

PFP IMPACT

Best Practice Recommendations of project Foster Power



FOCUSING ON PLACEMENTS:

- Valuing Youth Voice
- Sharing Information
- Encouraging Childhood
- Considering Medication
- Trusting Youth

IMPROVING SUPPORTS AS YOUTH TRANSITION OUT OF FOSTER CARE

project Foster Power is a group of current and former foster youth, ages 15 to 25+, who are using our voices and experiences to improve the Colorado child welfare system through youth-led organizing and advocacy. Hosted by the Rocky Mountain Children's Law Center, pFP is the Colorado partner of **Foster Youth in Action**, a network of groups across the United States and Canada who believe in the power of foster youth voice.

pFP follows a **Youth Action Cycle** to listen directly to youth members across the state, identify a shared issue, develop a plan, and work to create change through collective action. Hearing time and time again that youth did not feel adequately prepared or supported in their transition to adulthood, we identified our 2020-2021 issue for action: **Improving Supports for Young People Exiting Foster Care**. As part of this campaign, youth came together to develop best practice recommendations for professionals across three key areas: 1) Placements that Better Meet Our Needs, 2) Self-Care and Community, and 3) Education and Employment. This is the first of three volumes of best practice recommendations. Our intention is that these recommendations spark change in practice and create greater dialogue around these issues. We encourage you to contact us to continue the conversation.

BEST PRACTICE #1

Incorporate Youth Voice in the Placement Process. Communication is key.

Our Recommendations:

- When placing youth out of their home, ask them if they have ideas for possible placements. Maybe they know a family member, teacher, coach, or family friend who could be an option.
- Talk with young people about their placement preferences. What are their top three priorities? Maybe it's location (close to school or friends or other connections). Maybe they prefer a home with only younger children. Maybe it's a home that would encourage connection to the youth's own culture. Find out directly from the youth what things are MOST important to them in finding a placement. Be transparent and explain to the youth that while you might not be able to find a placement to meet all of their preferences, you want their input. The conversation in and of itself is important in the youth feeling heard.
- Think creatively about ways to introduce the youth to a potential placement. Maybe the young person has a chance to "interview" the placement, do a trial visit, or spend respite time in the home to see if it's a good fit.
- Communication is so important in placement changes. As much as possible, be direct with the youth about why any move is happening. Unless there is an emergency, try to give the youth as much notice as possible about the change so they can prepare. Provide an opportunity for "closure" - talking with the youth about why a placement wasn't the best option for them.
- Upon placement, be sure to provide the youth with a copy of their rights in foster care. Talk with them about these rights to ensure they understand and have a chance to ask questions. Be sure youth know who they can talk to if they believe these rights aren't being respected. Also talk with their placement about these rights so that everyone is on the same page.
- Be sure to schedule a recurring time to check in with the young people in your care. Regular check-ins help to build trust and create space to have open conversations about how youth are feeling in placement.
- Train foster parents and other placements on how to best build connection and trust with the youth in their homes.

The Problem . . .

"While youth should feel they have agency in their lives, many times foster youth do not feel like their voice matters when it comes to decisions in their own lives."

- B.T.

"Youth need to feel heard and feel like they have some control over their life. If there are decisions that are made about the youth that they are unable to have a say in, full transparency is a non-negotiable."

- Anonymous

Our Voice:

"Just like you have a gut instinct about incompatibility on a first date, youth have a similar sense when meeting a potential placement for the first time.

Had my caseworker listened to the alarm bells of my intuition, I could have avoided a year-long neglectful foster placement."

- E.M.

"I didn't get a say in my placement, and where I ended up pushed me further away from my goals of going to college and staying close to my family."

- S.C.

BEST PRACTICE #2

Share information to help everyone in the placement be on the same page.

