

Abortion Insights from Conversations with Youth in Foster Care



The Reproductive Health Equity Project (RHEP) for Foster Youth is a collaborative of public and private agencies that work together to promote the healthy sexual development of youth in foster care. RHEP honors the principles behind the reproductive justice movement and believes that every young person should have the right to bodily autonomy as they pursue relationships and build the lives and futures they envision for themselves. RHEP is convened by the **National Center for Youth Law (NCYL)**, a national advocacy organization dedicated to advancing the well-being of young people.



Overview

California has one of the largest foster youth populations in the nation, and close to half (49.5%) of youth in the California foster system are between the ages of 11 and 21.¹ These are critical years for sexual development, especially for youth in the foster system who face disproportionately poor health outcomes in several reproductive health areas, including early pregnancy, poor pregnancy outcomes, high rates of sexually transmitted infections, and high rates of sexual abuse and trauma. Youth often report barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health care (SRH) services, and when youth are able to access SRH care, they often report negative health care experiences, such as feeling judged or shamed by providers who are not youth-centered and lack understanding and empathy. These [disproportionately poor health outcomes](#) and limited access to quality health care services are not the failure of foster youth; rather, these disparities result from the intersection of barriers at different levels (e.g., individual, relationship, community, and society levels) that compound and impede a young person's agency and ownership over their own health. A lack of explicit support from the adults responsible for youth in the foster system, frequent moves, and other barriers also contribute to these disparities.²

Youth in the foster system should have access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, education, and information. **Abortion access is a critical component of reproductive healthcare.** Sexual and reproductive healthcare, especially abortion, is under attack, and barriers to care are increasing, especially for adolescents and young adults. RHEP is interested in deepening our understanding of foster youth's attitudes, beliefs, and sources of information about abortion, as well as better understanding what resources and information are needed to improve foster youth's experiences and access to abortion care in California. In 2024, we conducted three focus groups with current and former foster youth, totaling 20 participants. All participants identified as female and were ages 18-24.

¹California Child Welfare Indicators Project, 2025, In Care-Point in Time Count

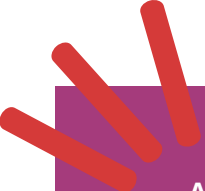
²Reproductive Health Equity Project, 2021, Interview Survey of Adolescents in Foster Care in Los Angeles County Regarding Sexual and Reproductive Health Communication and Access to Resources

Major Takeaways From the Focus Groups Included:

Initial exposure and sources of information on abortion are often inaccurate, based on personal values and beliefs rather than facts, and highly stigmatizing. Initial exposure to conversations about abortion is often not based on comprehensive, medically accurate sex education or other factual, reliable sources of information; conversations are usually negative, derived from personal values and beliefs, and include a great deal of stigma and misinformation.

A lack of factual, medically accurate information leaves youth confused and misinformed: Although many participants had heard about abortion, most of them were unclear on what an abortion procedure entailed, its safety, and how common the procedure is. For example:

- **Participants were surprised to learn that abortion is very safe.** This misinformation was due to the media or stories framing abortion as “scary,” “wrong,” or “unsafe.”
- **Youth often experience a lack of support when accessing abortion care, and often face shame and stigma.** Youth want better support during pregnancy and abortion, regardless of their own opinions on the subject. Participants who have had personal experiences with abortion report a general lack of support or empowerment, feeling judged by the adults in their lives, and often feeling pressured into a decision.



Abortion is a safe and common way to end a pregnancy. In fact, abortion is one of the safest procedures out there, as it has a lower complication rate than common procedures such as getting wisdom teeth pulled or taking common medications like Tylenol and penicillin. One in four women will have an abortion by the time they are 45.³

Abortion stigma can be described as a shared understanding that abortion is morally wrong or socially unacceptable. Stigma creates discomfort and contributes to misinformation and a lack of knowledge about abortion. Stigma harms people who have had abortions by causing them to live with guilt and shame, and often in silence and isolation.⁴

³ Planned Parenthood, What Facts About Abortion Do I Need to Know?

⁴ The Sea Change Program, ANSIRH, IBIS Reproductive Health, Abortion Stigma in Brief: What is Abortion Stigma?

