

Brain Frames: How Attorneys Can Engage Youth in Case Planning and Court Hearings

The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s “Brain Frames” resources draw on adolescent brain research to guide child welfare practitioners who interact with youth in foster care. Below are some of the Brain Frames tips for the legal community to keep youth engaged in case planning and court hearings:



Keeping the Family Conversation Alive

“Being legally connected to a permanent family is central to a young person’s well-being and sense of belonging.” Attorneys should be mindful about goal changes that prematurely shut the door on permanence. When discussing permanency goals with clients, attorneys should anticipate that youth may change their minds. Attorneys should engage, prepare, and support older youth before, during and after meetings and hearings. Legal advocates should acknowledge and address youths’ perceptions and fears regarding court.

Sample Scenario:

- **A young person says:** “I don’t want to be adopted by this family.”
- **What the young person may mean:** “I’m worried that if I’m adopted, I won’t be able to see my siblings anymore.”
- **What an attorney can say:** “I am here to support you. Let’s talk about what adoption means. Adoption does not mean you won’t be connected with your family and siblings. Let’s talk about who you would like to keep in touch with, and talk with the judge about what is important to you.”



Maintaining Connections to School and Work

Youth who have experienced foster care should have access to resources and opportunities to excel academically and be economically secure. Attorneys who represent adolescents in foster care should advocate to ensure school stability, encourage and support youth-driven case planning and decision making, and advocate for youth to participate in age-appropriate enrichment, extracurricular, social, and cultural activities. Attorneys should educate their clients on extended foster care, which has been shown to help young people graduate from high school.

Sample Scenario:

- **A young person says:** “I don’t care about school or graduating.”
- **What the young person may mean:** “I’ve moved around so much, I have no idea what I would need to do to graduate and I feel very overwhelmed.”
- **What an attorney can say:** “I know it must feel overwhelming. I am here to support you. Let’s set up a meeting with your school and caseworker to plan for graduation.”



Promoting Safe and Stable Housing for Young People

While it is common for young people to move out during late adolescence, youth who age out of foster care without a permanent family go from being fully dependent upon the child welfare system to being completely on their own. Attorneys who represent youth who are preparing to exit foster care should advocate for their clients to engage in typical activities that will help them eventually exercise housing independence, such as getting a job and basic money management skills. Attorneys should also discuss extended foster care with their clients.

Sample Scenario:

- **A young person says:** “I’m ready to exit foster care at age 18. I’ll be fine on my own.”
- **What the young person may mean:** “In foster care, I was never able to make decisions for myself and I want to live close to or with my family again.”
- **What an attorney can say:** “I am here to support you. Let’s talk about what your legal options are, and what extended foster care would look like. Let’s work to figure out the best plan to get you the support you need, and help you stay connected to important people in your life.”



Prioritizing Healing and Building Resilience for Young People in Foster Care

Attorneys for adolescents in care can help their clients navigate the ups and downs of adolescence and build resilience. Attorneys can support their clients by using words, facial expressions, and a tone of voice that communicates respect, acceptance, and support. They should also offer time and emotional space to help their clients process rejection, discouragement, or failure. In court, attorneys should advocate for youth to engage in activities not tied to their foster care involvement and for therapy that best fits the youth’s needs.

Sample Scenario:

- **A young person says:** “I don’t want to meet with you. You’re just like everyone else in this system, you don’t help me.”
- **What the young person may mean:** “No one understands me. Everyone is always telling me what to do and judges me. No one, including the judge, cares what I want.”
- **What an attorney can say:** “I understand you feel you are always being bossed around or scolded. I am here to support you. Let’s meet at a place where you feel comfortable to talk about how to talk to the judge about what you want and need.”



Supporting Young Parents

Young people who have experienced foster care are more likely to become pregnant before age 21. Attorneys who represent young parents can support their clients by advocating that young parents and their children stay together, educating legal communities that children born to youth in care should not be automatically placed in foster care, and prioritizing legal permanence to ensure young parents have built in support structures.

Sample Scenario:

- **A young person says:** “I want people to leave me and my baby alone. I don’t need help.”
- **What the young person may mean:** “I’m worried that people will think I cannot care for my child and will take my child from me. I’m already feeling overwhelmed by attending school and being a parent.”
- **What an attorney can say:** “I can see you’re growing into a great parent. I am here to support you. Let’s talk to your caseworker and the judge about what we can do to keep your new family together and how best we can support you to meet your personal goals.”

For the full text of the Brain Frames, visit: <https://www.aecf.org/blog/brain-frames-short-tools-for-positive-interactions-with-youth-in-foster-care/>.