

Using Your Voice: A Guide for Youth on Participating in Case Planning

As a youth in foster care, you should be informed and help make decisions related to what happens to you. Adults should not make decisions about your placement and your future without your input. They should include, assist, and guide you as you make decisions, lead discussions, and work toward your goals.

It's not easy when you are removed from your home and placed in care. You are thrust into a situation that you did not choose for yourself, but how you respond is up to you. Though it may not always feel like it, you can speak up about your wants, needs, concerns, questions, goals, and ambitions. As a youth in care, you have a right to participate in your case planning, and your caseworkers, caregivers, and other adults have an obligation to make sure you are heard.

This factsheet is intended to help you use your voice in whatever ways you are comfortable doing so, whether it is speaking up, writing it down, or enlisting the support of others to express your wants and needs. This factsheet provides information about how you can engage with the child welfare system and advocate for yourself and others.

WHAT'S INSIDE

What is youth engagement and why is it important?

What is case planning?

How can you participate in case planning?

What are your rights as a youth in care?

How can you become involved in advocacy efforts to elevate youth voice in child welfare?

Conclusion

Additional resources

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the foster care alumni who contributed their voices to this publication: David Samuel Hall, Elliott Hinkle, Frankita Jenkins, Madison Langan, and Torie Mendez. Their insights and expertise informed the concepts discussed, and their quotes are used throughout the factsheet.

WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Youth engagement occurs when young people in care actively make decisions about what happens to them. This requires caseworkers and other adults to treat young people as equal partners throughout their time in the child welfare system, to provide them with the information they need, and to respect their opinions. It also requires youth to use their voices and speak up about what they want and need.

Youth engagement is important because young people in foster care deserve to have a say in what happens to them, and they deserve to achieve their goals and ambitions for the future.

WHAT IS CASE PLANNING?

Case planning is the process of putting together a plan that outlines the outcomes, goals, and tasks concerning your care while in placement. Your case plan will serve as a roadmap for how to get from where you are to where you want to be. It will include details such as where you will live, where you will go to school, what services you will receive, what goals you will work toward, and what steps are needed to help you achieve those goals. Case plans can include information about you, your caregivers, the child welfare agency, and others who have responsibilities in helping achieve the outcomes, goals, and tasks in the plan. Some case plans are legal documents accepted by the courts, while others may not be.



As a youth in care, your ideas and opinions matter and should be thoroughly considered during the development of your individual case plan. You'll have help and guidance from your team—your caseworkers, family members, attorneys, judges, and others—and you'll be able to change and adapt your case plan throughout your time in care.

While all case plans look different, the following are key elements that are often included:



Location

Where do you live now? Where do you want to live? Where do you go to school?
Where are your siblings?



People

Who are the important people in your life? Your close friends? Family members?
Family friends? Counselors? Teachers? Some of the important people in your life may be part of your case planning team and help you make decisions.



Goals

Do you want to reunify with your family? Do you want to pursue adoption or another form of permanency? Do you want to learn how to drive? Do you want a job?
Do you want to go to college or vocational school?

Other things your case plan may include are your likes, dislikes, interests, extracurricular activities, and religious activities. You should have regular meetings with your caseworker to discuss the goals of your case plan.

In States that offer foster care for those 18 and older, the case planning process may look different. The permanency goals and circumstances of young adults sometimes differs from those of youth under 18, so caseworkers may strive to make case plans more developmentally appropriate and meaningful. Continuing to participate in quality case planning between ages 18 and 21 can have many benefits, including helping build a social network, recognize strengths, identify needs, and prepare for a successful and well-planned transition out of care.

"This case planning is going to happen with or without you...You can either choose to be part of that process and hopefully get something out of it, something that you actually want, or you could keep on dealing with whatever happens to you."—Former youth in foster care

Addressing Trauma, Grief, and Loss

An important piece of participating in your case planning is understanding and addressing your feelings of trauma, grief, and loss. Many young people experience a range of emotions when they enter the child welfare system. The better you can understand these emotions, the better you can understand your needs and talk about them with your case planning team.

