

MENU *for* Youth Engagement

Youth need to be heard. They need to play an active part in the critical decisions that affect their lives. Child welfare agencies need to ask for and use the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of youth to make meaningful system-level improvements. Federal laws and regulations require child welfare agencies to involve families, children, and youth in planning and implementing services.

Use this guide along with [stories of authentic engagement](#) to help you identify practices and actions that can strengthen the role of youth voice in your agency. Each audio story is anchored by the perspective of a youth and is partnered with one or two other perspectives—caseworkers, leaders, attorneys, or peer mentors. Select from a menu of suggestions in the guide to suit different purposes and audiences.

Use this guide individually or with groups to:

- ▷ Think critically about real-world examples of authentic engagement
- ▷ Consider how to engage youth voice in practice, peer support, and system-level change
- ▷ Learn to work more effectively with young people
- ▷ Augment agencywide training
- ▷ Focus meetings on youth engagement
- ▷ Connect with communities
- ▷ Recruit youth representatives
- ▷ Support the development of peer mentoring programs

Why Is Youth Engagement Important?

Adolescence is a time of massive changes in social, emotional, and cognitive processes and brain development that will shape the trajectory of adult lives. Risky behavior in adolescence has a neurobiological basis, and the plasticity of brain development during this period opens opportunities for both positive and negative experiences to impact emotional regulation and the ability to make sound decisions as an adult. It is important to provide a safe environment and support for youth to have new experiences and take risks (Konrad et al., 2013).

This is even more important for youth in foster care who may lack natural supports and have been exposed to chronic or severe stressors. Adverse childhood experiences negatively impact self-regulation and make youth more vulnerable to lifelong health and mental health difficulties with significant social and economic consequences. Trauma-responsive care, access to support networks, proactive and cooperative relationships, and normative experiences during adolescence can help mitigate earlier trauma (Murry et al., 2015).

As you listen to the stories in this series, you will hear the youth explain how engagement at the practice, peer, and system levels gave them the support and empowerment they needed during this critical developmental period. You will understand how engagement practices, such as being involved in their own case planning and experiencing leadership roles with the positive support of an adult or peer mentor, provide youth a safe environment in which to take risks, make mistakes, and learn emotional self-regulation. You will see how the experiences and supportive relationships help youth move through developmental tasks during adolescence to become healthy, connected, and productive adults.

Practice-Level Youth Engagement

Engagement at this level recognizes that the relationship between the child welfare professional and the youth is critical to accomplishing the goals of safety, permanency, and well-being. A strength-based approach to establishing and maintaining relationships helps to:

- ▷ Gain buy-in and empower youth to drive the decision-making process
- ▷ Empower youth to determine service needs
- ▷ Mutually set goals, develop case plans, and make joint decisions
- ▷ Build trust and accomplish change together
- ▷ Connect youth to their communities and needed supports
- ▷ Prepare youth for the transition from foster care to successful adulthood

Peer-Level or Peer-Led Youth Engagement

Engagement at this level enlists young adults who have had lived experience in the foster care system as mentors to help youth currently in foster care to:

- ▷ Navigate the system
- ▷ Meet case plan goals
- ▷ Provide mutual support and self-advocacy
- ▷ Learn life skills for successful adulthood
- ▷ Develop social and emotional skills through healthy peer relationships

System-Level Youth Engagement

Engagement at this level includes youth and young adults who are or were formerly involved with child welfare services as active participants in systems change activities to:

- ▷ Advocate for policy changes
- ▷ Serve on decision-making boards
- ▷ Evaluate child welfare services and programs
- ▷ Ensure that community resources are aligned with what youth say they need
- ▷ Ensure child welfare services build strength and resilience in youth
- ▷ Serve as practice advisors and consultants
- ▷ Conduct trainings

MENU

for

Youth Engagement

Menu for Improving Youth Engagement

Browse the menu to find suggestions for how to use different learning activities to suit different purposes and audiences. Select stories by reviewing the summaries of Authentic Youth Engagement Stories. Before listening to any stories, share [The Secret Sauce: A Recipe for Authentic, Honest, and Trusting Relationships With Youth and Questions for Critical Thinking](#). These resources may be used for individual learning, in coaching or supervisory sessions, or with teams.

For group learning, begin by asking the group what they believe are the basic ingredients for authentic youth engagement at the practice, peer, and system levels. Record the responses on a whiteboard, then share [The Secret Sauce: A Recipe for Authentic, Honest, and Trusting Relationships With Youth](#). Ask the group to review the list and identify any elements that stood out to them that had not been identified or discussed. Instruct them to note examples that illustrate the ingredients as they listen to selected stories. After listening to the stories, assign a few of the “Questions for Critical Thinking” for participants to discuss first in pairs, then in small groups, and finally with the larger group to discover common themes.



Appetizers

An appetizer should increase anticipation for what is to follow. Raise awareness about the value of youth engagement by featuring one or two stories and questions as an icebreaker for meetings or learning seminars or to jumpstart engagement with youth and families.

