

# A Caregiver's Youth-Centered Approach to Reproductive and Sexual Health

The Reproductive Health Equity Project for Foster Youth

## Amal & Cherie

When Amal El Mansoumi entered the foster care system, she did not feel prepared to manage her sexual and reproductive health. Also, she wasn't fully **aware of the rights she had regarding her own body.**

**"My education about sexual and reproductive health, unfortunately, was from peers at school, which obviously is not the most reliable information,"** Amal says, now 19 and no longer a foster care youth.

But things changed when Amal, at 18, went to live with her caregiver Cherie Schroeder, who provided a bridge for her to transition out of the foster care system. Cherie **discusses sexuality and reproductive health with a matter-of-fact approach to reduce any awkwardness and to put the foster youth under her care at ease.**

**"Cherie was always very direct,"** says Amal. **"It was professional, and I didn't feel uncomfortable. She asked me a bunch of questions and answered my questions perfectly."**



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**The fear of talking with a teenager about sexuality and reproductive health can be unnerving for any parent, but for individuals who oversee the lives and healthy development of foster care youth, those conversations are critical to teens' futures.**

**"Nobody's been doing this because of fear, I think,"** says Cherie, who has been the director of Foster & Kinship Education at Woodland Community College, in Yolo County, since 1985.

**"I'm a caregiver - I know it's scary. You don't want to make a mistake. I still think there's that belief that if I talk about reproduction, this child's going to go and be sexually active, when the research says exactly the opposite,"** Cherie adds.

Cherie says that **when caregivers understand it's their responsibility to dispense this information** and know the rights of foster youth, it's easy to get them on board.

**“Teenagers are going to be teenagers,” says Cherie.**

**“They’re going to test the waters and test the limits, and fall in love, make good choices and make bad choices. We want them to do so when they’re with us and we’re still here to catch them,” she adds.**

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Cherie empowers the teens who come to live with her starting with the small stuff. She takes them shopping and lets them pick out clothing and personal hygiene products that they prefer. **“I don’t know what kind of products you want; I want it to be your products.** I want to get what you need,” says Cherie.

In Cherie’s home, the youth living there have their own rooms, and Schroeder tells them early on that it’s their home, too. “You don’t have to ask me to open the refrigerator,” she says. When it comes to accessing condoms in the bathroom cabinet, “I make it so it’s not like somebody’s watching you. I don’t put a whole package of condoms in there, I open it and throw some in there,” says Cherie. “I think it’s scary when you come to a house like this and have that quiet space. The last thing we want you to do in this house is feel like you have to sneak,” says Cherie.

**Sharing information with foster youth about safe sexual activity and potential consequences of unprotected sex is not taboo—it is encouraged.** Amal understands the importance of this shift. “I know it’s nerve wracking to talk to somebody else about their sexuality and their body, but it has to be done,” Amal says.

Cherie introduces a lot of topics with her foster youth, including the decision to have a baby. She’s had youth in her care who were pregnant, and she’s guided them through their pregnancies, making sure they have access to prenatal care and a doctor. The youth also know about Planned Parenthood services and where a center is located. She meets twice a week with the foster youth to discuss everything from financial literacy and reproductive rights to domestic violence and healthy sexual development.

**“If I want something to be talked about— I’m the adult and I feel like I need to be the starter.** We really want you to have the power to have control over your own body,” Cherie says. She notes that sometimes just being there for a teenager as a bridge, a sounding board, or a trustworthy adult.

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**“I’m just the conduit to your adult life. Just tell me where you want to go.”**

Cherie admits her own mother wasn’t ready to raise a child and as a teenager she went to live with an uncle. Her first menstrual cycle began when she was only in fifth grade. “I was mortified; mortified by my own body, mortified by what was happening. I didn’t understand it.”

**“The last thing I’d want is for somebody under my care and under my supervision to feel like their body is their enemy.”**

**AMAL EL MANSOUMI** IS CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN WOODLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND LEARNING HOW TO WORK WITH FOSTER YOUTH AS PART OF THE AMERICORPS PROGRAM. SHE ASPIRES TO BECOME A NURSE.

**CHERIE SCHROEDER** HAS BEEN THE DIRECTOR OF FOSTER & KINSHIP EDUCATION AT WOODLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE, IN YOLO COUNTY, SINCE 1985. SHE ALSO HAS TAUGHT AN INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM FOR 25 YEARS THAT TRAINS FORMER FOSTER YOUTH AS CAREGIVERS, AND IS A VALUED PARTNER OF RHEP.

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## FOSTER YOUTH RIGHTS AND CAREGIVER RESPONSIBILITIES—KNOWING THE LAW

Through the work of the **National Center for Youth Law** and other advocates, foster care youth reproductive rights have changed a lot over the course of the past four to five years—especially the passage in California of the California Foster Youth Sexual Health Education Act, Senate Bill 89 in 2017. SB 89 mandates training requirements for county child welfare workers, juvenile court judges, resource families, foster parents, group home administrators, and Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program administrators.

Individuals in these roles need to be within the guidelines and directives of SB 89. The bill requires that the training address topics that include:

- The sexual and reproductive rights of youth and young adults in foster care,
- The duties and responsibilities of case managers and caregivers,
- How to document sensitive health information,
- Contraception methods, and
- How to engage with youth and young adults about these topics in a strengths based way.

For the most up-to-date information on laws and regulations for caregivers and social workers serving youth in foster care in California, visit [fosterreprohealth.org](http://fosterreprohealth.org).