RESEARCH FINDINGS
RELEASED 2021
L.Y.G.H.T. Mission

At the core of the L.Y.G.H.T. program, we aim to raise awareness about how youth in foster care who are grieving experience marginalization on various levels, to create ways to provide trauma-informed peer support to youth in foster care, and to promote the importance of moving the child welfare community toward a grief-informed holistic model of care.

Research Question

Does the L.Y.G.H.T. program, a peer grief support program for youth in foster care, enhance the well-being of youth in foster care?

Study Demographics

Participants

- Total Participants: 42
- L.Y.G.H.T. Program: 23
- Waiting List: 19

Ages

- AGE 12: 2
- AGE 13: 7
- AGE 14: 11
- AGE 15: 11
- AGE 16: 11

Gender

- Female: 27
- Male: 14
- Nonbinary: 1

Length of Time at Current Placement

- Less than 1 month = 5
- 1-2 months = 5
- 3-6 months = 11
- 6+ months = 18
- No answer = 3
Outcome Measures

Quantitative - Questionnaires

- Hopefulness
- Social Support
- Total Difficulties
- Self-Worth
- Problem Intensity
- Program Helpfulness
- Trauma-Informed Climate

Qualitative – Focus Groups

- Initial Interest in the Program
- Perceived Program Benefits
- Program Dislikes
- Barriers to Program Participation
- Program Recommendation
- Additional Feedback
Findings
For youth who participated in the L.Y.G.H.T. program:

- Social Support Increased
- Hopefulness Increased
- Self-Worth Increased
- Perceived Problems Became Better and More Bearable

### Results

**Social Support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beginning of Program (Baseline)</th>
<th>6 Weeks Later (Post-Intervention)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>5 = Low Perceived Social Support</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>25 = High Perceived Social Support</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results indicate a positive medium effect (effect size = 0.13) of the LYGHT program for social support: For youth who participated in the LYGHT program, perceived social support increased ($t_1$: $M=16.54$, SE = 1.11; $t_2$: $M=19.42$, SE = 1.17) compared to youth who did not participate in the LYGHT program ($t_1$: $M=18.99$, SE = 1.14; $t_2$: $M=17.87$, SE = 1.20).

$t=Time$ $Point$, $M=Mean$ $Value$, $SE=Standard$ $Error$ $^*$ Controlled for site of intervention
Results indicate a positive medium effect (effect size=0.09) of the LYGHT program for hopefulness. For youth who participated in the LYGHT program, hopefulness increased ($t_1$: $M=27.16$, $SE=1.72$; $t_2$: $M=29.03$, $SE=1.58$) compared to youth who did not participate in the LYGHT program ($t_1$: $M=26.45$, $SE=1.78$; $t_2$: $M=24.72$, $SE=1.63$).

$t=$Time Point, $M=$Mean Value, $SE=$Standard Error

*Controlled for site of intervention
Results indicate a positive medium effect (effect size 0.08) of the LYGHT program for self-worth: For youth who participated in the LYGHT program, self-worth increased ($t_1$: M=28.59, SE=1.50; $t_2$: M=29.39, SE=1.42) compared to youth who did not participate in the LYGHT program ($t_1$: M=31.90, SE=1.54; $t_2$: M=30.69, SE=1.46).

$t$ = Time Point, $M$ = Mean Value, $SE$ = Standard Error

*Controlled for site of intervention
Total Difficulties
(Emotional Problems, Conduct Problems, Peer Problems, and Hyperactivity)

Results indicate a small effect (effect size=0.03) of the LYGHT program for total difficulties: For youth who participated in the LYGHT program, total difficulties stayed the same ($t_1$: $M=14.13$, $SE=1.48$; $t_2$: $M=14.39$, $SE=1.47$) compared to youth who did not participate in the LYGHT program ($t_1$: $M=15.11$, $SE=1.53$; $t_2$: $M=13.90$, $SE=1.52$).

$t$=Time Point, $M$=Mean Value, $SE$=Standard Error
*Controlled for site of intervention
Results indicate a large effect (effect size=0.20) of the LYGHT program for problem intensity: For youth who participated in the LYGHT program perceived problems became better (M=4.29, SE=0.21) to a stronger degree compared to youth who did not participate in the LYGHT program (M=3.32, SD = 0.30).

