

SoC23

Summit on Children 2023



PARTICIPANT MATERIALS

Advocating *With* Youth Not *For* Youth

March 17, 2023

Jordan Gendel
Lauren Langan
D'borah Israel

Advocating with rather than for youth

D'Borah Israel

Jordyn Gendel

Lauren Langan



ROCKY MOUNTAIN
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law center

Project Foster Power

project Foster Power is a group of current and former foster youth who are using our voices and experiences to improve the Colorado child welfare system through youth-led organizing and advocacy.

Hosted by the Rocky Mountain Children's Law Center, pFP is the Colorado partner of Foster Youth in Action, a network of groups across the United States and Canada who believe in the power of foster youth voice.



Stay connected with us!

Follow us **@projectfosterpower**

Email **projectfosterpower@childlawcenter.org**

Young Adult Legal Advocacy (YALA)

YALA is a program at the Rocky Mountain Children's Law Center that works with young adults in Colorado who have experienced instability, like foster care, juvenile justice, or homelessness, and are entering adulthood.

We support young people navigating barriers to housing, education, and employment by providing civil legal services and connecting them to community resources.

Agenda

- ❑ Empowering Youth and Young Adults
- ❑ What Ethics Tells Us
- ❑ Issue Spotting and Community Connections
- ❑ Interdisciplinary Legal Teams
- ❑ Other Practical Tips

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Empowering Youth and Young Adults

Focusing on 18-25 year olds

- Ready to be active decision makers in their own lives¹ but they need the opportunities to practice these skills.
- Directing their own future can lead to positive outcomes.
“...develop higher self-esteem, improved leadership, and a stake in their own lives and communities.”²
- We shouldn't assume how youth and young adults would like to be supported or empowered.

Young adults are the experts in their own lives

What is Empowering Youth?

Empowering youth means getting to know them, fully. Building authentic relationships, and uplifting the youth in their own lives.

Empowerment is unique to each person

- **Listen.** It's all about how the young person is feeling and how *they* want to be supported
- **Advocate.** Not *being* their voice but *amplifying* their voice
- **Include** the youth in decision making
- **Connect** youth to community and help them find the right supports
- **Encourage** skill-building opportunities

Recognizing Power Dynamics

Consider your own identities:

- Profession and role on the team
- Education
- Disability or ability
- Sexual orientation
- Race and ethnicity
- Social class/socioeconomic status
- Gender
- Age
- Power in court & on the team
- + so many more

We can't change these but it is important to recognize and acknowledge them

Acknowledging Power Dynamics

Examples to get started:

Profession and role on the team

- Explain what brought you into your profession, or re-explain your role on the team.

Power in court

- What big and small ways can you make a young person feel more comfortable?

Information and Knowledge

- Use youth-friendly language
- Leave time for comprehension and questions
- Withholding is holding power - share the *why* behind a decision

Hypothetical

How might you introduce yourself, and begin your conversation with Jacob?

Are there any power dynamics that you would want to acknowledge?

Tips for Building an Empowering Relationship

Get to know them on a deeper level. They are more than just the file or case.

- ☐ Start by asking questions, and listening actively
- ☐ Find opportunities to authentically connect

Consider how the youth is feeling.

- ☐ Check in with the youth to see how they are doing
- ☐ Make sure they are comfortable before moving forward

Take your time.

- ☐ Explain details and leave room for questions
- ☐ Give time for understanding

Hurdles to Empowering Youth

Youth may not want your support right away

- Don't avoid necessary conversations just because you feel disliked
- Be supportive anyway. You may be all they have

Logistical barriers

- Ask if they'd like you to text them reminders for meetings/hearings
- Preemptively address transportation

Capacity

- *"I am really busy this week. Would it be alright if I called you on Monday?"*
- *"Can you write me an email with your concerns so we don't forget about them between meetings?"*

Assumptions

- Don't assume the youth needs help with something.
- Don't assume the youth can handle something without additional support.
- Ask!

Hypothetical (continued)

How might you respond to Jacob and what question would you ask him, while considering building an empowering relationship?

What hurdles do you foresee in building an empowering relationship with Jacob? How might you address them?

Agenda

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- ❑ **What Ethics Tells Us**
- ❑ Issue Spotting and Community Connections
- ❑ Interdisciplinary Legal Teams
- ❑ Other Practical Tips

What Ethics Tells Us

Model Rules of Professional Conduct:

- 1.2 Scope of Representation and Allocation of Authority
- 2.1 Advisor

1.2 Scope of Representation and Allocation of Authority Between Client and Lawyer

- A lawyer shall abide by a **client's decisions** concerning the **objectives** of representation and,
- A lawyer shall **consult** with the client as to the **means** by which they are to be pursued.

2.1: Advisor

In representing a client, a lawyer shall exercise independent professional judgment and render candid advice. In rendering advice, a lawyer may refer not only to law but to other considerations such as moral, economic, social and political factors, that may be relevant to the client's situation.

Think About It

What are some of the barriers you face in empowering youth in these ways?

