Episode 279—Ashley Curry: "I Don't Want a New Worker. Where's My Old Worker?": Relationship Disruptions Between Youth and Child Welfare Professionals

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSociaWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello from Buffalo and welcome to inSocialWork. This is Louanne Bakk and I'll be your host for this episode. Turnover among child welfare workers is a serious and well-documented problem because it disrupts relationships between young individuals who are receiving care as well as their child welfare professional. This, in turn, can have numerous detrimental effects on youth social and emotional development and well-being. In this podcast, Dr Ashley Curry discusses her research exploring the lived experiences of turnover within the child welfare system and the perspectives of individuals impacted by relationship disruptions. She defines what a relationship disruption can encompass, summarizes the reasons why relationship disruptions can occur and compares and contrasts traditional versus literal turnover. Originating from a multi-method qualitative approach, Dr Curry's research findings highlight the perspectives of three distinct groups experiencing turnover within a child welfare organization. Specifically agency administrators, agency workers and youth receiving care. Key implications for social work practice and policy, including the importance of attending to relationships in stressful times, are discussed and recommendations for child welfare organizations undergoing turnover and staffing changes are highlighted. Ashley Curry PhD LCSW is an assistant clinical professor at Erikson Institute in Chicago. She received her doctorate from the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. Her research interests include children's experiences of child welfare services, the impact of organizational dynamics on children, and relational approaches to practice. Dr. Curry was interviewed in August 2019 by Dr. Annette Semanchin Jones, associate professor here at the UB School Social Work.

[00:02:50] Hello, everyone. This is Annette Semanchin Jones. I am an associate professor at the School of Social Work and my area of interest is in child welfare, specifically around relational permanence and well-being for children and youth in the foster care system. And so I'm very excited to speak with Ashley Curry. She's a clinical assistant professor from the Erikson Institute. And we're going to talk a little bit about a study that she did looking at the impact of worker turnover and how that impacts use emotional and relational well-being. So welcome, Ashley.

[00:03:24] Hello. Thank you for having me.

[00:03:26] So why don't we get started? Could you tell us a little bit about what you set out to study and how that actually changed during the data collection process?

[00:03:35] Sure. So in short, I set out to study relationships, specifically relationship development over time between child welfare workers and youth in an independent living program. I wanted to know the specific elements that helped or hindered young people as they aged out of the system on their 21st birthday. We know that relationships are essential for our survival as humans and that everyone need positive and supportive relationships in order to grow and develop. This has been, of course, social work values

since the dawn of our profession,aAnd we also know from the vast psychotherapy literature that the relationship between therapist and client is thought to be the most important predictor of positive client change above and beyond therapeutic technique. And so given the importance of relationships from both the conceptual and an empirical standpoint, I set out to study those. I chose the child welfare system because by its very nature, it poses many threats to relationship building. I also thought the specific population of youth who are quote unquote aging out may be especially important since we know from the literature on youth aging out of the system that they face considerable obstacles as they launch into adulthood, often on their own. So what I did was I identified a field site where I could study relationships over time as they occurred. The agency was a large child welfare organization in a large Midwestern city. It had an independent living program serving youth preparing to age out of the system. And just to clarify for your listeners, the independent living program provided youths ages 19 to 20 an apartment, basic supplies and an allowance. They also had case managers that would meet regularly with them to help them develop independent living skills such as grocery shopping, doing laundry or registering for college. They would also attend court appointments with them and other meetings at the State Child Welfare Agency. And so in my process of getting to know this agency, it became very clear that they highly valued relationships, especially long term relationships. They believed that the longer they had a young person in their independent living program, the better they were able to support them as they transitioned out of the system. They talked extensively about their historically low turnover rates among workers and were overall pretty open and enthusiastic about having me study relationships in their program. However, about a month before I started collecting data, the organization had agency wide layoffs and restructuring. And this theme of organizational disruption continued throughout my entire two years in the program. So to answer your question, instead of being able to study relationship over time and learning about the qualities that really made relationships stick and helped youth that they launched into adulthood, I ended up studying relationship disruptions, given all the staffing changes that occurred.