Young people deserve access to medically accurate information and safe, youth-centered spaces that support them in making decisions that are best for their health, lives, and futures. Foster youth share that they often face complex and conflicting pressures when navigating pregnancy and abortion. Their decisions are shaped not only by their personal needs and wants but by the beliefs and values imposed on them by adults, political and religious ideologies, a lack of access to medically accurate information and high-quality healthcare, and systems that question their ability to make the best decisions for themselves. Foster youth find themselves facing stigma for various reasons, including 1) being in foster care, 2) being young and pregnant, and 3) thinking about accessing or needing to access abortion care.

Diving Deeper: What we Learned about Foster Youth and Abortion

Foster youth are more likely to first learn about abortion via sources such as media, religion, and the personal values and beliefs of adults, rather than through factual, medically accurate information.

When asked where they initially received information about abortion, youth most commonly cited movies, media, and the internet, followed by religion, family, peers, and (less frequently) school. Youth described their initial exposure to abortion as negative, often accompanied by values and beliefs of abortion being “wrong” or “bad”.

“I felt like I never had an actual conversation about it, but when I would hear about it, it kind of had that judgment.”

The initial delivery of information around abortion and the personal values and beliefs placed upon it often led to youth having strong feelings of shame and/or guilt when they experienced abortion. Several participants noted that friends or loved ones who had gone through an abortion played a significant role in shaping their views. Youth’s perspectives seemed to be primarily shaped by stigma from the media and the community.

“I grew up Christian. I first heard about it from my friend’s aunt, and it was when I got pregnant, and it wasn’t really like she was explaining what an abortion was. It was more her opinions on it, you know, and she would show me different videos that had a biased opinion about why it was wrong. But that was my first impression on it.”

Foster Youth Don't Feel Supported with Abortion Care, and Often Face Pressure and Shaming

Participants who had experienced an abortion described their experiences in the following way:

- **Lacking support and empowerment to make the decision that felt right for them:** Many felt alone in the process, without the guidance or encouragement they needed.

"The first time around, when I was pregnant, I felt a lot more support, and I think it was because it was just like my first time. So I guess it looks like I'm still single, and 'Oh you got pregnant again, so it's your fault that you're still a single mom'."

- **Feeling pressured:** Several shared that they felt they had no real choice and were pushed to make a significant medical decision without meaningful scientific information or a full understanding of their options.

"I did it once [had an abortion] after I had my first son, and I was more pressured into it. Like from my family members and stuff like that."

- **Grappling with guilt and shame:** Even when confident in their decision, feelings of guilt and shame lingered. Many participants worried about being judged by peers, family, or others.

"My first experience was when I was actively going through an abortion. I didn't have any conversation prior to my experience; I feel I didn't learn what I should have. I was two and a half months [pregnant] with no expectations of what was actually happening to me. I went through an abortion through the medication so I could be at home, but I was not prepared, and it traumatized me heavily. I felt no matter the choice I felt was right, I was going to be judged regardless, so I felt a lot of guilt having conversations about abortion."

Because of Negative Early Information, Foster Youth Face High Amounts of Stigma and Feel Conflicting Emotions Around Reproductive Care

Some youth discussed that having an abortion created a sense of **freedom, liberation, or relief**, but even with positive feelings, many expressed **conflicting negative emotions**; as one shared, “two truths can coexist.”

- Even when they believed it was the right decision, **feelings of guilt** often remained.
- Youth expressed **fear** around the procedure itself and hesitation about discussing the experience publicly.
- **Sadness** and a **sense of loss** were common reflections.
- Even those who support or understand abortion said they were sometimes influenced by negative media portrayals, adding to internal conflict.

“I feel like even though other feelings were stronger in my case, like shame and guilt, there was a sense of liberation as well because I was going to be able to take care of myself and my daughter and not have to start again, like kind of go backwards with a newborn baby.”

“I feel a lot of guilt about my experience, and I often feel that one day, I may suffer the consequences. But I know that I made the right decision for myself at the time. Eight years later, it still haunts me.”



Summary

What Shapes Foster Youth's Feelings About Abortion

Youth's feelings about abortion were deeply shaped by a range of personal, social, and cultural influences. Imposed personal values and beliefs, stigma, and first-hand experiences, whether their own or those of their peers, played a major role in shaping their views.