Agenda

- ✓ Empowering Youth and Young Adults
- ✓ What Ethics Tells Us
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Issue Spotting with Young Adults

- The problems we identify aren't always the problems the youth see
- Explain the *why* when prioritizing issues, and developing a plan for action
- They might not be ready, be there when they are
- Find strategies that help issue spot together

Connecting Youth to Their Community

At the end of our representation, we should not be the people the young person calls for support.

“Talk with young people about where they find support so that they can decide who makes up their community. Help them explore places of worship, local recreation centers, community gardens, school clubs or sports, a local coffee shop or restaurant, a pick-up basketball game, and so many other places of connection.”

-project Foster Power(pFP)

“Helping young people build their community gives them an opportunity to get comfortable with their surroundings, and to create a life that is more diverse. A community brings peace, happiness, and joy.”

- D.W. project Foster Power member

Hypothetical (continued)

What questions might you ask Jacob to help him self-identify the issues and solutions?

Agenda

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- ✓ Issue Spotting and Community Connections
- ❑ **Interdisciplinary Legal Teams**
- ❑ Other Practical Tips

What is a multidisciplinary team?

A group of people with different professional perspectives working together to advance one person's position or rights.

Who has been on your
Multidisciplinary Team?

Who could be on your
Multidisciplinary Team?

Word Cloud QR Code

Skills/Experience a Multidisciplinary Team may provide

- Crisis intervention
- Evaluation of clients' needs
- Advanced communication with client
- Assistance accessing community resources
- Employment support
- Mental health & substance use counseling

Benefits of a Multidisciplinary Legal Team

- Reduce workload for attorney
- Increase client satisfaction
- Reduced arrests and days in jail
- Significant improvements in youth mental health and behavior
- Increased treatment referrals and adherence
- Increased enrollment in school

Agenda

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- ✓ What Ethics Tells Us
- ✓ Issue Spotting and Community Connections
- ✓ Interdisciplinary Legal Teams
- ❑ **Other Practical Tips**

Project Foster Power: Improving Supports for Young People Exiting Foster Care

Best Practice Recommendations

- 1) Placements that Better Meet Our Needs
- 2) Self-Care and Community
- 3) Education and Employment

Reflection Activity

How could you have empowered Jacob differently?

What will you take with you into your next interaction
with a young person?



Advocating *with* Rather than *for* Youth
Sources

Slide: Focusing on Older Youth/Young Adults

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Slide: Connecting Youth to Their Community

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Slide: Skills/Experience a Multidisciplinary Team may provide

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Benefits of a Multidisciplinary Legal Team

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**Advocating *with* Rather than *for* Youth
Hypothetical**

You have been appointed to represent Jacob (he/him) as Guardian ad Litem. Jacob is 17 years old. You were appointed to represent Jacob's best interest in a dependency case, and Jacob also has an ongoing delinquency case for theft from a local convenience store. You know from the paperwork you received that Jacob was in kinship foster care with his grandmother from ages 2 - 5 years old and that she was then granted custody of Jacob.

How might you introduce yourself and begin your conversation with Jacob?

Are there any power dynamics that you would want to acknowledge?

Two weeks later you meet with Jacob and he is feeling more comfortable, so he shares a bit about what is going on in his life right now. He just started his senior year of high school, and is staying with his aunt. Until recently, Jacob lived with his grandmother since his dependency case closed. He shares that he is worried about his grandmother who is now facing health issues and is unable to care for Jacob full time. Jacob's parents have been involved in his life sporadically but do not have stable, appropriate housing.

How might you respond to Jacob and what question would you ask him, while considering building an empowering relationship?

What hurdles do you foresee in building an empowering relationship with Jacob? How might you address them?

Now that Jacob is feeling more comfortable, he shares a bit about what is going on in his life right now. Jacob tells you that he has been looking for a job but every time he gets through the interview process, he gets denied based on his background check. He doesn't understand what is showing up on their end, and why it is keeping him from getting a job. He also shares that he hasn't been able to afford groceries in 3 weeks because of the instability of his income. He shares some background information that he was in the foster care system between the ages of 13-16 and may have had a charge on his record, but isn't sure.

What questions might you ask Jacob to help him self-identify the issues and solutions?

Tips for Working *with* rather than *for* youth

Having Empowering Conversations

- Give options, even if they seem small. Ex: Do you want to talk about topic 1 or 2 first?
- Get on the same level. Ex: If they are sitting down, sit with them.
- Include youth in decision making
- Use visual tools to help explain harder concepts and to create plans together.
- Get creative with checking for understanding. Don't use yes or no questions. Ex: "That was a lot of information I just gave you, could you repeat back those next steps so I can make sure I didn't miss anything?"
- End every conversation with asking "what are your questions?" or by guiding the questions they may want to ask.

Building Relationships

- Build in relational time. Ex: "Let's spend the first 5 mins catching up. I want to hear how you are."
- Explain your role, and the purpose for working together.
- Follow through & communicate when plans change.
- Ask youth how they want to be supported and empowered. Ex: "In the past, I've sent a follow-up text with next steps. Would you like me to do that?"
- Start and end meetings with a relational moment. Ex: "What do you have planned for the rest of your day?"
- Send helpful reminders. It is not their job to keep track of it all, it's yours.

