

Series: Pursuing Permanency

Post 2: Engaging Youth

To learn more about the Pursuing Permanency series, which looks at ways to achieve permanency for youth transitioning from foster care into adulthood, please check out the introductory post here: [Post 1: "Enhancing Permanency"](#). If your organization has any programs that engage youth as you work towards their permanency, please share them by emailing Natalie Goodnow at ngoodnow@lutherservices.org!

How large of a role should youth in foster care have in their permanency planning? Are adolescents ready for these big decisions? Can they be an asset in this process? These are some of the questions the CYF learning cohort is asking as they explore how to incorporate youth's voices in their permanency programs. As it turns out, engaging youth in placement planning could actually help prepare them for adulthood. This post will look at two resources on engaging youth in transition planning, one from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and the other from the Mississippi Teen Advisory Board. The first piece is "**Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-Adult Partnerships**," and the second, "**Mississippi Youth Voice**," is a practice tool produced by a group of youth in the Mississippi foster care system which offers a look at their ideas for foster care improvement.¹

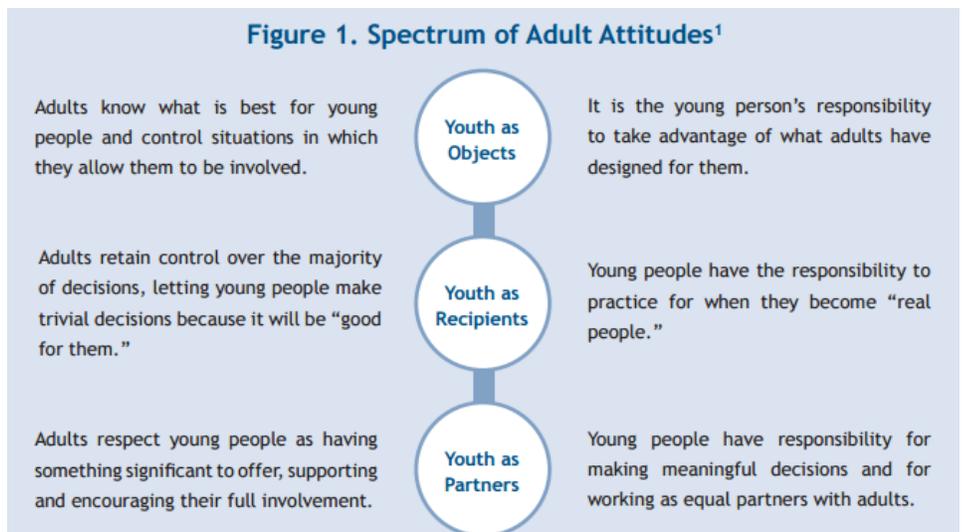
"Authentic Youth Engagement"

The brain of an adolescent undergoes a lot of alteration. Young adults who have the opportunity to practice skills such as decision-making and self-regulation, and engage with adults, are "strengthening the parts of the brain responsible for those functions" (1). Youth in foster care often don't have many opportunities to practice decision-making and leadership, resulting in a feeling of powerlessness. The brief posits that "The engagement of young people succeeds best when it is authentic and when it is supported by youth-adult partnerships" (1).

Importance of Authenticity:

"Engagement loses authenticity when adults are conflicted about questions of power and control. In his spectrum of adult attitudes, William Lofquist categorizes work with young people as fitting into one of three categories (see Figure 1). . . . The struggle in authentically engaging young people lies largely in the fact that it is challenging work to

Figure 1. Spectrum of Adult Attitudes¹



¹ <http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/sites/default/files/documents/Issue%20Brief%20-%20Authentic%20Youth%20Engagement.pdf>,
<http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/sites/default/files/MS%20YOUTH%20VOICE%20PUB%20FINAL7.18.14.pdf>

adequately prepare adults and young people to work together as equal partners. . . . Everyone will need to understand that it takes time to achieve true, meaningful youth-adult partnerships—time to feel comfortable with one another, to agree on areas of importance, and to come to decisions that are agreed on by both the young person and the adult” (1-2).

Authentic Youth Engagement:

The paper describes authentic youth engagement by the experiences of engaged youth. It includes: “They are respected, valued, and trusted and they feel appreciated, safe, and comfortable,” “[t]heir voices are being heard and treated as worthwhile,” “[t]hey see change and progress happening as a result of their contributions” (3).

