

PFP IMPACT

Best Practice Recommendations of project Foster Power



FOCUSING ON: SELF-CARE & COMMUNITY

- Self-Care Practices
- Physical & Mental Health
- Medication
- Building Community
- Activities & Opportunities
- Maintaining Community

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 second 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

SELF-CARE

Check in. Listen. Create opportunities for exploration.

Our Recommendations:

- Understand that as a professional on the youth's team, you are a big part of their life. Your opinions, ideas, and support matter to them.
- Check-in regularly with youth. Don't wait until something goes wrong to ask how they are doing. Be consistent and follow through on your promises.
- Self-care isn't just about "coping skills." Help youth understand that some self-care options can come from external sources, like friends or activities, while others are internal, like slowing down and breathing deeply.
- As youth grow and change, so will their self-care strategies. Allow youth the space to explore new ways to practice self-care.
- Allow youth to incorporate their cultural and religious practices into their self-care routines. Be open: these practices help youth maintain their identities and hold on to pieces of their lives from before they entered care.
- Consider sharing ways that you practice self-care with the youth on your caseload. What are your daily or weekly practices? Maybe practice self-care with the youth.
- Brainstorm self-care practices with youth and introduce them to new ideas. These might include: working out, practicing art, being outside, meditating, taking and understanding the medication that impacts their bodies, cooking and eating healthy, finding a therapist that feels right to the young person, photography, being around others, or taking space for themselves when needed or wanted.
- Talk with youth about how developing strategies for self-care now can positively impact them in the future. Self-care is not just for their time in foster care.
- Self-care practices can only be impactful if youth learn to use them in their day-to-day lives. Make sure everyone involved in the youth's life (from placement to school to the greater community) allows youth to develop and utilize these self-care skills. Work with youth to understand which practices might be best in certain situations.

The Problem . . .

" Self-care is the only way to move forward in our lives. It is incredibly important to know how to do this. When we are in the system, it makes it harder to know the way to care for ourselves."

- A.M.

Our Voice:

"Please stop treating foster youth as if we don't know how to take care of ourselves. We are often the only ones that have taken care of us."

- Anonymous

"When I was in care I did not get the ability to explore self-care options like my peers outside of care had. In my high school, I saw my peers having opportunities that I did not have."

- A.M.

BEST PRACTICE #2

SELF-CARE

Empower youth to actively participate in their own physical and mental health care.

Our Recommendations:

- Encourage youth to lead or at least participate in conversations about their own physical or mental health.
- Support youth in recognizing changes in their mental well-being, especially surrounding big transitions like placement moves. Talk with youth about how these changes are impacting the way that they feel, cope, or interact with others.
- Proactively create a plan WITH youth for taking care of their mental health. Don't just create treatment plans for them. Implement any plans WITH youth as well. Remember that these plans will need to change as youth change.
- Recognize that physical and mental health care plans are not one-size-fits-all. Particularly for transgender or gender non-conforming youth, LISTEN and encourage other professionals to do the same. For some of these youth, this may be their first time fully exploring their identities. Having access to affirming health care and other supports is essential for their own self-care practice.
- Remember: you are teaching skills for a lifetime, not just a case. It's important for all youth to develop strategies to care for their mental health while their cases are open so that when they leave care, they have the skills to implement these day-to-day practices.

The Problem . . .

"If young people are not involved in taking care of themselves when they're in care than they won't be involved in taking care of themselves when they're an adult."

- Anonymous

"In foster care, young people don't get shown how to set up a doctor's appointment, or how to get to and from places independently. We are taken without explanations like an outsider to our own health care."

- Anonymous

Our Voice:

"I was born with a heart disease and when I was in foster care I was just brought to the doctor with no explanation of what was really going on with *my* body. Once I exited care I still had the same disease and I had to learn it and how to care for myself for the first time on my own."

-Anonymous

BEST PRACTICE #3

SELF-CARE

Be thoughtful about medications.

Our Recommendations:

- For some youth, medication may need to be incorporated into their strategies for managing their physical or mental health. Talk with youth directly about the reasons for medication, their treatment options, and any alternatives that might be available.
- Educate youth about how medication might be a part of their self-care practice. The more youth know about their overall health needs, the better prepared they can be when transitioning out of care.
- Sexual health is also an important part of these conversations. Talk with youth openly and encourage them to talk with their doctors about this topic. Don't shy away from conversations about birth control.
- If youth are actively telling you they do not want to take medication, don't try to force them or punish them. LISTEN to what they are saying and talk with them about options.

