

JAY'S SPOTLIGHT

FROM 'NOT KNOWING' TO 'NOW I CAN TAKE CARE OF MY MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH'

Jay is a former foster youth and Youth Advisory Board (YAB) member with the Reproductive Health Equity Project for Foster Youth (RHEP) shares the importance of learning about her sexual and reproductive health rights.

Jay is currently raising her son and daughter while pursuing a master's degree that she plans to complete in December. She credits her foster mother, Sarah, for helping her care for her infant son who was born when she was under Sarah's care.

As a teenager living in foster homes, what did you know at that time about the risks of unprotected sexual activity?

"I came from a standpoint of not knowing. I didn't think of the potential of getting pregnant or getting an STD, because I was only 17. I was with my family until the age of 7, and **nobody sat me down and talked to me about that.** I was not provided that education. All it takes is providing those resources and that education and knowing how to deliver that as well. Be aware that we don't know. **I didn't even know what a condom was.**"

How have your experiences as a former teenager in foster care and YAB member taught you about the best ways to approach the topics of sexual & reproductive health with teenaged foster youth?

"I think the stance that my foster mother gave me was very realistic. But also, she would throw in her experience, validating that we're all young at one time and it's OK not to know. **She did this without shaming.** Anyone would become withdrawn if there's shaming or judging. We are foster youth, and unfortunately, sometimes we're moved from place to place. **We don't get the education that we need in terms of sexual health.** We have to **normalize being sexually active,** but it goes beyond that because as foster youth we lack love and support, so also discussing how to have SAFE SEX. Saying, 'you have to save yourself for marriage,' that's not realistic these days. Of course, it depends on religion and culture and all of that, but if a youth says I'm having sex, then give them the tools. Education and the method of delivery are both important. **Fear tactics don't work.**"

What obstacles did you overcome by learning about your reproductive health rights and available options?

"She (Sarah) empowered me in the sense that she gave me the **autonomy, provided me the resources, and encouraged me to have a voice.** We talked about the implications of becoming pregnant again and how that would be difficult at my age because I would not have a high school diploma. It was about being realistic. Being able to speak up for myself and learning how to do it. I needed to understand the implications of being more **empowered** with the decisions I'd make and the options that I have."

What are some of the positive outcomes of receiving sexual and reproductive health education?

"It was after I had my son when I realized I had choices and options. I was connected with the OBGYN. When my son was four months old, I got on the pill. After that, it became less embarrassing of a topic, and I was like, 'OK, this is something that's normal.' I felt less embarrassed to have that discussion with my doctor. Once I felt empowered in my experience, I felt like OK, I know what I can do, and **I know what my options are.** And now I take care of my mental and physical health."