[00:06:01] So it sounds like you really set out to do one thing and it changed a little bit. Could you say a little bit more and define what you mean by relationship disruption?

[00:06:09] Sure. I define relationship disruption as an unplanned ending between a worker and a young person. In my study, relationship disruptions happened when the worker and youth were no longer able to continue working together, and as a result, the young person had to get a new worker within the agency. And unfortunately, these happened regularly and I found that they occurred for two primary reasons. The first reason was traditional turnover. By traditional turnover, I mean workers leaving the agency. We know in child welfare that turnover rates among workers have been historically pretty high. This agency was unique in that they reported low turnover rates among staff prior to my arrival. However, during my time in the agency, they did experience considerable turnover among workers. The second reason that relationship disruptions occurred was due to a different type of turnover, or what I call lateral turnover. In my study, I defined lateral turnover as agency and staffing changes. These occurred when the administrators made decisions to move workers around to different positions or programs. Now, since the workers were still retained by the agency, that is they did not leave or get laid off. It was not turnover in the traditional sense. However, from the youth perspective, they still experienced turnover no differently than if their worker would have left the agency. This was a big distinction in my study and a big part of the findings. There was this assumption on the administrators part that agency and do staffing changes or what I call lateral turnover would not impact people as much as traditional turnover. But what I found through my observations and interviews

with young people is that they were often highly upset when their worker was moved to a different position or program, which they perceive as an actual ending to the relationship.

[00:07:40] So it sounds like some of these things that you're describing certainly also are not unique to just this one agency. We see a lot of, as you define it, traditional turnover as well as lateral turnover in many different types of settings and agencies and child welfare. So it looks like you're really trying to highlight the impact and perspectives of the different people that are directly impacted by those moves. Is that right?

[00:08:03] Exactly. One of the things I tried to do in my work is to highlight the youth perspective of the things that happened to them while in the system. To me, traditional turnover is a very agency-centric way of thinking about turnover. The agency loses the worker and then the agency has to spend the time, money and resources to replace that worker. Lateral turnover, on the other hand, really puts the youth experience of turnover front and center. And I think that is especially important since we know that youth experience turnover all too often and traditional forms of turnover only account for workers leaving the agency and therefore do not account for all the relationship disruptions that happen when workers are moved to different positions or programs.

[00:08:40] Yeah, I think that's such an important point and really an important point that you're highlighting in this study that really needs to be talked about more. So I was excited to see that in your study. You also mentioned observations and interviews. Could you tell us a little bit more about the methods you use to study this organization?

[00:08:57] Sure. Since relationships are inherently interactional, I chose methods that lend themselves well to studying interactions. So I spent two to four days a week at the agency over a two year period. And in my role as researcher, I was both a participant observer and an interviewer. My research participants were 33 people, including administrators, workers and young people. I essentially became part of the program and attended any and all appointments and activities, including staff meetings, community meetings and home visits. And in addition to the participant observation and informal interviews, I also conducted formal audio recorded interviews with participants. And in the end it was really important that I had observational data because it sometimes differed from or complicated the verbal reports by participants. In other words, at times what people thought about practice differed from what they actually did in practice.

[00:09:47] I think that's a really unique part of your study. I think a lot of times when we see studies on organizations, we might be limited, as you just said, to either surveys or even interviews. So I think that that's a really interesting piece. It actually sounds like your methods were somewhat ethnographic in nature then.

[00:10:04] Yes. The methods I used, especially participant observation, were certainly inspired by an ethnographic approach. Having said that though, I wouldn't necessarily call my study an ethnography. It is certainly not a thick description of the places and settings and people within the organization like, for example, anthropologist Clifford Geertz would have done. In fact, I went to great lengths to protect the confidentiality of the organization and all of the people in it. So while I did use participant observation as a primary data collection method in my write up, I certainly did not simply describe the specific setting or the people in a way that an ethnographer would have.