For foster teens, this engagement happens in two ways:

1. “[Y]oung people become partners in the development of their own case planning, including planning for permanent family relationships. They also participate in transition planning that addresses goals for education, employment, health care, and housing. At this level of engagement, young people fully understand their rights and responsibilities and are full partners in making decisions that affect their lives” (3).
2. “[Y]oung people become actively engaged in their community in areas that are of interest to them, such as faith-based groups, extracurricular school activities, local clubs, sports, causes, and politics. Young people who want to improve the foster care system also have opportunities to advise and influence child welfare practice and policy. . . . Opportunities to positively influence the foster care experiences of others is a very meaningful way for them to get involved and to give back” (4).

Youth-Adult Partnerships:

A key to an authentic youth-adult partnerships is equality in opportunities to make decisions and “independently carry out tasks to reach shared goals” (4). “Young people who are involved in positive, meaningful, respectful relationships with adults show improved skills and competencies and they are less likely to engage in dangerous behaviors. Research indicates that young people who are involved in positive social relationships and activities with adults develop stronger communication skills and leadership experience. They gain increased status and stature in the

Key Elements of Authentic Youth Engagement

Relevance: Engage the youth around relevant issues that affect their individual/collective life conditions.

Accessibility: Demonstrate accessibility that is inclusive, engaging a broad cross-section of youth, including marginalized youth.

Consistency: Become an organization that champions the inclusion of youth as routine practice.

Authenticity: Include authentic and formalized youth participation in program development, implementation, and evaluation. A high level of meaningful youth participation has clear roles, shared decision-making, a diversity of roles, youth empowerment, and/or increased personal agency for youth.

Hands-On, Action Learning: Offer projects that emphasize experiential learning and include action projects that have a range of structured and informal learning opportunities for youth to contribute.

Local Projects: Have a local community focus for youth action projects. Face-to-face, frequent participation is easier, and results and recognition are more readily visible.

Scope: Include an evolving capacity for youth to participate and an increased range of opportunities.

Recognition and Respect: Honestly and openly respect youth opinions, allow them air time and space in discussions, and recognize their contributions, including celebrating project milestones.

-Source: Hoffman & Staniforth, 2007
(Quoted in “Authentic Youth Engagement”)

community, which leads to greater self-esteem” (5). Adults are also benefitted, improving their own skills.

According to “Authentic Youth Engagement,” youth-adult partnerships often result in “greater willingness of young people to accept the services and messages of the program,” “additional human resources due to the sharing of responsibilities between young people and adults,” “new perspectives on decision-making, including more relevant and meaningful information about the needs and interests of young people,” and more (5).

Achieving Authentic Partnerships:

There are three conditions that help facilitate effective youth-adult partnerships: 1) “adults must be willing to share their power and responsibility with young people,” 2) “young people need to be willing to take on responsibility,” and 3) “both need skills to work together respectfully and successfully” (5).

Below are three main categories that organizations can work on to support and facilitate successful partnerships (6-8).

Helping Partnerships	Helping Adults	Helping Youth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer training to promote effective partnering • Select those willing to engage in mutuality of the process • Provide opportunities for partners to learn what each brings to the table • Encourage communication about mutual expectations • Emphasize mutuality of partnership • Ensure youth and adults work together to determine roles, guidelines, divide tasks, etc. • Provide resources, such as childcare for parents and transportation for youth • Allow youth to make significant program and community decisions 	<p>Make sure adults...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expect from youth partners responsibility, skills, and participation • Respect youth’s time and responsibilities • Treat youth as individuals • Take time to explain – youth may lack the knowledge to be effective partners at first • Plan for youth’s involvement (such as holding meetings when youth can attend in an accessible location) • Recognize internal and external barriers to youth-adult partnerships 	<p>Help youth...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate their capabilities, identifying strengths, interests, and commitments they bring to the table • Accept feedback – constructive criticism is not disrespect or a dismissal • Utilize opportunities • Check assumptions and stereotypes • Practice good communication -- adults may need help allowing youth to complete their ideas, and youth may need support to persevere despite interruptions

“Mississippi Youth Voice”

This document “reflects the priorities and insights of young people in the Mississippi foster care system” (1). In 2014, “30 members of the Mississippi Teen Advisory Board came together to share their concerns and solutions for a system to better support youth in foster care and those transitioning out” (1). This

youth-produced publication for the state is the result of their work, and this summary focuses on the key solutions they put forward on matters of independent living, privacy, staying connected to family, and more.

