

Prioritizing Youth Voice: The Importance of Authentic Youth Engagement in Case Planning

In a system designed to promote the safety and well-being of young people, it is essential to prioritize youth engagement in casework. Youth involved with the child welfare system are experts on their respective situations and should be treated as such. Authentic youth engagement promotes well-being, healthy development, and improved outcomes for young people, and it should be viewed as a principal philosophy to guide daily practice.

To truly prioritize youth engagement, child welfare professionals must recognize young people as equal and capable partners rather than service recipients. In individual case planning, this means caseworkers must empower youth to lead discussions about their futures, while also providing the support they need to achieve their goals and ambitions. A trusting youth-caseworker relationship sets the foundation for successful youth engagement and relies upon caseworkers investing time and effort into every interaction they have with a young person in care.

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This bulletin for professionals outlines the importance of youth engagement and provides caseworkers with key concepts and tangible strategies to apply to their practice.

WHAT IS AUTHENTIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

Although child welfare professionals and agencies often say they are engaging youth, not all youth engagement is authentic, especially if the motivation is to fulfill a requirement. Authentic youth engagement occurs when caseworkers actively involve young people early and throughout their case planning, empowering them to lead discussions about their futures and treating them as equal partners (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019).

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, and the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 all require States to engage youth in planning for their transition out of care. However, authentic youth engagement means holistically partnering with youth at all stages of case planning, not just when they are transitioning. In addition, while many legal requirements do not go into effect until a young person reaches the age of 14, there are age-appropriate ways to engage younger populations.

"I would say start empowering youth to be engaged from a young age, not when they are transitioning out of care...Even if a youth is 9, 10, 11, 12, they'll understand, 'Hey, we are going to have a court hearing and things will be talked about. Is there anything you would like us to talk to the judge about for you?'"
—Former youth in foster care

A youth-adult partnership—or a reciprocal relationship between young people and adults—is crucial for authentic youth engagement. Youth engagement loses authenticity when adults do not provide youth with the time to be thoughtfully and meaningfully engaged or do not treat young people as equals. In an authentic youth-adult relationship, neither partner's perspectives are viewed as subordinate to the other's and each acknowledges a willingness to learn from the other (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). As a result, the partnership can produce positive effects for the young person, such as improved communication and leadership skills, and the caseworker, such as insights they can use to strengthen their child welfare agency.

BENEFITS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Having a trusting relationship with a caseworker can have a major impact on a young person's time in the child welfare system and beyond. Authentic youth engagement has been associated with numerous benefits, including the following:

- **Skills development.** Being meaningfully engaged can help young people build skills such as reasoning, decision-making, self-regulation, self-esteem, leadership, and professional development (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019).
- **Youth empowerment and agency.** When young people make decisions about their futures, they can gain a sense of pride and agency (i.e., the ability to act freely and independently) (Cohen, 2017). Empowering youth to take the lead on decision-making allows them to recognize how their choices impact their lives and take credit for positive change. Participating in case planning may be one of their only opportunities to practice these skills.
- **Healthy brain development.** Adolescence is a major developmental window during which a person's experiences and relationships are critical for healthy development (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). During this time, youth develop a sense of self that is based on trying new things, making decisions, learning skills, and forming memories. This means that every interaction a young person has with their caseworker can have a magnified effect on the growing brain. Caseworkers can support adolescent brain development by providing opportunities for young people to build relationships, exercise autonomy, take healthy risks, and grow in a supportive environment. A supportive caseworker-youth relationship can also contribute to healthy development by helping the young person build resilience from past trauma and equipping them with strategies to make sense of the things that have happened to them.
- **Attainment of protective factors.** Social connection and relationships are [protective factors](#), which are attributes that promote well-being and reduce the risk for negative outcomes. By building mutual, trusting relationships with young people, caseworkers can "buffer" the effect of risk exposure and prepare youth to navigate challenging circumstances (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015).
- **Improved outcomes.** Meaningful youth engagement can lead to permanency and improved outcomes in all areas of child welfare (Capacity Building Center for States, 2017). Engaging youth and asking about their feelings regarding permanency can also help caseworkers identify and overcome barriers to permanency.
- **Enhanced service receipt.** Integrating youth voice into all aspects of child welfare planning and improvement can help ensure young people connect with the specific services, supports, and community resources they need (Children's Bureau, 2019) and increase their compliance.
- **Positive systems change.** At the system level, youth voice can drive positive change. Programs that young people help design, implement, and evaluate tend to be more relevant and effective than those designed without youth input (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012).