Other Considerations

- Advocate-not by being their voice but amplifying their voice.
- Be consistent in your words & actions.
- Explain the "why" behind your decisions or recommendations.
- Withholding information is withholding power.
- Remember, youth are the experts in their own lives
- Empower youth by reviewing their rights with them regularly.
- Find skill-building opportunities
- Connect young people to resources in their own community that will be there long after you are finished working with them.
- Let youth get to know you.

303.692.1165

Info@childlawcenter.org



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PFP IMPACT

Best Practice Recommendations of project Foster Power



FOCUSING ON PLACEMENTS:

- Valuing Youth Voice
- Sharing Information
- Encouraging Childhood
- Considering Medication
- Trusting Youth

IMPROVING SUPPORTS AS YOUTH TRANSITION OUT OF FOSTER CARE

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pFP follows a **Youth Action Cycle** to listen directly to youth members across the state, identify a shared issue, develop a plan, and work to create change through collective action. Hearing time and time again that youth did not feel adequately prepared or supported in their transition to adulthood, we identified our 2020-2021 issue for action: **Improving Supports for Young People Exiting Foster Care**. As part of this campaign, youth came together to develop best practice recommendations for professionals across three key areas: 1) Placements that Better Meet Our Needs, 2) Self-Care and Community, and 3) Education and Employment. This is the first of three volumes of best practice recommendations. Our intention is that these recommendations spark change in practice and create greater dialogue around these issues. We encourage you to contact us to continue the conversation.

BEST PRACTICE #1

Incorporate Youth Voice in the Placement Process. Communication is key.

Our Recommendations:

- When placing youth out of their home, ask them if they have ideas for possible placements. Maybe they know a family member, teacher, coach, or family friend who could be an option.
- Talk with young people about their placement preferences. What are their top three priorities? Maybe it's location (close to school or friends or other connections). Maybe they prefer a home with only younger children. Maybe it's a home that would encourage connection to the youth's own culture. Find out directly from the youth what things are MOST important to them in finding a placement. Be transparent and explain to the youth that while you might not be able to find a placement to meet all of their preferences, you want their input. The conversation in and of itself is important in the youth feeling heard.
- Think creatively about ways to introduce the youth to a potential placement. Maybe the young person has a chance to "interview" the placement, do a trial visit, or spend respite time in the home to see if it's a good fit.
- Communication is so important in placement changes. As much as possible, be direct with the youth about why any move is happening. Unless there is an emergency, try to give the youth as much notice as possible about the change so they can prepare. Provide an opportunity for "closure" - talking with the youth about why a placement wasn't the best option for them.
- Upon placement, be sure to provide the youth with a copy of their rights in foster care. Talk with them about these rights to ensure they understand and have a chance to ask questions. Be sure youth know who they can talk to if they believe these rights aren't being respected. Also talk with their placement about these rights so that everyone is on the same page.
- Be sure to schedule a recurring time to check in with the young people in your care. Regular check-ins help to build trust and create space to have open conversations about how youth are feeling in placement.
- Train foster parents and other placements on how to best build connection and trust with the youth in their homes.

The Problem . . .

"While youth should feel they have agency in their lives, many times foster youth do not feel like their voice matters when it comes to decisions in their own lives."

- B.T.

"Youth need to feel heard and feel like they have some control over their life. If there are decisions that are made about the youth that they are unable to have a say in, full transparency is a non-negotiable."

- Anonymous

Our Voice:

"Just like you have a gut instinct about incompatibility on a first date, youth have a similar sense when meeting a potential placement for the first time.

Had my caseworker listened to the alarm bells of my intuition, I could have avoided a year-long neglectful foster placement."

- E.M.

"I didn't get a say in my placement, and where I ended up pushed me further away from my goals of going to college and staying close to my family."

- S.C.

BEST PRACTICE #2

Share information to help everyone in the placement be on the same page.

Our Recommendations:

- When placing a youth, explain to them that certain information is shared with placements so that they can best meet the youth's needs. To the extent you are able, tell the youth what type of information needs to be shared and why. This might include information about their triggers, their likes or dislikes, their interests, their coping skills or supports, and any special needs.
- Consider having youth complete a form to help with this conversation. Share the form with any new placement - that way the youth has some sense of control over what information gets shared. The form could include questions such as "What do you want a new placement to know about you?" or "How can a new placement best support you during the transition to their home?" This will give the young person time to consider their needs and articulate them in a thoughtful way. Let the youth know you will share their responses with the future placement.
- Train placements about how to communicate with youth who are new to their home. Encourage the caregiver to ask the youth on Day #1 what they want the caregiver to know about them and create space for the youth to share their story (as much as they want to share) from their own perspective. This is important even if the placement has already been informed about the youth's history. The caregiver should be able to react to the youth and ask questions.
- It is important for youth to feel welcome in their new placement and supported in "getting settled." Encourage placements to let youth know at the beginning that they will have conversations about rules and expectations (perhaps later in their first week), but that on Day #1, the focus is on helping the youth take a deep breath and feel safe in their new space. Exact timing of the "rules and expectations" conversation may vary based on the youth, but it's key not to overwhelm them at the time of the placement.
- Prepare other individuals in the home for the youth's placement. Placements should not be a surprise for anyone!