[00:10:39] That makes a lot of sense, especially when we're talking about vulnerable use. I think that's really important to protect people's identity and privacy. So now that we've

learned a little bit more about this study, can you share what you see as some of the most compelling findings?

[00:10:54] Sure. So when I think about the findings, one thing that stands out to me is the unique perspectives that I gathered from each of the participant groups, especially as discrepancies between their perspectives began to emerge. So there's probably three big buckets I think about in terms of the findings related to each participant group. For administrators, I think about how they responded to the difficult pressures they faced within the agency and more importantly, the unintended consequences of their decision making, especially related to lateral turnover, which I talked about earlier. For workers, I think about how they ended their relationships with young people and the lack of support and guidance they received while doing so. And then for youths, I think about how their history of worker turnover prior to independent living seemed to really exacerbate their experiences with workers while in independent living.

[00:11:39] Great. Looking at the administrators first, it sounds like how you're describing this, that the lateral turnover was really an important finding, but also maybe unexpected, particularly for the administrators.

[00:11:52] Yes, it certainly was. So as I said before I entered the agency, during a time of what they referred to as organizational chaos. People would tell me "you've hir a bad time at the agency" or "this is the worst it's ever been." So I think that's important to emphasize. They faced many external pressures during my time, including the national economic recession, funding cuts from the state agency, drops in youth census and workers leaving the agency. In fact, a total of 15 staffing changes occurred while I was in the program. And these included workers leaving the agency, workers leaving the program, workers changing their positions and workers being hired. Now, what's important to keep in mind about these staffing changes is that each time one of them occurred, it prompted caseload to shuffle, which meant youth were then moved from worker to worker. So as an administrative team, they manage these pressures with what I call survivalist staffing strategies. They essentially went into survival mode and operated within a self-described culture of management. This was a top down approach aimed at keeping the agency at large afloat. And in the height of what I call the staffing crisis, they essentially made three significant changes at once. First, they laid off staff and significantly restructured programs and departments. This meant shuffling workers around the different teams and positions, which ultimately disrupted a considerable number of relationships between workers and youth. This was the birth of lateral turnover. Second, They also implemented an outcome oriented service model, which I will not get into today, but just know that it also significantly added to the stress and confusion workers experienced during that time. Third, they made the decision to lay off the clinical supervisor, which also significantly added to worker stress level. Since she was a sounding board to staff, especially during times of stress and organizational change. Now it's important to mention that besides instituting new survivalist staffing strategies, they also use survivalist language when talking to workers about these changes, telling them things like that they should be grateful for what they still had, which was a job, instead of focusing on what they had lost, which were clients, colleagues, positions, roles and a clinical supervisor.

[00:13:54] That sounds like you really were capturing kind of maybe a unique experience for this agency, but again, I think if we think about your typical child welfare agency, we often see agencies that might be in what you call a crisis mode or survival mode. So I think these findings really do have implications across the board. You also mentioned earlier that your whole focus of your study and this agency administrators specifically really highly

valued relationships, but it sounds like what you're describing in as you started collecting data, the administrators were actually making decisions that seemed to run contrary to that.

[00:14:29] Yes. So what I essentially found was that this agency that highly valued relationships actually disrupted those very relationships in order to adapt to the pressures they faced. And during all of this, they weren't really tuned into the unintended consequences of those decisions. One of the things that was especially striking was how differently the administrators, workers and youths viewed the impact of lateral turnover. This is a place where I found a considerable discrepancy in their views. So administrators set the tone by downplaying the impact of lateral turnover by saying things like "every worker is pitching in and I want the clients to know that." They also did not seem to be in tune with when the youth would become upset or withdrawn about a worker change. Overall, they seem very focused on the survival of the agency at large. And similarly, workers would present the changes to youths as not really an ending. Saying things like "it's different than if I was leaving the agency" or they would tell young people things like "I'll still see you in the office." Now young people, on the other hand, viewed lateral turnover or all the staffing changes that were happening between workers and youths as a fundamental change in the relationship. They viewed the worker moving to a different position or program as an actual ending. They would say to workers things like "you are not leaving the agency, but you are leaving me" or "we will no longer be able to go grocery shopping together." So these findings were pretty powerful to me and really highlighted the importance of the unique relationship that had developed between youth and staff in the program and how the youth did not just want any worker in the agency. They wanted their worker in the agency.