CHALLENGES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Despite the benefits, there are numerous challenges when it comes to authentic youth engagement. Youth in foster care have experienced disruptions in their lives, such as trauma, abuse, neglect, emotional turmoil, and more. For any number of reasons, they may be hesitant to trust adults or the child welfare system. Child welfare professionals can hinder engagement when they do not fully respect young people or treat them as equal partners. Common barriers to engagement include the following:

- **Adultism.** Adultism refers to behaviors and attitudes of adults toward youth based on the assumption that adults know better than young people and are entitled to act upon them without their agreement (Bell, 1995). Authentic youth engagement will be impossible to attain if caseworkers do not respect young people as experts on their lives whose perspectives and feelings matter.
- **Caseworker caseload and workload.** A caseworker's ability to invest time into building relationships and trust can make or break youth engagement. Young adults with lived foster care experience reported that they were engaged more often and had better relationships with caseworkers who had lighter caseloads and workloads.
- **Caseworker turnover.** Similar to capacity, caseworker turnover can impede engagement. Children and youth in care have already experienced disruption and instability in their lives. When they experience caseworker turnover, they may be less receptive to efforts to form relationships and participate in case planning.
- **Frequent placement changes and mobility.** Placement instability can interrupt engagement for young people, especially those who have experienced multiple placements or been in care for long periods of time. Repeatedly changing homes, schools, and neighborhoods can make young people jaded and less willing to engage in new relationships with peers, caregivers, and others.

"When I was younger—I went into care about 8 or 9—it was kinda easier for a case manager to engage with me because I was more open, but by the time I was 14 and getting a new case manager, I had been in care for however amount of years. It became harder to build those bridges again because now I have to tell the story again, and I have to make the plan again, and I have to get them to understand me again. It becomes draining to a person."—Former youth in foster care

THE RIGHTS OF YOUTH IN CARE

It is important that young people know their rights as well as what to do if they feel those rights are being violated. It is the responsibility of child welfare professionals to ensure children and youth are made aware of these rights during case planning.

[Federal legislation](#) grants youth age 14 and older the right to participate in case planning and transition planning. It also requires that case plans include a document that lists what rights youth have related to education, health, visitation, and court participation and a signed acknowledgement by the youth stating that the rights contained in the document have been explained to them in an age-appropriate way. Some States have additional laws, such as a foster children's bill of rights. It is important that caseworkers become familiar with the rights of youth in their State so that they can articulate them to the young people they work with.

In addition to understanding their rights, youth should understand the grievance process to follow if they feel their rights are being violated. The process should include the following steps:

- **Talk to a caseworker, attorney, or foster parent.** If something feels wrong, the first step a young person should take is speaking with the adults on their case planning team, especially their caseworker, attorney, and foster parents, to try and resolve the issue.
- **Talk to someone higher up at the agency.** If the problem is their caseworker or their caseworker is unresponsive, a young person should contact their caseworker's supervisor or someone else at the child welfare agency.
- **Contact an ombudsman.** Children's ombudsman offices, sometimes known as offices of the child advocate, are offices that handle issues and complaints related to child welfare services. These offices often are independent from the child welfare agency, so youth have another place to go if they feel as though their agency is not listening.

For more information about resolving complaints, see Information Gateway's [From Complaint to Resolution: Understanding the Child Welfare Grievance Process](#).

KEY CONCEPTS FOR ENGAGING YOUTH

Rather than a tool, caseworkers should view youth engagement as a mindset and an approach to integrate into daily practice. Because every person is unique, a one-size-fits-all approach to engagement will not be successful, and what works best will vary depending on the youth. In order to reach this level of personalized engagement, caseworkers should prioritize building a trusting relationship, asking questions, demonstrating honesty and transparency, and taking a trauma-informed approach.

BUILD A TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP

Relationship building is a critical component of engaging youth because it allows youth to develop trust with their caseworker—a process that takes time and adaptability. It is important for caseworkers to recognize that not every relationship will be the same, and making assumptions about a youth's interests, expectations, and opinions can be determinantal to relationship building. Establishing a strong foundation requires getting to know the young person fully, from their likes and dislikes to their hopes and ambitions for the future. Every conversation a caseworker has with a youth in care is a learning opportunity and being curious is essential.

