



WELL-BEING

PROMOTING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



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WHY IT MATTERS

Every year approximately 20,000 young people age out of foster care and start living independently, often at much earlier ages than their non-foster peers. Despite the requirement that they participate in Independent Living types of programs, many report they lacked the opportunity to test the skills they learned in these programs in real life. Furthermore, most indicate that they are not properly prepared for independent living.¹ These disadvantages mean they have poorer educational outcomes, lower chances in the labor market, lower annual earnings, and more homelessness compared to peers who have not lived in foster care. Once they leave foster care, youth are often required to depend fully on themselves. Ironically, for years, things were “done” to many youth in foster care without their input: they were removed from their home, families, schools, friends, and community;

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they may have been moved from one foster home to another or to a group setting full of rules and structure; and, they likely experienced school moves impacting their relationships and academic progress. All of these experiences often result in a sense of powerlessness and isolation.

While there are many supports that young people leaving foster care will need in order to help avoid outcomes that are detrimental to their well-being, ensuring that youth are engaged in any and all

decisions about their lives should be a priority for not only when they age out of foster care, but while they are in foster care. Engaging adolescents in planning and decision making regarding their lives has been shown to benefit brain development. New information in the field of neuroscience during adolescence and young adulthood reveals that the brain is undergoing

extensive remodeling and experience plays a critical role in how the brain matures and develops. Young people who have opportunities to be fully engaged with adults and “practice” skills such as reasoning, decision-making, and self-regulation are actually strengthening the parts of their brain responsible for executive functioning.²

Youth engagement happens best when it is authentic and supported by youth-adult partnerships. Youth are not going to be automatically engaged, especially if there has been a power dynamic in the relationship between adult and child. Consequently, a first step is the responsibility of the adults to shift their perspective from thinking that their job is to fix a youth’s problems. Rather, as a team, adults work with the youth to solve problems, make plans and set goals. A second step adults can take is to ensure that youth are actively engaged in things that they enjoy doing. Providing opportunities to engage in activities they enjoy will build confidence and self-esteem. This helps set the stage for the third role that adults can take in helping engage youth –providing them with not only instruction in typical adult skills, but multiple opportunities to engage those skills. In authentic partnerships, youth are able to practice skills that they will need to thrive as adults.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IS A WIN-WIN

According to Jim Casey *Youth Opportunities Initiative*, youth-adult partnerships result in:

- Fresh, new ideas;
- New perspectives on decision-making, including more relevant and meaningful information about the needs and interests of young people;
- Open and honest responses about existing programs or services;
- Additional human resources due to the sharing of responsibilities between young people and adults;
- Greater willingness of young people to accept the services and messages of the program; and
- Greater credibility for the program or organization among you people and advocates.³

ADVOCATES IN ACTION

Nothing about us, without us.

ACTIONS

As an advocate, one of the greatest opportunities you have to engage youth is to enhance their participation in court proceedings. The suggested actions below reflect this commitment:

- **Ensure that youth are involved in all decisions made about their lives.** Youth should be involved in case plan development, case plan meetings, and given the option to attend court hearings. They should be allowed to offer a formal response to court reports, incident reports and proposed permanency plans.

- **Advocate for youth to receive training in self-advocacy.** Find out what training is already available for youth or encourage the development of training on the court process, how to participate effectively and their rights. The best trainers are current and former youth from foster care who have experienced the court process and who are the best experts on this situation and experience.
- **Learn about services and resources available to youth.** Participate in training on youth's rights, available resources and areas impacting youth in foster care such as education, immigration, transition services and LGBTQA issues. If there isn't such training available in your program, ask for it.
- **Encourage training for judges, child welfare professionals and attorneys on the importance of youth engagement in court.** Professionals can benefit from training on the importance of youth involvement, how to modify hearings so they are more youth friendly and how to communicate with youth and ask the right questions. They should also understand their responsibility in ensuring that youth are engaged throughout the proceedings.
- **Raise the issue of barriers to court attendance.** Ask about alternatives to court hearing times that don't interfere with the youth's school attendance. Some courts hold specific hearings for older youth after school hours or on Saturday mornings. If youth can only attend court during school hours, ensure that they are not penalized for their absences.
- **Help organize transportation to court.** Make sure that getting to court isn't a barrier for youth participation. Ask who is responsible for coordinating and funding transportation so youth can attend their court hearing.
- **Debrief immediately after the court proceeding to assess how things went.** Begin by asking for feedback from youth as to their satisfaction with the quality of their engagement. Ask other members of the team how they might do better to engage youth. Make a commitment to do better the next time.

BRIGHT SPOT

YOUNG ADULT ADVOCACY PROJECT BOSTON CASA

In 2011, Boston CASA provided advocates to two youth who were 16 years or older; in 2017 that number had increased to 56. What brought about this significant increase was the introduction of the *Young Adult Advocacy Program (YAAP)*. Established in partnership with the Suffolk County Juvenile Court in 2014, Boston

CASA's YAAP focuses on young adults in Boston who, for a variety of factors, are unable to reunite with their families or be adopted. Instead, these youth age out of the foster care system as young adults without a safe and consistent adult figure in their lives and without a clear and realistic plan to move forward into young adulthood.

Over time, the child welfare system and involved agencies have created an unrealistic expectation that youth at the age of 18 can navigate the transition out of foster care and into greater independence alone. Many youth are not aware of the benefits of remaining in the custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) until they are 22, which can include education and vocational training, healthcare, and housing support. It is also true that many youth do not know the requirements of maintaining services. Often, youth turn 18 and are sent into the community to fend for themselves.