For help making sense of your situation, check out [A Guide for Youth: Understanding Trauma](#). This guide can help you understand how past trauma impacts your present and what you need to work on to begin healing.

FosterClub's [The Wounded Spirit: What Young People Can Do - Healing From Loss](#) is designed to help youth take control of their grieving process, no matter how you grieve. FosterClub also has an interactive [worksheet](#) to help you understand your rights as you experience grief in foster care.


HOW CAN YOU PARTICIPATE IN CASE PLANNING?

Even though you have the right to participate in your case planning, speaking up about what you want can be intimidating. The following strategies can help you use your voice and advocate for yourself to achieve your goals.

Set expectations. Tell your caseworker how you want to be involved in case planning. If you want regular opportunities to speak at planning meetings, tell them. If you would rather silently observe meetings and then debrief afterwards, tell them. This lets your caseworker know what level of engagement you are comfortable with and can help ensure that important decisions are not made without your input. If, over time, you decide you would like to be more involved than you previously decided, that is okay, too. Just let your caseworker know because they might not always ask.

Collect contact information. Get the phone numbers and email addresses for everyone on your planning team, including your caseworkers, other child welfare agency staff, and your legal representation. You need to be able to contact your team if you have questions or issues that you need to discuss outside of planned meetings.

Establish a relationship with your caseworker. There are many benefits to building a relationship with your caseworker. Regardless of your personal feelings about this person, they can make your time in care better, so it is worth it to try to create a respectful relationship.



"Pretty early on with my caseworker, I asked to be involved in a lot of things and said, 'I know that there might be times when you think I shouldn't be there, but I would really like to be a part of it or hear about it, because this is all about me and so not hearing about it feels weird.'"—Former youth in foster care



"That person makes decisions and approves things, so trying to build a relationship benefits you, because even if it's not someone you're going to be friends with, they hold power."
—Former youth in foster care

Ask for what you need. Don't be afraid to ask your caseworker, attorney, or other team members for what you need, whether it's clothing, transportation to an activity, personalized services, or something else. You have a right to have your physical, mental, educational, and social needs met, so don't be afraid to ask for access to doctors, counselors, activities, and whatever else it takes to meet those needs. It might be possible to have these things written in a court order.

Ask questions. The child welfare system can be difficult to understand. If there's something you're not sure about, know that it is okay to ask questions. No one should expect you to be an expert on child welfare, and you deserve to know what is happening and why. FosterClub has a [frequently asked questions webpage](#) where you can also seek answers to your child welfare questions.

Request options. Your caseworker's job is to ask you what you want, but it is okay if you don't always have an answer. If you are not sure what you want or what you are allowed to do, request options. For example, if a caseworker asks you if you want to participate in a meeting, you might feel overwhelmed and quickly say, "No." If you ask for options, however, you might learn there are ways to participate that you find more comfortable, such as joining by phone, writing a letter, or attending only a certain portion of the meeting.

Write letters. It is normal to get nervous about vocalizing your thoughts to your caseworker. Another way to engage is by writing it down. You can write letters or emails to your caseworker or to the judge who is overseeing your case to express your wants, needs, concerns, and questions.

Help set the agenda for meetings. You don't want to leave a case planning meeting feeling as though important topics were left out. Ask your caseworker if you can help set the agenda for meetings—that way you can make sure you talk about the things that are important to you.

Make your case plan personal. Your case plan should uniquely cater to your needs, wants, and ambitions. While discussing your case plan, request the services and supports that will help you reach your goals, regardless of whether these services and supports are traditional. This could mean asking to connect to outside resources or requesting a specific type of therapy. You do not need to follow a predetermined or "cookie cutter" case plan if that does not serve you best. Tune into your specific ambitions and goals, then vocalize them. Your team should want to help you succeed.



"It should be a plan that really aligns with a future you actually envision for yourself. If you plan on being a painter or something artistic, your case plan should include things that will put you on that path, maybe have a mentorship of that nature."
—Former youth in foster care

"Do what you can to try and speak directly with professionals...Make sure that you as a human being are put in front of the decision-makers so that they know: This person has thoughts about what happens, and they are aware. It just increases the chances of them making decisions that are actually what you want."

