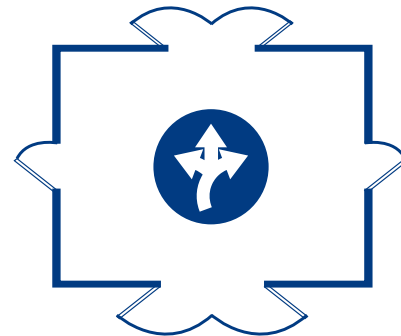


Youth Engagement Blueprint Series: Implementing Flexible and Innovative Programs and Practices



What is Youth Engagement?

Youth engagement is the intentional, authentic, and sustained involvement of young people in a decision-making activity (Gaughen, Flynn-Khan, & Hayes, 2009). "Implementing Flexible and Innovative Programs and Practices" is the fourth in a series of four factsheets that provide practical advice for increasing capacity for youth engagement at the organizational level.

What are Flexible and Innovative Programs and Practices?

A flexible and innovative program or practice for youth engagement is one that employs a risk-tolerant approach and allows for creativity and learning from mistakes. By implementing flexible and innovative programs and practices, organizations make the choice to approach decision-making, program development, funding, and daily practice in a way that is open to judicial risk taking by young people and seeks to meet their individual needs.

In order to best implement flexible and innovative programs, child welfare organizations particularly need to focus on normalcy, which means allowing young people in foster care to have experiences similar to peers who are not in foster care, such as allowing them the freedom to take risks and have new and independent experiences (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016). Normative activities offer young people opportunities for enhanced social engagement and network building, two essential components of identity development; such activities also create a sense of belonging, which combats the negative effects of trauma that many young people in foster care have experienced (Perry, 2006).

In recent years, research has also emerged on adolescent brain development, trauma-responsive care, and the importance of normalcy on the well-being of young people, allowing child welfare organizations to craft programs and policies aligned with the principles of trauma-responsive and developmentally supportive care (Murray, Rosanbalm, Christopoulos, & Hamoudi, 2015). This research can also inform the ways in which organizations think about normalcy and the use of mobile technology and social media in designing flexible and innovative programs for young people in foster care.

A final important aspect of implementing flexible and innovative programs and practices is a focus on transition planning to help young people in foster care create infrastructure and support networks as they exit out of care, including the creation of a personalized transition plan (Child

Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). When thinking about a flexible transition program, it is critical that young people themselves spearhead their own transition plans and work to put together a transition team that includes a variety of mentors and stakeholders. This is especially important if the young person is older than age 18 (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2014). Conversely, like most other people their age, a young person in foster care may make the decision to leave care at 18 (Pew Research Center, 2016). Foster care programs should be flexible and open enough to understand that a young person who voluntarily leaves foster care may return for additional support, just like a young person not in foster care may do with his or her family.

Flexible and innovative programs for youth engagement often:

- Promote creative ways to help youth and young adults feel engaged and included in decision-making that affects their lives and communities at all organizational levels; for example, young people could be encouraged to participate in in focus groups for continuous quality improvement (CQI) activities.
- Encourage young people and adults to work together as partners to achieve best outcomes for both young people and organizations (Norman, 2001; Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2012); for example, in addition to participating in their own case planning, young people could be involved in hiring youth development staff or in organizational CQI processes.
- Support normalcy for young people in foster care by encouraging participation in activities they enjoy (for example, extracurricular activities and/or social functions); in addition, organizations should support young people's participation in endeavors that challenge them, such as theater programs, leadership and challenge courses, student government, volunteer positions, etc.
- Align with the principles of trauma-responsive and developmentally supportive care
- Work with young people as legitimate and important contributors to process and outcomes
- Support young people with flexible and innovative approaches during crucial periods of their lives—such as when they are transitioning from foster care—and accept them back if they leave care but find that they need additional support
- Empower young people currently and formerly in foster care to take the lead in their own care—for example, by holding ongoing permanency conversations with child welfare staff and choosing potential permanent connections they feel are best suited for them

Building Organizational Capacity for Implementing Flexible and Innovative Programs and Practices

Capacity describes the potential of a child welfare system to be productive and effective by applying its human and organizational assets to identify and achieve its current goals. Building organizational capacity for implementing flexible and innovative programs and practices encompasses all five dimensions of capacity building: resources, infrastructure, knowledge and skills, culture and climate, and engagement and partnership (Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative, Brief #1: Child Welfare Organizational Capacities, 2015).

Building Resources

This includes concrete materials and assets, such as staff, funding, facilities, equipment, data collection tools and systems, informational and program materials, curriculum, and technology.