The Problem . . .

"I am more than my file. Don't let a placement turn me down because I am labled as 'at risk'. Yes, I am a human and I determine what my life can be."
- D.W.

"A lack of transparency results in a youth in care feeling that everyone but them is pulling the strings in their lives. If you want youth to exit care feeling like they have agency, be transparent with them from the beginning- and this starts with placements."
- B.T.

Our Voice:

"After an amazing Christmas stay with a potential foster family, I couldn't wait to be picked up from school the following day. Sadly, they never came. I was never told why. Eight years later, I still wonder what I did wrong."
- E.M.

BEST PRACTICE #3

Create opportunities for youth to experience and enjoy "childhood."

Our Recommendations:

- Consider using words like "quality" or "stable" when describing the childhood you want for youth. Using words like "normal" and "normalcy" can be upsetting to hear. Every young person has a unique childhood.
- Communicate with the youth about how they want to talk about their placement. Talk about how they want to refer to their adult supports/caregivers (as "foster parent," "guardian," "caregiver," by name, etc.)?
- Being able to engage in extracurricular activities, having time with friends, and having other opportunities for fun should be a part of every childhood. Be sure that placements are trained in the "reasonable and prudent parent" standard. Encourage placements to provide youth in their care opportunities for self-discovery by helping them find and choose activities to participate in and by supporting the connections they build with friends. Stop telling foster youth what they can't do and find opportunities to say yes!
- When possible, teach youth to have healthy relationships through the use of personal phones and social media. Help them navigate personal privacy and boundaries when using technology. Support them in spending time with friends outside of school, including hangouts and sleepovers.
- Learn about the relationships that were important to a youth before they entered care. Consider supporting these connections by encouraging continued contact when appropriate.
- All relationships can be difficult at times. Support youth in navigating these moments by offering guidance when they are struggling with communication and connection.
- Create household rules and consequences that are reasonable for the developmental level of each youth.
- Consider utilizing foster care funds to incorporate positive reinforcement options for youth, such as outings, games, toys, or allowance. Keep it consistent.
- Value youth agency. Set youth up for their futures by giving them practice in using their voices and making decisions. Send a message to the youth that they are insiders in their life decisions, rather than outsiders.

The Problem. . .

"We will never have another opportunity to have a 'childhood' if we don't take it now."

- V.J.

"Foster youth are often robbed of sleepovers, trampolines, and prom.

We sacrifice normalcy for safety to the point we go overboard and forget these kids just want to be kids.

If youth can't have a childhood while in the system, they'll never have one at all.

Trauma has corrupted most of foster youth's childhoods. You are responsible for making sure normalcy is restored for them."

- E.M.

Our Voice:

"These types of activities are labeled as "privileges" in care, but I didn't do anything wrong to be placed in foster care so why am I being punished?"

- Anonymous

"Let us be rowdy and silly. Chances are, it's the first time we've ever felt safe enough to do so."

- E.M.

BEST PRACTICE #4

Include youth in decision-making around prescription medication.

Our Recommendations:

- Explore healthy coping tools with youth as an alternative or additional way to manage prior trauma. Make sure you do this before seeking medication.
- Remember: you are in a position of trust and power as an adult in a youth's life. Use care in your decisions regarding medication. If medication is being considered for a youth, decision makers should be fully informed of the reason for prescribing, the plan for treatment, any side effects, and alternative options.
- Talk with youth about these medical recommendations. Involve them in making decisions about their own bodies. Be sure they understand that taking medication does not mean there is something "wrong" with them.
- If a youth is prescribed medication, teach them directly about those prescriptions, the potential side effects, and the intended impact. Give youth space to ask questions.
- Model what a good question might sound like so that youth learn how to advocate for themselves. Maybe help youth develop a list of questions before they meet with a doctor.
- Create opportunities during medical appointments, team meetings, and/or court hearings for youth to express their opinions regarding medication.
- Listen to youth when they tell you a medication isn't working or doesn't feel right in their bodies. Trust them to know their bodies best.
- Especially before youth exit foster care, develop a plan for medication management and/or discontinuation of prescriptions.
- Support transgender youth in accessing appropriate and supportive healthcare.

The Problem . . .

"We should know what medications we are taking, and if we don't, then why take them?"

- V.J

"When you use prescription drugs to treat our emotions, it may lead us to believe that there is something wrong with us. Instead, allow us to process our emotions in a healthy way."

- Anonymous

"Youth need to learn how to regulate their physical and mental health in a healthy way. Teach them the importance of this and how medications can and cannot help achieve overall wellbeing."

- E.M.

Our Voice:

"I was put on anti-depressants and Ambien during my time in foster care, which caused me to become dependent on those prescriptions for over 10 years until I was able to wean off of them and develop solutions that did not require taking a pill."

- Anonymous

"When I was in placements I had many changes in my medication but I never knew what they were for. When I asked, they did not tell me."

