

A Framework for Effectively Partnering With Young People





introduction

The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative® works to ensure that young people — ages 14 to 26 in the United States who have spent at least one day in foster care after their 14th birthday — have the resources, relationships and opportunities to achieve well-being and success. The Jim Casey Initiative does this by focusing on four key indicators: permanency, stable housing, educational success and economic security and pregnancy prevention and parenting support.

To make real improvements in these key areas, we recognize that we need key experts engaged in solutions and decisions that shape their lives: young people themselves. The Jim Casey Initiative uses an approach called authentic youth engagement. This approach includes a focus on racial and ethnic equity to achieve better outcomes for all young people; using partnerships with community institutions to make the most of resources; tracking data and evaluation results to assess progress; and building public will to create better policies and sustain momentum.

For the Jim Casey Initiative, which began in 2001, authentic youth engagement is a philosophical cornerstone, backed by high-quality tools and approaches. Through this signature practice, young people use their individual and collective power and expertise in helping to shape a better future for those in and transitioning from foster care into adulthood.

The Science Behind Authentic Youth Engagement

Emerging knowledge in the field of adolescent brain development shows that the brain undergoes extensive remodeling in response to the experiences people have during adolescence. Understanding the effects of trauma and adversity, the opportunity to heal and rewire the brain and the importance of learning through experience in a young person's life informs partnerships between youth and adults preparation, opportunities and support.

Authentic youth engagement in action: Jim Casey Initiative youth-adult partnerships

Young people are integrally involved in Jim Casey Initiative efforts to spur state policy and practice improvements. Working with adult advocates, nonprofit providers and child welfare system leaders, they have been involved in hundreds of practice and policy changes to better support older youth in foster care. Through these partnerships, young people have, among other efforts:

- identified, advocated for and implemented policy and practice changes in various jurisdictions across the United States;
- conducted data collection, analysis and research; and
- educated key stakeholders and community partners to raise awareness on certain issues and solutions.

why is authentic youth engagement important?

Young people are the experts on their own lives. Unfortunately, many times they are not seen as experts, and system leaders may not involve young people in decisions about their own cases or about how the system should operate to effectively support young people, families and communities. As a result, without this level of engagement, systems often perpetuate negative experiences and outcomes.

Drawing from their experiences, perspectives, ideas and skills, the Jim Casey Initiative advances system reform — including policy and practice changes — and seeks to strengthen communities in responsive and sustainable ways.

Authentic youth engagement demonstrates a commitment to an inclusive process geared toward advancing equitable outcomes as outlined in the Foundation's Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide.

Engaging young people in planning and decision making regarding their lives — and the larger community — yields benefits for them as they transition into adulthood. Authentic youth engagement is based on an understanding of adolescent development — recognizing how young people mature emotionally, mentally and physically and what they need to encourage and support that growth.

Youth-adult partnerships are an effective way to engage both young people and adults in meaningful activities that contribute to positive youth development. Through this experience, young people build skills such as reasoning, decision making and self-regulation.

Authentic youth engagement not only help young people build their self-esteem, leadership, advocacy and professional development skills, they also increase young people's influence and personal stake in the community. Youth-adult partnerships lead to well-informed decision making, practice design and policies, which is especially critical for young people in foster care who may have been excluded from the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

what does it look like in action?

When young people are authentically engaged, they should feel heard, respected, valued, trusted, appreciated, safe and comfortable. While there are many ways to engage young people, the Jim Casey Initiative's approach includes the four following components:

1 YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP treats young people as equal partners, cultivates trust, enables young people to build self-esteem and supports the development of problem-solving and leadership skills they will need in adulthood. Youth-adult partnership requires sharing information, having honest conversations, respecting varied experiences and opinions and setting clear expectations about roles and decision making. A few examples of youth-adult partnership include:

- working together to develop case plans;
- co-designing and facilitating trainings to educate child welfare professionals; and
- co-presenting resources and information to community partners.