[00:15:58] I really think that that speaks to just really the importance of looking at the youth perspective and how they define and appreciate those relationships.

[00:16:07] Yes, absolutely. And the other piece that I found really interesting and somewhat puzzling is that at the end of my time in the program as I was wrapping up data collection, the administrators seemed to assume that there were not that many instances of turnover, either traditional or lateral, during my time in the program. They actually encouraged me to calculate the rates, and so I did. And in doing so, I found that six out of the eight workers had left the program, resulting in a lateral turnover rate of 75 percent. Now, only five of those workers actually left the agency, so the rate of traditional turnover within the program over a two year period was only 62.5 percent. But still, clearly those percentages are troubling by any standard. So in the end, I found that the administrators were both underestimating the frequency of turnover and minimizing its effects, which again, I attribute to them being under a tremendous amount of stress and in survival mode during my time in the program.

[00:17:00] So you also said earlier that in addition to the lateral turnover, you talked about the worker as a stakeholder, feeling that they really lacked the support and guidance that they were receiving while they had to terminate or end a relationship. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

[00:17:18] Yeah, sure. So all of the organizational disruption and change did seem to trickle down and influence the ways in which workers ended relationships with young people. A couple of things that stood out to me were the assumptions that workers made about their relationships ending with clients and also the emotional responses that they themselves experienced about the relationship endings. So first I found that workers had a

tendency to minimize or downplay their role in the youth's life. They did this by assuming that they weren't that important to the young person or assuming that the young person wouldn't really care if the worker left the program. This again is where I found a considerable discrepancy between workers views and young people's views. Youths in the study overwhelmingly reported that their workers were very or really important to them and were able to give concrete, often glowing examples of their worker's importance to them. Second, I also found that workers, similar to youths, had emotional responses to the endings. These took the form of feeling sad, mad, frustrated or guilty, and given the clinical supervisor had been laid off, these feelings were not being processed in clinical supervision, or anywhere else for that matter. So workers were pretty much on their own to deal with all the changes and all the effects of those changes on both themselves and their clients. So I found that the assumptions and emotional responses workers had seemed to influence the ways in which they actually ended their relationships with young people. One of the administrators told me that she encouraged her workers to process the endings with young people. But unfortunately, that is not what I saw playing out in practice. I instead observed quite a few endings that involved a significant lack of processing. So instead of facilitating a space for processing the ending, workers at time engaged in approaches that posed a barrier to processing. These approaches avoided, minimized, or reframed the young client's experience of the ending, albeit unintentionally.

[00:19:06] Could you give us a couple examples of what some of these called processing barriers that you saw?

[00:19:11] Sure. So examples of avoidance included the worker either not telling the young person at all that they were leaving or it meant telling them, but then avoiding the difficult conversation that was bound to ensue next. By doing this, the worker essentially avoided addressing the young person's feelings about the ending in any meaningful way. Examples of minimization included downplaying the staffing changes that were occurring and unintentionally minimizing the importance of their unique relationship with the young person. They did this by emphasizing the fact that they would still be able to see them in the office, even though they weren't their worker anymore. Examples of reframing included turning the youth feelings of sadness, disappointment, anger or upset into something else altogether, especially something more positive, like encouraging the young person to be okay with the change or to even be happy about the change instead. So as a whole, these processing barriers, avoidance, minimization and reframing ultimately got in the way of workers being able to tune into the young person's subjective experience of the ending and end the relationship in as therapeutic a way as possible. Now some workers, on the other hand, were able to tune into the young person's experience and engage in what I call processing facilitators. These approaches acknowledged, validated and explored the young person's experience of the ending, which ultimately took seriously how the young person felt about the ending.