- V.J.

BEST PRACTICE #5

Listen first. Trust youth.

Our Recommendations:

- Youth know themselves best. Listen to them. Their intuition about what they need is really good.
- Encourage all youth to speak up and participate in their own cases, regardless of any disabilities, mental health concerns, or other challenges.
- Allow the youth to make mistakes and be there to guide them back on track. Don't disappear.
- Do your part in communicating with the youth no matter what. Your relationship will be strengthened if both you and the youth practice a resolution cycle. When you make a mistake, use this as a model to repair and take accountability in the relationship. Youth learn by watching you.
- When talking with a youth, listen to understand, instead of listening to respond.
- Think about how you can act like a "coach" in your interactions with youth, as opposed to being a "boss." Find ways to encourage them in achieving their own goals.

The Problem . . .

"When I would go to a new placement, the adults thought they knew me already just by having looked at my paperwork. The truth is, you won't know me until you talk to me."
- Anonymous

"If our teams of professionals don't listen, then we won't have the opportunity to know and express what we want."
- V.J.

"If you don't trust us, how are we supposed to trust you?"
- S.C.

Our Voice:

"I felt like my voice in care was treated more of an after-thought rather than a genuine suggestion for my own wellbeing."
- Anonymous

"Treat us with the same respect you would treat a coworker or peer. Don't talk down to me as if I don't know how to take care of myself. Trust me, I've been doing it since I was nine"
- E.M.

"In one of my placements I was trusted and felt like I was getting closer to independence. When I made mistakes I learned from them with the help of my group home parent who was awesome. She was patient, calming and she took the time needed for me to learn."
- S.C.

As foster youth, we often feel like outsiders in our own lives, not being given the opportunity to speak up and make choices.

These best practice recommendations were created FOR professionals BY youth with lived experience in foster care. We are here to be a part of the solution. We offer these recommendations to guide your work so that you can support youth in the best way possible.

Thank you for taking the time to read these. We hope you stop to think about how you can put them into practice.

Our goal is to improve supports for youth exiting foster care.
That starts with YOU and it starts NOW.

Stay connected with us via Facebook or Instagram:

@projectfosterpower

To get more information, email, call or text:

projectfosterpower@childlawcenter.org

720-691-5901



PFP IMPACT

Best Practice Recommendations of project Foster Power



FOCUSING ON: SELF-CARE & COMMUNITY

- Self-Care Practices
- Physical & Mental Health
- Medication
- Building Community
- Activities & Opportunities
- Maintaining Community

IMPROVING SUPPORTS AS YOUTH TRANSITION OUT OF FOSTER CARE

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BEST PRACTICE #1

SELF-CARE

Check in. Listen. Create opportunities for exploration.

Our Recommendations:

- Understand that as a professional on the youth's team, you are a big part of their life. Your opinions, ideas, and support matter to them.
- Check-in regularly with youth. Don't wait until something goes wrong to ask how they are doing. Be consistent and follow through on your promises.
- Self-care isn't just about "coping skills." Help youth understand that some self-care options can come from external sources, like friends or activities, while others are internal, like slowing down and breathing deeply.
- As youth grow and change, so will their self-care strategies. Allow youth the space to explore new ways to practice self-care.
- Allow youth to incorporate their cultural and religious practices into their self-care routines. Be open: these practices help youth maintain their identities and hold on to pieces of their lives from before they entered care.
- Consider sharing ways that you practice self-care with the youth on your caseload. What are your daily or weekly practices? Maybe practice self-care with the youth.
- Brainstorm self-care practices with youth and introduce them to new ideas. These might include: working out, practicing art, being outside, meditating, taking and understanding the medication that impacts their bodies, cooking and eating healthy, finding a therapist that feels right to the young person, photography, being around others, or taking space for themselves when needed or wanted.
- Talk with youth about how developing strategies for self-care now can positively impact them in the future. Self-care is not just for their time in foster care.
- Self-care practices can only be impactful if youth learn to use them in their day-to-day lives. Make sure everyone involved in the youth's life (from placement to school to the greater community) allows youth to develop and utilize these self-care skills. Work with youth to understand which practices might be best in certain situations.

The Problem . . .

" Self-care is the only way to move forward in our lives. It is incredibly important to know how to do this. When we are in the system, it makes it harder to know the way to care for ourselves."

- A.M.

Our Voice:

"Please stop treating foster youth as if we don't know how to take care of ourselves. We are often the only ones that have taken care of us."

- Anonymous

"When I was in care I did not get the ability to explore self-care options like my peers outside of care had. In my high school, I saw my peers having opportunities that I did not have."

- A.M.

BEST PRACTICE #2

SELF-CARE

Empower youth to actively participate in their own physical and mental health care.