2 PREPARATION empowers young people to make informed decisions. It enables them to be ready for and benefit from opportunities known and unknown. Preparation should happen well in advance of the event, meeting, etc. Preparation requires time, effort, patience, relationship building and awareness of a young person's unique developmental needs. Adults and young people must be open to practicing new skills, being flexible in adjusting agendas and schedules and addressing the attitudes and beliefs they hold about each other. Preparation enables adults to support young people in using their strengths, using their expertise and asserting their leadership. Examples of preparation for skill development and specific events include:

General Preparation for Skill Development

- partnering with young people to identify their interests and career goals;
- helping a young person create a resume and biographical sketch;
- developing skills using the Jim Casey Initiative's leadership and professional development competencies for youth and young adults; and
- increasing understanding and awareness about system reform to become change agents and to contribute when opportunities arise.

Preparation for Specific Events

- reviewing the context for the event and strengthening a young person's understanding of relevant subject matter;
- supporting a young person by asking effective questions to gather information and details related to the event and their role in it;
- reviewing techniques for how to manage inappropriate audience questions;
- developing and practicing a key message to equip young people to advocate for policy reform on a specific issue; and
- reviewing the agenda for an upcoming meeting with young people.



ASSESSING YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

- In what ways are adults asking for, listening to and incorporating the ideas of young people?
- In what ways are adults integrating the opinions, suggestions and experiences of young people into organizational decisions?
- How are young people and adults intentionally sharing power?



ASSESSING PREPARATION

- What information does the young person want and need to feel empowered to say yes or no to an opportunity to partner?
- What information does the young person want and need to feel confident and comfortable to contribute to the work?
- What is the young person's preferred preparation style? For example, do they prefer to talk things through on the phone or write things down?
- What skills or goals is the preparation strengthening?



ASSESSING OPPORTUNITY

- In what ways does this opportunity meet the needs of the young person?
- Is it related to an issue that interests the young person?
- Does the opportunity contribute to a skill or goal of interest to the young person?
- How does this opportunity contribute to a larger goal or effort for change?



ASSESSING SUPPORT

- In what ways does it meet the needs of the young person?
- What support strategies have been discussed with the young person?
- In debriefing an opportunity, did you discuss how they felt, what went well and what skills were gained with the young person?

3 OPPORTUNITY means providing avenues to exercise the youth-adult partnerships that have been formed. Working together, youths and adults should identify, evaluate and create these opportunities while thinking about how they will further a young person's development and specific goals. Young people should be engaged and prepared early on to be ready for leadership opportunities that arise organically and the opportunities that are planned well in advance. Examples of opportunities may include:

- being invited to participate in a speaking engagement or on a workgroup;
- collaborating to develop written materials and resources;
- launching a social media campaign to increase public awareness and debunk foster care myths;
- receiving an invitation to serve on a youth advisory board or a workgroup on sibling visitation;
- pursuing a summer job opening at a local, state or national organization; or
- learning about a budgeting workshop, a specialized course or program for a young person who is expecting or parenting to support skill building.

4 SUPPORT means maintaining authentic and trusting relationships that enable young people to gain the greatest benefit from participating in an opportunity to lead and contribute. Support is often physical, emotional and financial and is tailored to meet the unique needs of the young person. Young people should be financially compensated for their knowledge, time and contributions as equal partners. Sharing their experiences and contributing to systems change can be emotionally taxing and difficult work that requires intentional emotional support. Here are examples of what support looks like in action:

- Physical support means that an adult is present and available before, during and after an opportunity. It might include being available for a phone call to review the logistics of an upcoming speaking engagement; serving as the point person to help coordinate on-the-ground needs for youth participants; sitting in the audience to support a young person during a speaking engagement; and debriefing with the young person to learn about their experience.
- Emotional support could come in the form of encouraging self-care and supporting the young person in developing a plan to manage their reactions to information that may trigger difficult memories or emotions before, during and after an opportunity. This may include supporting a young person in reaching out to their support networks. Emotional support also includes offering encouragement and motivation before, during and after an opportunity.
- Financial compensation is a form of sharing power and is required when young people contribute their expertise to advance results. Financial support is often required to pay for travel and hotel needs. Financial support also includes advocating for equitable resources for young people who are parenting to secure child care while they are engaged in an opportunity.

the benefits of authentic youth engagement

Using the principles and components of authentic youth engagement can be rewarding for young people and adults. It empowers young people, builds mutually trusting relationships between young people and adults, provides an opportunity to build and share leadership, strengthens community connections, produces sustainable and equitable strategies and leads to better outcomes for young people.



