

# Having the Normalcy Conversation: Youth Engagement



## Introduction

An important part of holding a normalcy conversation—a structured discussion and planning session among key stakeholders on how to promote normal and developmentally appropriate experiences for youth in foster care—is ensuring that young people have the opportunity to participate. Important conversations around the topic of normalcy occur at all levels, ranging from individual- and agency-level conversations to local, county, and state meetings.

This tip sheet provides a framework to help organizations promote youth engagement in normalcy conversations at the local, county, and state levels. Below is a suggested sequence of steps to help prepare young people for having a normalcy conversation, including discussing normalcy policy and making recommendations for best practices around normalcy to policymaking organizations. Also included are two examples of programs that help equip young people currently and formerly in foster care with the skills and knowledge to participate in local, county, and state conversations about normalcy. The “Having the Normalcy Conversation: Youth Engagement” tip sheet is intended to be used with the “Having the Normalcy Conversation” guide and “Having the Normalcy Conversation: Sample Agenda” to help organizations plan for holding conversations about normalcy at the local, county, and state levels.

## Normalcy

**Normalcy** refers to allowing young people in out-of-home care to experience childhood and adolescence in ways similar to their peers who are not in foster care. It means allowing—and encouraging—young people to spend time with friends, participate in school and community activities, learn hobbies, and be supported in exploring their identities. Normalcy is important for improving the quality of life for youth in foster care. Research also shows that having developmentally appropriate, normative experiences improves permanency and transition outcomes for young people by developing valuable social networks and connections in the community, building skills, and allowing them to identify their strengths and interests.

Supporting meaningful youth engagement is a key component of building a child welfare system that promotes normalcy. Young people need to understand how changes in the law affect the opportunities available to them and how they and their caregivers will make decisions about their activities and experiences. Young people also need to be equipped with knowledge about the opportunities and experiences available to them in their communities and with advocacy skills so they can play a role in the decision-making process that determines their daily activities and the direction of their case.

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## Youth Engagement in Local, County, and State Meetings About Normalcy

The participation of young people currently and formerly in foster care in local, county, and state conversations about normalcy is vital to the success of the process, since they provide a critical perspective on the importance of normalcy for young people in foster care. For example, at one such meeting, a young person described the negative effects an overly risk-averse personal safety plan had on her emotional and mental health while she was in foster care. Others discussed the culture shift that needs to occur in child welfare agencies to make normalcy an organizational priority. Without young people's participation, policy-related meetings about normalcy would be missing a critical piece of the puzzle—young people's actual lived experience in the foster care system.

The following set of steps can encourage and prepare young people currently and formerly in foster care to participate in local, county, and state meetings about normalcy.

### Notify and Invite

The first step in promoting youth involvement in local, county, and state meetings about normalcy is making young people aware that they have opportunities to do so, and exploring whether they have any interest in participating. Under the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (P.L. 113–183), youth have enhanced opportunities to weigh in on case planning decisions in general, and normalcy planning in particular. They should be encouraged to do so at all levels.

Young people in leadership positions at agencies and states, such as those serving on youth advisory boards or youth advisory committees, are a natural fit for such invitations. However, meeting organizers should consider approaching young people not in obvious leadership positions but who may be identified by agency staff as providing a valuable perspective on normalcy planning.

Young people in foster care should be aware that:

- ▶ They have a right to normalcy under P.L. 113–183, as well as a right to participate in discussions about their rights and potential changes to them.
- ▶ They should have opportunities to participate in any conversations about normalcy at local, county, and state levels.
- ▶ Their participation may include, but is not limited to, assisting with planning all sessions in which they will participate (i.e., round-table and panel discussions, policy meetings, committees drafting documents related to normalcy and/or foster care more generally).

To invite young people in foster care to participate in local, county, and state meetings about normalcy, organizations should provide:

- ▶ A formal invitation to meetings about normalcy at the agency or organization
- ▶ Information about the meeting content, names of participants and panels, and any necessary preparation materials

### Educate and Prepare

To meaningfully participate in conversations about normalcy at the local, county, and state levels, young people in foster care need to understand what normalcy is and what it means in terms of access to activities and experiences. Meeting organizers should provide developmentally appropriate educational materials about normalcy and brain development to young people currently and formerly in foster care who will be attending the meeting.

Educational materials about P.L. 113–183's reasonable and prudent parent standard should also be provided so that young people know their rights and obligations under the law and understand the liability protections provided by the law. This will help them more meaningfully participate in a local, county, and state conversation about normalcy.

The format of the information may include, but isn't limited to, articles and books, videos, pamphlets, infographics, and other educational materials.

## Engage

Effectively engaging youth in foster care in local, county, and state conversations about normalcy requires planning. Meeting planners should ensure that youth and young people currently or formerly in foster care are integrated with other presenters on all plenaries or panels, not just on a "youth panel." Important examples of panels include those related to: training and support for child welfare workers who work with young people; ways to resolve conflicts related to care for young people; and developing a shared vision of normalcy so that agencies can provide the best level of care for young people. Meeting organizers should ensure that that young people in foster care participate in the development of all sessions. Opportunities should also be provided for all panel participants to meet each other and learn about each other's areas of expertise.

Meeting planners should create a meeting environment that encourages open discussion, honest feedback, and perspective sharing by all the participants. Young people currently and formerly in foster care should feel that their voices and concerns are being heard and understood by others on the panel and meeting participants. But this is only the first step: young people in foster care should also be able to actively participate in crafting new policies that align with their needs, the requirements of their daily lives, and preparation for transition from foster care.