Our Recommendations:

- Encourage youth to lead or at least participate in conversations about their own physical or mental health.
- Support youth in recognizing changes in their mental well-being, especially surrounding big transitions like placement moves. Talk with youth about how these changes are impacting the way that they feel, cope, or interact with others.
- Proactively create a plan WITH youth for taking care of their mental health. Don't just create treatment plans for them. Implement any plans WITH youth as well. Remember that these plans will need to change as youth change.
- Recognize that physical and mental health care plans are not one-size-fits-all. Particularly for transgender or gender non-conforming youth, LISTEN and encourage other professionals to do the same. For some of these youth, this may be their first time fully exploring their identities. Having access to affirming health care and other supports is essential for their own self-care practice.
- Remember: you are teaching skills for a lifetime, not just a case. It's important for all youth to develop strategies to care for their mental health while their cases are open so that when they leave care, they have the skills to implement these day-to-day practices.

The Problem . . .

"If young people are not involved in taking care of themselves when they're in care than they won't be involved in taking care of themselves when they're an adult."

- Anonymous

"In foster care, young people don't get shown how to set up a doctor's appointment, or how to get to and from places independently. We are taken without explanations like an outsider to our own health care."

- Anonymous

Our Voice:

"I was born with a heart disease and when I was in foster care I was just brought to the doctor with no explanation of what was really going on with *my* body. Once I exited care I still had the same disease and I had to learn it and how to care for myself for the first time on my own."

-Anonymous

BEST PRACTICE #3

SELF-CARE

Be thoughtful about medications.

Our Recommendations:

- For some youth, medication may need to be incorporated into their strategies for managing their physical or mental health. Talk with youth directly about the reasons for medication, their treatment options, and any alternatives that might be available.
- Educate youth about how medication might be a part of their self-care practice. The more youth know about their overall health needs, the better prepared they can be when transitioning out of care.
- Sexual health is also an important part of these conversations. Talk with youth openly and encourage them to talk with their doctors about this topic. Don't shy away from conversations about birth control.
- If youth are actively telling you they do not want to take medication, don't try to force them or punish them. LISTEN to what they are saying and talk with them about options.

The Problem . . .

"Wrong medications can hurt young people for the rest of their lives."

- S.C.

" We have to be able to manage our own mental health. We need our own life experiences of taking care of ourselves so that when we leave the system, *we know* how to handle our own mental health."

- D.W.

Our Voice:

"The judge forced me to take medications while I was in care. I didn't like any of them. They did not feel right in my body. I wish they would have talked to me about my medications and not forced me to take them."

- S.C.

BEST PRACTICE #4 COMMUNITY

Help youth build their community.

Our Recommendations:

- Transition years are a crucial time in a youth person's life as they learn to take care of themselves. One part of their self-care tool-kit is building a larger support system. These are individuals that youth may reach out to when they need help after leaving care.
- Help youth develop these relationships. Support people may include: friends, extended family, placements, teachers, coaches, therapists, doctors, Chafee workers, church or religious community, and others.
- Find and encourage opportunities for youth to connect with other young people with similar lived experience. This could be through Chafee, project Foster Power, Metro Youth Alliance, Youth Advocate Programs, and other groups.
- Talk with young people about where they find support so that they can decide who makes up their community. Help them explore places of worship, local recreation centers, community gardens, school clubs or sports, a local coffee shop or restaurant, a pick-up basketball game, and so many other places of connection.
- Support the youth in getting a job in their community so that they can meet other young people of similar ages.
- Encourage youth to maintain relationships with the friends they were close to before entering care.
- Help youth to build and maintain connections with their family in a way that is healthy and safe for them. Remember: they get to decide who they consider family.

The Problem . . .

"Helping young people build their community gives them an opportunity to get comfortable with their surroundings, and to create a life that is more diverse. A community brings peace, happiness, and joy."
- D.W.

Our Voice:

"I personally was never taught how to make and keep friendships. And for that reason, I have a very limited support system consisting of people my age."
- Anonymous

BEST PRACTICE #5

COMMUNITY

Encourage youth to engage in the same types of activities and opportunities as their peers.

Our Recommendations:

- Create opportunities for youth to participate in age- and developmentally- appropriate activities, such as sleepovers, shopping with friends, school dances, sports, concerts, clubs, and dating.
- Keep the "reasonable and prudent parent" standard at the forefront of decision-making. Remove unnecessary obstacles for youth to participate in social events or school activities. Remember: "Running a background check on every person I want to hang out with isn't 'normal.'"
- Support youth in getting their drivers' permits, licenses, and first cars. This will open up so many opportunities for them in terms of building connections and pursuing their interests.
- Give youth the opportunity to try things in the community independently so that they learn skills to navigate different situations.

The Problem . . .

"I didn't get my license until I was 28 years old. No young person should have to wait until they are that old. Help us get our permit and learn how to drive so we can access our communities independently."

- D.M.

Our Voice:

"I did not get to go to my homecoming or have a cell phone or social media. I was not told why. In my group home, my house parent told me 'if you can buy your cell phone, pay the bills, and earn it, then you can have one.' We didn't even have jobs."

- S.C.

BEST PRACTICE #6 COMMUNITY

Help youth maintain their community.