—Former youth in foster care

Ask for legal documents before transitioning out of care.

When preparing to transition out of care, make sure you leave time to collect your legal documents, such as your birth certificate, social security card, and court orders. These may be difficult to acquire once you exit State custody.

Keep an open mind. Being removed from your home is hard, and it's easy to want to disengage from your caseworker, foster family, and other child welfare professionals. But it is important to know that case planning is going to happen with or without your input. If you participate in the process, it is more likely that your individual needs will be met and your future goals attained.

Utilize your support network. Do you have a mentor, friend, coach, or extended family member who you turn to for advice in times of need? Talk to your caseworker about including them in case planning and other decision-making meetings. Having someone outside of the child welfare agency who has your best interests in mind can help make sure your needs are met. [Federal law](#) requires child welfare agencies to allow young people aged 14 and older to invite two members to join their case planning team.

Attend court hearings. Since a lot of decisions are made during court hearings, request to be present. Ask your caseworker to let you know well in advance when court dates will occur and request that they take place outside of school hours if possible. If a hearing is scheduled during school, you can ask for an excused absence.

"Realistically, the youth who I was in care with—or [the youth] I've worked with now that I'm emancipated from care—the ones who engaged in their case planning are more successful, and that's just realistically speaking, and the ones who weren't very engaged, their outcomes are bleak. We have to be realistic with youth about what life will look like if you're not engaged in your planning."

—Former youth in foster care

A Guide to Participating in Case Planning

You've entered the child welfare system and been placed in out-of-home care. Now what?



- **Identify your caseworker and attorneys.** Understand their role and what they are supposed to do for you. You can ask them to explain their job to you.



- **Get your caseworker's contact information.** Ask when you can contact them and how—phone, text, email, etc. Ask who you should contact if you need someone during hours when your caseworker will not be accessible.



- **Find out how often you will meet with your caseworker and attorney, guardian ad litem (GAL), or court appointed special advocate (CASA).** At a minimum, Federal law requires caseworkers to conduct monthly visits, but you can let them know if you would like more frequent contact outside of those check-ins. There is not a Federal mandate for how often youth in care meet with their legal representation, but it is important to have regular check-ins with your attorney, GAL, or CASA.



- **Participate in meetings.** One of the most direct ways to have a role in decision-making is to actively participate in meetings, including check-ins with your caseworker, family group decision-making meetings, and court hearings. If you are not comfortable speaking at these meetings or attending in person, consider another strategy, such as writing letters.



- **Set goals for the future.** Thinking about and setting goals will help ensure your case plan will help you achieve those goals. Some goals you might want to consider are graduating high school, getting a job, or reunifying with your family.



- **Keep track of important documents.** Hold onto any notes you have from case planning meetings and court hearings, handouts or forms you receive from the child welfare agency, and—before you transition out of the child welfare system—any personal documents that are in State custody, such as your birth certificate.




- **Build a transition plan.** Your caseworker should start working with you to develop a transition plan when you turn 14. Your plan should help you prepare for a successful transition to independence and include tangible steps to get you there, even if reunification or adoption is one of your goals. FosterClub has a [21-step checklist](#) with specific things every young person should do before they exit foster care.

WHAT ARE YOUR RIGHTS AS A YOUTH IN CARE?

Since the child welfare system is run differently in different States, the rights of young people in foster care may vary based on where you live. Asking your caseworker about your rights is a good place to start. Some States have a foster children's [bill of rights](#) with legal requirements that protect your safety and well-being.


According to [Federal law](#), all children and youth should be consulted, in an age-appropriate manner, in any permanency hearing. If you are 14 or older, Federal law requires that your case plan is developed in consultation with you and that you be given a document that lists what rights you have related to education, health, visitation, and court participation.



