

LEGACY THINKING LABS

Kevin Y. Brown's 10 Habits of Highly Successful Foster Kids.

"I firmly believe: Once a Foster Care Kid Always A Foster Care Kid" – Kevin Y. Brown

As an award-winning international motivational speaker, author and entrepreneur who grew up in the foster care system for more than seventeen years, I am well aware of the struggles that those who have experienced foster care endure. In my 25 plus years of experience both being a foster care youth and working with my foster care brothers and sisters, I also have learned the habits that make us successful, in spite of our circumstances. Here are 10 habits that I have discovered through conversation with many other successful foster youth who aged out of the system and created positive lives for themselves. I believe that these habits should be taught worldwide to increase the rise in the foster care success rates exponentially.

1. Build and Maintain Healthy Relationships:

As foster care children, we know how to start and destroy relationships very well. Due to the high volume of changes and disruptions (i.e., moving houses, families, schools and typical social pressures) as well as failed promises from adults, we tend to be guarded and unable to identify positive relationships and places to experience love. As a result, this makes us masters of self-sabotage and bridge burning. In my interactions with other successful foster care children, successful foster care children have learned to build and maintain healthy relationships primarily through trial and error. Habit #9, *Find mentors wherever you go*, sheds light on the importance of a wiser outside influence impacting us to be in touch with ourselves and that will help us maximize our potential and resources. One of the biggest myths for us is that we have to travel this journey alone. The truth is that we do not. With support and the willingness to work on ourselves, foster care children can maintain and build healthy relationships whether they be professional, romantic, parental or platonic friendships. Healthy relationships can lead to a support system to assist in life goals and a family-oriented lifestyle.

3 ways to start building and maintain positive relationships today:

- Be happy. – Your happiness and attitude directly affect all of your relationships and play a huge part in the longevity of them.
- Set boundaries for yourself. – You have to be in touch with yourself so that you are aware of times when you are doing things that you do not enjoy for others. Avoid doing things out of guilt vs. what is best for your needs.

LEGACY THINKING LABS

- Be dependable. – Part of being a great friend and sustaining relationships is keeping your word. Keeping your word lets others know that they can depend on you and in return you will be able to depend on them.

2. Financial Literacy:

In foster care, you usually learn how to survive without much, which teaches us delayed gratification and serves us with our financial psychology in creating our lives for the present and beyond foster care. Naturally, you have wants, and distinguishing between your wants and needs is the foundation to you sustaining and progressing into the upper echelon of Americans who are financially competent.

These financially competent people are your Steve Jobs, Coco Chanel, John Paul DeJoria, Rosie Perez, Rapper Pitbull, Eddie Murphy, Keisha Cole and so many more.

So what's the difference between wants and needs? According to dictionary.com:

A need is a requirement, necessary duty, or obligation. A want is something that you feel inclined to have, something that you wish for but don't need.

To explain further, needs are things that we cannot live without or things that are unavoidable, while wants are things that make us happy but aren't necessary for us to survive or get things done. For example, food and drink are needs because without them, we would not survive. Specific types of food like candy or our favorite pizza are wants because we could eat almost any type of food and still survive.

Now that you have a concept of your needs vs. wants, let's explore how to make your money go further through understanding assets vs. liabilities.

An **asset** is something that makes a profit periodically or when it is sold.

A **liability** is something that takes money away from you or loses money when it is sold.

ASSETS	LIABILITIES
Cash	Mortgage
House	Clothing
Rental Property	Car
Stocks, bonds & mutual funds	Student loans (other loans)
Retirement accounts (401(k) and IRAs)	Credit card debt

LEGACY THINKING LABS

Your understanding of these translates into your day-to-day life. I learned to manage my day-to-day earnings by using a method I learned from T. Harv Ekers's book, *Secrets of the Millionaire Mind*. The jar system is a way to organize money for every aspect of your life using 6 different jars or accounts. The six different accounts are:

1. Financial Freedom Account (FFA) – Money that is only invested to create passive income.
2. Long-Term Saving for Spending (LTSS) – Money that is saved for spending on big purchases like college tuition, house, cars, etc.
3. Education – Money for enrolling in seminars, books and empowering events for your personal growth.
4. Necessities – Money for all of your essential bills such as groceries, commuting, clothing, electricity, rent, phone bills, etc.
5. Play – Money for doing fun activities like going to the movies, eating at restaurants, outings, etc. This must be spent every month.
6. Give – Money for donations to help others in need.