[00:20:31] You also mentioned, again, for the third group of stakeholders, the youth themselves, you mentioned that another key finding involved that youth's history. So prior to coming to the independent living program, their own history, having multiple workers and how that may have complicated their experiences in that independent living program. Can you say a little bit more about that as well?

[00:20:52] Sure. So part of my study included in-depth interviews with young people where I learned more about their history of relationships with professionals and care. Not surprisingly, each of them had a significant history of worker turnover prior to independent living. They then brought this history with them into independent living, where they

unfortunately continue to experience even more turnover. And so I'll share four overarching themes that really frame their experiences with turnover before independent living. The first is that turnover happen frequently. The second is that turnover was often abrupt or poorly processed. The third is that turnover happened with all their child welfare professionals, including not only their workers, but also their therapists, mentors, staff at places like residential treatment centers and group homes, and also with their guardian ad litem, the court appointed attorney tasked with pursuing the child's best interests. And finally, the fourth is that turnover was experience as a relationship loss. That means that on a literal or objective level that they lost their worker. And then on a more individualized or subjective level, they experience a variety of complicated feelings in response to the loss, which of course, varied greatly based on their relationship with the person. Now, as your listeners may know, a lot of the literature on turnover in child welfare focuses on the causes of turnover. And in contrast, my study really looked at the effects of turnover, specifically on youth. And so in doing so, I found that turnover affected the emotional relational well-being of youth in a variety of complex ways. So on an emotional level, young people experience painful feelings in response the relationship loss, and they also develop protective responses to the emotional pain that sometimes gave the impression that they didn't really care. Although the data suggests that they did in fact care, and on a relational level, young people began to expect that workers would leave. They also talked about the way worker turnover made their quote unquote trust issues worsen, given that many of them had already experienced relationship losses and mistrust within family relationships, and ultimately they talked about being reluctant to connect yet again and to get close to and build another relationship with the next worker, which, of course, is understandable given their experiences.

[00:22:53] Yeah, I remember reading about that in your article, and I also remember that in addition to young people talking about the effects of turnover, they also share their own ideas about how to minimize those effects. Can you say a little bit more about that?

[00:23:07] Sure. Yes, they sure did. And the ideas that they shared included both taking relationship longevity seriously and taking relationship ending seriously. Regarding relationship longevity, they voiced a strong preference for longer term relationships, which they thought helped them to build relationships, to feel more trust in those relationships and to feel a greater sense of stability while in care. In fact, they thought it would be beneficial to only have one worker in care. They said it was hard enough to endure all the changes in the system, such as placement changes and school changes and all kinds of other changes. But that changing workers on top of all that made it even worse. Now, regarding relationship endings, they shared ideas about how to take them more seriously when they are inevitable. These included acknowledging the endings and allowing time for processing, carefully planning the transition with the new worker and keeping the relationship somewhat open and alive if possible, with the old worker.

[00:23:59] Yeah, so I think that that last piece about trying to keep that relationship open, especially as you describe some of these lateral moves, I could see that being really valuable to a young person still being able to maintain connections, even though that sometimes goes counter to messages about boundaries and keeping boundaries with social workers. But I think that that's really an important perspective. So in addition to some of the things you've already shared about your findings, can you talk about what you see as the key implications of this research for social work practice and policy?

[00:24:29] Yes. Well, I think the overarching implication of my research is to take relationships more seriously for youth and child welfare. We know how important they are