## Get Feedback

Getting feedback from normalcy conversation participants, especially young people in foster care, is an important part of the process. It allows normalcy conversation coordinators to determine whether young people are feeling engaged in the normalcy conversation, whether they believe their concerns are being heard and responded to, whether they are getting access to developmentally appropriate activities, and what more can be done or done differently in the future. Steps to get feedback from young people regarding the normalcy conversation include:

- ▶ Providing opportunities to "debrief" young people who have participated in a local, county, or state normalcy conversation or meeting, which may include focus group meetings, one-on-one conversations with mentors or facilitators, or written responses by email or through social media
- ▶ Arranging opportunities for young people who have participated in a local, county, or state normalcy conversation or meeting to discuss past trauma or other past experiences that may have come up during the meeting (these discussions should take place in a supportive setting with child welfare staff who are trained in trauma-informed and trauma-responsive care)
- ▶ Using surveys to find out whether young people are being engaged and included in conversations about normalcy, and whether they are accessing developmentally appropriate activities and experiences of their choice (for a summary of a survey conducted in Iowa, with responses, see [http://www.ypii.org/Resource\\_PDF/IssueBrief\\_Normalcy.pdf](http://www.ypii.org/Resource_PDF/IssueBrief_Normalcy.pdf))

Make plans to incorporate this feedback into the normalcy conversation or meeting process going forward for the individual youth, and use it to gauge system progress in supporting normalcy.

## An Ongoing Process

Conversations about normalcy at any level are not a single event but an ongoing process. If young people in foster care are regularly invited to participate in local, county, and state conversations about normalcy, they will be better prepared to do so each time. In addition, meeting organizers will be better able to prepare young people to participate in meeting development, the meeting itself, and any activities that result from the meeting. Youth needs and society's understanding of developmentally appropriate activities for young people are constantly in flux. Thus, continuing to discuss normalcy with young people in foster care improves the ability of agencies and states to best serve them going forward.

## Examples of Programs That Engage Young People in Policy-Level Normalcy Conversations

Below are examples of programs around the United States that engage with young people currently and formerly in foster care to make recommendations for normalcy-related policies and other foster care issues, and provide them with valuable skills for self-advocacy and opportunities to make a difference in policies that affect them in their daily lives. Note: The Capacity Building Center for States does not endorse any particular approach or youth engagement program and included the descriptions below as examples only.

### Youth Fostering Change

Philadelphia, PA

Youth Fostering Change (YFC), managed by the Juvenile Law Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a youth advocacy group comprised of young people currently and formerly in foster care. Youth and young adults join the group after a recruitment and interview process. The program runs for the term of the school year. Once a week, young people meet as a group and individually with staff. They also receive skill building instruction in advocacy, safely sharing their story, public speaking, and strategic communications. Young people receive a stipend for participation in the program, as well as for speaking engagements. Each year the group selects an advocacy project to address a need it identifies in the child welfare system. In 2012, the group selected normalcy.

YFC developed the Teen Success Agreement (TSA) to address the lack of normalcy in the child welfare system ([http://jlc.org/sites/default/files/publication\\_pdfs/TeenSuccessAgreementFINAL\\_0.pdf](http://jlc.org/sites/default/files/publication_pdfs/TeenSuccessAgreementFINAL_0.pdf)). The TSA is a tool that supports youth-led normalcy planning. It prompts team members to consider how to include developmentally appropriate activities in the case plan and the everyday lives of young people in foster care. To develop the structure and content of the TSA, YFC members learned about the challenges youth face in accessing age-appropriate activities and experiences, and talked with youth and professionals in the child welfare system. They used surveys, presentations, and focus groups to develop and get feedback on the tool. The group was supported by one full-time and one part-time staff member and attorneys at the Juvenile Law Center, who served as content experts, supporters, and connectors with stakeholders. The project reflected the vision of YFC members and served as a tool to engage youth in normalcy planning at the individual level.

### Project Everlast

Nebraska

Project Everlast is a statewide, youth-led initiative in Nebraska committed to providing resources, connections, and support to young adults as they age out of foster care. Project Everlast has created Youth Councils, which provide youth in Nebraska with channels for input in advocacy for the state child welfare agency, as well as service delivery. The Councils are supported by staff at Project Everlast and are a core component of the agency's structure. In 2015, the Nebraska Strengthening Families Act Stakeholder Group was convened, which included young people, foster parents, biological parent representatives, providers, attorneys, and other stakeholders. That year, the group had at least two meetings and conducted surveys and focus groups. The goal of the group was to develop recommendations around implementation of the Strengthening Families Act (SFA), including its normalcy provisions. In addition to working with Youth Councils, Project Everlast supports young people in preparing for the meetings and equipping them with the skills to be active participants. Youth Council members were key in ensuring the success of the youth surveys and focus groups, and youth voice was prominent in the recommendations that resulted from the stakeholder group (<http://childrens.nebraska.gov/PDFs/General%20Information/SFA/Letting%20Kids%20Be%20Kids%20Report.pdf>). A state law that passed in 2016 to implement the SFA LB 746 of 2016 provided for the continued work of the Nebraska Strengthening Families Act Stakeholder Group and required that membership include no fewer than three young people or young adults currently or formerly in foster care.

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