The Problem . . .

"Wrong medications can hurt young people for the rest of their lives."

- S.C.

" We have to be able to manage our own mental health. We need our own life experiences of taking care of ourselves so that when we leave the system, *we know* how to handle our own mental health."

- D.W.

Our Voice:

"The judge forced me to take medications while I was in care. I didn't like any of them. They did not feel right in my body. I wish they would have talked to me about my medications and not forced me to take them."

- S.C.

BEST PRACTICE #4 COMMUNITY

Help youth build their community.

Our Recommendations:

- Transition years are a crucial time in a youth person's life as they learn to take care of themselves. One part of their self-care tool-kit is building a larger support system. These are individuals that youth may reach out to when they need help after leaving care.
- Help youth develop these relationships. Support people may include: friends, extended family, placements, teachers, coaches, therapists, doctors, Chafee workers, church or religious community, and others.
- Find and encourage opportunities for youth to connect with other young people with similar lived experience. This could be through Chafee, project Foster Power, Metro Youth Alliance, Youth Advocate Programs, and other groups.
- Talk with young people about where they find support so that they can decide who makes up their community. Help them explore places of worship, local recreation centers, community gardens, school clubs or sports, a local coffee shop or restaurant, a pick-up basketball game, and so many other places of connection.
- Support the youth in getting a job in their community so that they can meet other young people of similar ages.
- Encourage youth to maintain relationships with the friends they were close to before entering care.
- Help youth to build and maintain connections with their family in a way that is healthy and safe for them. Remember: they get to decide who they consider family.

The Problem . . .

"Helping young people build their community gives them an opportunity to get comfortable with their surroundings, and to create a life that is more diverse. A community brings peace, happiness, and joy."

- D.W.

Our Voice:

"I personally was never taught how to make and keep friendships. And for that reason, I have a very limited support system consisting of people my age."

- Anonymous

BEST PRACTICE #5 COMMUNITY

Encourage youth to engage in the same types of activities and opportunities as their peers.

Our Recommendations:

- Create opportunities for youth to participate in age- and developmentally- appropriate activities, such as sleepovers, shopping with friends, school dances, sports, concerts, clubs, and dating.
- Keep the "reasonable and prudent parent" standard at the forefront of decision-making. Remove unnecessary obstacles for youth to participate in social events or school activities. Remember: "Running a background check on every person I want to hang out with isn't 'normal.'"
- Support youth in getting their drivers' permits, licenses, and first cars. This will open up so many opportunities for them in terms of building connections and pursuing their interests.
- Give youth the opportunity to try things in the community independently so that they learn skills to navigate different situations.

The Problem . . .

"I didn't get my license until I was 28 years old. No young person should have to wait until they are that old. Help us get our permit and learn how to drive so we can access our communities independently."

- D.M.

Our Voice:

"I did not get to go to my homecoming or have a cell phone or social media. I was not told why. In my group home, my house parent told me 'if you can buy your cell phone, pay the bills, and earn it, then you can have one.' We didn't even have jobs."

- S.C.

BEST PRACTICE #6 COMMUNITY

Help youth maintain their community.

Our Recommendations:

- There are so many case-related meetings and appointments. Be careful not to fill youth's schedules with "mandatory obligations." Talk with youth about their interests and priorities and be sure to create space for those activities as well.
- Help youth with transportation to and from sports practices, dance classes, movies with friends, and other activities. If you can't help with transportation, work with the youth to problem-solve and plan ahead.
- Teach youth to use public transportation, including ride-sharing options, so that they can develop these skills before they exit care.
- Allow youth to access technology like a phone or computer, and support them in creating healthy boundaries in their communications.

The Problem . . .

"If this was your child, you would do anything to have them have access to their community."

- D.M.

Our Voice:

"I started to use RTD when I was in foster care. I used it to get to and from my community. I had to get places myself. All young people in care should be able to use public transportation, especially if they don't have a car. It is very important to be able to access your community."

- A.M.

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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