and how impactful they can be, sdo I think the study really highlights that the more we can attend to and work towards relationship longevity for young people, the better. Now, that is obviously easier said than done. This was an agency with administrators and supervisors that clearly valued relationships. They had a strong history of relationship longevity between workers and youth before my arrival. I think my findings highlight the immense pressure that federal and state funding cuts can put on an agency. The stress and anxiety administrators were under with palpables and it affected their decision making in ways that would not have otherwise. I saw firsthand how priorities such as strong relationships between workers and youth went under the radar in the midst of survival and change. And this is a problem for the field. Many agencies face funding cuts or other significant financial pressures that put them in a similar predicament. I think my findings highlight the need to attend to relationships even in the most stressful of times, and on a very practical level that means doing two things. One, preserving relationships between workers and youth when possible, and two, taking relationship endings seriously when turnover is inevitable. Clearly, there is always going to be some degree of turnover within child welfare. However, this study found time and time again that it was not just that turnover happened, but that it was how turnover happened. Instead of having abrupt or poorly processed endings, ideally they would be carefully planned and carefully processed. This would include acknowledging the ending, validating the young person's feelings and exploring their experiences. I think handling the endings in a way that takes seriously the client's subjective experience would go a long way. Like I found in my study, there was an assumption on the part of administrators that workers were in fact processing the endings with young people. However in my observations, these endings were often made in casually abrupt ways, such as in the car or over text or in the middle of an activity or in the middle of a large group with many other people. Those choices were not what I would consider conducive to ending the relationship in a way that is most beneficial for the client. So I think helping workers to make decisions about what to say to young people, or the content of the communication, and how to say it to young people or the process of the communication and when, where and with whom to say it in front of, or the context of the communication, could be really beneficial. And I think this is another problem for the field. As much as we talk about the importance of relationships, there is a lack of empirical literature on relationship endings, not only in social work, but in the larger helping relationship literature as a whole.

[00:27:05] I just really agree with that assessment that especially I think in child welfare that again, I think being in a survival mode that people might see this as a luxury or an extra thing that they have to do. But I think your study really highlights the importance of taking the time to think through these ending processes as well.

[00:27:23] Yes, absolutely. So in addition to training workers like you mentioned, this study also highlights the need for high quality clinical and reflective supervision. Workers lacked support and guidance during my time in the program, and this impacted the ways in which they interacted with clients, they appeared to make assumptions about their relationships with youth and like their clients, experienced emotional responses to the ending. And both of these seemed to pose a barrier to ending the relationship in a way that was most beneficial to the young person. And it seems like having a supportive organizational culture, one that includes ample reflective spaces such as individual and group clinical supervision, would be helpful for workers and their practice with clients.

[00:28:02] Great. So can you share a little bit about what your own recommendations might be for child welfare organizations or child welfare as a whole?

[00:28:11] Sure, sure. I'd be happy to share some of those. Well, first, I think we should reconceptualize and redefine turnover from the child's perspective. The traditional definition of turnover, workers leaving the agency is too agency-centric and narrow. It does not accurately capture the full array of staffing changes that affect youth in the same way that turnover does. A more inclusive term like overall turnover, as proposed by Bernstein 2009, could be used, or we could use different terms for different types of turnover, such as traditional turnover and lateral turnover. I think until we adequately and systematically account for the full range of staffing changes that disrupt relationships between workers and young people, we will continue to underestimate both the prevalence rates of turnover and the effects of those disruptions on youth. Similarly, another recommendation I have is to add federal and state requirements to track the prevalence of worker turnover on young people, as well as the reason for the change, meaning whether the change was due to traditional turnover, lateral turnover, or because the young person requested a change. The first part of addressing the problem seems to be getting a sense of how often the disruptions are occurring and for what reasons. Once agencies are able to accurately track the turnover rates, then they could perhaps be measured or evaluated based on those rates, especially as they relate to changes in client experiences or client outcomes. At a minimum, the step may help agencies raise their level of awareness about not only the prevalence of relationship disruptions, but also their effects on young people. Another recommendation I have is to broaden our scope of turnover to include a variety of child welfare professionals, not just workers. Youth talked about experiencing turnover among a host of professionals, including therapists, staff at concrete care settings and guardian and litems. And these professionals all seem to play an important role in the child's life, so accounting for those relationship disruptions seem important. And the last recommendation I have for child welfare agencies is to actively address the disruptive effects of turnover on youth when endings are inevitable. They could do this by developing formal agency policies, protocols or action plans to follow when workers leave or staffing changes occur. I think this is especially important in the case of lateral turnover, which really seemed to go under the radar in my study. Perhaps team leaders and affected workers could meet to carefully evaluate all the ways clients would be impacted by the change. The team could then try to brainstorm a way to preserve especially close relationship or those that may result in a real setback for the client if disrupted. And then I think in addition to having those procedures in place for relationship endings, I would also recommend spending the financial resources to secure high quality clinical and reflective supervision like I mentioned earlier. Workers and other professionals, including supervisors and administrators, need reflective spaces to discuss, to dialog about, and to process their experiences. When the agency I studied laid off the clinical supervisor, it was felt as a quote unquote total total loss for staff and supervisors and no one in the agency stepped up to fill that void. So I think that lack of support significantly contributed to the ways workers ended their relationship with young people. My guess is that if they would have had the space to discuss their assumptions and emotional responses, they would have been better prepared to have those difficult conversations with young people. In my role as a professor at Erikson, I've been working on a project that explores the impact of reflective practice and reflective supervision on MSW students and new graduates. And in this study, my colleague and I have found that students and alumni crave reflective spaces such as individual reflective supervision and group reflective supervision seminars, and that these spaces have been found to really make or break their experience in the field. And so I think it's pretty clear that people need to be supported in order to do the best job possibl, and that is especially true in child welfare practice. And furthermore, I think those clinical and reflective spaces should be the norm and not the exception, But that's a whole other talk. I view those as an essential component to any good social work practice, not as an add-on or as a luxury, which I know you alluded to earlier.