$t=$Time Point, $M=$Mean Value, $SE=$Standard Error   *Controlled for site of intervention
Across all three sites, youth reported the L.Y.G.H.T. program provided a trauma-informed climate* where youth felt:

- **safe** in the L.Y.G.H.T. group
- they could **trust** other members in the L.Y.G.H.T. group
- **supported** by the other members in the L.Y.G.H.T. group
- the other L.Y.G.H.T. group members **understood** them and what they had been through
- the L.Y.G.H.T. group members **appreciated** sharing with and listening to one another
- that they **had choices** about whether and when they spoke, listened, or participated in the L.Y.G.H.T. program
- that their uniqueness and identity were **respected**

*The Trauma-Informed Program Scale (TIPS; Mitchell & Schuurman, in preparation)
Focus Group Overview

3 FOCUS GROUPS
91% PARTICIPATION RATE

SITE 1 = 6 PARTICIPANTS
SITE 2 = 7 PARTICIPANTS
SITE 3 = 8 PARTICIPANTS

AVERAGE LENGTH OF FOCUS GROUP
30-60 MINUTES

Focus Group Topics

• Initial Interest in the Program
• Perceived Program Benefits
• Program Dislikes
• Barriers to Program Participation
• Program Recommendation
• Additional Feedback
Initial Interest in the Program

When asked what initially drew them to be interested in the L.Y.G.H.T program, participants provided various responses.

- Boredom: "I didn’t have anything better to do."
- Curiosity: "I don’t know. I am curious about stuff."
- Ambivalence: "I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do it or not."
- Research incentives of a $25 gift card: "First was for the money. I’m not gonna lie."
- Interest in helping others: "Someone brought it to my attention and I thought it would be a good idea to join the group to support others."
- Interest in being involved in a group that discussed life: "I wanted to experience how was to sit in a group and talk about life."
Perceived Program Benefits

Theme 1: Personal Well-Being, Empowerment, and Agency

**HEALTHY EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL MANAGEMENT**

I was grieving so I could have the opportunity to open up so I don’t have to keep those feelings inside.

I knew that if I was going to stay in the house any longer, I would fight someone, even grown people.

It was my first time in a program like this. It was nice. It helped me to cope with what I was dealing with.

**HOPEFULNESS**

It helps you to feel like you are not alone. They are also going through something as well and you can help each other.

**AGENCY**

We had time to sit there and think about the people. It was like sending a message to that person, letting them know that I am okay and that everything is going to be okay.
Perceived Program Benefits

Theme 2: Relational Connection and Perceived Support

**SHARE LIVED EXPERIENCE**

I am not the only person who feels the way I feel.

**DEVELOPING AND BUILDING NEW RELATIONSHIPS**

What I like the most about the program was meeting new people and discussing and talking about their stuff and them knowing what they are going through.

**ACCEPTANCE**

I liked the program where everyone was understanding — when you come in with an attitude, they wouldn't jump back at you. They would help out and it would make me feel better.

**“RELATEDNESS” AND CONNECTION**

Everyone could relate to the topics. It hits you.

It drew me closer to the rest of the kids. I got comfortable with others.

This program was different from other because this program, like the title says, it brings LYGHT. Happiness and powerful. Relatedness.
Perceived Program Benefits

Theme 3: Safe Space

CONFIDENTIALITY AND TRUST

I was able to trust these kids with what I was going through. Lately I have been having trust issues. At first, I wasn’t sure I could open up to these kids. I learned I could open up to them and it would stay between us.

I like that you can talk about [your experiences of loss] and that no one tells anyone around the campus.

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING

We didn’t have to share when we didn’t want to.

I like that we could go off topic and we had a little freedom.

NONJUDGMENTAL AND RELAXING ATMOSPHERE

I liked that you are not judged by others and what you say.

It was stress free.
Program Dislikes

- There wasn’t really a part I didn’t like. Everything was good.
- I didn’t like the seats. They were uncomfortable.
- I didn’t like how long it was.
- I didn’t like that I couldn’t stop talking all the time.
- Some parts were boring.
- I didn’t like the fact of seeing people hurting. I wish I could fix their issues.
- The desire to help “fix” problems they could not resolve.

Barriers to Program Participation

- Conflict with their work commitments
  - I had to leave for work 30 minutes early. I was sad.
- Fatigue
  - Sometimes I was sleepy, so I didn’t want to come.
- Competing hobbies
  - I had to stop playing [my game].
Program Recommendation

VALUE OF PEER SUPPORT

It’s a great group. It can help with your problems and you have support there.