Here is an example of how you would break down your monthly earnings if you made \$2,000.00 per month after taxes.

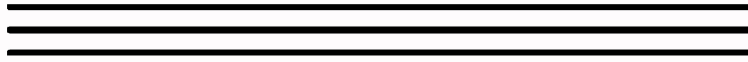
1. FFA = 10% = \$200
2. LTSS = 10% = \$200
3. Education = 10% = \$200
4. Necessities = 55% = \$1,100
5. Play = 10% = \$200
6. Give = 5% = \$100

For more insight on how to use the jar system, visit

<http://www.getrichslowly.org/blog/2009/07/08/learning-to-budget-with-the-jars-system/>

*Becoming financially literate will take time, so here are some tips to start working toward it today.

LEGACY THINKING LABS



3 ways to start being financially smart today:

- Count the money you currently have.
- Calculate all of your monthly and daily expenses and subtract them from your income.
- Read and understand how to use the jar system and implement it today.

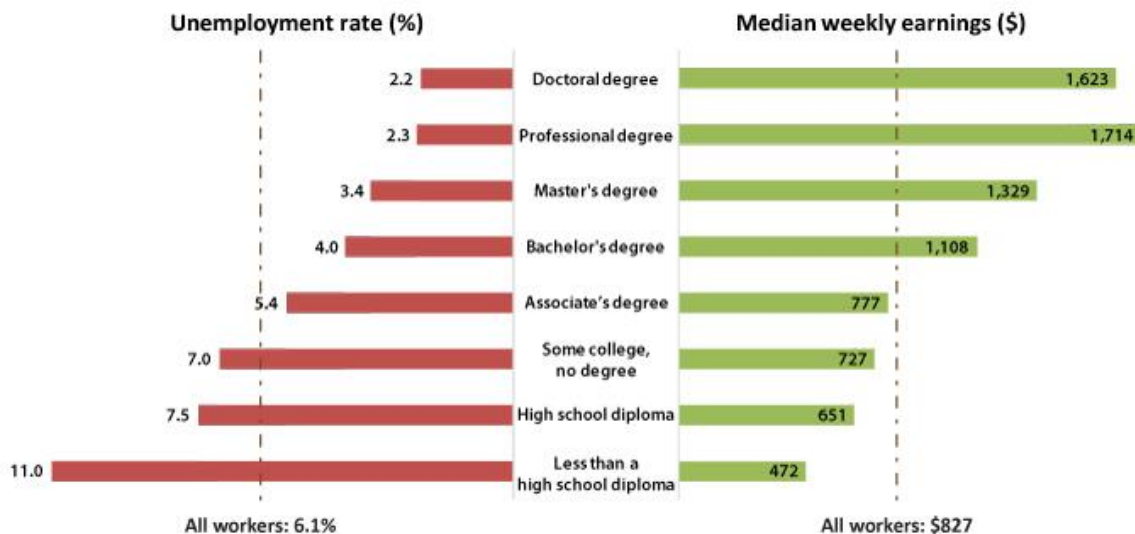
3. Take Advantage of Higher Educational & Vocational Opportunities:

Evolving is a lifelong process, and in order to grow and give yourself a fighting chance in today's world a higher education is key.

A higher education, in this regard, is a skill or the study and application of skills post high school. A college education is only one of the options of higher education; you also have the options of vocational schools, certificate programs and skill-building options. You can teach yourself trades and skills from YouTube tutorials as well. Statistics from the National Math & Science Initiative show that by 2018, it is projected that 63 percent of all jobs in the U.S. economy will require post-secondary education.

Your education level directly reflects the amount of money you are set to make over the course of your life and the likelihood of unemployment.