Our Recommendations:

- When placing a youth, explain to them that certain information is shared with placements so that they can best meet the youth's needs. To the extent you are able, tell the youth what type of information needs to be shared and why. This might include information about their triggers, their likes or dislikes, their interests, their coping skills or supports, and any special needs.
- Consider having youth complete a form to help with this conversation. Share the form with any new placement - that way the youth has some sense of control over what information gets shared. The form could include questions such as "What do you want a new placement to know about you?" or "How can a new placement best support you during the transition to their home?" This will give the young person time to consider their needs and articulate them in a thoughtful way. Let the youth know you will share their responses with the future placement.
- Train placements about how to communicate with youth who are new to their home. Encourage the caregiver to ask the youth on Day #1 what they want the caregiver to know about them and create space for the youth to share their story (as much as they want to share) from their own perspective. This is important even if the placement has already been informed about the youth's history. The caregiver should be able to react to the youth and ask questions.
- It is important for youth to feel welcome in their new placement and supported in "getting settled." Encourage placements to let youth know at the beginning that they will have conversations about rules and expectations (perhaps later in their first week), but that on Day #1, the focus is on helping the youth take a deep breath and feel safe in their new space. Exact timing of the "rules and expectations" conversation may vary based on the youth, but it's key not to overwhelm them at the time of the placement.
- Prepare other individuals in the home for the youth's placement. Placements should not be a surprise for anyone!

The Problem . . .

"I am more than my file. Don't let a placement turn me down because I am labled as 'at risk'. Yes, I am a human and I determine what my life can be."
- D.W.

"A lack of transparency results in a youth in care feeling that everyone but them is pulling the strings in their lives. If you want youth to exit care feeling like they have agency, be transparent with them from the beginning- and this starts with placements."
- B.T.

Our Voice:

"After an amazing Christmas stay with a potential foster family, I couldn't wait to be picked up from school the following day. Sadly, they never came. I was never told why. Eight years later, I still wonder what I did wrong."
- E.M.

BEST PRACTICE #3

Create opportunities for youth to experience and enjoy "childhood."

Our Recommendations:

- Consider using words like "quality" or "stable" when describing the childhood you want for youth. Using words like "normal" and "normalcy" can be upsetting to hear. Every young person has a unique childhood.
- Communicate with the youth about how they want to talk about their placement. Talk about how they want to refer to their adult supports/caregivers (as "foster parent," "guardian," "caregiver," by name, etc.)?
- Being able to engage in extracurricular activities, having time with friends, and having other opportunities for fun should be a part of every childhood. Be sure that placements are trained in the "reasonable and prudent parent" standard. Encourage placements to provide youth in their care opportunities for self-discovery by helping them find and choose activities to participate in and by supporting the connections they build with friends. Stop telling foster youth what they can't do and find opportunities to say yes!
- When possible, teach youth to have healthy relationships through the use of personal phones and social media. Help them navigate personal privacy and boundaries when using technology. Support them in spending time with friends outside of school, including hangouts and sleepovers.
- Learn about the relationships that were important to a youth before they entered care. Consider supporting these connections by encouraging continued contact when appropriate.
- All relationships can be difficult at times. Support youth in navigating these moments by offering guidance when they are struggling with communication and connection.
- Create household rules and consequences that are reasonable for the developmental level of each youth.
- Consider utilizing foster care funds to incorporate positive reinforcement options for youth, such as outings, games, toys, or allowance. Keep it consistent.
- Value youth agency. Set youth up for their futures by giving them practice in using their voices and making decisions. Send a message to the youth that they are insiders in their life decisions, rather than outsiders.

The Problem. . .

"We will never have another opportunity to have a 'childhood' if we don't take it now."

- V.J.

"Foster youth are often robbed of sleepovers, trampolines, and prom.

We sacrifice normalcy for safety to the point we go overboard and forget these kids just want to be kids.

If youth can't have a childhood while in the system, they'll never have one at all.

Trauma has corrupted most of foster youth's childhoods. You are responsible for making sure normalcy is restored for them."

- E.M.

Our Voice:

"These types of activities are labeled as "privileges" in care, but I didn't do anything wrong to be placed in foster care so why am I being punished?"

- Anonymous

"Let us be rowdy and silly. Chances are, it's the first time we've ever felt safe enough to do so."

- E.M.

BEST PRACTICE #4

Include youth in decision-making around prescription medication.