Example of authentic youth engagement in action: Ongoing workgroup

- **YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP:** A partnership between the housing authority, child welfare agency and local youth board. Representatives for each entity work together as equal contributors in goal setting and decision making to identify strategies supporting young people transitioning out of foster care.
- **PREPARATION:** Young people are prepared to attend ongoing workgroup meetings in partnership with adults who also serve on the workgroup. Young people receive the meeting agenda and background materials in advance, and they participate in meeting preparation calls to ensure they understand the context of the work and the roles of the people who are involved.
- **OPPORTUNITY:** There may be an opportunity for young people to lead a portion of the meeting. This requires advanced preparation, including support in co-designing the agenda and strengthening young people's skills in large group facilitation, public speaking and professionalism.
- **SUPPORT:** Financial support might include providing a travel stipend for young people to attend the meetings and an honorarium for their time and expertise in preparing for and attending the meetings. Physical support might include having a point person or adult supporter in the room to lift up the voices of young people. Emotional support might include debriefing the experience with young people afterwards.

learn more about the power of authentic youth engagement

The Road to Adulthood

This guide educates adults on how they can do more to ensure that young people leaving foster care have a clear path to self-sufficiency and successful adulthood.

www.aecf.org/resources/the-road-to-adulthood/

Brain Frames: Short Tools for Positive Interactions With Youth in Foster Care

Stemming from *The Road to Adulthood* report, Brain Frames consist of five printable handouts that take a deeper look at the recommendations from the report, with quick bullet points, fact boxes and sample conversations that are easy to use.

www.aecf.org/brainframes

Video: Promoting Brain Gains for Youth Emerging From Foster Care

This video discusses adolescent brain development and ways child welfare systems inhibit or encourage opportunities for the successful transition to adulthood.

www.aecf.org/blog/turning-brain-strains-into-gains-for-adolescents-in-foster-care/

The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning From Foster Care

This report explores what child welfare workers need to know about applying the latest adolescent brain development findings to young people in foster care.

www.aecf.org/resources/the-adolescent-brain-foster-care/

Realizing the Power of Youth and Young Adult Voice Through Youth Leadership Boards

This issue brief explores the Jim Casey Initiative's experience in developing and implementing youth leadership boards. It includes the perspectives of young people in foster care and the adults engaged with them.

www.aecf.org/resources/realizing-the-power-of-youth-and-young-adult-voice/

Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-Adult Partnerships

This issue brief outlines how child welfare agencies can support both strong youth-adult partnerships and authentic youth engagement.

www.aecf.org/resources/authentic-youth-engagement/

Achieving Authentic Youth Engagement: Core Values & Guiding Principles

This two-page fact sheet presents the three core values and related guiding principles that the Jim Casey Initiative believes young people in foster care need to truly have a say in planning their own future.

www.aecf.org/resources/achieving-authentic-youth-engagement-core-values-guiding-principles-2/

Equity Conversation Guides for Young Leaders and Partners

This set of four guides provides step-by-step instructions for facilitators to lead groups of young people in understanding the history of structural racism.

www.aecf.org/work/child-welfare/jim-casey-youth-opportunities-initiative/equity-conversation-guides-for-young-leaders-and-partners/

Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide Embracing Equity: 7 Steps to Advance and Embed Race Equity and Inclusion Within Your Organization

This guide demonstrates how a race equity lens can be adopted by foundations or other organizations that work directly with systems, technical assistance providers and communities.

www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide/



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

701 ST. PAUL STREET BALTIMORE, MD 21202 410.547.6600 WWW.AECF.ORG