- Work with young people in foster care to get their input on programs they would like to see started or ones they would like to access. This can include a variety of programs, such as skill-building programs, transition planning programs, arts programs, volunteering, etc. This work can be accomplished by creating focus groups to elicit information from young people about their needs and desires. These groups can then continue working as implementation teams of young people and adults to locate the necessary resources.
- Identify organizational champions to assist in locating funding, facilities, and other necessary resources to help get a flexible and innovative program for youth engagement off the ground or to assist young people in getting involved with an existing program in the community.
- Hire child welfare staff at all levels who are alumni of foster care and other human service programs to mentor and work with young people in foster care on transition planning and other program planning.
- Work with young people to develop innovative ways to use technology in programming. For more information, see “Youth Engagement Blueprint Series: Using Science and Technology Effectively” (<https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/youth-development/blueprint-series/>).

Building Infrastructure

This includes organizational structures and processes, such as policies, procedures, governance structures, service array, decision-making processes, practice protocols, training, human resources systems, and quality improvement systems.

- Create policies that support flexible and innovative programs for young people in foster care. For example, these could focus on removing logistical barriers in place or helping young people navigate legal or other bureaucratic systems.
- Involve young people in decision-making processes, such as case, program, and transition planning. Ideally, these processes would be led by young people themselves, with the input of adult mentors and other stakeholders.
- Create CQI systems that allow young people in foster care to comment on infrastructure already in place and address what does or doesn't work in real time.
- Provide training for staff on understanding how to integrate normative activities in the context of protective factors within a child welfare environment.

Building Knowledge and Skills

This includes expertise and competencies—for example, practice knowledge, leadership skills, team building, analytic abilities, and cultural competency.

- Institute training in cultural competency for staff members to better serve all the youth in their care.
- Provide training for staff in trauma-responsive care and teen brain development so that workers are able to more effectively engage with young people in foster care and offer assistance as necessary. This training will help workers be more aware of normal teen development and more risk-tolerant when confronted with normal teen behaviors.
- Offer workers regular opportunities to discuss youth development and normalcy with

peers and supervisors to ensure alignment with agency vision for increased access to normative activities.

Building Culture and Climate

This includes norms, beliefs, values, and attitudes that influence behavior—for example, shared vision, goals, morale and motivation, attitudes, openness, and buy-in for new programs and practices.

- Child welfare organizations need to undergo a culture shift when working with young people in foster care from a child-welfare-centered system to a youth-welfare-centered system. Organizational leaders and frontline workers should embrace a culture of informed risk-taking by teens and young adults in foster care and allow them to undertake challenges from which they can learn.
- Organizations should take a holistic approach to working with young people in foster care, which involves getting them access to programs that allow them to learn based on the developmental level that best meets an individual young person's needs.
- Organizations should create processes to reinforce the culture shift described above and ensure that a risk-tolerant approach to teen behavior can continue to be implemented on a regular basis. In addition, organizations should plan to regularly assess barriers to maintaining a risk-tolerant environment for young people in foster care.

Building Partnerships

This includes interorganizational and intra-organizational relationships, such as internal teaming, connections, stakeholder involvement, communications, and interagency collaboration.

- Identify and maintain partnerships with community members to offer access to creative and flexible programs for young people in foster care in all areas, including creative arts, sports, volunteering, and others.
- Make sure that young people in foster care are aware of community and other programs that are available to them. Communication methods may include email, texting, social media, signs posted in prominent places, and verbal communications.
- Include a variety of stakeholders, not just caseworkers or agency personnel, in transition planning programs when working with a young person to create a transition plan. These can include family members, educators, community members, mentors, peers, and others who have indicated a willingness to become part of a young person's extended support network.

Example of Flexible and Innovative Programs

Below are several examples of flexible and innovative programs that effectively engage with young people currently and formerly in foster care at a number of levels. Note: The Capacity Building Center for States does not endorse any particular approach or youth engagement program and includes the descriptions below as examples only.

Foster Youth in Action

California

<http://www.fosteryouthaction.org/>

Foster Youth in Action (FYA) is a national grassroots network of state youth foster advocacy organizations working with young people currently and formerly in foster care to make policy changes at the local, state, and national levels. FYA advocates for the foster youth voice and highlights the importance of youth leadership in policy organizations. Founded by California Youth Connection in 2008, FYA provides training, leadership opportunities, shared learning, and advocacy for young people in foster care. Now with 23 current and pending partners, FYA's network represents more than 80 percent of all foster youth in care. FYA is the only national organization raising up and connecting independent, grassroots groups fighting to secure rights and opportunities that current and former foster youth deserve.