Our Recommendations:

- Explore healthy coping tools with youth as an alternative or additional way to manage prior trauma. Make sure you do this before seeking medication.
- Remember: you are in a position of trust and power as an adult in a youth's life. Use care in your decisions regarding medication. If medication is being considered for a youth, decision makers should be fully informed of the reason for prescribing, the plan for treatment, any side effects, and alternative options.
- Talk with youth about these medical recommendations. Involve them in making decisions about their own bodies. Be sure they understand that taking medication does not mean there is something "wrong" with them.
- If a youth is prescribed medication, teach them directly about those prescriptions, the potential side effects, and the intended impact. Give youth space to ask questions.
- Model what a good question might sound like so that youth learn how to advocate for themselves. Maybe help youth develop a list of questions before they meet with a doctor.
- Create opportunities during medical appointments, team meetings, and/or court hearings for youth to express their opinions regarding medication.
- Listen to youth when they tell you a medication isn't working or doesn't feel right in their bodies. Trust them to know their bodies best.
- Especially before youth exit foster care, develop a plan for medication management and/or discontinuation of prescriptions.
- Support transgender youth in accessing appropriate and supportive healthcare.

The Problem . . .

"We should know what medications we are taking, and if we don't, then why take them?"

- V.J.

"When you use prescription drugs to treat our emotions, it may lead us to believe that there is something wrong with us. Instead, allow us to process our emotions in a healthy way."

- Anonymous

"Youth need to learn how to regulate their physical and mental health in a healthy way. Teach them the importance of this and how medications can and cannot help achieve overall wellbeing."

- E.M.

Our Voice:

"I was put on anti-depressants and Ambien during my time in foster care, which caused me to become dependent on those prescriptions for over 10 years until I was able to wean off of them and develop solutions that did not require taking a pill."

- Anonymous

"When I was in placements I had many changes in my medication but I never knew what they were for. When I asked, they did not tell me."

- V.J.

BEST PRACTICE #5

Listen first. Trust youth.

Our Recommendations:

- Youth know themselves best. Listen to them. Their intuition about what they need is really good.
- Encourage all youth to speak up and participate in their own cases, regardless of any disabilities, mental health concerns, or other challenges.
- Allow the youth to make mistakes and be there to guide them back on track. Don't disappear.
- Do your part in communicating with the youth no matter what. Your relationship will be strengthened if both you and the youth practice a resolution cycle. When you make a mistake, use this as a model to repair and take accountability in the relationship. Youth learn by watching you.
- When talking with a youth, listen to understand, instead of listening to respond.
- Think about how you can act like a "coach" in your interactions with youth, as opposed to being a "boss." Find ways to encourage them in achieving their own goals.

The Problem . . .

"When I would go to a new placement, the adults thought they knew me already just by having looked at my paperwork. The truth is, you won't know me until you talk to me."

- Anonymous

"If our teams of professionals don't listen, then we won't have the opportunity to know and express what we want."

- V.J.

"If you don't trust us, how are we supposed to trust you?"

- S.C.

Our Voice:

"I felt like my voice in care was treated more of an after-thought rather than a genuine suggestion for my own wellbeing."

- Anonymous

"Treat us with the same respect you would treat a coworker or peer. Don't talk down to me as if I don't know how to take care of myself. Trust me, I've been doing it since I was nine"

- E.M.

"In one of my placements I was trusted and felt like I was getting closer to independence. When I made mistakes I learned from them with the help of my group home parent who was awesome. She was patient, calming and she took the time needed for me to learn."

- S.C.

As foster youth, we often feel like outsiders in our own lives, not being given the opportunity to speak up and make choices.

These best practice recommendations were created FOR professionals BY youth with lived experience in foster care. We are here to be a part of the solution. We offer these recommendations to guide your work so that you can support youth in the best way possible.

Thank you for taking the time to read these. We hope you stop to think about how you can put them into practice.

Our goal is to improve supports for youth exiting foster care.
That starts with YOU and it starts NOW.

Stay connected with us via Facebook or Instagram:

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