U.S. Unemployment rate and earnings by educational attainment, 2013



<http://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2014/data-on-display/education-still-pays.htm>

LEGACY THINKING LABS

In many cases foster care children have the options to attend college, certificate and vocational programs for free through state funded tuition waivers. For those who don't have tuition vouchers, they still have the option to enroll in Debt-Free College Academy (www.debtfreecollegeacademy.com) to learn ways to afford college and avoid student loan debt. Successful foster care children are committed to evolving and moving forward. They use higher education as a vehicle to expedite them in achieving their future dreams.

3 benefits of a higher education:

- Earn more money over the course of your life.
- Start or continue a family tradition of academic high achievers.
- Put yourself in a position to compete for employment or as an entrepreneur on a global scale.

4. Find & Maintain Employment:

There are no educational or employment requirements to become a foster parent. That being said, foster parents may or may not be employed or have successful routines. Often times we as foster children only see an example of maintaining a consistent job and work schedule outside of our homes through our teachers, social workers, friends parents and community leaders. Life in foster care continuously seems temporary because of the inconsistencies in home, school, friends etc. This reality often carries over into responsibilities, meaning that when foster care kids move from place to place their responsibilities from home to home change. Usually not put in an advantageous perspective, these moves (opportunities, if you will) offer a chance to learn new skills and adapt to new environments; however the struggle for stability spills over into our professional working lives and cause us to be inconsistent in our commitment to employment, sustainability and ultimately our independence or freedom.

Successful foster care children build consistency in employment by taking it one day at a time and compounding their efforts at work. The consistency in your effort at work will allow you to maintain your job and meet your basic needs. As mentioned in Habit #2 *Financial Literacy*, when you can meet your basic needs, i.e, keeping a roof over your head, clothes on your back and food in your mouth, you will have the option to obtain your wants. Successful foster care children understand that employment is a key piece to their foundation.

LEGACY THINKING LABS

3 ways to find and maintain employment:

- Network to find out about opportunities.
- Update your resume & have it proofread by someone with a similar job that you want, if possible.
- Apply for the jobs you want.
- When you obtain the job, leave personal matters at home, be 15 minutes early every day and be the last one to leave the office every night.

5. Know How to Secure Stable Housing:

Finally, a place that we can call home and that has just our touch on it! Our personal sanctuary. Growing up in care, we often don't feel as if we have our own space or a place to call home. Sure, we transition in and out of many houses (building with four walls that people live in); but a home is somewhere we feel comfortable, safe and special. It's hard to gain that feeling while consistently looking over your shoulder, wondering if your foster parents will give up on you and send you back or if you make a mistake and are kicked out of your placement. Having a home of your own is sometimes our biggest dream as foster care children. We wish to lie in a relaxed environment where we make the rules. In order to get our own apartment/home, we have to understand the application process, which may differ from city to city.

Fortunately training and resources to obtain housing have been mandated through legislation from the Fostering Connections Act, and the competency of having this skillset is critical. Successful foster care children understand the importance and urgency of having stable housing because in order to maximize your potential and results, having a safe haven of your own where you can escape the world and gather your thoughts and be nurtured /celebrated is essential.

3 ways to secure stable housing:

- Find an apartment within your budget range.
- Apply for the apartment.
- Organize your funds according to the jar system and pay your rent on time each month.

6. Health & Wellness Lifestyle

Your health is your wealth. As foster care children, we are often instructed on how to live our lives without having a voice. So doctor, dental, social worker, court dates etc. are all set for us, which causes us to become accustomed to being taken care of and usually hinders us from being self-sufficient. Unfortunately these mandates do not cross over into our life in the realms of diet and exercise. What makes us different from the average kid growing up is that

LEGACY THINKING LABS

after we reach a certain age, we emancipate from foster care and can potentially be without any family ties in a world where being self-sufficient is one of the essential skill sets for survival. With the gift of resiliency, we have the ability to overcome incredible obstacles, and it's only right that we learn how the important habits of healthy eating and mental wellness and exercise serve us to have a long, happy fulfilling life.