Permanence Planning

Solutions for staying connected to siblings and extended family (2):

- Siblings should stay together whenever possible; if that is not possible they should stay connected through regular visits.
- Specify policies that enable youth to attend family and life events, and outings.
- Ensure that all youth have access to transportation to visit siblings and attend family events.

Solutions for involving youth in permanence planning (2):

- All youth in foster care should be allowed to take the lead in their case planning.
- Where possible, youth should be able to speak to the judge directly.
- The state should develop a system that will ensure youth and their social worker meet twice each month. Young people should be advised to keep a log of their contact with social workers.
- Ensure that all youth have a plan—developed with their input—before they leave the system.

Housing and Freedom of Movement

Privacy and respect solutions (3):

- Youth in care should have access to a phone where they can speak privately.
- Whenever a foster child wishes to speak with their social worker, foster parents and residential staff should allow this without asking why. Some conversations are private.
- At home, youth should be able to send and receive unopened mail.
- Youth should be given the opportunity to attend school and after-school activities with access to safe transportation and without additional scrutiny of friends and chaperones.
- All youth should have the right and ability to attend religious services and activities.

Solutions for Safety (4):

- Specify and enforce a “whistle-blower” policy so youth in foster care placements and group homes are encouraged to safely report concerns and problems.
- Social workers should develop relationships with those who work in group homes to ensure safe, respectful environments.
- Create a monthly newsletter for all youth in foster and kinship care that includes information on rights and policies.
- Create a Youth Advocate position under a performance-based contract to improve the rules, communication and safety in group homes.

Independent Living Solutions (4):

- Provide incentives for attending Independent Living Skills groups and other events.
- Ensure that all youth in foster care have multiple avenues to interact with MDHS [Mississippi Department of Human Services] staff to accomplish goals, including independent living.
- Provide support to youth to move personal belongings between placements—including suitcases, duffel bags, transportation and help with moves.

Physical and Mental Health

Access to Care Solutions (5):

- Ensure that all young people have access to personal documents including their birth certificate, Social Security card and medical records.
- Increase access for transportation to and from medical appointments.
- Promote education and enrollment in health insurance/Medicaid after leaving care.

Medication and Supplements Solutions (5):

- After a certain age, all youth should have access to written justification for prescriptions and medications to allow them to make informed decisions.
- Specify the situations in which a young person has the right to refuse medications and ensure all youth are informed of this.
- Give all youth access to their medical history and records in order to make informed health decisions.

Financial Stability and Literacy**Solutions for stipends (7):**

- Stipends should be direct deposited to a bank account for youth. Youth age 14 and up, as required by law, should be able to have a debit card to access these funds.
- Increase the clothing allowance and/or distribute funds three times each year rather than just once upon entering the system.
- Develop a consistent statewide system to prepare youth in care for financial stability after leaving care—including financial coaching and extending financial support for six months after leaving the system.
- Youth should have a copy of the Foster Care Handbook and a social worker should explain it to ensure youth are informed of their rights and understand disbursement of available stipends.

Access to Jobs and Appointments (7):

- All youth should be allowed and encouraged to work, unless the law states they are too young to manage the money earned.
- Designate a liaison to help youth get a driver's permit or license.
- Two or three times a year, have a designated day when local youth in foster care are taken collectively to get a learner's permit or driver's license.
- In small rural areas, the system could assign one individual to provide transportation for employment needs and appointments.

Education (8)

- Social workers and staff could liaise with school and after-school staff to help youth understand the clubs/ volunteer opportunities available.
- Develop and enforce a system to efficiently and easily transfer school records and ensure that all young people can access their records.
- Time limits on Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) funds should be extended.

If you would like to share what your organization is doing on permanency or have questions or a particular permanency focus/subject you wish to see a post on, please email Natalie Goodnow at NGoodnow@lutherservices.org.