YAAP recognizes the immense challenges these young adults face especially if they don't have someone by their side to help them navigate young adulthood. The program is grounded in a youth-driven process. Young adults are empowered to develop the skills necessary to be successful in self-advocacy in order to ensure that their needs are met, and they have every opportunity to thrive. Boston CASA's YAAP advocates are trained to support youth to make informed decisions about their futures which can include continued involvement with DCF, independence and/or transition into the community. The program helps educate youth about those requirements and how to stay in good standing with the Department of Children and Families to sustain these benefits. Advocates are trained and prepared to work with youth 16 years and older and continue with them through the age of 22, and in many cases, well into young adulthood. At 16 years of age, the advocate and the youth complete a self-assessment to begin understanding the youth's individual needs and goals. This joint effort helps determine the initial steps for identifying support and creating an advocacy plan.

YAAP advocates provide support to their youth in the courts and community to ensure that youth receive

the services to which they are entitled. For youth who cannot or do not sign on for DCF services, advocates become a lifeline that help these young adults receive guidance and community support at a critical point in their lives when they may not have family support or DCF involvement. If a young adult has emancipated from the system, but later recognizes the benefits to "signing" themselves back into services, advocates are well poised through their relationships with the courts to facilitate re-entry after their 18th birthday by contacting the youth's previously assigned attorney and DCF area office.

Throughout their involvement, advocates seek to connect youth with relational supports that provide opportunities for permanency and the sense of belonging within the community. For some young adults, Boston CASA's YAAP advocates become a permanent connection and part of that youth's natural support system. The program also provides funds for youth such as paying for driver's education, college tours, baby clothing and furniture if they have become parents, and other expenses that are typically needed by young adults.

Outcomes associated with the program to date have included increased numbers of young people in the program attending college, reduction in delinquency behaviors, greater access to tangible resources and services, parenting supports for youth who are parents and more judges recognizing the important role of this program. Perhaps the most important outcome is an increased investment in older youth in foster care and a greater level of accountability to fulfilling the commitment we have made to them.

For more information contact training@casaforchildren.org

SELECTED RESOURCES

Name	Description
<p><i>Foster Care Alumni of America</i>⁴</p>	<p>The vision of <i>Foster Care Alumni of America</i> is “that all people in and from foster care are connected, empowered and flourishing.” Their mission is “to ensure a high quality of life for those in and from foster care through the collective voice of alumni. We intend to erase the differences in opportunities and outcomes that exist for people in and from foster care compared to those who have not experienced foster care.”</p> <p>The organization provides a number of resources and opportunities for young people in and from foster care. One of those opportunities is training in “strategic sharing” which is the telling of life stories in a way that is meaningful, effective and safe. A <i>Strategic Sharing Guide</i> is available online for interested youth and their advocates.⁵</p>
<p><i>FosterClub</i>⁶</p>	<p><i>FosterClub</i> is dedicated to providing a peer support network for children and youth in foster care. Further, they believe that the experiences young people have in foster care place them in a position to affect change within the system, inform and motivate their peers, build public awareness and create public will for improved care for abused and neglected children.</p> <p><i>FosterClub</i> is about providing youth a voice within the system that so heavily impacts their lives. Whether advocating on their own behalf, in concern for siblings or family members, or speaking out on behalf of their 400,000+ peers currently in the system; websites, publications, and events provide a youth-friendly network which helps the voices of young people to be heard.</p> <p><i>FosterClub</i> is committed to providing the tools, training and a forum to help young people secure a brighter future for themselves and the foster care system.</p>

Name	Description
<p><u>Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative</u>⁷</p>	<p>As part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and other investors, the <i>Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative</i> is active in states and in local communities across the nation, to increase opportunities for young people who are in or transitioning from foster care. Some activities of the organization include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsoring <i>Success Beyond 18</i>, a campaign that advances policies and practices to help young adults who are transitioning out of foster care get on track to successful adulthoods. • Building young people’s personal and financial assets by engaging them in self-advocacy and leadership opportunities and using <i>Opportunity Passport’s</i> matched savings and financial education tools. • Developing practice, policy and evaluation tools to improve young people’s opportunities and assets. • Advancing the child welfare field’s understanding of neuroscience and brain research to encourage implementation of more effective programs and policies.
<p>Local and State alumni programs across the United States</p>	<p>There are many state and local alumni programs that youth in and from foster care can be involved in. Start searching by the key words – “alumni groups for foster youth” and your State name. You can also contact staff at the <i>Foster Care Alumni of America</i> group for assistance.</p>

ENDNOTES

- 1 Naccarato, T., Brophy, M., & Courtney, M.E. (2010). Employment Outcomes of Foster Youth: The Results from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Foster Youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(4), 551-559
- 2 Center on the Developing Child. In Brief: *Executive Functioning*. www.developingchild.harvard.edu
- 3 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (2012). *Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-Adult Partnerships*. Available at: <http://www.aecf.org/resources/authentic-youth-engagement/>
- 4 <https://fostercarealumni.org/mission/>
- 5 See <http://fostercarealumni.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/StrategicSharing.pdf>
- 6 <https://www.fosterclub.com/about-us>
- 7 <http://www.aecf.org/work/child-welfare/jim-casey-youth-opportunities-initiative/>