Program components include:

- Learning Hub, where young leaders ages 14 to 24 and adult advisers connect throughout the year, strengthen their leadership and advocacy skills, educate each other on key foster youth issues, and improve program practices
- Leaders for Change, an annual national conference in Washington, D.C. that brings together the FYA network to collaborate, share their voices with elected officials and other influencers, and empower and prepare youth to bring the fight for systemic change back to their communities
- Leaders United, FYA's youth-led leadership committee for leaders ages 15 to 24, through which members work on FYA's national policy campaigns, national policy plans, and the annual "Leaders for Change" conference; these youth leaders meet monthly to connect, share, and learn about the advocacy they and their peers are working on in their respective home states
- Capacity building services that help emerging foster youth-led groups get started, get organized, and take action and also help established groups improve programs and increase impact

Youth Support Partners

Pennsylvania

[http://www.alleghenycounty.us/Human-Services/News-Events/Accomplishments/Youth-and-Family-Support/Youth-Support-Partners-\(YSP\).aspx](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/Human-Services/News-Events/Accomplishments/Youth-and-Family-Support/Youth-Support-Partners-(YSP).aspx)

Started in 2008 by the Allegheny County, PA Department of Human Services (DHS), Youth Support Partners (YSP) works with young people formerly in foster care to educate and empower youth about their role in the planning process for their future and bring the voice of youth to the forefront during every phase of service development and provision to effect positive change for individuals and systems.

YSPs are young adult professionals who have personal experience in some area of the human services or juvenile probation system. They share their insights with youth currently in the system, advocate for them, and mentor them. This innovative approach of hiring alumni to work as peer mentors requires a supportive, diverse, and strength-based team of YSP leadership staff, DHS colleagues, and other system partners.

YSP's work includes:

- Working with youth between 14 and 21 years of age who are involved in human services or juvenile probation
- Enabling youth to become self-reliant, independent self-advocates and responsible for their own actions
- Helping youth understand legal mandates, court sessions, and legal documents
- Connecting youth to resources and natural supports
- Acting as a voice and advocate for youth involved with the child-serving systems at county, state, and federal levels
- Serving on a team supporting youth and families and helping identify natural supports

In addition to their personal experience, all YSPs take part in ongoing professional training, including the "Strength-Based Family Worker Credential" training, which focuses on positive youth and family engagement. They are also trained on DHS's service and support offerings, its contracted providers, and other agencies and community resources. With a heavy emphasis on skill building, coaching, training, supervising, and team building, the YSP Unit focuses on preparing the YSPs to work with youth from various backgrounds and experiences with a strength-based, culturally competent, positive, and youth-driven approach. Since its inception, the Unit has grown from 4 YSPs in 2008 to more than 30 in 2016. In addition, the YSP Unit management team of supervisor/coaches, managers, and support staff has grown over the years to further the goals of the program and support the YSPs in their work and professional development. The YSP Unit is the only program of its kind in the United States and serves more than 400 young people each year (Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2016; American Public Human Services Association, 2012).

New Avenues for Youth

Oregon

<http://newavenues.org/>

New Avenues for Youth, an organization based in Portland, OR, has been serving at-risk and homeless youth for more than 20 years. New Avenues for Youth uses a tiered service model built around the foundation of "typical" Independent Living Program (ILP) services funded by the state. This includes more intensive components for a subgroup of higher-needs youth (e.g., implementing the evidence-based My Life model for youth with mental health diagnoses or other disabilities) or more specific needs (e.g., for youth involved in sex trafficking,) or interests (e.g., college-focused support/leadership/housing program).

New Avenues for Youth is staffed with ILP coaches who work to expand the dialogue around transition planning—pushing youth and their teams to think beyond safety and to provide youth with developmentally appropriate opportunities to practice skills and take risks. Coaches encourage youth to take informed risks and undertake challenges while the safety net still exists instead of being overprotective, which can result in youth who are not well prepared or resilient to real-world expectations. Because New Avenues for Youth is a large program, it is able to meet the diverse needs of youth through specific positions for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and

questioning (LGBTQ) and mental health specialists. In fact, the program intentionally recruits a diverse staff (including those with lived experience in foster care) to address overrepresentation of youth of color and youth identifying as LGBTQ in foster care. By meeting youth where they are in transition to adulthood and designing service components that address prominent needs in the region, New Avenues for Youth works to strengthen the safety net during youth transition while also empowering young people to direct their own transition planning.

Program components include:

- Enrolling all young people in the program in the regular ILP in addition to the tiered service components for high and/or specific needs
- Cross-training all coaches in the tiered model so they are able to work with a range of youth needs, from providing more intensive services to working at a more typical level when youth are ready, without changing the coach/provider
- Working with the state agency and local university to create an “embedded researcher” partnership to inform program development, monitoring, and evaluation, including implementation of evidence-based approaches where possible
- Initiating a data-driven project to better understand who gets referred to ILP and who doesn’t (i.e., demographics of who is or isn’t referred)
- Focusing on prevention by enhancing the services provided for homeless youth in the area; New Avenues for Youth has created a preventative arm for foster youth at highest risk for homelessness (and/or serving as a “warm hand-off” when foster youth were enrolling in homeless and runaway youth services)
- Instituting an assertive engagement model based on years of experience serving runaway and homeless young people; the model includes an emphasis on physically getting coaches out into the community to meet with youth (coaches are entirely mobile with tablets/cell phones) versus structuring services only for youth who come through the door

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