I would tell [another youth] it helps you to feel like you are not alone. They are also going through something as well and you can help each other.

TESTIMONIALS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

I shared it with others living [in my community]. I told them I like it and it helps other kids.

I told my sister that she needs to come here and so she can quit telling me what she was going through so she could get some stuff off her back.

PROBLEM-RESOLUTION AND OVERALL WELL-BEING

I would tell [other youth] to join because when they join they are going to feel so much relief from their problems and stress.

I would recommend it. It’s very, it’s like soothing. It helps you to get through what you go through and to get advice on how to cope with your situations.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

I would tell [other youth] to join it! It would really help you out for the rest of your life.
Additional Feedback

LEARNING FROM PEERS
I learned that other people may have nothing. They could be very depressed.

CHANGE IN PERCEPTION
At first I didn’t want to go, even if it was for money. After the first few sessions, it changed the way I saw the group.

PROGRAM EXPANSION
For other youth populations who are grieving.

There are also people who are not in foster care that it would be good for.

You should expand the program to the community, people all over the world.

I think you should combine the program for all the different group homes because it would really help us support each other more because we know people from different places can relate to what we are discussing and feeling.

PROGRAM EXPANSION
For youth in foster care at multiple locations.
Additional Study Highlights

- **3 out of 4** youth chose to participate in the study (42 out of 54 eligible youth)
- **90%** percentage of youth who attended either 5 or 6 sessions
- **Only 1** youth withdrew from the study
- More than 60 hours of the LYGHT program were offered to youth in foster care
- **0** number of hours the clinical support person had to be called upon during group
While children and teens reside in the foster care system, away from their original families, most are faced with not knowing if or when they will return home. We have learned from years of research and through the L.Y.G.H.T. program, the uncertainty results in youth experiencing loss, grief, and ambiguity.

Fortunately, many children and teens in the foster care system are surrounded by a team of adults who are dedicated to ensuring their safety, health, and well-being. This important network of support may include adults such as: foster caregivers, children’s home staff, case managers, original parents, siblings, grandparents and other extended family, attorneys, guardians ad litem, therapists, coaches, teachers, and neighbors.

Each adult in this network serves a fundamental role in supporting and meeting the needs of children and teens in foster care.

However, the increased forced isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic means these children and teens are experiencing even more heartbreaking losses and disconnection. They are in even greater need of support and help from the adults in their lives.

Before the global health crisis, children and teens in our L.Y.G.H.T. grief support groups were saying things like:

- When we were separated from our families, our whole lives were turned upside down.
- People just don’t understand. They think we should be grateful to be in foster care and to just adapt to it, but we miss our family.
- Being part of the L.Y.G.H.T. program is so helpful — being with others who understand makes such a difference.

Being separated from their families already created significant challenges and uncertainty for these children and teens. Now, amid major loss and life changes, children and teens in foster care are faced with even more disruption to their lives. In-person visits are what many children and teens in foster care rely on for connection and hope, and currently these visitations are being put on hold for everyone’s physical health and safety. Even for the many children and teens who are cared for by loving foster caregivers, these relationships are often temporary, and it can be extremely challenging for children and teens to experience this crisis without physical access to the people they may be missing the most.
Next Steps

EXPANDING THE LYGHT PROGRAM TO MORE COMMUNITY SITES IN SOUTH CAROLINA


EXPANDING THE DELIVERY OF THE L.Y.G.H.T. PROGRAM TO INCLUDE YOUTH RESIDING IN FOSTER HOMES

EXPANDING THE LYGHT PROGRAM TO YOUNG ADULTS (17 TO 23 YEARS OLD) IN FOSTER CARE
Acknowledgments

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the youth who participated in this study, the L.Y.G.H.T. community sites (Epworth, Thornwell, and CYDC), the South Carolina Department of Social Services, and our generous funder, The Duke Endowment.

Contact Information

Monique B. Mitchell, PhD, FT
L.Y.G.H.T. Research and Program Director
Dougy Center: The National Grief Center for Children & Families
lyght@dougy.org
www.dougy.org/lyght

Funding

These findings are based on research funded by The Duke Endowment. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and are not necessarily those of The Duke Endowment, the South Carolina Department of Social Services, Epworth Children’s Home, Thornwell, or Carolina Youth Development Center.