"Kids want to know that you care enough about them to learn about them, and that makes them be willing to trust you, which is really the most important thing whenever it comes to case planning...that they trust you and they trust your judgement."—Former youth in foster care

Because every relationship is different, it is important to note that not every child wants their caseworker to be their friend. In situations where a young person is reluctant to develop a friendly relationship with a caseworker, it is important that the caseworker still establishes trust through actions, builds a relationship on regular and open communication, and facilitates contact between the youth and other supportive adults in their life.

ASK QUESTIONS

Another critical component of youth engagement is asking questions. Youth are experts on their lives, and it is impossible to know what is best for them without asking. Asking about a young person's needs, wants, questions, and concerns can help the caseworker develop a personalized plan that is catered to the young person's unique situation.

"One thing I wish that would've happened was that we would've been given more of a choice instead of [being] shown what to do or told...I think options are always just so important, too, because if you feel like there's only one thing you can do, and let's say that's not the most attractive option to you, you're not going to do it."—Former youth in foster care

Asking questions is also a way to ensure that young people take the lead on their case planning. Creating opportunities for youth to talk about what they want—and who they want involved in their case planning as a support—empowers them to make decisions and develop leadership skills. Many young people come into care not knowing their rights or how much say they are supposed to have in case planning. When caseworkers ask questions, they empower youth to play an active role.

Foster care alumni recommended the following questions for caseworkers to ask young people in care:

- What are your likes and dislikes? What do you do for fun?
- What are the important relationships in your life—siblings/relatives/friends/boyfriends/girlfriends? Do you need help facilitating contact with these people?
- Are there people in your life whom you are not comfortable seeing? How can we navigate those relationships?
- Whom would you like to be involved in your family team meetings?
- What activities would you like to stay involved with—extracurriculars/sports/music lessons? Do you need help getting to these activities?
- Are you involved in a faith community? Do you need help getting to services or youth groups?
- What types of services do you think would benefit you—therapy/life-skills classes/etc.?
- Are you happy with your case plan? Do you want to change anything?
- What are your goals for the future?
- How can I make this process smoother for you?

Asking questions is something that should continue throughout the case-planning process, since a young person may change their mind or might not initially feel comfortable telling a caseworker what they want. Caseworkers should respect that young people's experiences in out-of-home care will constantly change, and they should continue to give youth opportunities to voice their desires. Caseworkers should also be prepared to provide options when a young person does not have answers, since they may not know what their choices are.

"I feel like the case managers, as a whole, who engaged me the best, they got me to buy into my plan. It wasn't ever, 'Hey you have to do this.' It was, 'Hey, what do you want to do, and how can we make this easier for you?'"

—Former youth in foster care

BE REAL, BE TRANSPARENT, AND BE PRESENT

Many youth in care have complicated relationships with adults and may be hesitant to trust their caseworker. To develop this crucial trust and overcome any preconceived notions young people might have about child welfare professionals, it is important that caseworkers be real, transparent, and present.

"Being real" means being honest and realistic about a situation rather than putting on a facade. For caseworkers, this means acknowledging the reality that young people do not choose to become involved with the child welfare system. It involves addressing the circumstances that resulted in a young person being placed in out-of-home care and validating the thoughts and feelings they are experiencing. Caseworkers may be inclined to keep things positive, and while optimism is important, caseworkers should not avoid discussing hard topics. Young people often value and connect with a caseworker who addresses tough situations rather than skirts around them.

Transparency is another quality youth in care expect from their caseworker. Caseworkers should be as open and transparent as possible with young people about the details of their case. A caseworker may be inclined to withhold details about a case to protect a young person or spare their feelings, but withholding information can hinder trust building and compromise engagement, which could result in hurting a young person even more. It is important to disclose as much information as possible in a timely and age-appropriate manner to keep youth in care actively informed and involved in case planning.