Positive Influences

- Empathy for others' situations, recognizing "everyone is human"
- Feelings of relief, especially considering the challenges of pregnancy and the cost of having children
- More positive emotions if the abortion is medically necessary or needed due to sexual assault/abuse
- Having a support system when having an abortion can help shift emotions away from fear/shame

Negative Influences

- Anti-abortion messaging from the media and/or trusted adults, anti-abortion protests at clinics, religious institutions, and beliefs
- Negative or traumatic experiences when accessing abortion care, including peer stories
- Social pressure, judgment, and lack of understanding
- Misconceptions and misinformation about abortion care

"Mental health, resources [and] support systems all factor into how you think, and that varies person by person."

*"I have more negative feelings when religion gets involved, when they have big posters of pictures. It was very triggering. Or when they were outside Planned Parenthood, shaming us and saying we are making the wrong choice. I would feel more positive if it wasn't a topic that was taboo. **I have the right to choose what is best for me and elevate that choice.**"*

"Two truths could coexist ... You can have multiple feelings about it, and that's OK. And that's normal."

"When I think about someone else, I just have a lot of empathy about it because I have gone through it. And even though I have my own beliefs, I feel like empathy was the strongest feeling in that situation. And it was just, I feel like we should understand what people are going through and why they're making their decisions."

High-Quality, Affirming, and Nonjudgmental Healthcare, Information, and Support: What Youth Want and Need in Terms of Pregnancy and Abortion

Participants who reported having experienced a pregnancy and/or abortion reported not having received enough support from the trusted adults in their lives. What they wanted instead was clear:

- Participants wanted to better understand their options and the process of abortion before making a decision. Many expressed that having information about what they could expect before, during, and after an abortion would have been helpful.
- Participants wished they had received more affirming medical care for what can be, for some people, an intense experience.
- Participants wished they had access to better mental health support for processing the experience. Several participants shared that they did not have anyone to talk to and process the experience with, and wished they had a resource or support person they could have reached out to.
- Participants expressed a desire to feel supported, no matter their decision, rather than face judgment from social workers, foster parents, or healthcare providers.

Unique Pressures Faced by Youth in the Foster System

Foster youth shared that they often face complex and conflicting pressures when navigating pregnancy and abortion. Youth voiced the following experiences:

- Being seen as unfit to raise a child, regardless of their readiness or desire to do so. This often shows up as pressure to have an abortion due to assumptions that foster youth shouldn't become parents; or pressure to carry the pregnancy and choose adoption, with the narrative that it's "better than putting the baby into the [foster] system."

- Caregivers and adults often pushing their own beliefs on youth, making them feel unsafe or unable to disagree due to fear of losing support and housing. While this is true for many young people, youth in the foster system have various adults around them who are responsible for their well-being, this includes social workers, resource parents, judges, etc., who have the opportunity to weigh in on a young person's medical decisions. Youth in the foster system are also more likely to feel unsafe or unable to disagree because their support systems or housing are tied to these adults.
- Financial instability leads youth to feel pressure to have an abortion, making it less likely that they can afford better medical care for the procedure.
- Lack of a support system or "parents that can teach you" and equip them with the right information and support to make the decision that best meets their needs.

"I constantly feel unfit, even though I am [a fit parent], you know? And no one who was telling me not to have an abortion prepared me for that because they just didn't go through my experience, being uprooted from my home as a young child. And like, they didn't even account for how that trauma would impact a pregnancy and being a parent. And a lot of people, when they push their ideas and feelings on abortion, they just don't account for people's backstory, like the lore, you know, what makes us us. And for me, just something as simple as, like, I could take my son late to school one day, and I'm just like, constantly like 'Oh my God. They're going to find out I was in foster care. I'm unfit. I shouldn't have a kid.' And those intrusive thoughts are insane."

"Being in care, you don't have that support. Yes, they give you financial support, but there's not that support of, 'My parents can teach me how to do this or teach me how to do that.' And I think it changes the way people see abortion, as well, for people that are in care because it's like, 'Oh, well, they don't have anyone to support them. So if they want to have an abortion, that's fine.' I kind of feel like that because I have been told that, 'Oh, well, if you have a kid, it's going to be very hard because you're in foster care. So your kid's also going to be like rumbling around with you in care.' And it's kind of like a weird touchy subject."