[00:32:18] Yeah, absolutely. So it sounds like you are already doing some interesting new work. What do you see as your next steps in your work in this area?

[00:32:26] Well, that's a really good question. I think one of the very next steps is really trying to disseminate my findings to agency settings, given across the U.S. we have some state and local child welfare agencies with record rates of turnover. I'd really like to partner with them on addressing this problem on the ground, again by really putting the child's perspective front and center. So that would include working with administrators and agency leaders to set up some of the supportive and reflective organizational culture pieces that I mentioned previously, as well as putting some of the tracking mechanisms in place so that the prevalence rates and the effects of turnover could be more closely monitored. This would include training staff about the importance of relationships with young people and the ways in which they could approach endings in the most therapeutic way possible. I think that goes for not only workers, but also guarding the litems and staff in residential care facilities and group homes.

[00:33:17] Great. Well, I really appreciate this great work that you're doing. Is there anything else that you would like to share with our podcast listeners that you haven't yet covered?

[00:33:26] The only thing that I want to mention is that I don't want to give the impression that I think professional relationships are more important than family relationships or anything like that. I think all youth should be at home with their families unless, of course, there is a clear and compelling evidence that they will be harmed if they stay. I also think that youth should spend the shortest amount of time as possible in the child welfare system. Having said that though, the reality is many children do spend a considerable amount of time in the system, including the young people in my study. So I think if we are going to have a system where we remove children from their primary caregivers, which I happen to think is a really big deal, then I think we have an ethical responsibility to provide those children with supportive and nurturing relationships while they are in care. I hope that goes without saying, but I just wanted to make that point. Sometimes when I advocate so strongly for the importance of professional relationships, I fear it might give the impression that I think they're most important.

[00:34:19] I appreciate that distinction. And I think also what your study found is that, you know, this obviously varies for youth and varies for workers, but a lot of youth really see those professional relationships as also important in their lives. So I think that that's a really important point. Well, thank you so much, Ashley. I've really enjoyed learning more about your work and I wish you well as you continue in this area. It was great talking with you.

[00:34:42] Well, thank you. I really enjoyed talking with you as well.

[00:34:45] You've been listening to Dr. Ashley Curry's discussion on turnover and relationship disruptions within the child welfare system. I'm Louanne Bakk. Please join us again at inSocialWork.

[00:35:05] Hi, I'm Nancy Smyth, professor and Dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school, our history, our online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs, we invite you to visit

our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there, check out our Technology and Social Work Resource Center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.