Successful foster care children understand that no matter the amount of money, fame or challenge that they have or will experience they must keep moving forward. In order to contribute to the world, they must be willing and able to invest in themselves today. Invest in yourself through your body and mind through meditation, the food you eat and exercise. Here are some recommendations to start your health and wellness lifestyle right now.

3 ways to start your health & wellness lifestyle today:

- Meditate for the first 10 minutes of your day to get grounded in your day's intention and purpose,
- Exercise 3-4 times per week.
- Eat high energy foods like fruits and vegetables and a diet balanced in protein.

Don't be overwhelmed: A little progress each day makes a difference over time.

7. Perspective (Foster care is an opportunity, not a tragedy.)

Growing up in care allows you the opportunity to experience living in other homes. Understanding that at some point in your life someone didn't care enough about you to make sure that you did not end up in foster care is a hard reality to face. So is being the reason that you or your siblings are in care. There are many other scenarios that are not so black and white that land us in care. No matter the reason, it is not an ideal situation.

Successful foster care children view foster care as an opportunity vs. something that has happened to them that they can't move past. Often times, we as foster care children hide the fact that we are in care from the world due to the embarrassment and questions that follow after people become aware. As a professional speaker and former foster care youth who has spoken to thousands of foster care professionals and youth worldwide, I encourage my audiences to see that we are chosen for care because the universe understood that when we were born that we were strong enough to handle it. I also highlight that there are more than 397,121

(<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport20.pdf>) children in foster care in the United States from ages 0-21. And 104,853,555

LEGACY THINKING LABS

(<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-03.pdf>) people in the United States from ages 0-24. Which means that we are really the strong chosen few.

Foster care actually saved my life because it gave me the opportunity to create the life that I dreamed of by equipping me with angels and resources in my environments. I also attribute a great deal of my success to listening and action. Two major assets often overlooked. Because of foster care, I am able to continue moving forward maximizing my potential and results.

Foster care provides us the ability to adapt to different cultures and environments by living in many different types of homes and constantly re-inventing ourselves. It is also usually the hardest time in our life and makes challenges after care easier to manage. We are paying our dues up front to reap the rewards later. "I Am The Brand Say I Am" is a quote that I made up that means that you are in control of your own destiny, and we as foster care children really are. Sadly, expectations of us are sometimes so low that we have the opportunity to do and create the life we want post care instead of being told what we have to do or become.. Care also allows us to have more access to resources such as medical, dental, psychological help etc. that we may not have had while in the care of our biological families. For the reasons listed in this habit, any successful care kid should view foster care as an opportunity vs. an embarrassment and work to make the most of it.

3 reasons to view foster care as an opportunity:

- After surviving care, you know you can survive anything.
- You have access to resources that you possibly wouldn't have with your biological family.
- You have the opportunity to live in different places to gain perspective on the possibilities of how you want your life and home to be when you emancipate

8. Strategic Sharing:

When and what to tell can be a challenge for someone who has experienced trauma. According to the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Children in Foster Care report authored by Jessica Hieger, foster care kids experience posttraumatic stress syndrome at rates higher than that of war veterans. (Pecora et al., 2005)

(http://www.nrcpfc.org/is/downloads/info_packets/PTSDandChildren_in_FC.pdf)

This being said, foster care kids often over share, telling the gruesome realities of the way we are/were treated as second-class citizens in care vs. answering a surface level question. This ultimately opens up the floodgates to emotions for

LEGACY THINKING LABS

ourselves and those listening, which can make atmospheres awkward or unrelatable. It has been my experience when sharing about life growing up that it's best to share things that I have in common with others first, and only share the reality and depth of my experience when asked if I feel comfortable doing so and from a perspective of victor vs. victim.

In my conversations with other successful foster care youth, we have joked and come to the realization that foster care is a unique experience and one that can only be 100% related to by other foster care children. There are inherent habits we have, like the way we pack away food because of in our lives when we didn't know when our next meal was coming, the imbalance of different treatments on birthdays and holidays, or living on the outside of the inside of someone else's family. Understanding that when people generally ask us about different times and experiences growing up, they are looking for the lighthearted stories vs. the heavy hearted stories is key. This doesn't mean that your stories and experiences while growing up don't matter, just that they are not for everyone or to be heard in every scenario. You and your life's work are a testimony to what you are made of; not what has happened to you. Successful foster care children stand in this truth and triumph in life because of it.