System-level engagement stories can support culture shifts in the agency. Open a meeting focused on including youth voice in meaningful policy change work or collaborate with youth-supporting organizations. Use with a multidisciplinary or continuous quality improvement team.

Peer support engagement stories can begin conversations with youth-serving organizations about building a peer-to-peer mentoring program or recruiting youth representatives.

Practice-level engagement stories can be used to open a staff unit meeting, training, or a one-on-one coaching session. Use in court collaborative partner meetings to establish a common understanding of youth engagement.

Meals

Meals are a dedicated time for nourishment. Use a selection of stories representing all three levels of engagement to create a longer training session. Share a “meal” with community groups and other youth-serving organizations to raise awareness about the value of youth engagement. Help leaders, managers, and staff work more effectively with young people by adding stories to existing training or as a refresher for veteran staff.

Snacks

Snacks are meant to sustain you between regular meals. Use one of the nine stories as a regular feature in staff, partner, and stakeholder meetings over time to keep the focus on including youth voice. Veteran workers can sharpen their engagement skills by listening to the stories and considering the questions as an ongoing professional development feature of supervisory sessions.

Desserts

Desserts are the sweet dish served at the end of a meal. Use the Dessert Menu to find resources for more in-depth information and steps for action planning to integrate youth engagement into standard practice from case planning through system-level changes.



The Dessert Menu

Select resources from this Dessert Menu to move beyond the stories and find more in-depth information and steps for action planning to integrate youth engagement into standard practice from case planning through system-level changes.

The [Youth Engagement Blueprint Series](#) promotes culture and climate that encourage youth engagement at all levels of an organization. The series describes how to build capacity in each of four component areas: viewing young people as organizational assets, having the right people, implementing flexible and innovative programs and practices, and using science and technology effectively.

[Information Memorandum ACYF-CB-IM-19-03](#) provides guidance and suggestions from the Children's Bureau about engaging, empowering, and utilizing family and youth voice in all aspects of child welfare to drive case planning and system improvement.

[Engaging Partners to Achieve Timely Permanency](#) offers tips and strategies to engage organizations with deep community ties like nongovernmental organizations, faith-based communities, and philanthropic organizations that have been key partners in supporting children and youth in foster care to achieve permanency. The tips and strategies can also be used to collaborate with the same organizations to create opportunities for mentoring or peer support programs.

["Building and Sustaining Collaborative Community Relationships"](#) gives practical steps and guidance for establishing, assessing, and evaluating new and existing collaborations.

["Strategic Planning in Child Welfare: Strategies for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement"](#) presents tips and strategies for engaging stakeholders in federal monitoring, reporting, planning processes (e.g., Child and Family Services Reviews, Program Improvement Plans, Child and Family Services Plans, Annual Progress and Services Reports), and other agency processes.

["Beyond Strategic Planning: Engaging Families in Plan Implementation"](#) provides strategies and considerations on engaging and maintaining youth and family voice during the implementation of Child and Family Services Plans. The publication describes setting expectations and preparing for participation, making the process welcoming, and establishing and maintaining effective communication throughout the implementation process.

["Creating a Vision Together: Engaging Families and Youth for Better Outcomes"](#) summarizes strategies and tips to collaborate with families and youth at all levels of agency planning and decision-making.

[Positive Youth Development](#) discusses positive youth development, including key principles, how to integrate positive youth development into youth development programs, how to assess youth involvement and engagement, and youth-adult partnerships. The site also connects to related resources for successful youth engagement.

[Developmental Relationships Resources](#) contains links to research, tips, and a framework for strengthening the developmental relationships that help young people succeed.

Authentic Youth Engagement Stories

Practice-Level Engagement

Practice-level engagement stories highlight the fundamental relationship between child welfare professionals and youths. The stories illustrate a strength-based approach to establishing and maintaining relationships to accomplish change together by setting goals, developing case plans, and making joint decisions. Individual-level engagement achieves buy-in and empowers youths to drive the decision-making process.



Andrea and Medina's Story

Reveals the elements of a trusting relationship between a youth and her attorney. The attorney gained the youth's trust through modeling consistency and reliability. Their relationship developed into a lasting, supportive friendship that helped the youth learn to advocate for herself and her child.

Medina

"No matter how angry, sad, or depressed I was, she was always there. Once I saw I could really trust her, I started opening up more."

Andrea

"I had to work hard to earn Medina's trust. There were times when she was so angry at the world and the system she found herself in that she would yell and hang up on me. But she would call back. And I would always answer."



Ronnie and Jackie's Story

Shows how nonjudgmental, active listening and relatability build rapport and trust. Opportunities to laugh and talk about real life situations helped a youth and his attorney develop a mutually rewarding relationship.

Ronnie

"She always listened to me and never once judged me for anything."

Jackie

"Ronnie bought into the relationship, and his buy-in graced me with the opportunity to learn more about him as a person preparing to enter the world more independently."



Diana and Tishana's Story

Tells the story of the relationship, initially forged over a shared meal, between a youth and her court appointed special advocate (CASA). The CASA worker's advocacy for concrete supports to meet the youth's needs helped grow the trust in their relationship.

Tishana

"She is someone who believed in me since day one and never gave up on me."