Our Recommendations:

- There are so many case-related meetings and appointments. Be careful not to fill youth's schedules with "mandatory obligations." Talk with youth about their interests and priorities and be sure to create space for those activities as well.
- Help youth with transportation to and from sports practices, dance classes, movies with friends, and other activities. If you can't help with transportation, work with the youth to problem-solve and plan ahead.
- Teach youth to use public transportation, including ride-sharing options, so that they can develop these skills before they exit care.
- Allow youth to access technology like a phone or computer, and support them in creating healthy boundaries in their communications.

The Problem . . .

"If this was your child, you would do anything to have them have access to their community."

- D.M.

Our Voice:

"I started to use RTD when I was in foster care. I used it to get to and from my community. I had to get places myself. All young people in care should be able to use public transportation, especially if they don't have a car. It is very important to be able to access your community."

- A.M.

As foster youth, we often feel like outsiders in our own lives, not being given the opportunity to speak up and make choices.

These best practice recommendations were created FOR professionals BY youth with lived experience in foster care. We are here to be a part of the solution. We offer these recommendations to guide your work so that you can support youth in the best way possible.

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PFP IMPACT

Best Practice Recommendations of project Foster Power



FOCUSING ON EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT:

- Encouraging Education
- Providing Support
- Modeling Skills
- Planning for the Big Picture
- Thinking Ahead

IMPROVING SUPPORTS AS YOUTH TRANSITION OUT OF FOSTER CARE

project Foster Power is a group of current and former foster youth, ages 15 to 25+, who are using our voices and experiences to improve the Colorado child welfare system through youth-led organizing and advocacy. Hosted by the Rocky Mountain Children's Law Center, pFP is the Colorado partner of **Foster Youth in Action**, a network of groups across the United States and Canada who believe in the power of foster youth voice.

pFP follows a **Youth Action Cycle** to listen directly to youth members across the state, identify a shared issue, develop a plan, and work to create change through collective action. Hearing time and time again that youth did not feel adequately prepared or supported in their transition to adulthood, we identified our 2020-2021 issue for action: **Improving Supports for Young People Exiting Foster Care**. As part of this campaign, youth came together to develop best practice recommendations for professionals across three key areas: 1) Placements that Better Meet Our Needs, 2) Self-Care and Community, and 3) Education and Employment. This is the third of three volumes of best practice recommendations. Our intention is that these recommendations spark change in practice and create greater dialogue around these issues. We encourage you to contact us to continue the conversation.

BEST PRACTICE #1 PURSUING EDUCATION

Believe in youth. Show them what is possible.

Our Recommendations:

- Don't just tell youth that college is possible. Make it possible by helping them find, apply for, and understand scholarships, grants, and financial aid.
- Experiences matter. Bring youth to visit different types of education programs like trade schools, community colleges, state colleges and universities, certification programs, and others. Young people need to see it to know that it is actually a possibility for them.
- Connect youth with people, programs, and resources that will help them throughout their post-secondary education, both within the school itself and outside of school. Getting to the first day isn't enough. To pursue their goals, they need continued support.
- Help young people to build and manage their schedules as they transition to post-secondary opportunities. They may be juggling work, family, and other commitments on top of the school obligations. There are a lot of moving pieces and they need support to navigate everything.
- Believe in youth. And help them to believe in themselves. Help young people to navigate the barriers that they may face along the way.

The Problem . . .

"It is an institutional problem that not everyone is seen as 'good enough' or 'having what it takes.' I had people who told me I had what it takes, but not everyone had those things."

-S.L.

"The supports professionals can provide us even before we get into school can make all the difference.

It can make it feel actually possible. Without these support systems we can easily fall through the cracks or not believe that we can do it."

-B.T.

Our Voice:

"When I was getting ready for college, I had to do my own personal research and make connections myself to find supports in order to pay and go to college."

-E.M.

" Programs like Fostering Success supported me during my time in higher education. It made me feel like I was not alone, and was one of the reasons I stayed. Help youth get connected to programs like these."

K.U.

BEST PRACTICE #2

FINDING EMPLOYMENT

Walk alongside youth. Show them where to start.

Our Recommendations:

- Allow youth to get jobs while they are still in foster care. Support them during their introduction to the workforce!
- Encourage youth to think about volunteering. It's a great way to build job skills and connections and may lead to employment opportunities in the future.
- Show youth how to do a job search online or where to look in their own neighborhoods. Talk with them about what they may want to look for when they are searching, and help them develop a plan.
- Getting a job is an entire process requiring skills from start to finish. Knowing how to apply is an important step. Help youth practice filling out job applications, crafting resumes, and writing cover letters.
- Youth may be nervous before an interview or before their first day of work. Help them to develop the confidence and skills to overcome those nerves.
- Support youth in finding jobs that will offer them community. Friends made at work can be some of the best support systems.
- Make the connection for youth that having a job can be beneficial for their own mental health, their social and emotional lives, and their futures.

The Problem . . .

"After transitioning out of care you have to rely on yourself. Your GAL and caseworker aren't there anymore. There are so many skills we need to know in order to find and keep a job before we leave foster care. Please take the time to communicate with us, help us develop these skills to step into a professional world."

-S.B.

Our Voice:

"I didn't get any support looking for a job. I had classes for interview prep. But every job I ever got, I got of my own devices."

-S.C.