3 ways to share strategically:

- Identify the goal of the story you are telling.
- Be aware of the environment/setting & depth of the question you are answering.
- Share from the perspective of a champion vs. victim.

9. Find Mentors Wherever You Go (especially after care)

Mentors make a difference in success. They may go by different names such as teacher, coach, aunt, uncle, Mr. Mrs., dad, mom, social workers, county worker, care giver, etc. Successful foster care kids know that they cannot make it in life by themselves and that they do not know everything. Mentors can serve as lifelong positive connections as well as the chosen family that we have always wanted. Mentors build you to a higher standard and are usually our cheerleaders on our quest to create the lives that we dream of. They support us during our triumphs and our failures and encourage us to keep persevering. They also offer us shortcuts in life by informing us of their life experiences through trial and error. Here is a quote that speaks to this habit perfectly:

“An intelligent person learns from their own mistakes, but a genius learns from the mistakes of others.” – Anonymous

LEGACY THINKING LABS

Though we may switch homes, schools and families, our mentors can be more permanent fixtures in our lives. As I've spoken with other successful foster care children that has been their case. An advantage of finding a mentor wherever you go is that you have a friend who is like family wherever you go. You also have someone who is more familiar with the lay of the land in a place that you may be new to. Mentors have been my guiding light and a huge X factor in my success. I have had mentors in my life since the age of 7 as a member of the continentals of Omega Boys & Girls Club. These same mentors have supported me for almost my entire life, and I have also acquired new mentors on my journey to learn new things and build a bigger chosen family. Mentors make a great support team and amazing extended family. I acquired a mentor when I got to college, and gained many when I moved to New York and as I have traveled the world. I will continue to find mentors wherever I go and mentor others as I evolve. Mentorship works best when you ask questions, take action based upon advice that is given to you and show gratitude.

3 ways to find mentors:

- Find someone who has the skills, personality traits or job position that you want.
- Ask for their mentorship and have a valid case as to why you are worthy.
- Be consistent.

10. Be Aware of Your Environment

Environments have a strong impact on us. Growing up in foster care, we don't usually have a choice about what our home, school or neighborhood environments are overall. If there is a home available, we are typically going to it because one of the goals of the child welfare system is to have foster care youth in homes. These homes may or may not be a good fit for us, each time we move we encounter: New people, new set of rules, new religions, new diet, bedtime and the list goes on. We might not have power over these things; but we do have power to dictate the amount of time and way that we use these resources in these environments to our advantage. Our peer group can play a large part in the environments that we choose to hang out in. This old saying reigns true: Birds of a feather flock together. And if you are the smartest and most hardworking in your crew, you need to find a new crew.

Successful foster care children understand that it is important to realize which environments and people are in alignment with their long-term goals and which make them feel good about themselves. As you learn to identify your environments and the people in them, you will understand how different experiences impact you and what you need to do to make sure you spend time in places where you are celebrated vs. tolerated. Your ability to be aware of your

LEGACY THINKING LABS

environments and choose your peers helps you to choose a family and mentors wisely. Choose your environments wisely and they will elevate you beyond your expectations.

3 ways to pick peers:

- Choose friends who have similar future interest as you.
- Choose friends who motivate and celebrate you.
- Choose friends who are dedicated to becoming better all around.

3 ways to avoid toxic home and neighborhood environments:

- Make friends from other parts of town and go to visit them.
- Participate in extracurricular activities in school that allow you to travel (debate team, leadership class, volunteering, community service).
- Join sports teams that travel and practice.

It is our responsibility as both current foster care youth and Alumni to improve our graduation and overall success rates. We are to be the inspiration for each other, those who work with our foster care brothers and sisters and generations to come. Habits are built over a period of time and take consistent conscious effort. I hope that this writing inspires a greater level of expectation and excellence amongst my foster care brothers and sisters, the professionals/parents that work with us and the world overall. Thank you for reading.

Sincerely,



Kevin Y. Brown