"I wanted my caseworker to share more information with me. There was this assumption of like, 'We can't let you know everything,' but for me, as like 15 and 16, I'm like, 'I'm about to have to be in control of my whole life so I would really appreciate you actually letting me know fully what's going on because it impacts me.'"—Former youth in foster care

In addition to being real and transparent, caseworkers should be present. Early in the relationship, caseworkers should set a precedent of how often they will be in contact with a young person to provide information and updates. Caseworkers should also establish early in the relationship when and how they will be reachable in order to set boundaries and avoid burnout. Some questions the caseworker should address include the following:

- Can the youth call or text their caseworker's cell phone?
- During what hours will the caseworker be reachable?
- Who should the young person contact if they need someone to talk to during hours the caseworker is not available?

- How often should the young person expect to meet with their caseworker?
- How often should the youth expect their caseworker to check in or provide updates via phone or text?

It is important to be predictable when working with young people in care since they have already experienced a lot of change and uncertainty.

"My first time in care, I actually never even met with my caseworkers other than whenever I was dropped off to one foster home and then whenever I was moved around to different inpatient facilities. Those were the only times I not only met mine, but even talked to mine. I didn't know whenever I had court dates. I didn't know what was going on with anything in my case."—Former youth in foster care

RECOGNIZING A YOUNG PERSON'S CULTURE

A crucial part of developing a respectful relationship with a young person is learning about and recognizing their culture. Actively asking questions about a young person's culture can help caseworkers better understand them, demonstrate to the young person that they care, and help that young person meet their cultural needs.

"For me, when I first went into care...I'd always tell [my caseworker] like, 'I need my hair done. I need my hair done. I need my hair done,' and she didn't understand why my hair was such a big thing to me. And the more she become competent in the realities of my culture, being that I'm Caribbean and we have a certain texture hair and it takes a lot to upkeep it, she had to advocate for me. She told the judge, 'Hey, she needs a hair allowance,'...and little things like that made me more comfortable with her because she began to buy into my reality of what I experienced every day."—Former youth in foster care

TAKE A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

Many children and youth involved with the child welfare system have experienced trauma. A [trauma-informed approach](#) to child welfare practice involves understanding the impact of trauma on child development and working to minimize its effects without causing additional trauma. Because of past trauma, young people may initially resist relationship building, and caseworkers may find that developing trust requires a significant time investment up front (Salazar et al., 2020). It is important for caseworkers to recognize that this resistance stems from trauma so they can work through potential barriers and provide consistent, responsive support for youth.

TANGIBLE STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING YOUTH

Because youth engagement should be viewed as a general approach to child welfare practice, there is not a concrete set of guidelines to follow in order to achieve success. That being said, caseworkers can utilize the following strategies to elevate youth voice and support engagement efforts.

Promote normalcy. Youth in care often do not get to experience the same normal, age-appropriate activities their peers experience, such as athletics, extracurriculars, learning to drive, sleepovers with friends, getting a job, and dating (Simmons-Horton, 2017). Promoting normalcy and giving youth opportunities to engage in these activities has been linked to several benefits, including enriched foster care experiences, improved academic performance, and increased social skills. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 requires agencies to provide training on normalcy and give foster parents and caregivers the freedom to allow youth in their care to participate in activities that are appropriate for their age and development. Caseworkers can ensure youth in care are provided these opportunities by discussing normalcy activities with youth and caregivers during visits. Questions to discuss include the following: What activities do you enjoy or want to try? Have you had the opportunity to participate in those activities while in care? If not, what barriers are preventing you from participating? How can we overcome those barriers?

Support young peoples' interests. Along similar lines, caseworkers can engage youth by supporting their likes and interests. This could involve attending a youth's musical performance, playing video games with them, asking if they want to watch a football game together, or talking to them about their favorite TV show.

"I was in band. I would have been totally cool with my caseworker coming to a band concert, even if it just meant you kind of have an understanding of what I'm good at beyond familial structure. Like, I have an entire interest outside of case stuff, so that would've been really nice."—Former youth in foster care

Celebrate small and large accomplishments. Adolescents are more receptive to rewards-based learning than punishment-based learning (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). Rewards such as praise and acceptance trigger the release of dopamine to the brain, which can reinforce certain actions and behaviors. In addition to the other supportive adults in their lives, caseworkers can act as a young person's cheerleader by celebrating their achievements whether they are small or big (e.g., from completing a homework assignment to getting accepted to college). Because praise may be unfamiliar to some youth, it is important to demonstrate that their accomplishments deserve to be celebrated. Continuously recognizing accomplishments, believing in a young person's future, and setting high expectations can all contribute to healthy development, building trust, and feelings of empowerment.

