



TOP TIPS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

thoughtful collaboration with RHEP Youth Advisory Board & youth in foster care

- **we are more than the sum of our negative experiences**
- **avoid condescending and negative tone and comments**
- **have empathy**
- **use positive and active nonverbal communication**
- **our experiences are our own, no matter your degree or position**
- **avoid assumptions and ask for further insight**
- **be culturally aware in understanding trauma**
- **use youth-centered approaches**
- **know your job, know our rights**
- **respect and apply the correct pronouns and identities**

WHY WE WROTE THESE TIPS

From August to September 2021, the Reproductive Health Equity Project for Foster Youth (RHEP) Youth Advisory Board (YAB) members came together for four YAB-led sessions to discuss the responsibilities and expectations of youth-serving organizations when engaging youth.

RHEP's network of youth-serving organizational partners create and implement youth-centered sexual and reproductive health programs and policies for youth in foster care. As YAB members, we often work with these organizations as consultants, practitioners, and focus group participants. While these are generally positive experiences, there is still room for improvement in how partners interact with YAB members and implement our ideas.

We...want to prioritize what we know makes us feel powerful and empowered.

During one of the first YAB-led sessions, we expressed that we have felt powerful in the following situations:

- "I felt powerful and in control when I had to confront someone n call em out for being a bad friend. I never confront, but I felt like it was important to stand up for myself."
- "I felt powerful creating and shooting my own film...because it was something I created and not someone else's work."
- "Graduating school and doing productive things for my future made me feel powerful and in control because I beat a lot of the statistics..."
- "Anytime I had a meeting with my caseworker or lawyer, I felt empowered in what I was doing for myself and I felt that for the things I couldn't control, there were others that were there to help me with it."

The feeling of being empowered is related to standing up for ourselves, creating things for ourselves, and

overcoming stereotypes. While we hope those reading this will take into account ways they can change, we also want to prioritize what we know makes us feel powerful and empowered.

In contrast, we remember feeling disrespected and disempowered when:

- "[Those providing services] made me feel like I wasn't worth anything."
- "[Service providers would] offer me a list of clothes, explaining why it's important to dress business casual."
- "[One time] I was feeling very down and triggered, so I began headbanging in my room. A staff came in, and rather than asking me what was wrong or if she could de-escalate me, she came in very annoyed and told me the sound of the banging was bothering her and to keep it down."
- "I sometimes felt like I had to prove myself to those working around me and be even a bit of a showoff to prove that I was worthy of support and worthy of being looked upon positively."

We have written this tip sheet to make sure that youth-serving organizations are aware of how their words, tone, and actions affect how we work with them.

When those working for youth aren't respectful of our unique personalities and needs, it feels as though they do not care about us. This leads to those organizations and staff treating us like we are unintelligent and incompetent, and we don't feel empowered to express our feelings. Your attitude can affect not only what you say to us, but also your tone, body language, and facial expressions.

We have written this tip sheet to make sure that youth-serving organizations and RHEP network partners are aware of how their words, tone, and actions affect how YAB members and youth in foster care work with them.

TIPS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

We are more than the sum of our negative experiences. There are a lot of assumptions made about how “sad” and “difficult” youth in foster care have it. However, we are more than the sum of our negative experiences, and we want to prioritize the positive. Prioritizing the positive can help us remember when things have worked and solutions for the future. Youth-serving organizations should not overly emphasize and focus on our negative experiences, unless we lead the conversation that way.

Avoid assumptions - ask for further insight. There are many stereotypes and assumptions about youth currently and formerly in foster care and what their lives are like. Before jumping to any conclusions, it is important for youth-serving organizations to ask respectful questions. This will not only make us feel more comfortable when working with you, but the programs and services will also be more relevant to our actual experiences.

Have empathy. Youth in foster care and formerly in foster care have had many experiences that people working at youth-serving organizations most probably haven't had. It is important when listening to us share our experiences that your first response is empathy. That means responding to our emotions appropriately, focusing on listening, and showing that you care about what we're talking about.

Be culturally aware in understanding trauma. A trauma-informed approach entails the following principles: safety, trust, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, voice, and choice, and cultural, historical, and gender issues. Many staff from youth-serving organizations come from a different cultural background than youth who are in foster care. It is key when working with youth in foster care and YAB members that this difference is taken into consideration. This can look like naming the differences so that youth know you are aware and using language that is not exclusive to certain cultures. As one of us said, “YAB members come to these meetings because we have experiences in foster care and we're being open and vulnerable about these experiences. It's nice and appreciated if staff can also be vulnerable and let us know their own background.”

Use youth-centered approaches. Youth-centered approaches include using language that isn't exclusive, such as acronyms and jargon, and structuring meetings or listening sessions with the experience of youth in mind. Youth-serving organizations can think about who their audience is when conducting presentations, trainings, and focus groups and tailor the way they deliver information so that it is engaging, participation-based, and allows for youth to express themselves without rushing them.

Be mindful that our experiences are our own, no matter your degree or position. While many youth-serving organizations are made up of highly qualified staff, whether because they have certain advanced degrees or have worked in the field for many years, first-hand experience in foster care is the most important perspective. Those partnering with YAB should check their privilege and pre-existing notions about who is “qualified” to be part of decision-making. As one of us said, “It's one thing to learn how to swim from a book, but it's totally different to actually jump in the water.”

Respect and apply the correct pronouns and identities. As part of a trauma-informed and youth-centered approach, youth-serving organizations need to prioritize speaking to youth the way they want to be spoken to. This is especially important with their pronouns and how youth self-identify, whether that's their race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or other identities. When in doubt, ask us respectfully rather than making assumptions.

Avoid condescending and negative tone and comments. While youth in foster care and YAB members are often younger than youth-serving organizational staff, that is not a reason to talk down to us. Youth-serving organizations should use a respectful tone with us and treat us positively. Utilize language that is respectful and non-judgemental.

Know your job, know our rights. There are many systems, organizations, and adults who are part of youth's lives, and it is important that those working with youth know what their responsibilities are and how to communicate those responsibilities clearly. In the case of YAB members, who are not currently in foster care, it is still key to communicate your role so that we know where you are situated in the network of actors. Additionally, youth-serving organizations should know the rights of youth in foster care.

Use positive and active non-verbal communication to show that you are listening. When a YAB member is speaking, it is important to use positive and active listening skills, which include paying attention to what is said, withholding judgement, reflecting what they said to ensure it is accurate, asking questions and showing interest, and affirming what has been said. Even in online settings, it is important to show that you're listening, either by nodding, reacting with a thumbs-up, or typing a quick “hearing you!” in the chat.

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