taussig

I think one of the things we also want to highlight for practitioners and important for policymakers as well. Is that one of the challenges to this youth voice, which I think we all value and know is important. But youth voice within child welfare, I see often that the youth were invited to the table to give their perspectives, and those then who accept the invitation and show up tend to be really a select group of young people. And they often are young people who have aged out of care and those who feel empowered and safe to share their stories without fear of repercussion. So rarely are we talking with young people under the age of 16 let's say. It's even more rare to hear the voices and perspectives of youth who have reunified those who have been adopted or permanently placed with kin. I think that's what makes our studies findings somewhat unique. And what we hope you know, one of the implications then is that hopefully practitioners will seek out and value the voices of youth. That have had different child welfare experiences and talk with youth on a one-to-one basis because again, those who have the ability, both from an emotional and you know safety perspective and have the means to be able to show up on a panel are different potentially than those who wouldn't feel comfortable or don't have the opportunities to have their voices heard in more public forums.

## Dr. Michelle Munson

I really appreciate. That point, Heather, I think that's very trauma informed as well. And we really have to be intentional to be able to get more variation in whose voices we're listening to. Our research also highlights that we should not and cannot make assumptions about how young people feel about the child welfare system. Or their preparedness for adulthood based on demographic factors. For example, there were no differences in young people's appraisals of placement in out of home care as a function of gender age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, maltreatment type, adverse childhood experiences, cultural pride or trauma symptoms in these studies.

## Dr. Heather Taussig

You know the Family First Prevention Services Act really prioritizes prevention efforts to reduce out of home care, and these upstream efforts echo the narratives of many of our study participants. Who suggested that more support and time for birth families is needed before we remove children from the home. Similarly, their nuanced perspectives should also inform when it's necessary to remove children. Then how to best support children if removal is deemed necessary. And again, unfortunately, youth voices often absent from these early conversations that have such weighty implications for children and families.

## Dr. Michelle Munson

We, as researchers, policymakers and practitioners would do well to similarly approach reform with this kind of nuance. These issues we're talking about today on the podcast are never unidimensional or static. And valuing the voices of diverse youth with diverse child welfare experiences will be critical to developing culturally attuned, supportive, and effective youth and family centered policies and practices.

## Dr. Heather Fox

I'm so glad we got that on recording the recommendations you guys have made are so useful to I think everyone who might be listening to this podcast. So, what are you researching now? Is there a research question you're hoping to explore in the future?

## Dr. Heather Taussig

There's several things cooking, you know. As always, I'm continuing to look at how positive youth development, programming and interventions can lead to positive outcomes for young people with child welfare involvement, and in what ways and for whom. We have a couple of recent papers published from this same data set that we're talking about and study the Fostering Healthy Futures study. One looking at the impact of turning points on young people's lives and how having any type of turning point, whether it's positive or negative can buffer the impact of early ACES on later life satisfaction. We also published a paper recently on the types and sources of social support that were most helpful to young people in their trajectories. As well as how young people define family. Currently in the works are a couple of papers on looking at birth, parent contact and interactions post age 18 for the young people in our studies. Yeah, so those are the things in our shop, and this is Heather, that we're working on currently.

## Dr. Michelle Munson

Yeah, thanks for that question. I always love to talk about things that are coming down in the work. At NYU, we are doing a lot of different work to cocreate psychosocial interventions, in particular partnering with youth and young adult leaders in that cocreation. A lot of our work at NYU is around engagement and around how to improve engagement and all kinds of services and programs. So, we've learned a lot by listening to young people about the kinds of strategies that they prefer. A lot of the psychosocial interventions that we're working on embed, you know, developmentally and I would say also culturally resonant modalities that use, for example, music, art, photography. We get really excited to be thinking about how can we embed these kinds of strategies within interventions to attract youth and hopefully maintain their attention and connection to our programs. And always excited about continuing to partner with Heather. Small anecdote, I met Heather when I was a doctoral student and she became one of my mentors on my early research related to supportive adults. So, so glad to be continuing to collaborate with Heather.

## Dr. Heather Taussig

And I feel similarly grateful. I've been trying to get Michelle to collaborate with me for years and years and working on these two papers has been an absolute joy. Michelle is coming out to Colorado in a couple of weeks and we have workshopping time to cook up our next collaboration. I’ve already blocked out when she's here. Hopefully Heather, you will invite us back in the future to talk about some of our forthcoming work that we'll be doing together.

## Dr. Heather Fox

I think that sounds incredible. I'm sure that you will have more intriguing study findings and great advice for how we can update our policies and practices in the future. To recap, for today we've been talking with Dr. Heather Taussig and Michelle Munson about recommendations from youth who have lived experiences with the child welfare system. Thank you, Doctor Munson and Taussig for sharing your research with us today. We look forward to learning more about your research in the future. Our thanks go out to the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign School of Social work for its support of this podcast series to our listeners. Do you have feedback on the podcast, a topic you'd like to learn more about or research you'd like to share with our audience? Contact us at dcfs.orc.w@illinois.gov. And thank you for listening to the Translating Child Welfare Research Podcast.