Talk to youth in care about their siblings. Sibling connections are important and can be a protective factor for children and youth who have been placed in out-of-home care. Whether siblings have been placed in the same or different homes, caseworkers should talk to young people about their siblings.

If they have not been placed together, ask whether the siblings have been able to have regular contact. To ensure that siblings can maintain their connections, caseworkers should facilitate regular visits, arrange virtual forms of contact, plan joint outings, and more. If they are placed together, ask whether siblings would like to meet with you together or separately, since there may be things they would prefer to discuss without their sibling in the room. See Information Gateway's publication [Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption](#) for more research, strategies, and resources to assist child welfare professionals in preserving connections among siblings.

Swap "caseworker visits" with casual outings. A young person likely will not always enjoy caseworker visits, especially when they require them to talk about difficult topics. Taking a young person on a casual outing—for example, out to eat or to see a nearby landmark—could help the young person feel more comfortable and ultimately strengthen the youth-caseworker relationship. When there is an activity involved, like eating or walking, conversation may flow more easily than in a formal setting, such as sitting across from each other at a desk. Even if nothing "serious" is discussed during the outing, bonding can help the young person see the caseworker as an ally, rather than just an authority figure. Another time to bond outside of caseworker visits can be during car rides. Time permitting, a caseworker can offer to take a young person to their sports practices, appointments, court hearings, or independent-living events.

"I did have a caseworker who would take me to meals, and I appreciated that. Even if it was fast food, it was like, 'You have to sit with me while I eat this, and we're probably going to end up talking.' And food can be a very good way to kind of break some things down and just literally break bread together."

—Former youth in foster care

Be mindful of perceived stigma. There is a perceived stigma associated with being involved with child welfare. Youth in care may experience fear of being treated differently or be subjected to bullying if their peers know they are in foster care (Dansey et al., 2019). This perceived stigma could hinder relationship building if a young person is fearful or ashamed to be seen with someone wearing social worker identification. While caseworkers should have conversations with youth in care about this stigma and work to help them build resilience, they should respect that it is a young person's decision whether they want to share their foster status with others. In the words of a foster alumna, "Leave the badge in the bag" when meeting with a young person in public.

Don't overlook the "good kid." Several foster care alumni reported being overlooked by their caseworker because they were a "good kid," meaning they generally followed the rules and did not display major behavioral issues. They reported not seeing their caseworkers as often as they would have liked because their caseworker considered their case easier than others. This attitude can hinder engagement because a young person might not have as many opportunities to express their concerns to their caseworker as others, or they might not want to express concerns because they want to maintain their "good kid" persona. It is important that caseworkers evenly distribute their time among their caseload and are aware that the "good kid" might be struggling, too.

"Being a child that didn't act out in school and wasn't doing the running away, I feel like I got overlooked a lot. And a lot of times the youth who do engage in more at-risk behaviors, they're provided more services, and that's not to say that the youth who isn't displaying that doesn't need the services, we just... take on that burden of keeping it all together, and we shouldn't have to."—Former youth in foster care

Partner with other sectors. A young person might have a strong relationship with supportive adults in their life from other human services sectors, such as a teacher, guidance counselor, health-care provider, coach, or attorney. Caseworkers should partner with these other sectors when possible to help ensure the child has the best possible outcome.

Let youth decide who they want at family team meetings. A common engagement practice is holding [family team meetings](#) with the child or youth, their family members, child welfare professionals, and other significant partners to develop, implement, and evaluate individualized case plans. When putting together family teams, caseworkers should allow the young person to determine who they want present. Caseworkers should ask youth who the significant people are in their life, whether they would be more comfortable if certain family members were not present, and if they want help. The answers to these questions should help caseworkers assemble the family team accordingly. Federal law requires child welfare agencies to allow young people aged 14 and older to invite two members to join their case planning team.

Provide different options for engagement. Young people will have varying levels of comfort with engaging in their case planning. Cater to these differences by providing alternative ways to engage, such as writing letters or helping set the agenda for a meeting. Caseworkers can also encourage young people to have a voice in court hearings and help them prepare remarks for the judge.