"I got jobs while in residential care but every time I went to go for a first day, my therapist or someone else said I wasn't ready and needed more healing work."

-V.C.

BEST PRACTICE #3

KEEPING EMPLOYMENT

"Don't just tell us. Teach us."

Our Recommendations:

- Help us to learn skills common to all types of employment. For example: "professionalism", talking to strangers, showing up on time, advocating for ourselves in the workplace, and professional conflict resolution.
- Give youth the opportunity to learn how to manage their own time and schedules while they are still in foster care.
- Support youth in navigating transportation. They will need to get to and from work. Some jobs will even require a license. Support youth in getting their license before they turn 18. If that's not possible, brainstorm other transportation options.
- Being able to work with different personality types is a necessary skill. Support youth in this area. Help young people navigate difficult conversations with co-workers or their employer. This might range from discussing a conflict with a co-worker, asking for a raise, navigating a schedule conflict, or discussing opportunities for job growth.
- Employment paperwork can be confusing! Help youth learn the essential skills of filling out a W-2 or I-9 form at work and filing their taxes correctly.

The Problem . . .

"We need stability in placement in order to learn the skills to build our professionalism. Young people in foster care need the opportunity to experience the work place. Give us this opportunity."

-S.L.

"If you don't teach us these skills, who will?"

-Anonymous

Our Voice:

"My team didn't teach me how to keep a job. When I turned 18 years old, I had no where to go, and I was broke. I took a job that wasn't good for me, just to pay my bills."

-Anonymous

"When I was in foster care I was not taught any of these skills, because of this I still don't have a full time job. These skills are essential to succeed in life."

-A.M.

BEST PRACTICE #4

BIG-PICTURE LIFE SKILLS

Set youth up for success after care.

Our Recommendations:

- Help youth develop overall financial literacy. Many young people learn these skills naturally in their homes while growing up. Those in care do not often get that education.
- Open a bank account with youth and help them understand the purpose of having one. Teach young people how to save money in that account. Explain what it means to have a credit score and talk about how one can build and maintain "good credit." Help youth practice both writing a check and paying a bill electronically.
- Be sure to connect youth with the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood before they leave care. Explain what kind of support that program can provide, even if they aren't currently open to those services.
- Coach youth about balancing their schedules, upholding commitments, and setting up necessary appointments. Logistics can be difficult. Work with young people to practice scheduling things like doctor's appointments.
- Talk with young people about being parents themselves. Teach them skills and tell them about supports. This is a big worry for some young people in care. These conversations can help them break the cycle of having their children experience the system.
- Encourage young people to advocate for themselves while they are still in the system. Self-advocacy is a skill that will support them for life.

The Problem . . .

"Society expects parents to teach youth these subjects. In foster care, this isn't an option for us. Leaving these topics out of discussions between a professional and a young person will create gaps for foster youth when it comes to their life skills and overall success."

-B.T.

"Youth in the system grow up so fast. Priorities shift when a young person is involved. We miss out on opportunities to learn some of these life skills. It is important for our teams to reach out, and find ways to support us."

-H.T.

Our Voice:

"During my time in foster care I was never taught by my professionals what a 401k was, what a proper salary looks like, how to file taxes, or how to understand what job benefits are. This didn't set me up for success."

-S.B.

"The system sets you up to be lost, afraid, and frustrated with yourself. We never could work and weren't taught responsibility. They were too focused on our traumatic pasts and treated us like breakable kids who needed to be in a bubble, but that never helped us, it only hurt us."

-S.L.

BEST PRACTICE #5 OTHER LIFE NEEDS

Teach youth to think to the future.

Our Recommendations:

- When youth leave foster care, they need a place to live. This isn't just a temporary need, but a need for the rest of their lives. Help them understand what housing options exist, even if they aren't ready for those opportunities yet.
- Rent is expensive, especially on one's own. Help youth learn to safely find roommates that will feel like a "good fit."
- Teach us how to find and get connected to temporary and permanent financial supports. Example of these are: housing voucher programs, public housing, Education Training Vouchers, scholarships, loans, grants, social security, etc.
- Prepare youth to be problem-solvers. They don't want to be reliant on partners or friends. Teach them how and when to ask for help.
- It can feel overwhelming to have so many fragmented resources and agencies providing support. If you are working with a young person and they need help from another organization, provide a warm introduction when possible, rather than just giving youth a referral number.
- Encourage youth to learn from their mistakes along the way. It is natural for young adults to "mess up." Help them to keep going.
- In foster care, youth don't always get the same opportunities as their peers in learning how to care for themselves. Don't forget about youth. They may seek out your help in the future.

The Issue . . .

"When a young person is in foster care everyone makes decisions for them. We need to learn responsibility, and how to take of ourselves while we are still in care."

-D.M.

"Professionals are networkers for youth in care. We need help navigating these systems. We haven't been taught these things yet, and we need your help to learn it."

-K.A.

Our Voice:

"My team connected me with Chafee services before leaving care. My Chafee resource has connected me with my community to better myself currently.

It has been lifesaving. Every young person in care should be connected to a resource that will support them like Chafee has supported me."

-A.M.

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