Diana

"Tishana is capable of achieving any goal she sets for herself, and I am privileged to be part of her journey."



Stefani and Kim's Story

Demonstrates how showing up and listening are foundational to developing a nourishing relationship with youth. As she evolved from a youth into a teen mom and an advocate, a young woman describes the constant support she and her family received from a social worker. The social worker talks about how their relationship has contributed to her own personal growth.

Stefani

"Amidst all of our perfectly imperfect relationships, every youth in care deserves someone like her."

Kim

"I have seen her grow and learn. We also learned from each other in unexpected ways."



Coney and Kristopher's Story

Addresses the importance of transparency, honesty, and respect in building mutual trust. A case manager's commitment to being genuine and transparent helped a youth overcome years of distrust stemming from earlier traumatic experiences while in foster care.

Kristopher

"I explained to him that the most annoying thing past workers did was blindside me. Once I told him that, he made sure that I felt like the captain of my life."

Coney

"My relationship with Kristopher has taught me patience, the importance honesty, and to treat young people with respect and individuality."

Peer-Level or Peer-Led Engagement

Peer-led engagement stories showcase mentoring programs that enlist youth who were once in foster care to help other youth involved with the child welfare system. Youth peers can help to translate the child welfare system and reduce the stress and anxiety of uncertainty in difficult times. Hearing from someone who has gone through the system and is able to share how it affected their lives can be a powerful source of peer-to-peer support. Peer mentors assist through mutual sharing, support, and advocacy.



Paulette and Luz's Story

Tells the story of the relationship between a youth in foster care and a BraveLife peer navigator. Both talk about the personal sharing and mutual trust that have forged a connection that will last a lifetime.

Luz

"I wanted to be able to advocate for myself, to let everyone know my thoughts, to fight for my daughter the way she fought for me. I learned to stand up for myself and to let no one plan out my life, especially the foster care system."

Paulette

"Witnessing Luz's growth reminded me of my experience in care, which I shared with her. I share my story if I feel it's going to make a difference in a young person's life."



Sarah and Nic's Story

Underscores the importance of consistency and encouragement in trusting relationships. A Fostering Success peer mentor gave this advice to the youth she mentored: stop listening to the people who don't believe in you.

Nic

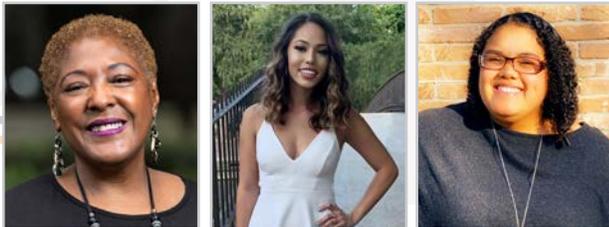
"My mindset has shifted. I can face difficult obstacles and classes with confidence thanks to the encouragement I've received."

Sarah

"I've tried to be a consistent support to him no matter what he was going through and his biggest fan when he's doing awesome."

System-Level Engagement

System-level engagement stories illustrate the intentional inclusion of youth and young adults who are or were formerly in foster care as active participants in systems change activities. At the system level, youth may advocate for policy changes, serve on decision-making boards, evaluate child welfare services and programs, act as practice advisors and consultants, conduct trainings, and participate in social marketing campaigns.



Debra, Kaylah, and Brittany's Story

Highlights the advocacy work of State and Regional Youth Leadership Councils. Two paid regional and state youth specialists and the Texas Director for Transitional Living Services describe how including youth voice by providing a "seat at the table" at the state capital enhances the child welfare system. All three discuss the rewards and personal impact of their work.

Brittany

"Being able to teach, empower, and mentor young adults in the foster care system while being able to relate to them has given me such a rewarding feeling."

Kaylah

"I initially didn't want to be associated with foster care and wanted to completely erase it from my past. I didn't want it to define me, my family, or my future. ... I've now realized the positive impact that using my voice and lived experience has had in my work."

Debra

"My passion and commitment to youth was instilled very early by my father, who worked with at-risk youth for many years."



Anika and Micaela's Story

Reveals how advocating for youth makes a difference in system change and in the advocates' own lives. The Director of Policy and Advocacy at NMCAN and a youth advocate talk about their shared experience testifying as expert witnesses for state legislative committees and how it created a strong bond between them.

Micaela

"Honestly, policy and politics was not something I was initially interested in. But by being at the capitol, learning about the process, seeing how my advocating could make a difference, I became really interested in it...I also gained a lot of skills and got good at it."

Anika

"We worked together every step of the way. ... Through all this, we came to really trust each other, in the work and as people."

References

- Konrad, K., Firk, C., & Uhlhaas, P. J. (2013). Brain development during adolescence: Neuroscientific insights into this developmental period. *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International*, 110 (25), 425–431. <https://doi.org/10.3238/arztebl.2013.0425>
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This product was created by the Capacity Building Center for States under Contract No. HHSP2332015000711, funded by the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Users may freely print and distribute this material crediting the Capacity Building Center for States.

Suggested citation: Capacity Building Center for States. (2021). *Youth engagement menu*. Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.