"Just speak up. Even if it's beyond your social worker... If you are unable to communicate what you need or what you want with them, take it up the chain of command. Don't stop making noise until somebody listens."—Former youth in foster care

If you feel as though your rights are being violated, there are steps you can take. First, talk to your caseworker or foster parent. Speak up about what feels wrong and see if you can work together to resolve the issue. If the problem is with your caseworker, contact their supervisor or someone else at the child welfare agency. Some caseworkers include their supervisor's contact information in their recorded voicemail greeting. Other people to talk to can include staff at your independent living program or your attorney.

If you have tried vocalizing your concerns and still feel unheard, contacting an ombudsman may be an option in your State. 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 you have another place to go if you feel as though your agency is not listening. The National Conference of State Legislatures maintains a list of [children's ombudsman offices](#) so you can find what is available where you live.



"It's okay to hold [the agency] accountable. It's okay to use words that thoroughly describe the feelings that you encounter when they drop the ball. It's okay to thoroughly uphold the standard that you feel you should get from them and don't feel bad about asking for anything that you need."—Former youth in foster care

HOW CAN YOU BECOME INVOLVED IN ADVOCACY EFFORTS TO ELEVATE YOUTH VOICE IN CHILD WELFARE?

As a youth with lived foster care experience, you have valuable insights that can help transform the child welfare system so that other children and youth in care can have improved experiences and outcomes. A lot of foster care alumni become advocates for system reform after they exit care or even during their time in care. Consider using your voice beyond your individual case planning to bring about positive change for others. You can check out [Youth Move's seven stages](#) of becoming an advocate for youth for more information about how to share your story.

There are several ways to become involved in child welfare advocacy efforts:

- **Youth advisory boards and councils.** These are organizations that help young people with lived foster care experience advocate for child welfare policy, program, and service improvement, often by connecting them with policymakers. Many States and localities have some form of a youth advisory board or council. In addition to FosterClub's [National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council](#), visit its national map of [youth and alumni leadership groups](#) to see what is available where you live.
- **Foster care alumni associations.** Similar to youth advisory boards and councils, foster care alumni associations help equip former foster youth with the resources they need to advocate for systems change. Other services include alumni reunions, scholarship programs, and fundraisers such as [Foster Walk events](#). Many States' alumni associations are chapters of the [Foster Care Alumni of America](#).
- **Serve as a consultant for a child welfare agency.** Many child welfare agencies seek youth in care and foster alumni to share their stories and participate in policy and program development—some of them helped us write this factsheet! Ask your caseworker about opportunities to partner with your local agency.
- **Contact your elected officials and representative.** You can have a direct impact on Federal and State child welfare laws by talking to the policymakers who set the rules and disperse funding. All it takes is an [email, phone call, or visit with your elected representative](#) to start the conversation.

If you are interested in getting involved in child welfare system reform but are not sure where to start, you can check out the [National Foster Youth Institute](#), a youth development organization that helps young people get involved in child welfare reform through various programs and internships.



CONCLUSION

Adults should not be making decisions about children and youth in care without their input. All young people deserve to be meaningfully involved in their case planning so that they get the supports and services they need to work toward the future they want. Engagement looks different for everybody, so find what works best for you and do not be afraid to exercise your rights. You are the expert on your life, and you have gained valuable insights about the child welfare system through firsthand experience. Speak up to make positive changes in your life and the lives of others. Use your voice.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[FosterClub](#) features a variety of information and opportunities for young people in care and alumni, including meet-ups, workshops, internships, a transition toolkit, and youth perspective blogs.

[FosterStrong](#) engages and empowers youth in care and foster care alumni in storytelling and awareness-raising efforts.

[Think of Us](#) helps young people stay connected to what's happening in the child welfare field.

Information Gateway's [Youth resource collection](#) provides information about youth engagement, development, outcomes, and more.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). *Using your voice: A guide for youth on participating in case planning*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/using-your-voice-guide-youth-participating-case-planning/>



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau



This material may be freely reproduced and distributed. However, when doing so, please credit Child Welfare Information Gateway. This publication is available online at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/using-your-voice-guide-youth-participating-case-planning/>.