"I wasn't very vocal in the beginning, but I started writing letters to my guardian ad litem, and from there, she kind of coached me and empowered me, [saying] 'It's okay for you to come and speak in front of the judge.' And it was empowering for me to get that acceptance that it was okay for me to have a say."

—Former youth in foster care

Safely utilize technology and social media. When used appropriately, access to the internet and mobile devices can help young people in care establish and maintain meaningful relationships, develop a sense of personal identity, and feel empowered (Capacity Building Center for States, n.d.). Technology and social media often represent a comfort zone for young people, and [caseworkers who use these means to stay in touch](#) with young people can build relationships by demonstrating a willingness to communicate on their terms.

"My caseworker would let me know what's going on, whether she was sending me text messages or finding alternative ways aside from leaving a voicemail, because a lot of youth don't check their voicemail, and making sure that we kept current contact."—Former youth in foster care

Be aware of caseworker turnover. Frequent caseworker turnover is common in child welfare, with rates estimated at 20 to 40 percent in the last 15 years (Casey Family Programs, 2017). As a result, children and youth may be hesitant to trust and confide in their caseworkers out of fear that they may eventually leave. It is important that caseworkers still make efforts to effectively engage these youth in case planning by demonstrating empathy for their situation, thoroughly reviewing case notes from previous social workers so that the youth does not have to "start from scratch," and providing concrete examples of what they can offer (e.g., "In the time we have together, I can help you achieve x, y, and z goals.").

"You're already in a system where most of the people aren't consistent in your life and then to [have a caseworker who is] supposed to be consistent in your life and then they leave, it just kind of reinforces that idea in your head...It's like, why do I even want to form these relationships if they're not going to last?"

—Former youth in foster care

Provide closure if leaving. When caseworker turnover does occur, it is important that the outgoing caseworker provides closure for the youth in care. While that specific caseworker will no longer be working with the youth, the way they handle their departure can impact the young person's perception of adults and the child welfare system. Saying goodbye and providing an explanation can help prevent or reduce the young person's feelings of abandonment and distrust.

Provide youth with opportunities outside of the requirements. Caseworkers should provide young people with opportunities outside of what is required at the agency, State, and Federal levels. Programs and classes, such as life skills classes and youth advisory boards, can give young people an opportunity to practice decision-making and support healthy development. It is hard for a young person to visualize a life plan and transition from care if they have not had opportunities to practice leadership, decision-making, and skills development throughout their adolescence. Research the opportunities in your community and share them with youth in care. For resources and tools available to help youth pursue education, search for a job, manage their money, transition from care, and more, see Information Gateway's [Youth web section](#).

Prepare youth for transitioning out of care or permanency. An important element of engaging older youth is preparing them for their transition out of care. Federal legislation requires the child welfare agency to develop a transition plan with the young people when exiting care; however, these are often focused on logistics rather than the emotional, psychological, and developmental aspects of transitioning (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Caseworkers should view transition planning as a process that unfolds over time and involves close youth engagement. They should partner with youth to assess their strengths, needs, and challenges and help them build self-determination and resiliency. For more information about transition planning, see Information Gateway's [Working With Youth to Develop a Transition Plan](#). Caseworkers should also talk to teens about reunification, kinship caregivers, guardianship, and adoption placements to ensure that young people explore all their options when preparing to transition out of care. Professionals need to help young people process what different options may mean so that they can make an informed decision that represents their best interests. For more information about talking to youth about permanency, see Information Gateway's [Belonging Matters—Helping Youth Explore Permanency](#).

Emphasize the importance of youth advocacy while youth are still in the system. Many youth who have experienced foster care go on to advocate for child welfare systems change. Young people currently or formerly in care have valuable knowledge about child welfare and are uniquely qualified to advocate for the improvement of services for youth in foster care. Talk to young people in care about participating in advocacy efforts, such as youth advisory boards, and emphasize the importance of using their expertise and lived foster care experience to advocate for positive change.