"If I were to get pregnant, I always knew that abortion would be the only option for me because I knew that I wouldn't be able to afford having a child. I wouldn't want to bring a child into foster care with me. I didn't have a place for that child to live and all of those things. So, for me, I automatically understood what those circumstances could look like for someone who would need to get an abortion. And so like, basically my experience in care made me more understanding and empathetic to people who would need it."

Call To Action: Together, We Can Make High-Quality, Affirming, and Nonjudgmental Healthcare, Information, and Support Available for All Youth

Youth should have access to high-quality healthcare and medically accurate education and resources. Based on these takeaways, it's critical to ensure young people, particularly foster youth, can access reproductive health information and services, including abortion, so that no one feels pressured or shamed about decisions about their bodies or lives.

This includes:

- Ensuring youth in the foster system receive comprehensive, medically accurate sexual health education and resources that include information about all pregnancy options, including abortion.
- Ensuring youth in the foster system are informed of their rights to access age-appropriate, medically accurate sexual and reproductive healthcare and information; and their right to consent to sexual and reproductive health services and their confidentiality rights regarding those services.
- Ensuring youth in the foster system have access to high-quality, affirming, and trauma-informed health care services in a timely way and are not diverted to crisis pregnancy centers, also known as CPCs or fake clinics.⁵

It is also critical to ensure that young people have access to safe, youth-centered spaces and non-judgmental and trusted support, so they can make important decisions about their health, lives, and futures. This includes:

⁵ Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs) are religious non-profit organizations that primarily aim to deter people from having abortions. CPCs also oppose contraception and comprehensive sex education. CPCs target people seeking reproductive healthcare. Although many centers offer limited health services, they are not medical clinics, frequently provide inaccurate health information, and do not adhere to medical or ethical practice standards. Public health and medical organizations warn that CPCs pose risk to individual, family, and public health." - Swartzendruber A and Lambert D. Crisis Pregnancy Center Map. <https://www.cpcmap.com>. January 22, 2025. Accessed: February 18, 2026.

- Ensuring health care providers know how to provide high-quality, affirming, and non-judgmental care that is foster youth-friendly.
- Ensuring social workers, foster caregivers, and judges are trained on current SRH information, the rights of youth in foster care in terms of SRH care and information, their duties and responsibilities in ensuring that foster youth can obtain SRH health care and information, and how to select and provide appropriate referrals and resources.
- Ensuring youth have a way to communicate with and receive support from the person they identify as a trusted support.



Now more than ever, as advocates, we must ensure that youth have access to information about their rights and healthcare options. We encourage our partners to join RHEP and our Youth Advisory Board in spreading the word about the importance of empowering foster youth to have agency over their medical decisions and pregnancy. Share this report and the resources below with your community.

Resources

<https://abortion.ca.gov> A resource made in partnership with RHEP and other organizations/leaders in CA. This site has helpful information about accessing abortion in California.

[Teen Talk Foster Youth](#): a free, virtual, community-based sex ed series specifically for youth in the California foster system.

For Youth

- [Self-Taught](#): Former Foster Youth on Sex, Health, and Life. A podcast from foster youth, for foster youth, with unfiltered conversations about sex, health, and life
 - [S2E5: Abortion Care According to Former Foster Youth](#)
 - [S2E1: What are Foster Youth's Rights to Healthcare?](#)
- [Is this clinic right for me or my friend?](#)
- [A Teen's Guide to Abortion from PPPSGV](#)

For Providers

[Foster Friendly Healthcare Toolkit](#): a collection of easily accessible tools and information that support health care providers in delivering quality sexual and reproductive health care to youth in the foster system.

For Caregivers

- [Fostering Parenthood](#): A podcast by caregivers for caregivers promoting the healthy sexual development of foster youth.
- CDSS: [SB89 Foster Caregiver and Resource Parent Training](#)

For Social Workers:

- CDSS: [Sexual and Reproductive Wellness for Youth in Foster Care Virtual Training](#)

Group Homes and STRTPs:

- [Sexual and Reproductive Wellness in Foster Care: An SB89 Compliant Training for California Group Homes and STRTP's](#)