Connect youth with peer support systems and peer-led programs. Young people tend to trust their peers more than anyone else, especially if they have been involved with the foster care system. Caseworkers should recognize and support a young person's connection with their peers and point them to peer-mentoring programs or other programs designed and led by youth with foster care experience. For example, Allegheny County's [Youth Support Partners program](#) connects young adults with lived experience in different human services systems to youth currently in the systems. The partners use their experience to help youth understand legal mandates, encourage them to become self-reliant and independent, and connect them to resources and natural supports. The Westchester County Department of Social Services also has a peer-to-peer navigator program called the [BraveLife Intervention](#). The program uses a three-phased model centered around engagement, empowerment, and connections to reach youth at-risk of homelessness. Through the initiative, peer navigators help young people work toward goals, interact with professionals, and initiate connections on their own.

PRIORITIZING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AT THE AGENCY LEVEL

Authentic youth engagement requires agency leadership buy-in and willingness to change. For caseworkers to effectively engage young people in daily practice, child welfare agencies must set a culture that prioritizes youth engagement at all levels of an organization. This involves a shift in philosophy that recognizes child welfare professionals cannot know on their own what is best for youth and should seek out youth perspective to inform policy, program, and practice development. Incorporating youth perspectives during service planning can lead to improved enrollment and participation in programs and services, enhanced quality of services offered, and increased credibility of a service or intervention with the target population (Gothro & Caplan, 2018).

To implement policies, programs, and practices that prioritize authentic youth engagement, agencies require the appropriate infrastructure and capacity. The Capacity Building Center for States identified four essential elements for organizational capacity to sustain youth engagement (Capacity Building Center for States, n.d.):

- **View young people as organizational assets.** Agency staff should respect the values and opinions of youth and seek opportunities to involve youth in decision-making, program improvement, and other areas.
- **Use science and technology effectively.** Programs, practices, and policies should be informed by an understanding of adolescent brain development. Agencies should also use technology and social media to communicate with youth and young adults.

- **Have the right people.** An organization's leadership, staff, and community partners should be committed to practicing authentic youth engagement at all levels of the organization.
- **Implement flexible and innovative programs and practices.** Youth engagement programs and practices should apply creative approaches and leave room for mistakes.

Consider asking your supervisor or organizational leadership the following questions about youth engagement:

- Are youth authentically involved in discussions at all levels of our organization?
- What programs do we have in place to promote youth engagement and leadership opportunities?
- Did youth have input on the development, implementation, and evaluation of these programs?
- Is our leadership team committed to making youth engagement a daily practice?
- What type of youth engagement training is available for caseworkers at our agency/in our State?

Federal Priorities Reinforce the Importance of Youth Voice

In November 2025, President Trump issued the Executive Order "[Fostering the Future for American Children and Families](#)," which outlines a Federal commitment to strengthening the child welfare system and improving outcomes for children and youth in or transitioning out of foster care. It emphasizes modernizing systems, strengthening casework practice, and focusing on youth well-being, stability, and long-term success.

Progress toward these priorities is strengthened through meaningful engagement with youth themselves. Young people involved in the child welfare system are experts on their own lives, and their perspectives are central to effective case planning and decision-making. When youth are treated as capable partners, they are more likely to be invested in their plans, develop essential life skills, and experience a greater sense of control and stability. Authentic youth engagement supports healthy development, strengthens relationships between youth and caseworkers, and contributes to improved short- and long-term outcomes.

Elevating youth voice through authentic youth engagement is integral to building stronger, more responsive child welfare systems.

CONCLUSION

Achieving authentic youth engagement requires child welfare professionals and agencies to embrace a culture that prioritizes youth voice at all stages of case planning, program development, and system improvement. At the case level, authentic youth engagement requires caseworkers to establish mutual, trusting relationships with youth in care and recognize that every relationship will be different. Caseworkers should approach every interaction with a young person as an opportunity

to learn, while empowering youth to lead discussions about their future and providing them with the supports and services they need. Using the concepts and strategies outlined in this bulletin, caseworkers can take steps within their agencies to ensure youth voice is prioritized at all levels of the child welfare system.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Episode 63: "Foster Care Alumni - Making Lived Experience Matter, Part 1"](#) and [Episode 65: "Foster Care Alumni - Making Lived Experience Matter, Part 2"](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway) These podcast episodes discuss the importance of including youth with lived experience in policy and program development.

[Recommendations for Improving Permanency and Well-Being \(Administration for Children and Families Youth Engagement Team\)](#) This report provides key recommendations from three roundtable discussions with young adults with lived experience in the foster care system about how to support permanency with kin, relational permanency, and successful older youth adoption.

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